

Sent via email

13 May 2013

To: Sharon Heal, Editor, Museums Journal

National Redundancies top 400 mark since 2010 (Museums Journal, March 2013)

In your March issue you highlighted the significant number of redundancies at national museums in the 2010 to 2012 period. You gave the figure of 49 for the Science Museum Group (SMG), which includes the Science Museum in London, The National Media Museum in Bradford and the National Railway Museum in York. As of 14 January 2013 that figure had risen to 79. It is likely to be even higher now, as the cuts programme is ongoing.

In your article you quoted Mark Taylor, director of the Museums Association, who lamented the loss of expertise resulting from the cuts and the negative effect this will have on the institutions concerned, as well as his belief that front line services will inevitably suffer. We share his concerns. As trade unionists we are also very concerned that more staff than necessary are being made redundant.

From the start of the "change programme" at the SMG, launched in the spring of 2011 to find 10% savings in staff costs, we have urged the adoption of a strategic, organisation wide approach which would enable the SMG to make the best use of measures available within its own managing change policy to minimise the effect of the cuts on staff, such as voluntary redundancy and redeployment. We believe such an approach would also have helped to retain important expertise within the group.

The SMG chose instead to adopt a piecemeal, department by department approach, refusing to widen the pool of potential volunteers beyond the affected departments. This reduced the effectiveness of voluntary redundancy as a tool to lessen the impact of the cuts and also severely limited the scope for redeployment of at-risk staff.

So concerned were we at the SMG's approach that, together with our sister union PCS, we raised a collective grievance. This was rejected at the various senior management levels within the SMG (Director, Chief Operating Officer, Chair and Board of Trustees) and so we wrote to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Maria Miller MP. Ed Vaizey MP, the Under Secretary for Culture, responded but declined to engage with our concerns on the grounds that the department has an "arms length relationship with the Science Museum Group" and, as such, it would not be appropriate to "intervene in discussions about the restructuring process".

Our next step was to undertake a survey of our members to find out their views of the change programme and its effects on them and the organisation. The results highlighted a number of important issues: most of the work of redundant staff has been retained within the organisation and shared among the remaining staff; these staff are having to do more work, often working above their grade and also working below their grade; almost half are working more than their contracted hours without compensation. Morale is perceived to be worse now than it was at the start of the change programme, as is the performance of the organisation. The survey also showed that the SMG is failing to effectively communicate the progress of the change programme to its staff: 87% of respondents said that they had received much less (55%) or a little less (32%) information about the change programme than they would have liked.

Meanwhile, on 22 March this year it was announced to staff that "the Science Museum welcomed its three millionth visitor of the year and celebrated the highest number of annual visitors to the Museum since complete records began." The fact that the Science Museum has been able to welcome a record number of visitors reflects great credit on the efforts of a diminished pool of staff. However, the reality is that these staff are working harder, often for longer hours without reward, and are absorbing the work of departed colleagues.

It is really only the goodwill of increasingly hard pressed staff that is enabling the organisation, across all of its sites, to maintain its offer to the public. That this goodwill has survived so long may be viewed as remarkable, especially when one considers that staff have been experiencing falling living standards due to an extended period of pay restraint and increased pensions contributions for many. How much longer this goodwill will last, especially in the light of the knowledge that the Director and Chief Operating Officer received bonuses of between £15,000 and £20,000 in 2011-12, is a question that deserves serious attention at the highest levels of the organisation.

It is our experience of the change programme at the Science Museum Group that more staff than necessary are being lost to the organisation, and possibly to the sector as a whole, while ever greater demands are being made on the remaining staff, stretching their goodwill ever nearer to breaking point. At the same time the SMG is inviting further cuts by presenting an impression that it is able to maintain and even improve its public offer with ever fewer resources. Such an approach is ultimately self defeating as the goodwill of staff is not infinite and the SMG's ability to produce the same or more with less is equally finite.

Regards,

Prospect Science Museum Group Branch Committee