



Museum_Bridge:

connecting museums internationally

Final Report & Recommendations



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Connecting Museums Internationally:

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1. Executive Summary

This report draws on four strands of evidence collected between May and November 2025: 22 interviews with national and regional museum leaders; an interim project report outlining emerging collaboration models and sector needs; the Connecting Museums Internationally survey; and three final virtual workshops. Participants from both the UK and internationally, including representation from the Global South, contributed at each stage, with the survey and final workshops achieving a particularly strong spread of international voices.

Across all evidence sources, the message is consistent: there is strong, sustained and timely demand for UK–international museum collaboration. Museums want to build connections across borders, but they face uneven capacity, fragmented networks and persistent structural barriers. What is missing is a neutral, trusted intermediary with both museum sector expertise and international reach. Without this, opportunities are lost, partnerships remain ad hoc, and long term, meaningful collaboration is accessible only to the best-resourced institutions.

A core insight emerging from the synthesis is that any service aiming to support collaboration must operate through two distinct but complementary modes:

- **BUILD:** supporting organisations with low or no international engagement to access opportunities, build confidence, overcome barriers and take first steps.
- **DEEPEN:** supporting organisations with established international activity to cultivate more ambitious, ethical, and strategic long-term partnerships.

These modes respond directly to the survey evidence that the sector is divided roughly 50/50 between active and less-active international collaborators, each requiring different kinds of support.

Restitution, encompassing research, repatriation, community reconnection and shared stewardship, is emerging as a strategic priority for many institutions. It is acting as a catalyst for new forms of long-term collaboration, trust-building and global leadership. Even where collections originate locally, international collaboration is still recognised as valuable: enabling knowledge exchange, strengthening relevance to local communities, supporting climate-conscious practice, and opening up new approaches to co-curation.

The report proposes a new Connecting Museums Internationally service – **Museum_Bridge** - grounded in:

- equity and access (especially for smaller institutions and the Global South),
- long-term relational practice,
- restitution and ethical partnership,
- climate responsibility,
- digital inclusion, and
- sustainable, co-created collaboration.

A three-part model - Inform, Facilitate, Empower - provides the structural foundation, while Build and Deepen describe how users move through the service.

Governance, delivered jointly by ICOM UK and the British Council, with an internationalised steering group, ensures global legitimacy, sector inclusion, and ethical oversight.

Museum_Bridge has the potential to reshape the UK's international cultural position, expanding global relationships, strengthening ethical leadership, and elevating museums of every scale.

2. Evidence of Demand Across the Sector

The evidence base shows a deep appetite for structured international collaboration. Survey engagement was evenly split between UK and international respondents, senior leaders and curators, national and local museums, offering a balanced perspective.

2.1 An “overdue” model

Interviewees described the absence of a national brokerage mechanism as a barrier. Many noted that current partnerships rely heavily on:

- personal connections,
- coincidental encounters, or
- ad hoc email introductions.

This leads to inequity, as well-resourced institutions flourish while others lack visibility, capacity and access.

2.2 Strong interest in all three service components

Across all subgroups, there is strong support for:

- Signposting - widely valued, especially by less active institutions.
- Brokerage - particularly desired by national museums and active collaborators.
- Capacity-Building - extremely high among international respondents (93%).

2.3 Divergent but complementary needs

There is strong agreement that international collaboration matters but why it matters differs:

Low/No engagement groups value:

- professional learning,
- audience reach,
- international profile,
- early-stage confidence-building.

Active collaborators see:

- international work as core to mission,
- opportunities for deep research,
- ethical leadership (restitution, shared stewardship),
- complex multi-country projects.

These differences shape the logic of BUILD and DEEPEN.

3. Barriers and Challenges

Across interviews and surveys, barriers are consistent and structural.

3.1 Funding & short-termism

UK museums cite funding as the top barrier (83%). International partners point to inadequate infrastructure and short-term, project-based models that hinder sustained collaboration.

3.2 Staff capacity & organisational constraints

Capacity is the most universal barrier across all segments (73%).

3.3 Logistics, geopolitics & risk

Global partners highlight visas, shipping, insurance, and unstable political environments. UK partners report uncertainty post-Brexit and reduced access to EU networks.

3.4 Digital inequality

Digital access is far more limited in many partner regions.

International respondents point to digital and technical capacity gaps as a major barrier (47% vs 4% UK).

3.5 Ethical complexities

Many institutions lack guidance on:

- restitution pathways,
- consultation with source communities,
- new legal contexts,
- trauma-informed practice,
- shared stewardship agreements.

3.6 Visibility and access

Smaller museums, both in the UK and globally, feel largely disconnected from international opportunities.

These challenges confirm the need for a well-governed, coordinated brokerage service.

4. Strategic Priorities for the Museum Bridge Service

Restitution, capacity-building, climate responsibility, digital innovation, and ethical partnership consistently appear as strategic drivers of collaboration.

4.1 Restitution as a strategic priority

This includes:

- provenance research,
- repatriation pathways,
- community-of-origin engagement,
- post-return partnership opportunities,
- shared stewardship models.

Language is a live and sensitive issue in international museum relations, and it presents a clear opportunity for the new Museum_Bridge service to offer leadership. In particular, the service can model the use of the term ‘restitution’ in its broadest and most constructive sense, referring to the restoration of relationships and the co-creation of hopeful joint futures.

As Philip Ihenacho, Director and Chairman of the Museum of West African Arts, puts it:

“Restitution means not just the return of objects, but restoring what was lost or damaged. Not just artefacts, but opportunities. Not just compensation for the past, but investment in the future.”¹

Ihenacho, P. (2024). Interview in ArtNet News: “The Museum of West African Art Is Opening Its First Permanent Site in Nigeria”.

4.2 Climate and sustainability

Institutions are increasingly exploring:

- low-carbon touring,
- digital/hybrid models,
- climate justice collaborations.

4.3 Digital transformation

International partners request training and infrastructure support to participate equitably.

¹ Ihenacho, P. (2024). Interview in ArtNet News: “The Museum of West African Art Is Opening Its First Permanent Site in Nigeria”.

4.4 Diaspora and community engagement

UK institutions emphasise the importance of:

- diaspora relationships,
- community-driven collaboration,
- equitable interpretation.

4.5 Equity, visibility & inclusion

Particular focus on independent museums, underrepresented geographies, and Global South partners.

5. Design Principles

The Museum_Bridge service should be founded on the following principles:

- **Mutuality** – shared benefit, co-created value.
- **Equity** – structured inclusion of underrepresented institutions.
- **Accessibility** – language support, cultural translation, digital inclusion.
- **Sustainability** – climate-conscious models and long-term funding.
- **Relationality** – trust-building beyond transactions.
- **Ethical leadership** – particularly on restitution and representation.
- **Strategic alignment** – connecting partners with matched missions and values.

6. Operation Model: INFORM → FACILITATE → EMPOWER

The service architecture consists of three components:

6.1 Model 1: INFORM - Signposting & Discovery Hub

A low-barrier digital gateway providing:

- institution directory (UK and global),
- funding finder,
- practical toolkits,
- visa/logistics guidance,
- ethics and restitution resources,
- templates (MOUs, risk frameworks, partnership agreements).

BUILD mode:

- supports new entrants with simple, actionable tools.

DEEPEN mode:

- provides advanced pathway mapping and thematic clusters.

6.2 Model 2: FACILITATE - Brokerage & Convening

A human-led brokering service delivering:

- curated partner introductions,
- context-specific intelligence,
- thematic convenings,
- moderated restitution dialogue,
- due diligence support,
- global networking.

BUILD mode:

- low-stakes introductory matching
- confidence-building clinics
- regional mentoring

DEEPEN mode:

- intensive, long-term partnership facilitation
- multi-country network-building
- targeted convenings and project incubation

6.3 Model 3: EMPOWER - Capacity-Building & Partnership Programmes

Longer-term development programmes including:

- curator exchanges and placements,
- leadership cohorts,
- conservation and digital training,
- climate-safe touring development,
- deep restitution and shared stewardship programmes,
- community-of-origin engagement methodologies.

BUILD mode:

- foundational training in digital access, funding navigation, and cultural awareness.

DEEPEN mode:

- joint research, co-curation, shared stewardship pilots, long-term multi-year partnerships and pilot programmes.

7. How the Service Will Operate: BUILD and DEEPEN

The evidence strongly supports a dual operating model:

7.1 BUILD Pathway

For museums with limited or no international experience.

Focuses on:

- confidence-building
- access to opportunities
- step-by-step guidance
- peer mentoring
- signposting and basic brokerage
- digital and conservation skills
- initial restitution literacy

Outcomes:

- more museums participating internationally
- reduced inequality of access
- increased visibility and capacity

7.2 DEEPEN Pathway

For museums already active internationally.

Focuses on:

- advanced brokerage
- thematic clusters
- climate-safe and ethical partnerships
- complex multi-country projects
- deep restitution and community relationships
- co-commissioned exhibitions
- sustained, multi-year collaboration

Outcomes:

- more ambitious partnerships
- strengthened cultural diplomacy
- higher-quality outputs
- ethical leadership and innovation

These pathways allow the service to meet diverse needs without diluting its mission.

8. Governance Model (Integrated)

The research highlights that collaborations between UK museums and international partners are often shaped by significant power imbalances. Cultural diplomacy is frequently framed through the lens of “soft power”. While this concept has greater currency in policy discourse than in the museum sector, it remains useful if applied with care. It should not be treated as a model of one-way influence, but as a relational form of power grounded in reciprocity, mutual benefit and genuinely balanced partnerships.

Museum_Bridge must therefore address these imbalances not only through its operational practices, but by embedding this commitment into its governance from the outset, creating the time, space and conditions for Global South representatives to participate and shape decisions on an equal footing.

8.1 Co-Chairship: ICOM UK & British Council

In partnership, they provide:

ICOM UK:

- diplomatic and sector specialist reach through national and regional networks in more than 120 territories and 8 regions
- definition of standards (through International Committees), including in Museum Management, Museum Security, Training of Personnel, Exhibition Exchange Sector intelligence.

British Council:

- diplomatic reach,
- regional networks,
- cultural intelligence,
- alignment with soft power priorities.

8.2 Internationalised Steering Group

Balanced representation drawn from:

- UK nationals, regionals, independents
- Global South museum partners (rotating seats)
- diaspora and community-of-origin representatives
- university museums
- restitution, climate, digital and conservation specialists
- British Council regional leads

8.3 Specialist Thematic Subgroups

Could cover:

- Restitution & Ethical Partnerships
- Climate & Sustainability
- Digital Access & Infrastructure
- Collections Care & Loans
- Inclusion, Disability Access & Community Engagement

8.4 Secretariat

A small joint Secretariat hosted between ICOM UK and the British Council will:

- manage day-to-day operations,
- provide brokerage support,
- moderate the platform,
- ensure ethical compliance,
- coordinate capacity-building programmes
- Identify regional/thematic pilot opportunities.

9. Recommendations

- I. Adopt the **INFORM** → **FACILITATE** → **EMPOWER** model With **BUILD** and **DEEPEN** as the operational logic.
- II. Embed restitution as a structural pillar, not an optional add-on.
- III. Prioritise equity, especially visibility for regional, independent and Global South institutions.
- IV. Invest in digital inclusion. Provide multilingual, accessible, low-bandwidth tools.
- V. Build capacity through long-term cohorts, especially in digital, conservation and restitution readiness.
- VI. Position climate action centrally. Champion circular touring, low-carbon exchange, and climate justice collaborations.
- VII. Develop a hybrid funding model Blend public funding, sector contributions and philanthropic support.

10. Conclusion

The evidence shows that the UK museum sector is ready for a coordinated, values-led international collaboration service. The Build/Deepen approach aligns directly with sector needs, providing accessible entry points while supporting ambitious, long-term, ethical partnership work.

By embedding restitution, equity, and sustainability, this service can position the UK as a global leader in responsible cultural cooperation - enhancing soft power, strengthening global relationships, and enabling museums of every scale to thrive internationally.

Appendix 1: Evidence Sources

- 3 Virtual Workshops – bringing together UK and international museum representatives. *Recorded and reviewed by project team in November 2025.*
- [Full Connecting Museums Internationally Survey Report](#) - includes analysis of differences between respondent sub-groups, with reflections on how these insights can inform service design. *Shared with the Project Steering Group on 10/11/25.*
- [Data Counts per Survey Question](#) - a breakdown of the 82 survey responses. *Shared with the Project Steering Group on 10/11/25.*
- [Headline Findings](#) - a short public summary of the survey results. *Shared with the Project Steering Group on 10/11/25.*
- [Interim Report](#) - includes review of relevant reports, analysis of 22 interviews to identify sector reactions to the idea of an international “matchmaking service” for museums. *Presented to the Project Steering Group on 18/09/25.*
- [Report on Early Insights into a Matchmaking Service for UK–International Museum Collaboration](#) - includes early insights from a sample of interviews with senior museum representatives; a SWOT analysis summarising cross-cutting issues; design principals; literature review and examples of successful international engagement. *Presented to the Project Steering Group on 17/07/25.*