

Challenging as equal partners

Okay, so how do you get to the stage

whereby you can work with a museum on an equal partnership?

I think it's simply a question of reminding the museum

that they have got a social responsibility

to work with and to inspire

and to encourage the local community to give to them.

I mean, it's not a question of them and us.

You know, we're all in the same boat together.

Because there always is this public perception

of there's them on the hill in the museum

and there's us down here

the community groups, you know.

Now is the time to work together.

Challenging them, I think to a degree,

museums need to allow themselves to be challenged.

They need to be receptive to criticism.

They need to be able to step back

and take some things on the chin.

Community partners, to be fair,

are often very used to voicing concerns,

whether that be at local government level,

to the authorities, to the state bodies or whatever.

Even campaigning as well.

So, typically, community partners

are not shy of giving opinions but the means

they may use for speaking up

may not be those with which museums
are altogether familiar or comfortable.
So museums need to be able to take criticism
in a number of different forms.
I wouldn't find it difficult
but then challenging things
is what I'm paid to do
and the challenge doesn't have to be a confrontation.

A challenge could be a conversation.

Not everything has to be a full-on;

'You're doing that wrong.

That's not really working.

It's not really what we want.

Have you thought of?'

I think, at first, when I first became a community partner,

I was a little in awe of the people.

It takes a while to recognise
how these organisations operate.

I think I have the confidence
and the skill and the how
to be able to challenge them,
but that took a while to build that up.

I guess it's kind of difficult
to be on equal terms
when you've got like one big institution
that's got a lot of staff and resources
and smaller community groups.

So they're always going to be unequal in a way
but I think as long as you recognise
the assets that both bring to the project
then that's really when you can
actually be equal partners.

You can become working as equals
with a gallery maybe after a project or two.

I think it's a natural thing.

I think you gain experience, you gain trust.

I think it's the length of the process.

It's a long time for the project,
there were three years.

Over that period, you could build up trust

but I think it's investing time

in those relationships,

understanding that every partner

you have around the table

they have different needs to the museum.

They also may have different needs to each other.

So it's taking people as a group

but also as individuals as well

and just working collaboratively.

The group that I'm working with,

they're very open to the community partners having a voice

and they like to be challenged.

They've encouraged us

to challenge them from day one

because that's what we're there for.

We're not really critical friends

but we do play a part in breaking down

maybe their ideas about things

from a museum background

compared to a third sector background.

I think I'd use three words really.

There's 'tolerance' of each other.

There's 'reciprocity', which I think is most important

in terms of expecting a positive outcome. And also 'trust'.

We've given something back to the museum

so they've learnt a lot about

the complexity of our clients

and they feel empowered

to work with them and safer.

They've had to learn an awful lot

and they've been really willing

and really interested in that

and I think they've gained an awful lot

from working with our clients

as much as we've gained working with them.

So it's been very reciprocal.

I don't feel like they've done 'to us' or given 'to us'.

I feel that it's worked both ways.