Imperial War Museum library closure and cuts to the education service

My Committee has had its attention drawn to the proposals to close the library of the Imperial War Museum and make cuts to its education services, in addition to other cost-cutting measures.

While we are conscious of the considerable constraints on the finances of even nationally important and internationally renowned institutions like the Imperial War Museum, my Committee strongly believes that the resources of major institutions should continue to be made available to the public. It is therefore very concerned that these proposals should be brought forward at this time, when the national focus on the centenary of the First World War brings the Museum’s collections, and collective expertise, into the spotlight.

We would be grateful for an explanation of the proposals, and particularly of how the Museum’s educational work can be maintained and its resources made available to scholars. We may well raise the issue with the Secretary of State when he gives oral evidence to us in the New Year on the work of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

17 December 2014

Response from Diane Lees, Director General, Imperial War Museum to the Chairman, Culture Media and Sport Committee

Dear Mr Whittingdale

Thank you for your letter dated 17 December.

IWM has successfully managed significant reductions to government funding (a one-third cut in real terms over the past 5 years) with no major change to frontline services or wholesale redundancies. At the same time, we have welcomed over 2 million visitors to our 5 branches across the UK and have delivered the first phase of highly successful First World War centenary programme (including new and acclaimed galleries at IWM London and a national and international Partnership Programme comprising 3,332 member organisations to date). Alongside this, we have continued to seek efficiency savings to ensure that we deliver high audience impact and maximise value for public money.

In the context of continuing funding reductions, and in spite of the fact that we have successfully built our self-generated income (so that it is over half of our total income), we now need to fundamentally review what we do, how we are structured and how we can reduce expenditure in order to maintain our long term sustainability.
In autumn 2013, as a direct consequence of reduced and reducing grant in aid, we launched our change programme. With the recruitment of a Change Director to lead the project, this process has included a detailed review of the current IWM organisational structure and activity. The change programme seeks to ensure IWM can continue to respond to challenges and opportunities, build on our successes to date, improve and update ways of working across the organisation and reduce IWM's net expenditure by £4million per annum to account for changes to funding and increases in pension contributions. We aim to achieve this expenditure change by reducing costs and increasing our income through further commercial activity. This means that we will have to make difficult decisions.

The consultation period for the organisational restructuring element of the change programme commenced in autumn 2014. The changes currently proposed do not involve any branch/site closures and we remain fully committed to maintaining IWM’s physical presence in Manchester, London and Cambridgeshire. However, we are considering changes to how core collections are accessed at IWM London. All accessioned collection items, and some (non-accessioned) books and ephemera will remain at or under the museum's management and will continue to be accessible by appointment. A programme of digitisation of these core collections is also in train so that those across the UK and further afield who are not able to visit the museum sites in person, can engage with IWM’s subject matter- the causes, course and consequences of war and conflict. To note, researchers and authors will still be able to access IWM’s core (accessioned) collections by appointment, however like other institutions that have faced budgetary restraints, restrictions on accessing materials will be certain days and I or times and we are looking at the possibility of charging some users. I must reiterate that these are proposals that are currently being consulted upon internally.

In responding to the reduced and reducing funding position which is affecting all publicly funded bodies to a greater or lesser degree, some difficult decisions will need to be taken to ensure the on-going sustainability of Imperial War Museums. The position will be clearer in the coming months once we conclude the internal consultation. Further cuts in funding will result in even more difficult decisions despite us remaining within the Centenary period.

Diane Lees
Director-General

8 January 2015