

## British Museum symposium on museum engagement

March 2013

*Vanessa Trevelyan, President Museums Association, and Head of Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service, gave an overview of how and why public engagement has gained importance in the museum and heritage sector in recent times, and introduced the Museum Association's initiative **Museums 2020**, a consultation process that looks at how UK Museums can increase the impact that they have on individuals, communities and society in the future.*

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Museums represent the sum of humankind's creativity. They are for inspiration and enjoyment as well as learning. A recent visitor to the Barbara Hepworth Museum in St Ives said *"Fantastic - a beautiful, peaceful and inspirational place, it changes with the seasons and weather. I would not miss it, it's unique."*

I think we would want all our visitors to be so enthused.

UK museums are transforming the ways they engage with people. Participation and attendance numbers are up, buildings are refurbished, collections are better used and cared for. There is increasing interest in the impacts museums can have and the difference they can make to people's lives. The challenge is to move on from a generalised sense that a museum provides public benefit by merely existing, to identifying how it can best make a defined and explicit contribution.

When I started work at the V&A Museum of childhood in the 1970s the ethos was very much that we, as museum professionals and experts, identified things suitable for display and interpretation and then presented them to the public as a *fait accompli*. We tried to make them as informative and engaging as possible but it was our responsibility to develop the knowledge and present it, and it was the public's job to consume it and hopefully enjoy it and come back for more. But did the population at large appreciate what we were doing? A lot of people came through the doors but what were they actually getting from the experience?

In the 1990s I commissioned a piece of research on why people didn't visit museums. We selected six groups of people – women with young children, older people, unmarried men in their 30s etc – and held focus group discussions to find out what they thought. The resulting report is still quoted, mostly I think because of the title, which I regard as the best marketing choice of my career. One of the “women with young children” said that, basically, museums were **“dingy places with different kinds of bits”** – and that was what I called the report.

Gradually museums started using visitor research and feedback to evaluate what they were doing. This led to consultation with the public prior to developments taking place, and now the buzz word is **co-production**. Basically, we have moved from a solely **product led service**, where we start from the basis of what collections and expertise we have and develop services to exploit and promote them, to a **customer led service** where we identify the needs of our visitors and potential visitors and develop services around those. Their needs might encompass economic regeneration, equalities or giving a voice to disadvantaged, discriminated or ignored groups, and these needs might be identified through questionnaires, mystery shopping, focus groups, community meetings, user panels etc.

### **What are the benefits of co-production?**

This is what Norfolk County Council has identified as the benefits:

- More knowledge of what people and communities need and expect
- A better focus on outcomes and the bigger picture, rather than a narrow focus on delivery
- Improved outcomes (such as meeting needs, effective targeting, fairness and value for money) because services are co-designed with people who have experience of using them
- Getting it right first time - helps to minimise costs and waste
- People likely to be more satisfied with services
- Increased public trust in more accountable organisations

Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History is unusual in that its whole programming comes from community collaboration. In a blog written for the London Museums Group, its Director describes how “*Each month we work with 50-100 individuals to co-produce our community programmes. It’s not unusual for us to meet with an environmental activist, a balloon artist, a farmer, and the Mayor of Santa Cruz all in one day.*” She emphasises the importance of face to face meetings and involving the whole community not just self appointed ‘usual suspects’

We have a more mixed approach in Norfolk. Here are three typical projects undertaken by Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service:

- *Wonder of Birds* – a specialist led temporary exhibition exploring the history, impact, inspiration of birds through geology, natural history, art, decorative art, as a means of using our collections in inspirational ways to enthuse people. Different special interest groups are involved in developing a programme to complement the exhibition.
- At the award-winning Time & Tide Museum in Great Yarmouth local people told us that they wanted this new museum to include the traumatic bombing of Great Yarmouth during WW2 – a story often omitted from official histories of the war. Having only very generic objects representing WW2, we commissioned a film using original footage courtesy of the Imperial War Museum and a fictional story of a couple separated by death as a result of the bombing.
- The newly formed Norwich Youth Forum was offered the opportunity to programme an event that would attract their peers as well as interest other audiences. The result was *Skin*, an exploration of skin and the many ways in which it is used and celebrated from tattooing to fashion items and taxidermy. The event attracted a much younger age group than usual and the Youth Forum is now planning *Skin 2*.

So apart from wanting museums to better meet the needs of their users, what were the particular drivers for change?

One of the key things has been the development by the late Museums, Libraries and Archives Council of the five **Generic Learning Outcomes**, or GLOs, in the early 2000s. These describe the impact that we hope our museum activities will have on our visitors. If we use the GLOs to develop displays, exhibitions and events, we can be confident that we are providing a well rounded experience that is designed for the needs of our visitors rather than just the bounds of our individual knowledge.

### **1 Knowledge and Understanding**

- Knowing what or about something
- Learning facts or information
- Making sense of something
- Deepening understanding
- Making links and relationships between things

### **2 Skills**

- Knowing how to do something
- Being able to do new things
- Developing intellectual skills
- Information management skills
- Social skills
- Communication skills
- Physical skills

### **3 Attitudes and Values**

- Feelings
- Perceptions
- Opinions about ourselves (eg self esteem)

- Opinions or attitudes towards other people
- Increased capacity for tolerance
- Empathy
- Increased motivation
- Attitudes towards an organisation (eg a museum, archive or library)

### **4 Enjoyment, inspiration, creativity**

- Having fun,
- Being surprised
- Innovative thoughts
- Creativity
- Exploration, experimentation and making
- Being inspired

### **5 Behaviour, progression**

- What people do differently as a result of engaging with museums

The **Museums Association** has started a dialogue with its members, key organisations both related to the cultural sector and outside it, and the public, to discuss what museums are for and where they should be heading. This dialogue is called *Museums 2020* and the Museums Association position is that every museum can do more to improve people's lives and play a bigger part in meeting society's needs.

Museums 2020 looks at four aspects of museum activity:

**1      *Museums can improve individuals' lives by supporting learning, stimulating interaction with friends and family, building skills and confidence and boosting wellbeing***

Museums allow people to spend quality time together. Museums are fundamentally there to stimulate thought and reflection and support learning. Most museums want to be inclusive, engaging with ever broader audiences. Many museums go much further: building individuals' skills, providing a safe, supportive environment in which vulnerable people can build their confidence, and serving people with health needs.

There is growing interest in the contribution museums can make to people's wellbeing, a term used in varied ways. "Wellbeing" can specifically refer to mental health, to health in general, or to a more general sense of quality of life and happiness. The New Economics Foundation has reviewed scientific research into wellbeing and identified five things everyone should do regularly to enhance their wellbeing:

- **Connect**...with the people around you
- **Take notice**... be curious, savour the moment, reflect on your experiences
- **Keep learning**... try something new, rediscover an old interest
- **Give**... do something nice for a friend, or a stranger, volunteer your time
- **Be physically active**...

These are all things that museums can deliver.

**2      *Museums can strengthen communities by bringing people together, validating the experiences of particular groups, supporting community organisations and seeking ways to increase community participation***

Museums enhance understanding within and between communities, bringing people and groups together, and can help define local distinctiveness. They connect to their communities by offering opportunities to volunteer. Many

museums work with other organisations in interdependent relationships to help strengthen communities. However, most museums have more potential to become truly **of** their communities. Many groups remain unrepresented in museums' main displays and collections; some groups are less likely to engage with museums than others; and the workforce seems resistant to diversification. "Participation" is useful shorthand for opening up museums to a range of voices. At its most developed level, a range of people participate in making decisions. Some museums collaborate with international "communities of origin". Participation can transform communities and individuals from occasionally consulted consumers of museum-created product to active participants.

**3      *Museums can make a difference for society. Museums develop collections, create knowledge and contribute to cultural life. They can promote public debate and beneficial social change***

Museums stimulate wide appreciation of both familiar and lesser-known aspects of art, history, science and, increasingly, life today. As well as creating and holding collections, museums create, hold and share knowledge for society. By reflecting on the past museums can help people think about the future. Some pioneering museums are explicitly "activist", aiming to use their position as trusted organisations to bring about socially beneficial change.

Increasingly, the boundaries are dissolving between knowledge created within the organisation and other knowledge and expertise. In this digital age access to information is increasingly democratic, but museums still hold massive reserves of information and knowledge that is just not accessible. And often museums are not collecting the information that would inform a wider debate. At the Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service we undertook a research project looking at the "hidden histories" of our collections. What information about the objects or the people associated with them was available that might help these collections or histories resonate with some of our target audiences? We were able to identify some key objects which had particular relevance to people with disabilities or were users of mental health

services. By displaying these sympathetically within the museum as part of the mainstream interpretation we gave a voice to people who too often feel that they are not heard or even visible.

**4      *Museums can aim to care for their locality and their environment, as well as for collections. They can help people think about more sustainable ways of living***

Museums' careful stewardship of collections hasn't often extended into explicitly caring about the natural environment. Some specific museum activity can be environmentally harmful, such as air conditioning.

The biggest area of museum energy use is probably visitor travel. There is a growing literature that argues in favour of museums focusing more on a local audience and less on tourists – not perhaps a very persuasive argument here at the BM.

Many models of a more sustainable future see an increased role for organisations such as museums. In any less consumerist society, there is likely to be increased demand for worthwhile experiences and “meaning making”.

**So what do these ideas mean for museums and the people who work in them?**

***Increasing impact implies more focus on activity and programming, with less unchanging “permanent” displays***

Museums could rethink the ways they allocate their space, with more available flexibly for a wider range of activities: for workshops, for short-term pop-up displays, for performances, for discussions. It may be that sustained, long-term work with a marginalised group might have greater impact than less intense work with greater numbers. Museum buildings and sites are a great public asset, but to reach wider audiences, museums will need to expand the work they do offsite and virtually.

***People who work for museums will need to work differently and develop new skills.***

This might mean a perceived loss of control, power and prestige. It might mean working towards corporate goals rather than your personal interests and you might feel that you are losing the ability to determine your own priorities. There has already been a change in the profile of museum staff and this is likely to continue. New roles relating to community engagement, immersive learning, customer care are being created all the time. Does this mean that curators will be squeezed out of a reducing workforce?

When I entered the museum profession I had an image of myself as a researcher in an ivory tower, pursuing scholarship for its own sake and generally being very brainy. The reality has proved very different and much more enjoyable. We obviously need scholars because good interpretation and enjoyment can't happen without knowledge and understanding – otherwise museum collections are just stuff – curios. But we need scholars **and** a whole range of other roles so that our museums are truly meaningful to a wide range of people.

The MA's vision is that museums in 2020 will be responsive and socially engaged; they will include many more voices, will share responsibility in varied partnerships, will house increasingly varied activities and will change constantly. People who work for museums will be entrepreneurial, creative and collaborative. Your museum might be more comfortable with the language of wellbeing, health and happiness; with that of participation and co-production; with that of rights, equality and justice; or with that of environmentalism and transition. But each museum – and each individual who works for museums – can make a contribution to that 2020 vision.

*For further information on Museums 2020 check out the MA website*

[www.museumsassociation.org](http://www.museumsassociation.org)