


Safeguarding intangible heritage: five key obstacles facing museums of the North East of England

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ABSTRACT

As international awareness of the importance of intangible heritage grows, the issue of how it can be effectively safeguarded has been increasingly debated. In recent years, museums have been called upon to engage more with intangibles due to their shared concerns for both culture and preservation. However, traditional museology has tended to focus on tangible expressions of heritage as opposed to those of an intangible, or living, nature. In response to this debate, the following paper brings to light five key obstacles facing six museums in the North East of England with regard to safeguarding intangible heritage. Uncovering these obstacles has been achieved through an analysis of data from policies and documents, observation and in-depth interviews with professionals holding high levels of responsibility within these institutions. It is argued that these key obstacles, including the perceptions, efforts and limitations on which they are based, can negatively affect the effectiveness of safeguarding approaches with respect to intangible heritage.

Introduction

In recent years, as the importance of safeguarding intangible heritage (hereafter IH) is gaining recognition on an international scale, the call for museums to become involved has also grown in strength. Indeed, much of this attention has been a direct result of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of*

the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organisation (UNESCO),¹ adopted in 2003 and currently ratified by 110 States.² Concern for how the 2003 *Convention* will be implemented on the national level has led some to believe that museums, archives, and other non-museum organisations, should be called upon for these safeguarding efforts despite any inherent

limitations (see for instance Kurin, 2004a, p.73; 2004b, p.7; Lee, 2004, p.6; Matsuzono, 2004, p.13; Boylan, 2006). This was particularly apparent at the October 2004 General Conference of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), which with its theme set as *Museums and the Intangible Heritage*, highlighted general limitations that museums can face when engaging with IH. One obstacle cited by participants was the fact that, traditionally, museums are concerned with tangible representations of heritage (Kurin, 2004b; Lee, 2004; Matsuzono, 2004; Yim, 2004). In addition, the preservation practices of museums pose the risk of 'fossilising' intangible cultural expressions since they are, by nature, both alive and ever-changing – concepts that will be further examined in the following paragraphs (Pinna, 2003; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004, p.60; Kurin, 2004b, p.7). Nonetheless, Kurin (2004b, p.7) noted that *museums are generally poor institutions for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage – the only problem is that there is probably no better institution to do so*. This sentiment echoes many authors' opinions on how museums can become better equipped in dealing with IH based on the fact that they are already committed to valuing, preserving and disseminating information about cultural heritage, as well as cultural memory (Kurin, 2004b, p.8; Dubé, 2004, p.125).

Building upon Kurin's (2004b, p.7) questions - *can museums really safeguard intangible cultural heritage...do they want to?* from the aforementioned ICOM conference, the overall aim of this paper is to present specific barriers museums can face with regard to safeguarding IH. This aim is achieved through an analysis of data based on the perceptions, efforts and plans of museum professionals holding high levels of responsibility within six museums in the North East of England. The data from these six case studies has been

collected through document analysis, observation and in-depth interviews with managers, curators, and an assistant, depending on the institution.

The following paragraphs will discuss the developing relationship between IH and museums. From there, a brief introduction to the North East of England and the six case studies will set the stage for a presentation of the aforementioned data.

Within the discussion, five key obstacles will be identified and discussed in relation to the data. Conclusions will then be drawn by viewing these obstacles as indicators of the changes museums must undertake in order effectively to safeguard IH.

IH and heritage institutions

When attempting to safeguard any aspect of IH, it is crucial to gain a deep understanding of the expression through consultation with those who are closest to it – its owners (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Kurin, 2007; Stefano, 2008; Stefano & Corsane, 2008). Indeed, at the very heart of IH are *inextricable links to people* that cannot be overlooked (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004, p. 60). In relation to three intangible cultural expressions in the North East of England, Stefano and Corsane (2008; see also Stefano, 2008) have demonstrated that the significance and values that are embedded within, and expressed through, IH can be uncovered when the perspectives of local community members and individuals – the owners of these expressions – are sought. Moreover, these values, emotions and meanings, such as senses of belonging and pride, are at the core of any representation of heritage – be it tangible or intangible – and should be the focus of all safeguarding approaches (Smith, 2006, p.56; Stefano & Corsane, 2008, p.356).



Figure 1
Musicians performing regional folk music outside the city of Newcastle

The sentiments that can be expressed through IH are embedded within interconnected relationships between communities (and individuals), their representations of heritage and their localities (Stefano & Corsane, 2008, pp. 351-353). However, it is through people that IH is expressed, and it is through people that IH evolves in response to environmental, social, cultural and political changes surrounding them. An example is the Rapper dance of North East England, a centuries-old sword dance from the coal mining communities of the region. Originally, this five-person sword dance was performed by miners, who were predominantly men and whose industry has entirely collapsed in the past century. Currently, amongst the Rapper community of non-miners of differing ages and occupations, there are also a number of women's groups performing in pubs, competitions and festivals throughout the UK. Here, this particular intangible cultural expression has evolved whilst reflecting a particular societal change – that is, the acceptance of female participation. Indeed, it can be beneficial to view people as the agents developing intangible cultural expressions to survive as both mutable and relevant. Similarly, Kurin (2007, p.12) states that IH

... is not something that can easily be isolated from a larger constellation of lifestyles, nor de-articulated from a broader world of ecological, economic, political, and geographic interactions.

Therefore, the question becomes: can IH be safeguarded by heritage institutions whilst maintaining these vital 'interactions'?

In general, museums have been looked to due to their

shared concerns for preserving representations of various communal heritages throughout the world. Practices including conservation, documentation, archiving, interpretation and contextualisation have formed the cornerstones of institutional aims. However, with respect to IH, its living and ever-changing nature proves to be the chief problem facing safeguarding efforts of these institutions (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004, p.61; Kurin, 2004b, p.7; 2007, p.14; Burden, 2007, p.83; Dubé, 2004, p.125, Lee, 2004, p.5; Boylan, 2006, p.64). As noted earlier, traditional museological practices have tended to concentrate on the collection of tangible heritage. As Davis (1999: 32) has stressed, after being brought into the museum building, material evidence becomes disconnected from its original contexts. Because of this, there is a general need for heritage professionals to work together with the individuals and communities who express IH out in the places and environments in which these expressions have developed. From the relevant literature, institutions have been called upon to *engage in substantive dialogue and partnerships with people who hold heritage* (Kurin, 2004b, p.7), *adopt open, outward-looking views of their role in society* (Boylan, 2006, p.64), *present intangible culture or heritage in a way that will interest and involve the general visitor* (Burden, 2007, p.90), and act as *oxygen masks for local cultures which are slowly suffocating to death* (Lee, 2004, p.6). These calls for 'heritage intervention', as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004, p.58) states, are positive in intent. However, it is also important to uncover specific obstacles that may affect the effectiveness of safeguarding efforts. Focusing within the North East of England, the following paragraphs will examine the

perceptions, efforts, plans and limitations of six museums in relation to safeguarding heritage of an intangible nature.

Six museums in the North East of England

For the purpose of this study, the North East of England consists of the three counties of Northumberland, Tyne and Wear and Durham. As discussed elsewhere (Stefano & Corsane, 2008; Stefano, 2008), this region boasts an intensity of heritage in both tangible and intangible forms, with long histories and deep connections to their environments and people. One example mentioned earlier, the Rapper dance, is also closely tied to the folk music living traditions, Northumbrian smallpipe (regional bagpipe) playing, numerous dialects, and the coal mining heritage of the region. There are a plethora of other distinctive intangible cultural expressions that have their roots in occupational skills, the culinary arts, the performing arts, and craft making, among others. This wide array of living heritage has created the need to investigate the attitudes and efforts of heritage sector professionals in relation to safeguarding IH. This is also due, in part, to the homogenising forces of globalisation which affect all corners of the world, as cited in the preamble of the 2003 *Convention*.

In this paper, the six institutions consist of four museums and two heritage centres which are accredited with museum status. Five of these are concerned with the heritage of their immediate localities, while one aims to address the heritage of the entire North East. These museums have been selected from a larger study of sixteen museums and non-museum organisations in

order to highlight the most common limitations, or obstacles, which can potentially affect approaches to safeguarding heritage of an intangible nature (see Stefano & Corsane, 2009 for data on five other museums of the region). It is important to note that this larger study also includes the perspectives of the Rapper dancing and folk music communities through participant observation of rehearsals, competitions and informal performances for over two years, in addition to in-depth interviews with forty practitioners (see Stefano & Corsane, 2008; Stefano, 2008). Nevertheless, the scope of this paper is limited to the views, practices and plans of museum professionals with regard to safeguarding the IH of the North East of England. In order to respect the anonymity of those interviewed, the museums have been labelled with the letters A through F.

The remainder of this section will examine data that has emerged from document analysis, museum visits and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven professionals at these six museums. Two curators were interviewed from Museum F, while the rest are represented by one staff member. The data collected from these institutions will be presented under the following four themes: policy statements, perceptions of IH, perceptions of what safeguarding IH means, and inadequate resources. Five key obstacles facing the museums with regard to safeguarding IH will be identified based on an analysis of this data.



Figure 2
Young musician performing in a Northumbrian Smallpipe competition in Alnwick, Northumberland



Figure 3
Young musician performing in a Northumbrian Smallpipe competition in Alnwick, Northumberland

Policy statements

Each museum is guided by a variety of policies regarding collections management and acquisition, as well as documents covering their missions, aims and objectives (the oldest dating to 2003). All institutional activity aims to adhere to the goals and standards set forth in these documents (Dean, 1994:13). In order to gain an understanding of what viewpoints and activities the museums, as institutions, uphold as most significant, it is, therefore, necessary to examine them. Moreover, the institutional priorities given to safeguarding IH can also be gleaned from an inspection of mission statements, aims and objectives, and acquisition and collection management policies. Indeed, it has emerged that, on the whole, little reference is made to heritage of an intangible nature. As presented in the following paragraphs, the institutional aims and collecting policies of each of these museums are most concerned with tangible representations of heritage.

With regard to overall mission statements, it is evident that the operational purposes of the six museums concentrate on the preservation of local and regional history. Individual mission statements put forth aims to:

*maintain and preserve the history of [the immediate region]
present, in a dynamic museum, the social history of the people of the North East of England
maintain the historic [building] as a notable example of its kind and as an accredited museum of local history
collect, preserve, interpret and display aspects of the heritage of [the immediate region]*

preserve, record and make accessible the history of [the town].

An exception is made for one museum's mission statement which is shared with the local government and states that it is *Working together to improve the quality of life in [the immediate region]*.

The above focus on tangible heritage is also echoed within the museums' aims and acquisition policies. Looking more closely, one aim of Museum B is *to interpret the history of the [town] from prehistoric times to the present day through seeking to acquire and conserve objects*. Similarly, the 'vision' of Museum A is *to inspire interest in local heritage through acquiring illustrative materials that can be satisfactorily housed and exhibited*. Furthermore, in all the acquisition policies, terms such as 'objects', 'items' and 'materials' are used to describe what is collected, preserved and interpreted by the museum staff. Museum C's acquisition policy states that future collecting will focus on *objects, documents, specimens, and photographs relating to [the immediate region]*, as what is currently on display. Moreover, at Museum E, collecting criteria again centre upon tangible representations of heritage by aiming to display and interpret the *development and history of local people using objects, photographs and printed materials*.

In contrast with the other museums, aspects of regional IH are addressed in the acquisition and collection management policies of Museums D and F. The collection management policy of Museum F (within which acquisition procedures are located) makes reference to a *collection of oral histories, both tape and*

transcript. These oral histories have been collected for approximately four decades in order to *preserve the memories of North Eastern people* through the recording of historical facts, family information, stories, dialect, music and song. This collection is a part of the larger Resources Collection which also contains photographs and printed material. Furthermore, within the acquisition policy of Museum D, one sentence is devoted to the existence of a small collection of *oral history recordings reflecting the experiences of representatives of all communities within* [the immediate region]. Nonetheless, the inclusion of oral histories in the collections management and acquisition policies only occurs with Museums F and D, even though three of the other institutions have oral history collections, as we shall see later. From looking at each of the museums' stated directions, it has become clear that tangible heritage is at the core of their preservation and interpretation efforts.

Perceptions of IH

Before examining more conventional obstacles such as limited resources and safeguarding practices, it is beneficial to first examine perceptions of IH held within these six museums. Uncovering the ways in which IH is viewed and defined provides insight into the subtle barriers that can exist in safeguarding approaches. In addition to an analysis of policies and documents, these perceptions may help to further locate where the focus of institutional practices and plans is placed, as well as assist in assessing whether particular expressions of IH, as outlined in the 2003 *Convention*, can be effectively safeguarded by them.

One interesting perception – the notion of 'living history' – was most frequently used as a guiding definition when discussing the nature of IH. Generally, this notion has been associated with certain objects and practices from the past that are disconnected from present usage in the communities outside the museums. For instance, at Museum D, the Manager preferred to use the term 'living history' as opposed to 'IH'. He explained:

I have no understanding at all [of IH]...I see heritage as something which people are looking at more uncritically than you would as a historian such as collecting memorabilia from past times that enable them to understand something about what was going

on and which is still there that they've inherited.

In addition, oral traditions and historical re-enactments were cited when considering IH at Museum E. Interestingly, it was later revealed that the oral traditions they referenced date back to the 16th century and have ceased to exist outside the museum. Furthermore, at the same institution, the meanings of contemporary sayings – as most often rooted in the past – are also believed to be an *intangible aspect of history*. At Museum F, one Curator mentioned a regional culinary festival that is re-enacted on site once a year, even though it no longer occurs in the North East region.

IH has also been defined as the actual interpretations made in relation to objects, as well as background information used to tell stories about such material heritage. The Curator of Institution B confirmed this by saying: *... we have collections sitting here, but the intangible thing for us, from my point of view, will be the interpretation that takes place around them*. At Museum F, another Curator noted that IH *contributes to the stories of objects*. Moreover, when talking about the displays of Institution E, a staff member noted that *... there is a lot of intangible evidence used to back up the tangible, or sometimes it is the intangible that gives you the sort of string that you follow and then you can find the tangible evidence for it – it's a mix*.

Although these notions deviate from the definitions provided in the 2003 *Convention*, all the interviewees, at one time or another, did cite more familiar examples of IH. One type of IH to which they referred was the recording of memories and stories, or oral histories. Even though the Manager of Museum D was not comfortable with the term IH, he was able to mention 'folk memories' and oral histories in relation to projects other organisations have undertaken. Additionally, at Museum E, documentation of stories, events and traditions through aural and written records was also used as a definition for IH. Moreover, aside from oral histories, dialect, rituals, festivals and music were mentioned specifically at Museums B, C and D. Nonetheless, as we have seen, the examples given were from the past and in the form of records such as musical manuscripts and cassette tapes. In addition to what IH constitutes, the notion of documenting IH was heavily referenced during discussions on safeguarding practices, as we shall see in the following section.

Perceptions of what safeguarding IH means

In order to assess the potential obstacles that these six museums might face with regard to safeguarding IH, the above perceptions uncover how such heritage is viewed. Taking this further, it is also important to examine the ways in which the act of safeguarding intangible cultural expressions is also perceived, practiced and planned for at these institutions. The following paragraphs will present the attitudes and thoughts surrounding safeguarding approaches, as well as any current approaches and plans when applicable.

Documentation, mainly in the form of oral histories, has been most commonly cited as a method for safeguarding IH by all the interviewees. This perception has been both directly revealed – as in the collecting policies of Museums D and F – and indirectly revealed through discussions on the nature of IH. At Museums C and F, IH was also given the vague description of *heritage you cannot touch* and was, therefore, believed to be best captured, or pinned-down, through documentation. Generally, these documentation activities have centred on recording the memories and stories of people in reference to the past. A Curator at Museum F explained:

... we do have some music, but I think there is more of a concentration on getting people's stories and people's histories...[the collection] has got the way that people used to work, the way that families lived, how the homes were organised and what the wives used to do, etcetera.

It is important to note that all the museums, except for Museum A, are currently involved – or have been in the past – with oral history projects. For example, the Manager of Museum D stated: *... we are attempting to preserve, what I would call living history, in the sense that we are recording, before people die, their memories from the past.* Interestingly, when asked if memories could be safeguarded through other methods, he responded *how else can you preserve a memory?* Moreover, when asked about safeguarding expressions like dance, he again replied *... if I was setting out to deal with dance, I would want to film it.* The Curator of Museum B noted that recordings offer *... an interesting way of collecting information which is different from your traditional academic idea of how we learn about the past.* Furthermore, when asked if written documentation is

enough to safeguard dialect, the Curator of Museum C disagreed and added that digitally recording the dialect would be better.

An important aspect of this notion of safeguarding-through-recording is the convenience it offers for displaying IH, especially within exhibitions and educational programmes. It is believed that this heritage that *one cannot touch* can be made accessible for learning purposes through video, as well as audio recordings. The ability to play recordings associated with the tangible heritage on display has also been seen to 'add value' to the overall experience of an exhibition or educational programme. For example, a karaoke-like display at Museum B offers visitors the chance to sing along to two folk songs of the region. The Curator stated that these recordings are *a satisfactory way to show intangible heritage.* In addition, at Museum D, a selection of oral histories pertaining to regional life can be listened to at the touch of a button within a display. Moreover, at Museum C, a recording of music relevant to a particular exhibition is usually played overhead. The Curator believed that the recording *gives an ambience* to the room because it *adds to what you've got there* and noted, [professionals] *call it 'added value' now.* The Curator of Museum B believed that 'added value' consists of *more music, noise and things to do, coupled to reading and looking at things* and makes an exhibition more vibrant.

Furthermore, the staff members interviewed at Museums B, E and F expressed the view that oral histories, as well as recordings of music, are also valuable when used for research purposes. Most significantly, they contended that the notion of safeguarding IH falls with recording it and holding the recordings as resources for a wider public. Within Museum F, this is most evidenced by their calling their photograph, document and oral archives the 'Resources Collection', as described within the collections management policy previously discussed. With over 1000 hours of sound recordings, the oral archive is used for exhibition and planning developments within the institution, as well as for studies conducted by outside members of the public. When speaking about museums in general, one Curator said: *you can record a lot; you can preserve a lot and you can make it available for when people are doing research...we have a role to be guardians of traditions so that its there for when practitioners want to use it.* At Museum E, a staff member also believed that their collection of oral

histories and music is, at best, a resource, and noted that a prominent musician used their collection when writing a book. Similarly, at Museum B, the Curator also noted that, *we have oral histories in the stores and we have them here as a resource; we may not be interpreting them or taking them out, but they are here.*

Aside from recordings, all staff members agreed that using their museums as venues for live performances and demonstrations is a more dynamic approach to safeguarding examples of IH such as music, dance, storytelling and occupational skills. The Curator of Museum B succinctly phrased this by saying ... *getting people to have a go on the [bagpipe] is probably going to be sparking interest more than hearing the piece of music on a rolling tape.* Moreover, giving a reason why live demonstrations should be brought into the exhibition setting, the Manager of Museum D said ... *it actually allows people to experience what took place in an intimate, personal way as opposed to looking at a [video] screen or reading a piece of paper.* Nonetheless, as discussed in the next section on inadequate resources, limitations in funding, time and space have kept such activities at a minimum, if they have occurred at all. Most staff members talked of future plans to include performances and demonstrations out of desires to further *enhance the exhibitions*, as one Curator of Museum F put it.

Inadequate resources

When asked about where the priority lies in each of these museums, all the staff members interviewed said that it is with safeguarding tangible heritage. The difficulty in engaging with IH was cited as one reason for its low priority. The Curator of Museum C phrased this concisely ... *tangible things are much easier to handle and research.* He also noted that because of this, there is no institutional desire to 'collect' it, a sentiment also expressed at Museum E where they said ... *we don't actively go out and look for intangible stuff.* However, it is Museum A that remains the least engaged with safeguarding IH. From the Curator's point of view, this is due to inadequate funding, and shortage of staff and time. In her words ... *we have very limited resources and are entirely run by volunteers...it's quite difficult to cover what we already do without trying to cover other aspects as well – we're fully stretched with material heritage.* The staff members of the other institutions also cited similar

problems that can affect approaches to safeguarding IH in more dynamic ways. The required resources have fallen under the following four themes: funding, staff, time and space. At Museum E, the limitations of having a volunteer staff and a small budget were believed to affect the amount of time available for researching and making the oral history and music collections more accessible. In addition, an assistant noted that a lack of space limits the opportunities for demonstrations of living traditions, such as local folk music. This issue of performance space was also mentioned at Museum F, where one Curator had to hope for good weather since performances are usually held outside. Moreover, she noted that the money needed to pay performers is also limited.

All the interviewees, except for those of Museum F, described a lack of staff and time. It is important to note that all the museums rely heavily on volunteer staff. The numbers of volunteers and amount of time have been linked on the premise that volunteer effort requires the use of personal time and personal interest as well. The Curator of Museum C, a volunteer himself, addressed this notion by stating ... *if it is something I have to go out and personally work on, then it is more difficult since I do lots of other things than besides being Curator.* He went on ... *it is about having somebody who has got that particular interest, and who has the time to do it and develop it.* Similarly, at Museum B, the Curator stressed that safeguarding IH requires *people, knowledge, energy and enthusiasm*, resources in which they are lacking and, therefore they would need a *specific project officer dedicated to that.* She added that although it is important to safeguard IH ... *the work you would have to do to make it relevant to certain groups of people would be too large.* Furthermore, the Curator of Museum D stated that ... *the people who work with me are more tangible history oriented*, which greatly influenced institutional priorities. This notion was also expressed by the Curator of Museum A, who mentioned that more attention could be given to IH if ... *I had a volunteer who was very interested in that or somebody was funding us to do that.*

Due to these funding, staff, time and space constraints, it has also been suggested that the museum 'themes' should be dedicated to IH in order for institutional priorities to shift. For instance, the Curator of Museum B believed that the best forum for intangible heritage is through performance, however, she noted that ... *I don't think it could lead as a [museum] theme.* She added ... *I think the theme [of the museum] is always going to be*

representing social history in a fairly traditional manner. At Museum E, an assistant noted that safeguarding local folk music is more appropriate to an institution that is fully dedicated to such traditions. Interestingly, both interviewees referred to the fact that representing IH is not mentioned in their institutions' policies or plans, which accounts for the low priority it is given. This notion has led some interviewees to believe that village halls, churches and other traditional performance venues are where IH is best expressed, as well as safeguarded. For example, the Curator of Museum C said that although there is space for performances ... *the streets are a good place to hear folk music* due to the potential for a wider audience. Furthermore, at Museum F, it is also believed that The Sage, a concert hall in the city of Newcastle, has the space, as well as the overall mission, to promote expressions of regional IH such as folk music and dance.

Discussion: five key obstacles

The previous section has presented data on the perceptions of IH, as well as its safeguarding, held by seven high-level professionals at six museums in the North East of England. In addition, institutional priorities were assessed through an examination of the mission statements, aims, and collection management and acquisition policies of each of these museums. Furthermore, the interviewees stressed that museum functions are affected by a lack of funding, staff, time and space, resources that can especially benefit safeguarding approaches concerned with intangibles. Taken together, this data has been analysed and grouped into five key obstacles, which have been identified as follows: the exclusion of IH from policy statements, IH being seen primarily as an accompaniment to tangible heritage, the perception of IH as 'living history', the limitations inherent in documentation and inadequate resources. On the whole, these obstacles are founded upon the most commonly expressed notion that IH is secondary to material evidence. In order to raise the priority of safeguarding intangible cultural expressions within these six museums, and thereby increase the effectiveness of safeguarding approaches, these obstacles need to be considered.

1. The exclusion of IH from policy statements

As noted, four out of the six institutions have mission statements that exclude any reference to IH. Terms such

as 'objects', 'items' and 'material' are used to describe the types of collections acquired, stored and interpreted within these institutions. From this fact alone, it is clear that the institutions prioritise the tangible. It can also be argued that the issue of safeguarding IH falls outside the scope of these institutions' goals and standards and is thereby omitted from any consideration. Thus, the absence of IH from policies and documents constitutes one key obstacle in potential safeguarding approaches. For the two exceptions, Museums D and F, references to the recording of the memories, stories and music of local people are included within their collecting policies. In particular, within the collection management policy of Museum F, the archive of oral histories is stated as belonging to the 'Resources Collection'. It is written that this archive is used for institutional research and planning, as well as being made accessible to the public. Through this, it is evident that the value of local memories, stories and music is certainly recognised. Nonetheless, it is also apparent that they are given a lesser status than objects since they are only seen as resources for research purposes when developing displays and programmes.

Overall, the analysis of policy statements has revealed that IH is given a low priority at these institutions. When mention is made of IH, it is relegated to documented form as oral histories – tangible evidence of intangible events. It is important to stress that other expressions of IH, such as the living musical and dance traditions so deeply-rooted in the heritage of the region, are not cited at all. If these museums are to become involved with the safeguarding of regional intangible cultural expressions, they will have to be given a higher priority in institutional policy. A beneficial start would be to amend the stated policies to include both the documentation of IH, as well as approaches to safeguarding those expressions which are living and evolving. Stating institutional aims to safeguard certain examples of IH raises their status to match that given to 'objects', 'items' and 'material' in each of these museums. Most importantly, the museums cannot be held accountable for safeguarding intangible cultural expressions if their mission statements, aims and collecting policies fail to state such intentions.

2. The emphasis on IH as 'living history'

Overall, it has become apparent that a more contemporary view of regional traditions is secondary to

the emphasis placed on those which have occurred in the past. From an examination of mission statements, four out of the six museums aim to preserve 'local history', which can account for the historical emphasis of museum functions. In addition, when examining how IH is viewed and defined within the museums, the notion of 'living history' was the one most commonly expressed. This term was used both directly as a definition (at Museum D), and indirectly through examples of traditions that no longer exist. Five of the seven interviewees also noted re-enactments of past events as a means to introduce IH into the museum setting. For instance, one Curator of Museum F, while discussing a re-enactment of a past festival, stated ... *we're kind of preserving the tradition and saying how it was done, but it won't happen again out there in the real world.* Furthermore, it is worth noting that the majority of oral testimonies collected focus on memories and stories of long-ago events, captured before 'people die'. Although these examples do belong within the definition of IH, the strong emphasis placed on past events and customs can also be seen as an obstacle to safeguarding efforts. The focus on historical intangible cultural expressions needs to also be placed upon those that are still being practiced outside institutional walls within the North East region. Indeed, the international debate, as presented within the Introduction, is most concerned with safeguarding contemporary expressions of IH, including those threatened with extinction. On the whole, it is clear that perceptions of IH need to broaden to include the current examples of regional living traditions, their practitioners and how museums can aid in their survival.

3. IH seen primarily as an accompaniment to tangible heritage

The idea that IH is more of a resource, or accompaniment, to tangible heritage has also emerged as a key obstacle facing all six institutions. This has been shown through observation and in-depth interviewing, as well as document analysis, as discussed in relation to the first obstacle above. Observation of exhibits at Institutions B, C, D and F that include the use of oral history and music recordings, shows that these focus on the objects and not the stories and tunes to which one can listen. For example, the karaoke-style activity at Institution B offers little information on the history and meanings of the two regional folk songs played. In general, these recordings are there to 'enhance the

experience' and give an 'ambience' and 'added value' to the tangible heritage on display. Burden (2007, p.83) refers to this manner of using recordings, or representations of IH, in exhibits to enhance the material heritage on display as the *first capacity*, meaning, it is the object which *receives the attention* of both the professional and public, as opposed to a display devoted solely to the intangible, or the *second capacity* (Burden, 2007, p.83). This 'second capacity' approach to exhibiting IH was mentioned indirectly within the interviews through references to holding live performances. Nonetheless, such events would, again, be held to 'enliven' the material on display. In the words of the Curator of Museum B, ... *what we've got on display can be displayed in a more interesting, vibrant way and I think that involves intangible things like music and performance...*

Viewing IH as an accompaniment, or background resource, to tangible heritage is an obstacle due to the fact that it fosters a narrow view of its nature, as well as of the role museums can play in safeguarding it. This secondary, or supportive, role documented IH plays within these institutions may also divert museological attention away from the multitude of expressions that are alive and ever-changing outside museum walls. Through the interviews, all seven professionals agreed that tangible heritage – that is, the acquisition, preservation and interpretation thereof – is the main priority in their respective institutions. It is understandable that if tangible heritage is given the overall priority, then IH would have to play a secondary role. In particular, the interviewees of Museums B, C, and D expressed the notion that it is much more convenient to work with records of IH, especially for display purposes. It has been revealed that recordings of IH are used as resources for research, exhibition and institutional programme planning, which are, indeed, valid uses of such documentation. However, it is evident that IH is perceived to be information (usually from the past), that remains in the background and is used primarily for research and to provide for more 'authentic' interpretation, as one Curator of Museum F mentioned. An assistant at Museum E noted that documenting stories, traditions and memories, among other things, is important because ... *you can't get them back once they're lost; and if they're documented and dusty, there is still the record.* Such statements uncover a perception that intangible cultural expressions are most useful as documented evidence available to support the museum collections. Thus a

barrier exists to thinking about other ways in which intangible cultural expressions can be kept from being 'lost'.

4. The limitations inherent in recording IH

The most common safeguarding approach for IH that has emerged focuses on the production and preservation of recordings. This has become apparent through the exhibits at Museums B, C, D and F, as well as the perceptions revealed by the interviewees. When asked if documentation helps to preserve living traditions, the Curator of Museum A agreed by adding that *taping people* is how to keep them for the future. In addition, five of the six museums are, or have been, engaged with the collection of oral histories. It is clear that 'capturing' the memories and stories of local people is an activity considered effective for preserving records of past life, which is a notion against which it is hard to argue. Nonetheless, certain expressions of IH, particularly within the North East, have been found to consist of interconnected links between people and their environments, through expressions of senses of belonging and pride, as examples. The significance and values held by the agents of intangible cultural expressions are far less perceptible than, for instance, distinctive dance steps and regional accents. Thus, a key obstacle facing these heritage institutions lies with the inherent limitations of actual recording processes. Video cameras and taping devices cannot 'capture' and, therefore, safeguard these embedded senses of belonging and pride. Moreover, as Kurin (2007, p.12) states:

If [IH] exists just as a documentary record of a song, a videotape of a celebration, a multi-volume monographic treatment of folk knowledge, or as ritual artefacts in the finest museums in the country, it is not safeguarded.

Most significantly, the interconnected relationships between the heritage at hand, its owners and territory remain neglected if it is believed that taping a sword-dancing performance is an adequate method for safeguarding it. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004, p.60) contends that:

It is not possible – or it is not easy – to treat such manifestations as proxies for persons, even with

recording technologies that can separate performances from performers and consign the repertoire to the archive.

Thus, the limitation of a recording is that all it produces is another tangible piece of evidence of an event. This limitation can be overcome through a realisation that the actual safeguarding of intangible cultural expressions involves more than documentation. Moreover, this can lead to the recognition of IH as multi-faceted and inextricably connected to people and the environments within which it evolves. Nevertheless, as presented in the next section, a lack of resources must also be overcome in order to safeguard IH in a more holistic and integrated manner.

5. Inadequate resources

It is apparent that one key obstacle is the lack of funding, staff, time and space needed for safeguarding IH within these institutions. It is important to note that all the interviewees believed that if more of these resources were available, then IH would be given a higher priority in their institutions. The interviewees of Museums A, B, E, and F specifically stated that a limitation in funding has contributed to the low number of their activities that concentrate on intangible cultural expressions of the region. The fact that performances and live demonstrations would be arranged, if funds were available, was also noted. The space needed to hold events – for both the performers and audience – has also been listed as a limitation to promoting living cultural traditions within Museums E and F. This has brought to light the notion that those museums can only be viewed as venues for certain types of intangible cultural expressions, a safeguarding approach that is arguably forward thinking. However, the perception was also revealed that these events would only serve to further enhance the exhibitions and tangible heritage on display, as opposed to safeguarding the messages and values that are being expressed through them.

The interviewees of Museums A, B, C and D also said that if the number of staff, including volunteers, increased, more projects concerned with intangibles could be facilitated. In addition, the Curators of Museums A, B and C mentioned that the personal interests of volunteers greatly influence what types of projects are undertaken. Furthermore, the idea that a large amount of time would also be needed to complete

projects dealing with oral histories or other intangible cultural expressions was also discussed by the Curators of Museums A and C, who equated time with staff numbers. In general, it is evident that these factors strongly affect the low priority given to IH at each of these museums. Similarly, the professionals interviewed at Museums B, C, E and F felt that if their institutional priorities focused on IH, the overall 'themes' of their museums would have to change. Other venues, such as concert halls, were seen as more appropriate for the promotion of regional folk music and dance traditions. It can, therefore, be argued that if the themes of these museums were to include living heritage, resources could potentially be allocated to safeguarding them.

Conclusion

This paper has uncovered five key obstacles facing six museums within the North East of England. It is argued that these five obstacles, including the perceptions, efforts and limitations on which they are based, can negatively affect the effectiveness of safeguarding approaches with respect to IH. This is due to the fact that, first and foremost, IH requires an elevation of status equal to that which is given to tangible heritage.

Only when IH is seen as representing more than unique dance steps, nuances of dialect and stories to enhance exhibitions, can new approaches to effectively safeguard them be considered. With this shift in perception, recordings can be used for documentary and research purposes without being burdened with the intention of preservation. Moreover, the emphasis placed upon examples of IH which no longer exist, can also begin to extend to those expressions still evolving beyond institutional walls. Recognition of the authority and expertise of the agents of intangible cultural expressions can lead to partnerships centred on promotion and transmission. Moreover, safeguarding approaches can begin to take into account the interconnected relationships between people, environments and the heritage being expressed. Taken together, these five obstacles demonstrate an overall perception that intangible cultural expressions can be safeguarded if they are taken from their original contexts and brought into the museum building to support the material evidence on display. In the words of one Curator *...it is when you are outside the museum that you find intangible heritage.* Therefore, the question still remains as to whether

museums can effectively safeguard IH whilst maintaining these vital connections to the outside world. ❏

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NOTES

1. Referred to as the 2003 *Convention* in this paper.
2. The number of State Parties was found on <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/> on 6 March 2009.