

Surviving capital projects

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We live in a project and partnership culture where capital developments depend on the generous response of funding bodies, such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Regional Development Agencies or European funding programmes. This way of working needs new or enhanced skills. Many museums are unprepared and thereby risk losing out on the opportunities available, or waste time and money during the life of a project.

Before the introduction of the Heritage Lottery Fund capital projects were few and far between. Since the 1980s capital projects have become commonplace and there is a body of expertise and evaluation to guide us all through the uncertain landscape that is project management.

This presentation summarises what I have learned through several major capital projects. Undertaking a major project is exceptionally exciting - it will change your life but it also has the capacity to destroy your confidence and peace of mind. The actual project delivery is a white-knuckle ride because once you have started you can't get off but must keep going at a fierce pace. You need to remember that what can go wrong will go wrong. Finally, those involved in fundraising may not believe this, but getting the money is the easy part.

What is a project?

This may seem a silly question but many people are not aware how projects differ from general operations.

A project is a unique set of coordinated activities, with definite starting and finishing points, undertaken by an individual or team to meet specific objectives within defined time, cost, performance parameters as specified in the business case.

Projects are:
One-off
Special activity
Have precise objectives
Produce specific pre-defined deliverables
Deliver a specific change component
Have a defined start/finish
Have a defined budget
Require a multi-skilled team with specified activities and roles
Are cross organisational

Since 1999 when I joined the Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service I have supervised over 15 major projects including:

- Norwich Castle/Shirehall
- Gressenhall – Phases 1 to 3
- Time & Tide Museum of Great Yarmouth Life – Gulbenkian Museum of the Year finalist in 2005
- Cromer Museum
- Thetford Ancient House Museum
- Lynn Museum
- Town House Museum of King's Lynn Life
- Strangers Hall, Norwich
- Bridewell Museum, Norwich

These were all aimed at achieving:

- Improved museum product
- Increased visitors and visitor satisfaction
- Improved access, both physical and intellectual
- Improved visitor and staff facilities
- Interesting and exciting displays focussed on the user with measurable learning outcomes
- Contribution to local regeneration strategies
- Acknowledgement by our governing body that we were contributing towards the wider County Council agendas

But we actually achieved a great deal more including substantial improvement in skills relating to:

- Preparing funding applications
- Designing and delivering projects
- Undertaking public consultation
- Developing partnerships with stakeholders
- Team building

We also:

- Restructured front-of-house delivery with improved customer care
- Embraced *Inspiring Learning for All* as the framework for developing and delivering displays, interpretation learning services and customer care
- Provided exciting work opportunities for a high achieving team of both existing and new staff

Key lessons learnt from experience at NMAS

- Develop an inspiring vision that will engage visitors, staff and funders
- If you set your sights on an aspirational outcome and set off confidently, others will be drawn to support you in often unexpected ways.
- Your project will need a dedicated team right from the first twinkle in your eye to final completion.
- Employ people with the right attitude and approach. This may mean sidelining some existing staff who might have assumed they would be leading on your project. On the other hand, projects can provide opportunities for staff with hitherto unidentified skills and knowledge.
- Enhance your permanent skills base. Develop the skills of your existing staff where possible, only bringing in consultants to provide genuine added value.
- All projects will have revenue consequences. Never assume that additional costs will be covered by additional earned income.
- Go for low tech solutions where possible. Just because you can afford the bells and whistles as part of a capital programme doesn't mean that your staff will be able to operate the systems in the future or that you can afford the maintenance and replacement from your revenue budget.
- Talk to your funders. Don't try and hide problems from them – they are actually very skilled in detecting bullshit and will always have useful insights to offer. After all, they have a big stake in the success of your project.
- Be all-encompassing in your Stakeholder Group. This is the chance to get the grumpy people on board. Remember, keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.
- Once you start tinkering with old buildings, bits of them will fall down. Building contingency should be at least 20%.
- Don't buy cheap lifts.
- Compartmentalise your budget. Deal with any deficits within that compartment, by additional fundraising if necessary. Don't filch from future stages of the project or you will end up with nothing to spend on display or visitor seating.

- Use the project to introduce step change into your organisation from creating the initial vision, to working with the public, to delivering the service on completion.
- Multi-task. Decanting all your collections prior to building work provides the ideal opportunity to check and improve documentation, update insurance valuations, undertake remedial conservation, digitise and rationalise collections.
- Talk to your existing and potential users at all stages of the project – they provide an excellent consultancy service.
- Don't be shy. Maximise publicity. While you're shut you're sexy. Even mouse-chewed cigarette packs found under the floorboards rate a half-page article with photo in the local press.
- There's no problem that can't be solved. You may not like the solution but there is a solution.
- Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate. Photograph everything at every stage and keep records.
- Finally, have fun. Managing a project will be your life for several years so don't treat it as a chore but a fantastic opportunity.