

Access to the Victoria and Albert Museum



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL
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executive summary

- 1 The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) is the National Museum of Art and Design. The four million objects it holds include costumes, furniture, books, watercolours, metalwork, sculptures and ceramics. They also include the collections of the National Art Library and the three branch museums that, in addition to the South Kensington Museum, the V&A administers - the Theatre Museum, the National Museum of Childhood and the Wellington Museum. In 1999-2000, the V&A received grant-in-aid from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (the Department) amounting to £30 million.

“The promotion of access for the many, not just for the few”

Source: The Government's Comprehensive Spending Review 1998



- 2 This report looks at the V&A's work to meet its aims of increasing access to, and understanding of, the collections; developing and extending knowledge of the collections; and sharing its expertise. These aims contribute to the Government's aim of extending access in the Culture, Media and Sport sector.
- 3 Specifically, we examined the V&A's achievements against its targets for broadening access, and how the Museum is responding to the challenge of broadening access. The V&A recognises that a key challenge is to improve its image:

“The V&A was perceived as a dusty and old fashioned place, many people had no idea of what it exhibited”

Source: a quote from the Chairman of the V&A Trustees as reported in a national newspaper

The V&A's achievements against its targets for broadening access

4 We looked at how successful the V&A has been in achieving key access-related performance targets set out in its 1997-98, 1998-99 and 1999-2002 Funding Agreements with the Department:

- visitors to V&A sites;
- visitor satisfaction levels;
- the proportion of the collections accessible;
- visitors in educational groups.

In examining the V&A's achievements we looked at changes to performance measurement being considered following a sector-wide Efficiency Review commissioned by the Department.

Visitors to V&A sites

5 Our analysis of V&A visitor numbers since 1992-93 shows that while numbers increased in the early part of the period, since 1994-95 there has been a downward trend. The V&A's target, over the three years up to and including 2001-02, was to achieve a 16 per cent increase in visitors. There were 1.27 million visitors to the V&A in 1999-2000 - the first of the three years - but this was some 320,000 lower than the target and 200,000 (13 per cent) fewer than in the previous year. The V&A and the Department have agreed to revise the target which means the V&A is no longer required to achieve an increase in visitor numbers over the period 1999-2002. There are financial implications. Fewer visitors means less visitor income, and less money for new acquisitions (paragraphs 2.2, 2.4 to 2.5 and 2.8 to 2.9).



6 The V&A has not undertaken any detailed work to identify the reasons for the drop in visitor numbers. We found that year on year percentage changes in visitor numbers to the V&A and to a basket of six other national museums and galleries in London had fluctuated in the period 1993-94 to 1999-2000. However, the percentage reduction experienced by the V&A in 1999-2000 was particularly marked. In the first six months of 1999-2000 visitor numbers fell at 20 out of 37 leading visitor attractions, both publicly and privately funded, for which we obtained data (paragraphs 2.11 to 2.12).



Visitor satisfaction levels

7 Over the last three years the South Kensington Museum has achieved visitor satisfaction rates of 96 per cent or higher, but in 1997-98 and 1998-99 fell short of its 99 per cent target. The lower target of 97 per cent was exceeded in 1999-2000. The Department is currently considering with the V&A and the other national museums and galleries how measurement of visitor satisfaction can be strengthened, for example to cover satisfaction with the level of service and to include in-depth peer evaluation. We identified some possible technical enhancements to the measurement of visitor satisfaction that the Department could use in developing guidance for the museums and galleries, for example, making a quantitative assessment of satisfaction by asking visitors to award points out of ten (paragraphs 2.13 to 2.16).



Proportion of collections accessible

- 8 As the V&A defines as accessible any object that is on display or can be viewed by appointment, it regards virtually all of its collections as accessible. However, the Museum does not publicise the nature and availability of those items held in its reference collections or in store - for the South Kensington Museum, this represents about two thirds of its main collections. Following the Efficiency Review the Department is considering a new performance measure to provide a more meaningful assessment of accessibility - 'the percentage of the V&A's collections that are on display and accessible to all without having to make special appointments' (paragraphs 2.17 to 2.18).

Visitors in educational groups

- 9 As one of the V&A's objectives is to promote lifelong learning, its key access-related performance targets include the number of visitors in booked educational groups at the South Kensington Museum. Over the last three years the V&A's target has varied between 80,000 and 100,000 visitors in such groups. The V&A fell short of the target in 1997-98 but exceeded it in 1998-99 and 1999-2000 - the 111,000 visitors in booked education groups last year represented almost 9 per cent of all visitors to the Museum. However, in 1999-2000 the V&A had, following guidance issued by the Department in February 2000, included in its definition for the first time, all visitors in educational groups not just those in formal education. The target for 1999-2000 was not adjusted to reflect this expanded definition of educational visitors (paragraph 2.19).

The V&A's performance measurement arrangements

- 10 A key aim of the sector-wide Efficiency Review (paragraph 4) was to meet the Department's requirements for an agreed basis against which the performance of government sponsored museums and galleries could be measured. The results of the review were published in September 1999 and 22 core performance indicators were identified. In February 2000 the Department circulated definitions and guidance for all 22 performance indicators to the national museums and galleries. The Department now considers that not all 22 performance indicators will be appropriate to each of the museums and galleries, and it has developed a smaller set of core performance indicators and associated targets for incorporation into the Funding Agreements of individual museums and galleries. A selection of indicators and sub-indicators were incorporated into the Funding Agreement with the V&A from 2000-01.
- 11 Our examination of the V&A's access-related performance measures - three of which are being retained under the new arrangements - identified some concerns about scope, definition, measurement and reporting (paragraphs 2.21 to 2.28). These include:
- some measures cover only the South Kensington Museum, not the other three V&A sites. The cost of measurement is a factor;
 - although the Committee of Public Accounts has stated that independent validation is essential to the credibility of performance reporting, the V&A's performance, which is reported to Parliament, is not independently validated. To obtain assurance for itself, the V&A has asked its internal auditors to validate its performance data;
 - there were inconsistencies in the way targets were set and performance measured. For example, in 1998-99 a one-off change in how visitor numbers were calculated meant that the target was achieved when otherwise it would have been missed.





How the V&A is responding to the challenge of broadening access

- 12** In promoting access and attracting new visitors, the V&A has to try to meet the sometimes conflicting needs and tastes of its existing and potential visitors. While the V&A has a good understanding of the types of people who currently visit the Museum, and their likes and dislikes, it has yet to undertake any specific research amongst non-visitors to find out why they do not visit, although it plans to do so (paragraph 3.4).

Projecting the right image

- 13** The V&A recognises that it has an image problem, and that potential visitors might be put off by its highbrow reputation. However, some visitors, particularly enthusiasts of art and design, see the V&A as a 'highly prestigious' institution. One difficulty is that the V&A's name does not indicate the nature of its collections. The Museum is working with consultants to examine the options for increasing 'brand awareness'; is implementing a new marketing plan; and has put in place a programme to encourage younger visitors, attract first time visitors and present its collections in new ways (paragraphs 3.6 to 3.8).



- 14** One way that the V&A plans to strengthen its image is through improvements to the fabric of the South Kensington Museum. The Museum has embarked on a major project, costing £31 million, to redevelop the British Galleries. The project, which covers some ten per cent of the gallery space at the South Kensington Museum, is due to be completed in late 2001 and is seen as the first major step to revitalise the Museum. In the longer term, another project - the Spiral (see photograph opposite) - is designed to give the outward appearance of the Museum a more contemporary look. As well as providing a contemporary exterior, the Spiral will give the Museum a new entrance and will be the centre for contemporary art and culture. This project is scheduled to be completed by 2005, at the earliest, at an estimated cost of £80 million (paragraph 3.12).

Making objects accessible

- 15** To make its collections accessible in the most literal sense, the V&A has been experimenting with longer opening hours. But one of the challenges the V&A faces is presenting its collections in ways which are appropriate, while appealing to a broad range of visitors with different tastes and requirements, and within financial constraints. Some visitors like what they see as an 'old school' and 'purist' approach. Others find the displays tired and old fashioned, and would like greater use of interactive technology, though in a subtle way. The V&A has set up a 'test bed' for the new display and presentation techniques it proposes to adopt in the new British Galleries, and visitor reaction has been positive (paragraphs 3.14 to 3.15 and 3.18 to 3.22).

Targeting different types of visitors

- 16** The V&A runs specific activities which are designed to increase the number and range of visitors as well as meeting the needs of its existing audience. An example is the Shamiana project, the aim of which was to encourage women and children of South Asian origin in Britain to explore their cultural heritage through the V&A's Indian collection. The project was identified as an example of good practice in the Department's Efficiency Review. More generally, the V&A was identified as following good practice in introducing new approaches to learning (paragraphs 3.30 to 3.31 and 3.39 to 3.40).
- 17** In a typical year, the V&A stages two or three major exhibitions, and visitor numbers tend to increase by more than 20 per cent during these periods. But the exhibitions are not just about attracting large numbers of visitors. The V&A aims to provide a mixed diet aimed at different audiences. Some are designed to have mass appeal and others to be of more specialist interest. The Museum also targets exhibitions on particular communities, for example 'The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms'. The V&A recognised that while this exhibition might not have a mass appeal, it was contributing to the aim of broadening the range of visitors (paragraphs 3.32 to 3.34).
- 18** The V&A has difficulty attracting children and families - in 1999 just 14 per cent of visitors were under the age of 18. The Museum has developed a Family Programme to encourage children and families to visit, but while the activities are popular awareness of the Programme is low (paragraphs 3.35 to 3.38).

Embracing the electronic age

- 19** The Internet provides a powerful opportunity for museums and galleries to increase public access through remote connections to their collections and expertise. The V&A website (<http://www.vam.ac.uk>) was first launched in 1995 and was updated in 1999. The current website has received a number of awards, but the V&A recognises the need for continuing development. Our review pointed to scope to improve the links to other websites, and there are gaps in the information provided - for example there is no information on the V&A's programme of courses. One aim of the website is to encourage users to visit the Museum, but a survey of visitors in December 1999 showed that only two per cent had been influenced by the website (paragraphs 3.41 to 3.44).



Conclusions and recommendations

20 The V&A is doing much to broaden access to its collections. It is working to create a more positive and clearer image, and uses its special exhibitions and visitor programmes to achieve wider appeal and provide quality learning opportunities. It is also taking action to make the Museum a more visitor-friendly place. But there is still much to do to improve public understanding of the nature of the V&A's collections, and improve the way they are presented. While work is in hand to do this, the V&A has to grapple with the diverse and sometimes conflicting needs and tastes of the visitors it is seeking to attract. The need to do so is clear. While the V&A's aim was to achieve a 16 per cent increase in visitor numbers over the three years up to and including 2001-02, the reality is that its numbers have been on the decline since the early 1990s and took a sharp fall in 1999-2000. The V&A and the Department have agreed to revise the visitor numbers targets for 2000-01 and 2000-02 to the level achieved (1.5 million) in 1998-99.

21 In the light of our examination our main recommendations are:

The V&A should:

- i undertake a thorough analysis of the reasons for the continuing reduction in its visitor numbers and, in particular, the sharp fall in 1999-2000;
- ii press ahead with plans to carry out research among non-visitors to find out why they do not visit. The V&A's plans for increasing 'brand awareness' and tackling its image problem are important in this regard;
- iii give particular attention to stimulating public awareness of its two major projects - the British Galleries and the Spiral. The Museum is setting great store by these projects and effective marketing will be crucial if they are to have the desired effect in raising the Museum's profile and drawing in new visitors;
- iv be alert to the possibility that other parts of the Museum could suffer from the contrast with the modernised British Galleries. The Museum will need a clear plan for dealing with this, and for applying (within resource constraints) to its other galleries the lessons from its research into the British Galleries, for example on new display techniques;
- v improve communication about the activities it offers. Implementing the ten-point marketing plan should help, and there may be scope to make more use of its website to encourage visits. There are good things going on at the V&A that not enough people know about.

The Department should:

- vi push forward with the further work it recognises needs to be undertaken on some of the 22 core performance indicators produced by the Efficiency Review and, where appropriate, incorporate these into the Funding Agreements of the individual national museums and galleries;
- vii work with the individual national museums and galleries to ensure that the new performance indicators are underpinned by good quality performance data and accurate, reliable and informative performance reporting.

