



Paul Hamlyn Foundation *Our Museum* Special Initiative

The *OUR MUSEUM* organisations
A summary of the journeys

Belfast Exposed

Introduction

Our Museum: Communities and Museums as Active Partners was a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Special Initiative, established in 2012 and finishing in early 2016. The overall aim was to influence the museum and gallery sector to:

- Place community needs, values and active collaboration at the core of museum and gallery work
- Involve communities and individuals in decision-making processes
- Ensure that museums and galleries play an effective role in developing community skills and the skills of staff in working with communities

This was to be done through facilitation of organisational change in specific museums and galleries already committed to active partnership with communities. *Our Museum* offered a collaborative learning process through which institutions and communities shared experiences and learned from each other as critical friends.

In early 2012 nine museums and galleries were selected to join *Our Museum* from participants in an earlier consultation and research period.¹ The organisations reflected key differences in the wider sector in scale, character and location. Their different starting-points, different challenges and priorities and the different kinds of resources at their disposal, were recognised by the Foundation. The organisations selected were: Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales; Belfast Exposed; Bristol Culture; Glasgow Museums; Hackney Museum; Museum of East Anglian Life; The Lightbox; Ryedale Folk Museum; Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums.²

Each organisation responded to the *Our Museum* Outcomes and Indicators of Success framework and identified 'strategic change objectives' it anticipated would be the focus of its work during the programme. They also identified the members of their *Our Museum* 'engagement team': five people from the museum/gallery, ideally including the chief officer, and five people from community partners to work together collaboratively. The museums and galleries participating in *Our Museum* experimented with a wide range of approaches to achieving their strategic change objectives and create organisational change.

This document assesses the progress of Belfast Exposed and the challenges it faced in creating organisational change. It is a supplement to the main evaluation report by Gerri Moriarty and Sally Medlyn:

Museums Galleries Communities-Active Partners-Mutual Benefit: An evaluation of the Our Museum Special Initiative. Paul Hamlyn Foundation. June 2016.

¹ The research was published as: Lynch, B. 2011. *Whose Cake Is It Anyway? A collaborative investigation into engagement and participation in 12 museums and galleries in the UK*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation

² The Museum of East Anglian Life and Ryedale Folk Museum were funded for two of the three years of the programme. After they left the *Our Museum* programme the Foundation supported them with organisational review and business planning.

The four *Our Museum* Outcomes and Indicators of Success

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 on-going reflection, dialogue and openness to challenge, alternative values and working methods

Indicators of Success for each outcome set out key assumptions about organisations committed to active partnership with communities: core values; kinds of leadership; ways of working; the nature and purpose of partnerships which might help inform policy and support delivery; how community and staff capacity building might help to deliver all outcomes; what good practice in this area might look like; and the critical role of reflection and dialogue in the work.³

³ The Outcomes and Indicators of Success are set out in full on page 28 of the main report

Belfast Exposed

This summary assesses the progress of **Belfast Exposed** and the challenges it faced in creating organisational change against the four *Our Museum* outcomes; Rooted in Local Needs, Community Agency, Capability and Reflection. It has been written by the *Our Museum* evaluators Sally Medlyn and Gerri Moriarty and is a supplement to the main evaluation report which contains further details of the outcomes framework: *Museums and Galleries-Active Partners-Mutual Benefit: An evaluation of the Our Museum Special Initiative*. Paul Hamlyn Foundation. June 2016.



Belfast Exposed is Northern Ireland's principal gallery of contemporary photography. It mounts a programme of changing exhibitions; holds an archive of more than a million images largely donated by local photographers, and runs education and community programmes. Belfast Exposed is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. It is funded by Arts Council Northern Ireland and Belfast City Council, project grants and earned income and is governed by a voluntary Board.

Outcome 1 Rooted in Local Needs: New Business Plan valuing archive, gallery and community programmes equally

Belfast Exposed was proud of the way in which it had developed historically, from a community photography initiative founded in 1983 by a group of local photographers. This had aimed to develop an approach to photography that reflected the experience of Belfast from the 'inside' as a challenge to official and media representation of a city in conflict. In more recent years, Belfast Exposed had focussed its work on *'transformation from a small-scale, though politically significant, community photography project into a gallery, with an international reputation.'* The organisation believed that: *'...our focus on (re) building the organisation through the gallery project, has given rise to a problem of unequal development between the gallery and the community programme, where artists, audiences, community participants and staff often express a 'fragmented' experience of Belfast Exposed either as a contemporary gallery space or as a community photography resource.'*

In Year 1, an independent consultant carried out a review to clarify what was needed to bring about organisational change and completed a perception survey with external stakeholders. The survey confirmed the sense of the organisation as fragmented and commented that the organisation appeared to lack coherence and strategy: *The archive, community and gallery could so easily fit together – but they*

don't. Progress in making change was slow and focussed primarily on administrative and management reviews.

Towards the end of Year 2, a new Director was appointed. A Business Plan was developed, facilitated through the *Our Museum* programme, with a Vision to '*Create and inspire a culture of photography*' and a Mission: '*To be the major centre for photography in Northern Ireland, promoting and encouraging excellence in the medium, enhancing the reputation of local photographers internationally, and bringing the best of world photography to the heart of Belfast.*'

The Business Plan grounded the organisation's priorities and activities in its heritage in Belfast; its unique archive; its contemporary gallery; and its programme of community engagement and learning delivered across Northern Ireland. Belfast Exposed's successful bid to Arts Council Northern Ireland for 3-year funding (2015-18) included the whole scope of its work – '*a joint set of values and goals*' - as well as full funding for the Community Programme Coordinator's salary for the first time.

As the *Our Museum* programme ends Belfast Exposed intends to establish a trading arm to generate income from training and sales of artwork to cross-subsidise its work.

Outcome 2 Community Agency: New models of community photography practice

At the beginning of the *Our Museum* programme, practical responsibility for Belfast Exposed's engagement with communities, including knowledge of the content and origins of material in its archive, rested overwhelmingly with one member of staff: the Community Photography Coordinator. It was recognised this engagement with communities had to become integral to the work of all staff and also be clearly understood by volunteers and Trustees.

At the beginning of Year 2, a consultant was appointed to undertake a '*Review of Community, Collaborative, Education and Training Programmes*'. Her interim report suggested pilot 'next practice' programmes. Three large pilot projects were proposed – community hubs, collaborative commission and a schools project – to test ideas and ways of working and generate greater cross-organisational connectivity. An evaluation framework focused on a series of questions such as: '*What worked and what didn't work? Is this an effective way of designing and delivering programmes of work? How did the partnership work and was this effective in generating ownership, better outcomes and long term sustainability?*' The pilot projects were delivered during Years 2 and 3.

Core principles were agreed to underpin all the pilots including, for example, the need for a sustainable business model and co-design in collaboration with community partners.

Belfast Exposed piloted two new models of community photography, *The Family Album Project* and *The Zoom Project* and identified the value of a new kind of role, that of community curator: *'Both of these new models of work are designed to be community led, with community involvement, empowerment and decision making from conception of the project to the final outcome. The community curator will have a responsibility to make sure that the final outcome is one that the community has full ownership over and reflects the socially engaged message or story that the community has decided to highlight.'*

Belfast Exposed established an *Our Museum* engagement team, which involved the majority of its small staff team, including two interns. Its community partners initially comprised individuals and representatives from two community organisations who had worked with the organisation previously. Community partners changed throughout the programme with little continuity or clarity amongst community partners about their role in working with staff or Board towards Belfast Exposed's strategic change objectives.

During Year 3, the Exchange Space on the first floor was renamed Belfast Exposed Futures and its purpose re-focused to meet the needs of a specific community, emerging artists: *'a gallery space dedicated to showing the best new photographic talent from Northern Ireland. It supports the development and presentation of new work by six artists a year in a series of solo shows.'*

There was further development of artist residencies to test out how Belfast Exposed Futures would work; a second annual exhibition of work by people on Belfast Exposed's Stage 3 training programme; development of a new Futures youth group; and the new *Futures Emerging Artists* programme.

Belfast Exposed also launched a new programme *Reawakening the Archive*, with the development of an Archive Steering Group, including people who had been involved in founding Belfast Exposed: *'We have a duty of care to the objects and to the people. We can move out of conflict themes, the material can address different themes and be a resource for artists too and be relevant to communities: different kinds of relevance.'*

As the *Our Museum* programme ends it is also proposed to develop new archive based community programmes, including the first *Communities in Focus* to be piloted at the beginning of 2016.

There is currently an acknowledged gap in community expertise amongst Board members, which the organisation intends to fill.

Outcome 3 Capability Building: Photography POD, Community Programme Volunteers

Training courses for community groups and for individuals wanting to improve their practical skills had been run for many years by Belfast Exposed's Community Photography Coordinator. The photography training structure had four stages, each designed to help develop photography skills, and increase understanding of photography as a creative medium. As the *Our Museum* programme got underway Belfast Exposed was uncertain about how best to use training courses to generate increased income in order to cross-subsidise other Belfast Exposed work; there were concerns that this might adversely affect training used as an integral part of community development.

Belfast Exposed developed the concept of the Photography POD, a pop up workspace, designed to develop photography skills amongst individuals and groups: first piloted with Dunmurry Community Association. The pilot was intended to test a more sustained way of working within a community and build on the existing relationship '*to create a physical space within a local community to enable direct engagement in photography and long-term photography infrastructure development.*' In Year 3 the POD moved to Hazelwood Integrated School in Newtownabbey where the focus was work with school students up to GCSE A level, though the POD was open to members of the local community. Regular workshops to develop skills, develop appreciation of photography, '*bring the gallery to the POD*' and talk about how to look at art were delivered. Plans have been made to develop a steering group approach to the development of the Pod: bringing together everyone with a stake in the project.

Increased attention was paid to Belfast Exposed's internal community of volunteers. In Year 2 existing volunteers, including photographers and some people from an art background, delivered the *Volunteers Curate* show in the main gallery. A new volunteer with archive experience began working with the Community Photography Coordinator as part of making the archive more visible within the organisation. During Year 3, a training programme in facilitation skills was delivered for volunteers interested in working in the community; a Community Volunteers programme was developed to enable volunteers to learn community photography facilitation skills through shadowing and delivering practical sessions; and an exhibition of work by volunteers took place in the Exchange Space.

Outcome 4 Reflection: Residentials, joint internal planning

Belfast Exposed's initial aspiration was to build a range of reflective processes into all the development stages of community projects and to use the Exchange Space for reflective discussions with communities, leading to changes in policy and practice.

However, the organisation's need to find ways to better connect the three strands of its work began to take priority. During Year 2, the external consultant's report on *Community, Collaborative, Education and Training Programmes* was used by the staff team as the basis of a reflection session. This prompted discussion of the importance of *'joining things up'* through experiment with different models of practice; of communicating the full scope of Belfast Exposed's work internally and externally; and changes in the gallery exhibition programme as dialogue increased internally between curatorial and community programme staff.

Regular forward planning meetings of the whole staff team were introduced. There was also greater reflection between staff members on *how* shows are selected and created and this increased practical connections between the gallery and the community programmes. *Valuable Reflections*, a show featuring twenty-four community groups, came about in this way and led to plans for the staff team to work together on longer time scales so that community focused exhibitions were given proper time in the gallery.

Two residential reflective sessions were held during Year 3. This included a residential away from the gallery for staff, some community partners and Board members. This was facilitated by an external consultant and focused on development of the Business Plan. A second session, facilitated by the *Our Museum* Critical Friend, involved the staff team in forward planning and reflection about how a forthcoming exhibition in the ground floor gallery could *'demonstrate excellence in promoting better participation in high quality arts from people living in disadvantaged and other marginalised groups?'* and how learning gained from joint planning for a future POD could be applied to longer-term planning processes.

As the *Our Museum* programme ends, Belfast Exposed has not identified a clear method for reflecting strategically with a range of community partners.

