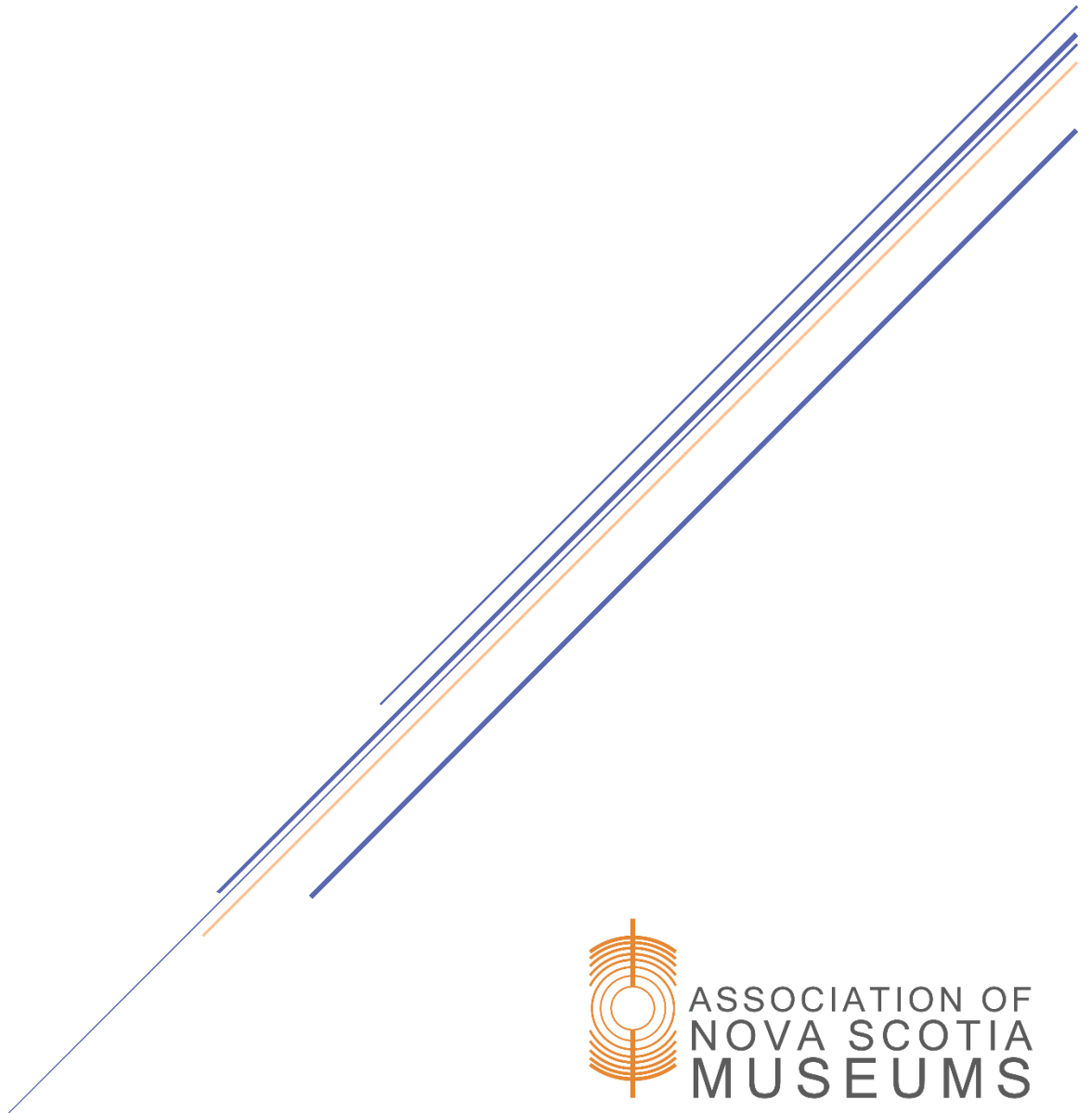


ANNUAL REPORT

Museum Evaluation Program

2020



December 7, 2020

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I. Executive Summary

The Association of Nova Scotia Museums (ANSM) is a non-profit organization which supports museums in Nova Scotia. Since 2016, this support has included the management and delivery of the Museum Evaluation Program (MEP). The MEP aims “to encourage the development of best practices in Nova Scotia’s museums”, which is part of ANSM’s mandate. To assist with this aim, a peer-based Museum Evaluation Program Working Group (MEPWG) provides guidance on myriad issues. ANSM is a partner of the Government of Nova Scotia in the development, delivery and reporting of the MEP.

The Museum Evaluation Program includes:

- MEP Working Group
- Evaluation orientation sessions
- Guidance and support for participating museums
- Documentation Review
- Site Evaluation
- Evaluation reports for participating museums
- Application and review process for selecting evaluators
- Evaluator training and resources
- Accreditation

2020 was to be Year 2 of the MEP’s 4-year cycle. Program activity was initiated as usual in fall 2019 when museums slated to be evaluated were contacted, other museums were encouraged to join, orientation sessions were delivered, and fall/winter support was provided.

In March 2020, the ANSM board of directors held a special meeting to determine the best course of action in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the uncertainties around the pandemic, it was decided to postpone the 2020 evaluations and push back the evaluation cycle by one year. In lieu of regular activities, ANSM staff were instructed to develop and implement new support initiatives for those in the program.

This report outlines work carried out prior to the decision to delay the 2020 evaluations, and explains how ANSM was able to pivot its operations to provide enriched support to museums through the remainder of 2020. It also includes feedback received from participating museums that engaged with ANSM over the course of the year. *delete

II. Preparations

Museum Evaluation Program Working Group

The MEP is guided in part by the Museum Evaluation Program Working Group (MEPWG). This group consists of museum and government representatives and evaluators from across the province. Their commitment and interest in the MEP and heritage community in general, is second to none. As noted in the 2019 report, two members completed their full terms of service, and so a matrix of members' backgrounds and skillsets was used to identify needs. An application process was circulated via ANSM's communications channels, and three new members were selected to join the group in January. The program officer of the Community Museums Assistance Program also has a standing invitation to join the group. This year the MEPWG met 4 times, and assisted in the development of a new [MEP Policy, Intention to Participate form](#), and abbreviated site evaluation forms for both storage facilities and secondary museum sites operated by the same organization. The latter will make site evaluations more efficient by enabling the evaluated organization to respond to governance and other overarching questions once at their primary museum site, and then focusing on unique realities of operations at their museum sites.

Current MEPWG members:

- Susan Marchand-Terrio (Chair), Isle Madame Historical Society
- Lyne Allain, Mahone Bay Museum
- Joe Ballard, ANSM Board Member/Little White Schoolhouse Museum
- Cathy Blackburn, MEP Evaluator
- Lynette de Montreuil, DesBrisay Museum/Wile Carding Mill
- Matthew Hughson, Fisherman's Life Museum
- Karin Kierstead, ANSM
- Amber Laurie, Nova Scotia Museum
- Valerie Lenethen, MEP Evaluator
- Kellie McIvor, Halifax Regional Municipality
- Anita Price, ANSM

Evaluation Timeline

Key dates and deliverables of the MEP were again outlined in a program timeline and made available to participating museums in conjunction with orientation sessions. As outlined in the next section, the postponement of 2020 evaluations meant that the timeline had to be revised. The updated timeline was broadcast through ANSM's communication channels and remains [available on the website](#).

Evaluation Orientation Sessions

In October 2019 ANSM notified the 27 museums that were scheduled for evaluation in 2020 and encouraged them to register for an orientation session. Four sessions were delivered, with the locations selected based on which museums were scheduled to be evaluated. The final session was also made available via Zoom, enabling museums to attend virtually. This was a new offering of the MEP and was welcomed by several museums that had conflicts with the other dates.

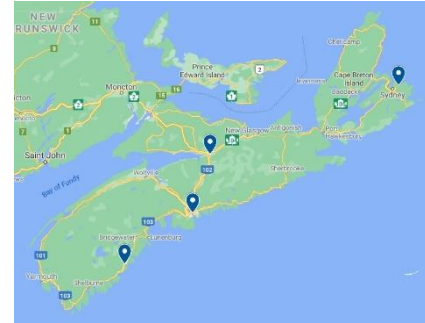


Figure 1: Orientation Session Locations

A brief survey was sent to the virtual attendees to seek their thoughts on that format. They were asked about the length of the session, sound/video quality, suggestions for future online sessions, and any other thoughts to share. Three responses were received, and while each individual expressed preferences about engagement and session length, they were all in agreement that this was an excellent option for those that cannot attend in-person.

The program (Zoom) worked perfectly and I much prefer to use this technology rather than drive a long distance. If information transmission is the goal, I suggest employing this method or simply sending out well structured paper copies, with feedback (a test!) to make sure everyone read it, but if you need to discuss and actively build people's skills through practice, then face to face probably works better.

~Museum Worker

[Due to personal challenges], it will be impossible for me to attend meetings etc so webinars are my way to go now. The cost of traveling and lodging etc etc could be cut back if there could be more of those types of meetings presented, especially during the winter months when traveling is such a challenge. Thanks for setting this up!

~Museum Worker

Attendance at the four sessions consisted of 59 individuals from 27 museums. With the exception of one museum which cancelled at the last minute, every museum being evaluated attended orientation. It is recognized that this would not have been the case without the virtual attendance option.

Dartmouth – 17 attendees from 7 museums

Liverpool – 12 attendees from 7 museums

Sydney – 14 attendees from 7 museums

Truro – 16 attendees from 7 museums

Evaluator Recruitment and Selection

The evaluator application process was opened in January, and the MEPWG reviewed 15 applications at their February meeting. ANSM was very encouraged by the number of new applicants, which represented both mid-career professionals and recent retirees. 11 applications were approved, and two others were selected to serve as “spares” in the event that an evaluator’s availability changed.

As in previous years, mapping out the skillsets and backgrounds of evaluators informed the development of four teams of three. ANSM’s Executive Director and MEP Manager always serve as team leaders, and two other long-standing evaluators also agreed to fill this role. The MEP Manager worked with evaluators to develop brief biographies for sharing with museums, which were to be released with the site evaluation schedule in early April.

Site Evaluation Scheduling

Museums were asked to share their blackout dates for July site evaluations by mid-March. As March neared, reminders often resulted in queries about contingency plans. However, at that point ANSM was operating as per usual. Once information was received from the museums, it was compared with the availability and conflict of interest information received from the evaluators. Combining the two, a draft site evaluation schedule was developed, including the assignment of evaluation teams to museums and travel routes.

III. Postponement

ANSM Board Meeting

From late February through March ANSM staff received numerous queries from museums wondering about the status of the 2020 evaluations. Most queries were emailed as simple questions, but one formal letter was received. As the COVID-19 pandemic spread and the Nova Scotia Government declared a state of emergency, it was clear that a decision needed to be made, and quickly. The ANSM Board of Directors asked the Executive Director and MEP Manager to develop a list of options for them to review and discuss. While on the surface this appeared to be a simple task, it required much thought and consideration of impacts, museum realities, availabilities, among other things. Many museums had also been actively preparing for their evaluation since the orientation sessions. The FTP website was opened in January for museums to submit files for Documentation Review (deadline May 1, 2020) and by the end of March, 8 museums had uploaded information. The concept of a three-week lockdown was still new and it was widely hoped that this would be enough to mitigate further restrictions. There were far more questions than answers, but an overall desire to be fair and equitable in delivering the Museum Evaluation Program.

The following options were considered by the ANSM Board of Directors:

- Continue with evaluations as planned, in the hopes that restrictions would be lifted well in advance of the July site evaluations.
- Maintain the Documentation Review deadline but push back site evaluations to the fall, in the hopes that restrictions would be lifted and site evaluations could be safely conducted.
- Postpone the 2020 evaluations until 2021, pushing back the evaluation cycle.

On March 31st the board deliberated on each scenario and its implications. At the end of their discussions they chose the third option – to postpone the 2020 evaluations. It was felt that there was too much uncertainty, too much stress, and that asking museums to continue with an evaluation during a pandemic would be in direct contravention of ANSM’s mission, vision, mandate and values. ANSM staff were tasked with developing an action plan for delivering new and additional support services for the remainder of the year.

Communicating “Plan B”

Upon learning of the board’s decision, ANSM staff drafted messages for circulation to the museums. The first of these was included in the March 31st Beacon e-newsletter. That evening, a message was circulated to the museums slated for evaluation, inviting them to join ANSM’s Executive Director and MEP Manager for a virtual discussion about the postponement and new evaluation plan on April 2nd. 19 individuals representing 15 museums participated in the online session, and highlights were circulated to 84 individuals representing all 27 museums on April 3rd via the Q&A email group that was set up from the orientation session attendance sign-in sheets.

Thank you for being so proactive and fluid in these challenging times and for all your support!
~Museum Worker

Evaluators were also contacted and informed about the board’s decision and were encouraged to apply again in 2021. Responses were very similar; they applauded the board for making the right decision in very difficult circumstances and expressed a desire to participate in future evaluations.

I know this must have been a hard decision. I fully support this approach.
~MEP Evaluator

Disappointed I won’t be travelling this year but hope I am able to assist next year. It certainly is going to be a tough time for museums.
~MEP Evaluator

“Under the circumstances a wise decision. It ensures the safety of all those involved and allows the museums to be evaluated under ‘normal’ conditions. Perhaps restrictions will be relaxed later in the summer and they can begin the process of adapting to the new norm. As well let us hope the current level of financial support is maintained, and their profile within their community is enhanced by the stay-close-to-home lifestyle we have all adopted. Although disappointed this summer’s NS heritage adventure is cancelled, rest assured I will be ready to roll in 2021.”

~MEP Evaluator

ANSM’s Executive Director contacted government stakeholders to inform them of the board’s decision and new action plan. Again, responses were supportive and encouraging.

IV. “Plan B”

Communications

Throughout the year, ANSM’s Executive Director and Manager of the Museum Evaluation Program were both in regular communication with museums. A significant amount of time was spent responding to phone and email queries, and providing as much reassurance, information, resources and support as possible. In addition to this, ANSM introduced Community Chats on Monday afternoons, which took place on Zoom for 17 weeks and served as a discussion forum and opportunity to share updates on wide-ranging museum issues.

Q&A Emails

A standard support element of the MEP is to develop an email group to circulate news, tips, and reminders of deadlines.

According to many museums, the most helpful aspect of these emails is the Q&A (question and answer). As museums contact the MEP Manager with questions, these are addressed promptly and individually, but also tracked and stockpiled anonymously for inclusion in Q&A messages. Sign-up sheets from the orientation sessions inform the initial contact list, but museums were also asked to encourage others from their organization to subscribe.

23

Q&A emails
circulated to
date

84

Subscribers to
the Q&A
emails

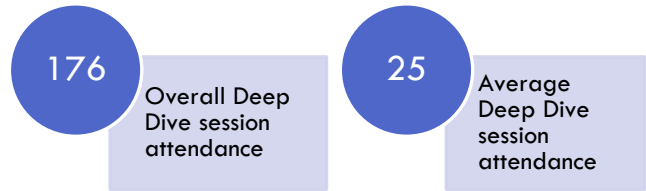
Just want to let you know that I find these Q & A’s very helpful!

~Museum Worker

MEP Deep Dives

Inspired by orientation session feedback and ANSM's capacity to deliver online training, a plan was developed to provide monthly [Deep Dives](#). Deep Dives are in-depth analyses of each section of the

evaluation and element of the MEP. Each session follows the same format, with approximately 45 minutes of lecture and 15 minutes of questions and discussion. All 101 museums that participate in the MEP are encouraged to participate, and while registration is required, the sessions are available free of charge. They are also recorded, allowing museums to view any session that they could not attend, and use the recording as a training tool or planning discussion guide. Since the first session was offered in May, attendance of the sessions has varied from a low of 16 individuals to record of 33 individuals. Interestingly, many participants are board members or volunteers who have never attended orientation sessions or other ANSM training offerings. As seen with the virtual orientation session, removing the barriers of travel and registration fees has opened the door for more people to learn about and become involved in the evaluation process. As a result, ANSM has been building broader and stronger relationships with museums and museum organizations have been gaining broader and stronger understandings of the MEP and professional standards of practice.



*Thanks! A lot of great ideas and hints.
~Museum Board Member*

*Thank you! A great overview and yes the wheels are turning.
~Museum Worker*

*This session has been extremely useful. I really appreciate these seminars.
~Museum Board Member*

*I was actually planning to skip this one as it might be too much in the weeds for me, but others from our museum agreed to join so I did also. It was great and you had some very good points for us to consider.
~Museum Board Member*

Documentation Review Dispatches

Almost one-third of the museums slated for evaluation had already been submitting files for review when the postponement was announced, and through discussions with museums it became clear that many wanted to continue with the evaluation process, albeit at a slightly slower pace. They also hoped to receive more one-on-one support from ANSM as they conducted preparations. In response ANSM committed to reviewing submitted files, working through the scoring process, and providing suggestions for improvements. If clarifications are required, information missing, or there are opportunities for improvement, this is outlined in a simple document that has similarities to standard evaluation reports. Dispatches are released at the end of every month.

26

Dispatches circulated to date

15

Museums that have received dispatches

I loved getting the documentation review dispatch to help fix our policies and look forward to the second one.

~Museum Worker

Excellent feedback. A perfect example of why this delay is helpful.

~Museum Worker

Orientation Refresher

In keeping with the usual evaluation timeline but given the COVID-19 restrictions, a virtual orientation refresher session was delivered on November 5th. 28 individuals participated in the session, with half of them saying that it was their first time attending an evaluation orientation session. As noted previously, the free, online delivery expanded participation from the usual curators and board chairs to a much more varied group of staff, volunteers and board members.

28

Orientation refresher session attendance

24

Museums that participated in orientation refresher

Thank you so much for sharing (yet again) your expertise and offering such great support during today's MEP orientation session.

~Museum Worker

V. Engagement & Feedback

ANSM tracks MEP engagement activities every year (electronic attachment), including communications received from and sent to museums, when museums submit information for Documentation Review, and more. This year, every museum reacted and responded differently to COVID-19. Some laid off staff and closed down all operations, while others closed to visitors but continued to operate and deliver services through staff and/or volunteers. Some stopped holding board or committee meetings while others shifted to conference calls or virtual meetings. As a result of the various approaches, engagement with the MEP also varied greatly. ANSM encouraged museums to continue with their evaluation preparations and take advantage of the extra time and supports available. The vast majority of museums have done so, both in terms of participating in Deep Dives and submitting files for Documentation Review.

Since the 2020/21 evaluation process is still ongoing, ANSM has not yet conducted a survey to gather feedback from participating museums. This will take place in 2021. Having said that, feedback has been received from many museum representatives. At the end of each Deep Dive session, numerous messages of appreciation are received via the chat function. These are often quite similar, consisting of thanks and commending the session's helpfulness. The same can be said for Documentation Review dispatches. Casual input will continue to be documented and be combined with the formal survey results of next year. A sampling of this input has been shared as quotations throughout this report.

VI. Moving Forward

A number of lessons have been learned during this extraordinary year, and it will be interesting to see if or how the additional support mechanisms impact evaluation results. Not only have these additional supports provided museums with feedback and the opportunity to make adjustments final to the evaluation scoring, but the additional staff, volunteers and board members who have participated in orientation and Deep Dive sessions and joined the Q&A email list could have a big impact as well. With more people involved in the evaluation process, the burden of preparations will be shared and these museums will have a better understanding of professional standards of practice. With these considerations in mind, three opportunities have been identified:

MOVING FORWARD

1. Remove barriers to participation
2. Increase feedback
3. Increase access to orientation and learning tools

1. Remove barriers to participation.

Two of ANSM's values are inclusivity and sustainability. Shifting to virtual delivery opened up doors for more people to participate in training sessions, which will hopefully help to make those museums more sustainable. While ANSM sees rich value in in-person learning and feels that the conversations and networking facilitated in-person cannot be replaced by online learning, this year has shown the need for both. As the MEP continues, it will be crucial to identify barriers to participation and work with museums to ensure that their organization is broadly engaged in the evaluation process.

2. Increase feedback.

While not every museum participating in the 2020/21 evaluation has taken advantage of the Documentation Review Dispatch offer, those that have shared that it is very helpful to them. The MEPWG has discussed the idea of increasing feedback but is also justifiably concerned about the feasibility of delivering this support during a normal evaluation year. While some museums proactively reach out to ANSM for input on their policies or procedures, the majority of MEP participants wait to prepare for evaluation until after their fall orientation session. Later feedback places additional pressure on MEP support capacity. Other options for feedback should be researched, reviewed and discussed by the MEPWG.

3. Increase access to orientation and learning tools.

Throughout the pandemic ANSM has offered many virtual learning opportunities, the majority of which were recorded. The recordings have been requested many times, and ANSM is now in the process of developing a long-term plan for providing access via the reference library. Continuing to review feedback from participating museums, evaluators, and evaluation results will provide input on even more resources and tools that will be beneficial to Nova Scotia's museum community.