

FRIENDS AND GOVERNING BODIES

by *John Blundell*

In their enthusiasm for, and dedication to the support of museums, friends and volunteers may sometimes fail to appreciate the differing roles of Friends groups and Trustees and other governing bodies. One outcome of this lack of understanding, could be a stand-off between those enthusiasts and museum management, with potentially damaging results for the success and good name of the very institution, which they all seek to support.

Recent experiences amongst some members of BAFM has led to the suggestion that a guidance note, outlining some key differences between supporting and governing bodies of museums could be of value to members. Whilst consideration of this note may help to ease existing tensions, the main aim is to assist members in avoiding a breakdown in relations between those working in a supporting role and those in a governing role in a museum.

Occasionally a Friends group may change from being a supporting group to a body with trustee status with a very different remit from its original focus. Can one body realistically pursue the two differing functions? Whilst this note has been prepared with the problem of the relationship with trustee bodies in mind, Friends of other categories of museum may find the note pertinent, not least because similar problems can arise between Friends of museums provided by local authorities, universities, societies and even national ones.

This note does not set out to discuss the range of circumstances that can lead to a stand-off between the two parties. It is acknowledged that issues of:
weak or dominating management;
dominating personalities within a Friends group;
or even straightforward clashes of personality;
are often to blame.

The basic mission and aims of the Friends, should be to support the aims and objectives of the museum. The World Federation of Friends of Museums (WFFM) considered some of these fundamental issues, assembled them together and enhanced them with statements about

rights and responsibilities of friends and volunteers, to create a Code of Ethics. The code was adopted at the 9th International Congress of Friends of Museums, in Mexico in 1996. Although BAFM has not itself developed a code of ethics, it has noted and given general support to the WFFM Code.

As the Code covers many issues pertinent to British Friends groups, it may be worth viewing some of these in the context of some of the real and potential problems that can arise between Friends and governing bodies.

The following points are drawn from the Code but are by no means exhaustive.

Section 1: Definitions

A Friend is one who contributes to the development and influence of the museum;
is one whose support may be moral, financial, or may be given in time or expertise;
may be a benefactor, a donor, a volunteer, a board or staff member.

An Association is a group which brings together such friends, but it can only operate with official recognition from the museum institution.

Section 2: Status and Mandate

Friends should carry out their activities in an open manner and in a spirit of co-operation with the institution;
support the museum with generosity and enthusiasm;
respect the museum mandate and develop a programme with the participation and agreement of the museum authorities

Section 3: Organisation

A Friends group needs an operational link with the museum;
needs to develop its action plans in partnership with the museum.

Section 4: Duties

Friends have a responsibility to recognise the regulations of the museum, they should:

- show loyalty to the museum;
- maintain confidentiality;
- take care in media relations;
- avoid conflicts of interest;
- co-ordinate their fund raising activities with the museum priorities, not least acquisition policy

In return a Friends group would expect of a museum:

- appropriate recognition of its work;
- a fostering of an harmonious relationship;
- a sharing of its mission, long term goals and future plans.

Although the Council of BAFM has not formally adopted the WFFM Code of Ethics, nevertheless it encourages members to follow the general principles outlined above.

The full content of the Code may be seen on the WFFM website www.museumfriends.org

BAFM also appreciates that members of Friends groups, both individually and collectively, might not be conversant with the administrative structure of their museum. Accordingly the chart overleaf is provided to assist members in identifying their place within the overall organisation.

BAFM urges its members, particularly officers and committee members of the Friends group to familiarise themselves with their own museum's structure.

A discussion on their role and place in the structure, with the Director and with the leader of the governing body is to be encouraged, particularly with changes of key officers within the Friends group occur. This may be of assistance in informing the wider membership and in leading them away from rather than into conflict.

In all these deliberations, Friends should always be aware as to who has the ultimate responsibility for the day to day responsibility for running the museum and to whom that person is answerable.

This note may also be of assistance to those Friends who may be in the process of change from being a supporting body to that of a governing body such as a trust. The following table is provided to assist members in understanding the administrative relationships in several types of museum.

In conclusion it is advised that whilst the note attempts to explain the current relationship between many Friends groups and their museum, there is a growing recognition of the need to engage all stakeholders in a formal relationships in the management of museum services.

This could lead in the future, to the increasing acceptance of the need to co-opt a Friends representative into the structure or indeed bringing at least one representative of the Friends into the governing body in a more formal way, as a representatives of such an important stakeholder groups as a Friends organisation.