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Communities and Museums as Active Partners:

Emerging learning from the *Our Museum* initiative

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What is *Our Museum* and what is it trying to achieve?

The *Our Museum* programme has been running since early 2012 and is scheduled to finish in early 2016.

Our Museum is supporting eight museums and galleries through a process of organisational change, through which they place collaborative work at the heart of their organisations, building sustainable partnerships with communities and involving them in decision-making.

Our Museum is about embedding participatory practice: it is not about delivering more short-term community projects. Its focus is, therefore, on facilitating organisational change so that participatory work becomes core, embedded, sustainable and less at risk of being marginalised when specific funding streams run out.

Our Museum aims to achieve significant shifts in participatory practice in the museum and gallery sector nationwide, by documenting, analysing and disseminating learning of 'what works' and 'what doesn't work' when embedding participatory practice.

Background

This programme builds on an extensive consultation process started in 2008 and a research phase led by Dr Bernadette Lynch. Her report (published in 2011 as *Whose cake is it anyway?*) concluded that investment in recent years by public and private funders in community engagement and participation in the UK's museums and galleries had not succeeded in shifting the work from the margins to the core of many organisations. Most engagement work and staffing were short-term, project-funded and vulnerable, with communities remaining passive beneficiaries rather than active partners.

The *Our Museum* programme was designed specifically to address the issues raised in that report.

Intended outcomes of the programme

The programme has four overall outcomes – by which we mean that this is what we hope will be true of the participating museums and galleries by the end of the programme:

Outcome 1: Rooted in local needs

Museums and galleries understand their role within their localities: they are effectively informed of, and respond to, the range of their communities' needs and values, and are aware of and initiate opportunities for partnerships with communities and other sectors to meet local needs.

Outcome 2: community agency

Communities are sustainably at the core of all the values, strategies, structures and work of museums and galleries: actively and regularly participating and collaborating in dialogue and decision-making about the work of the museum/gallery.

Outcome 3: capability-building

Museums and galleries play an effective role in developing community skills, capabilities and creativity: preparing and helping people to be engaged in their communities, to articulate their voices, to find employment or volunteering opportunities in the heritage sector and elsewhere; and supporting staff to learn how to work with communities.

Outcome 4: reflection

Museums and galleries embed reflective practice into their work: internally, with community partners, and across the sector, to ensure ongoing reflection, dialogue and openness to challenge, alternative values and working methods

We are really interested in what doesn't work!

We commissioned an independent evaluation team – Gerri Moriarty, Sally Medlyn and Helen Corkery – to measure each organisation's journey of change and to draw out the overall learning. They gather many types of evidence, and involve both staff and community partners in discussions to unearth 'emergent' or avoided issues.

The evaluation process is not a 'tick-box' exercise to measure success. We are just as interested in what doesn't work as in what does; in how any change is brought about; the benefits of changes; the challenges raised in creating change; and the tensions which museums and community partners may experience in bringing about change. The evidence we are gathering in this way is what informs the learning summarised in this document.

What have we done so far, and what are the barriers to embedding participatory practice?

The eight participating organisations to a large extent reflect the diversity of the museum sector, with a mix of urban/rural, large/small, local authority/independent/national, and different types of collections.



They are:

- 1 Hackney Museum**
- 2 The Lightbox, Woking**
- 3 Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives**
- 4 The Museum of East Anglian Life**
- 5 National Museum Wales**
- 6 Belfast Exposed**
- 7 Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums**
- 8 Glasgow Museums**

Each of these organisations is addressing the four outcomes of the programme in a unique way, so that we are witnessing a broad range of approaches to embedding active partnerships with communities. Participation and joint decision-making are built into the process: in each organisation, the programme is developed and managed jointly by museum staff and community partners (though we are learning that some approaches to this work better than others).

The main barriers to embedding participatory practice

Through Dr Bernadette Lynch's research phase and the *Our Museum* programme, we have learned about the main barriers to embedding participatory practice in museums and galleries:

- Leadership and governance: the difference between tacit support and active commitment and championing by directors and senior managers, and too often the lack of a governing board's understanding of its remit and responsibilities.
- Conflicting strategic agendas: the perception that generating income and increasing audiences conflicts with deeper community engagement and participation.
- It's someone else's job: one staff member or group tasked with working with communities, rather than the responsibility being shared across the organisation.
- The usual suspects: museums and galleries often choose to work with known and 'safe' communities, which can be unrepresentative of an area's diversity and less challenging for the museum.
- Staff resistance (which can be conscious and unconscious), and lack of skills in how to work with different communities.
- Fear can lead to paralysis and avoidance and be a barrier to change: we have encountered fear related to financial survival, and fear for professional status and expertise.

What are we learning about effectively embedding participatory practice?

We are only about half-way through the programme, but we already have a lot of insight into what works and what doesn't in terms of embedding community engagement and participation. Between them, the eight organisations have found effective ways of addressing all those main barriers to participation noted above.

Of course, huge challenges remain for the individual organisations: organisational and cultural change takes time and is never easy. We acknowledge that not all of the changes we are supporting will happen within the relatively short life-span of this funded programme, and that it is too early to measure the real long-term impact of much of this work.

Small changes add up

We are learning that embedding participatory practice takes time, patience and commitment: from the organisation, its community partners, strategic sectoral bodies and funders. You cannot achieve it by changing just one or two things. Embedding participatory practice – and tackling all the main barriers – means changing lots of small things across the whole organisation.

The overall message is: **small changes add up**. Small improvements and changes in many different areas, across the whole organisation, add up to significant transformation in community engagement and participatory practice.

We are learning that five key areas of museum practice and management are particularly critical for participatory practice:

- **governance**
- **staff professional development**
- **how to engage with community partners**
- **evaluation, and**
- **the importance of the voice from outside.**

Below, we highlight specific practical examples of actions taken by *Our Museum* organisations in these five areas, which are addressing all the main barriers to participation.

These actions do not necessarily provide a model or template for successfully embedding participatory practice, but we hope they act as a pointer for other organisations and funders to how the common barriers can be tackled in a practical and effective way.

What are we learning about governance?

The director, senior staff and trustees – or equivalent governing body – all need to actively support change to embed and sustain community engagement and participation

Leaders must show active and championing commitment to participation, not just passive support

- At National Museum Wales, no one is in any doubt of the director's active commitment to engagement and participation: he is vocal about it in public. In a recent restructuring, he underlined this by appointing, to key senior positions across the whole organisation, staff who have experience, commitment and passion for community participation, who can ensure it is embedded and sustained.
- At Belfast Exposed, the new director immediately reviewed all organisational change and engagement objectives and pushed to make them more ambitious, in this way underlining her priorities for the organisation.

Leadership is not just the director but the wider management team – which can be a block to change – and they too need to be actively committed to participation

- The management team of Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums recognised that attempting deeper community engagement sometimes seemed to conflict with the strategic imperatives of income generation and increasing visitor numbers – as is the case in many museums. They met for a facilitated day to discuss the importance of community engagement and to review their decision-making processes, acknowledging that there was no conflict in principle, but that they needed to be more aware of any perceived conflict when making hard decisions. This is a realistic approach, and it is about raising the awareness around community engagement of decision-makers within an organisation.

Longer-term, sustainable change is only effective if trustees (or equivalent governing body) actively support and understand participation: they need training, ongoing development and evaluation of their involvement

- The *Our Museum* programme at National Museum Wales has four trustee champions who attend every meeting with community partners. The museum organised a training day on participation for the whole trustee board, to discuss the meaning and importance of participation for their organisation, and how it can be rolled out, embedded and sustained across the whole organisation and all its museums. Trustee involvement in the programme was formally evaluated, with trustees, staff and community partners all asked for their views about how to further develop that involvement.
- Similarly, The Lightbox, Woking, did a presentation to their new Board of Trustees on their fresh approaches to community partnerships, and as a result there is increased understanding and support for this new way of working.

What are we learning about staff professional development?

For community engagement to be truly embedded and sustained, all staff need to understand its relevance to their own work and to the museum overall, how they can contribute, and how to work with communities

Ensure that responsibility for community engagement is shared across the organisation

- One of the biggest barriers to real and sustainable community engagement and participation is that it is often on the periphery of museums and galleries, and the responsibility of one member of staff or one group, often externally funded on short-term contracts.
- National Museum Wales, The Lightbox, Woking and Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives have addressed this by changing the job descriptions of all staff across the organisations: every member of staff, no matter what their role or specialism, now has community engagement written into their job description. It is no longer 'someone else's job': it is everyone's job.

Introduce programmes to develop all-staff buy-in, understanding and skills around community engagement and participation

- Glasgow Museums worked hard in Year 1 of their *Our Museum* programme to get staff to understand that it was fundamentally about changing the way they worked with communities. They designed their Staff Ambassadors programme to address this. Very different from traditional training, this offers opportunities for staff to learn what real, meaningful community engagement looks and feels like. It is a self-directed programme, 10.5 days over a six-month period, with staff choosing from a menu of opportunities: field visits to community arts projects, involvement in live projects, work swaps, and coaching and mentoring. It has changed the way staff across this large and complex organisation understand the purpose of their work.
- Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums realised that the principles and practice of community engagement (and what it even means) seem simple and easy to some staff, but profoundly obscure and frightening to others. They have developed a training programme which identifies basic steps and building blocks clearly.
- Community partners in several of the organisations have delivered training and development sessions to museum staff on community issues they have expertise in. This is an important element in acknowledging that museums do not hold a monopoly of knowledge, and that communities can be real 'partners' rather than beneficiaries.

Provide resources for staff to learn about different approaches to community engagement through peer learning and exchange

- The Museum of East Anglian Life recognised that its staff were cut off from developments in other museums, partly through its remote location and partly for financial reasons. One focus of its *Our Museum* programme is to encourage and resource staff to visit other museums to learn about different ways of working with communities which they then feed back into their own work. The *Our Museum* programme explicitly resources such exchanges and peer learning as an essential part of organisational change to embed participatory practice.

What are we learning about engaging effectively with community partners?

Museums should think strategically about who their communities are and who to work with, rather than relying on 'the usual suspects'

Museums benefit by actively seeking out partnerships with community partners who have the strategic remit, specialist knowledge and community networks to support them with major changes to their policies and practice

- National Museum Wales wanted to revolutionise its relationships with volunteers; broadening and diversifying the volunteer base; focusing on the needs of the volunteer rather than the needs of the museum; ensuring that meeting the needs of volunteers was the responsibility of all staff, not just that of a volunteer co-ordinator. It has worked closely with organisations like Diverse Cymru, DrugAid Cymru and the Welsh Council for Voluntary Action to open the museum up to a wide range of previously uninterested/disengaged individuals. Its partners have decision-making powers; for example, they worked with museum staff to recruit a post-holder to support this initiative.

Written terms of reference help community partners and staff to understand what is expected of them and what kind of involvement they can have in decision-making

- Hackney Museum has developed two separate mechanisms for collaborating with community partners. Their Advisory Panel has borough-wide membership, asks partners to commit their time for over three years and considers strategic issues. Their Community Partners Group focuses on an exhibition or programme of specific interest to partners and is in place for a shorter period of time (12-18 months). Both groups have written terms of reference.

A wide range of community partners can be invited to take part in focussed conversations about the work of the museum or gallery and its plans for the future

- Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums organised a People's Parliament day open to communities and museum staff, with the support of an independent facilitator. This was an opportunity to talk about community engagement work going on across all the museum sites and how this could be developed and strengthened.
- Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives invited 60 community groups to one of its venues, M Shed, to discuss how it should change its 'You Make Bristol' display; over 100 nominations for new additions to the display were made. The museum has continued working with a smaller number of participants who wanted to help make the final selection and to research and write text for the exhibition.

Community partners can be commissioned to deliver elements of a museum's or gallery's exhibition or programme

- Hackney Museum wanted to develop a new approach that would respond to the significant diversity and complexity of the communities it serves. For the exhibition, 'Side by Side', which explores contemporary life in Cazenove Road – one of the most diverse areas of Hackney – the museum commissioned local artists, filmmakers and photographers to work in partnership with local people, community groups and schools to explore the nature of their communities (through different faiths, cultures, histories, fashions, languages and foods) and what it means to them to live in Hackney today.

What are we learning about evaluation and evidence of change?

Organisational change processes benefit from a rigorous approach to qualitative evaluation, action based on shared reflection and ongoing critical dialogue with all stakeholders

The value of a clear evidence framework in mapping organisational change

- All the organisations participating in *Our Museum* share an agreed evidence framework. This has four outcomes and a set of qualitative indicators of success for each outcome. A baseline assessment of each organisation's work was carried out in 2012, using the framework; this means it has been possible to assess their journey over time, recording new developments and achievements and identifying areas which still require attention. The framework could easily be adapted for use by other cultural organisations which aim to strengthen their partnerships with communities.

External evaluators are able to focus attention on the change process, facilitate discussion, encourage progress and offer challenges

- An independent evaluation team was commissioned to work formatively with partner organisations, the programme director and the programme Steering Group – working with them closely from the beginning all the way through the programme.
- The *Our Museum* evaluation team's methods have been designed to minimise demands on both museums and galleries and their community partners as much as possible, by gathering and analysing data that they are already producing for other reasons. The evaluators have regular contact with participants, both verbally and through written reports; this enables them to raise concerns, ask questions and identify significant progress. This directly informs decision-making during the lifetime of the programme. The *Our Museum* partners report that they value the team's ongoing commitment and constructive critique. The team will produce an end-of-programme, summative report, but a formative process of evaluation over time is vital in supporting organisational change.

The significance of developing positive, constructive and honest self-evaluation processes has been emphasised by the funder

- *Our Museum* partners have engaged in regular reflection and self-evaluation and have been encouraged to take calculated risks, report what hasn't worked and lessons learned to the funder, as well as progress and success.
- Glasgow Museums has asked all staff on its Staff Ambassadors programme to keep journals of their experiences; these have proved an invaluable tool in understanding the impact of the programme and the difficulties staff can face when applying lessons learned in the everyday working environment.

- Hackney Museum and Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives have worked with an external facilitator to reflect, with staff and community partners, on a year's work and to use the reflections to plan for the following year.
- Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums have experimented with Tumblr as a way of using film for joint reflection and to disseminate experiences across the museum and the wider sector.
- National Museum Wales and Glasgow Museums have presented papers about their reflections on *Our Museum* learning at national and international conferences. Although some of the information gathered by the external evaluators or the partner organisations will eventually prove useful for advocacy and PR, this has not been a priority for evaluation.

The *Our Museum* programme has demonstrated that an active critical dialogue between funder and the organisations it funds pays dividends

- The *Our Museum* Steering Group gave robust and detailed feedback to partner organisations at the end of Year 1, with the aim of pushing organisations to achieve the strategic goals they themselves had set. In some cases, continued funding for Years 2 and 3 was made conditional on action in certain areas. This was initially uncomfortable for all concerned, but it led to an increase in frank dialogue and new, shared insights into how progress might be made.
- The *Our Museum* director also meets quarterly with all Lead Contacts from the partner organisations; this has led to increased levels of knowledge sharing and opportunities to discuss challenges and barriers to change in more depth.

What are we learning about the importance of an external voice?

Museums and galleries should involve people from outside their own organisation in open and honest conversations about the process of change underway in their institutions, in order to bring fresh and independent perspectives to bear, to encourage reflection, and to help ensure that difficult issues are addressed and not avoided

Working with a critical friend is proving an effective way for *Our Museum* participants to gain an independent view of the programme and processes underway in their organisations and prompt honest reflection and appraisal

- Most *Our Museum* organisations are working with critical friends: a trusted person outside the museum who takes the time to fully understand the context of the work and the outcomes that the organisation wants to achieve, asks provocative questions, provides additional data, evidence or lessons from elsewhere that give a fresh perspective, and offers a critique of work.
- Each *Our Museum* organisation ‘sets the agenda’ and chooses how to follow up on conversations. *Our Museum* participants have selected challenging topics to work on with critical friends: for example, at the Museum of East Anglian Life the change implications of co-production of exhibitions with particular communities of interest or geography; and at The Lightbox how best to use their reflections on the learning from the work they are doing together so the organisation can continue to change and embed a different way of working.

Peer learning is an effective method of encouraging the sharing of experience, knowledge, information and learning

- Members of staff and community partners from *Our Museum* organisations have visited each other, seeing first-hand how others approach similar issues, as well as clarifying where different circumstances demand different approaches. For instance, staff and community partners from Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives visited National Museum Wales to share experience of recruiting and working with community partners.
- All community partners and staff from each *Our Museum* organisation attend an annual peer review explicitly focused on reflection with thought-provoking presentations by people with particular expertise or experience in community participation: John McGrath, National Theatre of Wales, and Nina Simon, Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History.

Community partners and staff have benefitted from allocating time for active and regular reflection on what is being learnt

- Hackney Museum has instigated regular reflective sessions for staff to root the needs of the community at the centre of the museum's work, and to plan how to embed this way of working after the *Our Museum* programme ends.
- Staff and community partners at National Museum Wales recognised that project planning and information sharing took up a lot of time at meetings, so they decided reflection should always be the final agenda item, to ensure they regularly reflected together on the meeting and wider programme.

An external independent facilitator can help create a safe space for museum staff and community partners to discuss issues that may be complex, multi-layered or contentious.

- Glasgow Museums worked with a facilitator to map the learning from their Staff Ambassadors programme;
- Hackney Museum worked with a facilitator to identify their learning from Year 2 of the programme from a variety of different perspectives
- Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums asked a facilitator to support a management symposium where the potentially conflicting objectives of active community partnership and meeting strict financial targets were openly discussed.

Afterword

This paper has presented emerging learning about what works and what doesn't in terms of embedding community engagement and participation. These are key issues for individual museums and galleries and directly relevant to the core aims of strategic sectoral organisations and funding bodies. Everything that we are learning through the *Our Museum* programme is, in principle, transferable.

The *Our Museum* programme continues until early 2016 and there is lots more to learn. We hope that this paper marks the start of an ongoing dialogue about how, together, we can make best use of this learning for museums and the wider cultural sector, to make community engagement and participation more effective and sustainable.

Please join our discussion on www.ourmuseum.org.uk.

