



**In this edition of the newsletter we focus on two main topics:**

**The challenges of embedding participation**

**The evaluation process in Year 3 and the final report we will be drafting in 2015**

## **‘Taking it to the Streets’: Commonwealth Association of Museums Conference hosted by Glasgow Museums: May 2014**

Piotr, Sally and Gerri were asked to speak at this conference about the challenges of embedding participation, based on the experiences of the *Our Museum* programme. We had limited time, so couldn't talk about all the challenges organisations are facing or include all the ways in which they are being addressed. We wanted to share with you those we highlighted. We described three difficulties:

### **Difficulty 1: Committed, Distributed Leadership**

We spoke about the difficulty of ensuring that the leadership of an organisation - all the elements of the leadership of the organisation - are fully committed to the strategic changes the organisation is proposing. Right from its inception, the *Our Museum* initiative recognised the importance of leadership in achieving organisational change; one of the key criteria for a successful application to participate in the programme was that the Director or equivalent fully supported the proposals.

However as the programme has developed deeper issues of leadership have become apparent.

The first is that it is relatively easy to ‘support’ a proposal for change, particularly at the conceptual stage; it may simply mean signing a letter - it can mean as little as ticking a check box. Active commitment to change is much harder; it can mean making painful decisions, making the time to champion new approaches and support the staff who are leading on them, removing obstacles to progress, challenging naysayers. This is demanding, especially at a time when the financial and political pressures on cultural institutions in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are immense.

The second is that, in most organisations, leadership does not reside simply with the Chief Executive. Trustees play a vitally important role, for example; there can be serious problems if they are kept in the dark or are fundamentally unsympathetic to the aims of the initiative to create organisational change. In others, members of the Senior Management Team can act either as champions of progress or as major blocks to progress. Organisational change does require the active commitment of the leader of an organisation; it also requires distributed leadership – active commitment at different levels throughout the organisation.

## **Difficulty 2: The ‘High Maintenance Funder’**

The Paul Hamlyn Foundation is undoubtedly a ‘high maintenance funder’ and this has caused difficulties for participating organisations.

What did we mean by the term ‘high maintenance’? It’s easier to start with ‘low maintenance’ - which is the kind of relationship cultural institutions in the UK have traditionally had with some of their funders. We exaggerated the profile of the low maintenance funder to make the point: a low maintenance funder assesses an application, hands over the money, requires a quantitative monitoring return at the end of the project or programme, wants to hear that all the objectives identified have been achieved, doesn’t read the evaluation reports and doesn’t ask awkward questions. This is, of course, a stereotype, but as with most stereotypes, it is easily recognisable.

Paul Hamlyn is not that kind of funder. To paraphrase comments from the *Our Museum* Steering Group:

*‘We care very much how our money is being spent, we care very much what kind of impact the work is having and we want to learn as much as we can from the programme so we can influence thinking and action in the wider cultural sector.’*

It is only as the *Our Museum* programme has progressed that the full implications of the funder’s intentions have become apparent to participating organisations.

Some organisations have struggled to understand, for example, that the funder is more interested in the calculated risks that they have taken and the learning that has resulted, than in a list of ticked check boxes. Other organisations have wanted the funder to do difficult thinking for them, for example, wanting PHF to give a fixed definition of a ‘community partner’, which could somehow apply equally to the context of a small museum in a rural area and a large national or regional museum.

Some organisations have been outraged to receive robust feedback on their perceived lack of progress in certain areas from the *Our Museum* Steering Group and to have strict conditions attached to further funding. Some have been surprised that their assertion that they cannot be expected to pay attention to a key principle or criterion because their circumstances are in some sense ‘unique’ has been met with

the question ‘and so how might you imaginatively address the principle, whilst taking account of your particular circumstances?’

Several organisations have found it difficult to escape from a ‘project’ mind-set in order to focus fully on the strategic nature of a programme, which aims to support organisational change and frames ‘activity’ such as particular projects as a means to achieve that change not an end in itself. To give an example, at this point in the programme, some organisations have been talking about ‘sustainability’, meaning sustainability of a specific project, rather than sustainability of a new organisational approach.

This ‘high maintenance’ model of funding has also posed challenges for the funder and for the evaluators. At times, the funder may have seemed to organisations less of a partner and more of a patriarch – for example, a great deal of criticism of the *Our Museum* Peer Review last year was that it was organised from the top down, with little room for museums and their community partners to influence the agenda. The evaluators have often found themselves prefacing verbal and written feedback by reminding organisations that they are offering suggestions and posing questions; they are not pretending to fully understand all the complexities of an organisation’s situation or to be infallible experts in the problems they are facing.

### **Difficulty 3: The Many Faces of Fear**

Fear can be a major barrier to any kind of organisational change, because it leads to paralysis and avoidance.

One group of fears we highlighted relates to the difficult financial and political environment in the UK. In such an environment, senior leaders can frame their *Our Museum* work programme as a time-consuming burden, irrelevant to what might be considered to be their central priority – survival. In an environment characterised by re-structuring and voluntary redundancy, museum staff can fear that, for example, proposals to develop work with volunteers is ‘code’ for replacing trained professionals with enthusiastic amateurs.

A second group of fears relates directly to professional status. If you have studied and worked tirelessly to establish yourself as a recognised expert you can feel threatened if it is suggested that there are other kinds of expertise which might complement your own. The word you can hear is not ‘complement’ but supplant. If you have spent years or even decades as an institution trying to balance the decision-making powers of, for example, elected local authority members and executive officers, it can be alarming to consider the possibility of sharing decision-making or even advisory powers with members of the public. At the other end of the spectrum, if you have a life-long commitment to the principle and practices of active partnership with communities, you may fear that progress with the OM programme is terrifyingly slow, or even that there is no progress at all; you too can feel paralysed and disempowered.

The final fear we explored is the one that seems to be buried in a phrase we have heard a great deal during the last few years – ‘We’re already very good at this....’ It is an extraordinary phrase. The organisations in the *Our Museum* programme were initially chosen precisely because they had a track record of good engagement with their communities. PHF- and far more importantly – the museums themselves, wanted to develop, strengthen, extend or radically question that existing track record. So what lies behind the comment? On a good day, we believe that it is the voice of fear, a realisation that the implications of true partnerships with communities are much bigger than organisations or individuals had expected. On a bad day, we wonder if it is the voice of complacency, which is, of course, even more of an enemy of change than fear.

The organisations that are making most progress in the *Our Museum* programme have not ignored their fears; they have identified them, respected them and found ways of addressing them. They have felt the fear and done it anyway.

We went on to highlight some of the different ways in which museums, galleries and their community partners have faced some of these difficulties and challenges.

### **Active and ‘championing’ leadership The Director**

At the National Museum of Wales the director has played a key leadership role at critical moments and in vital decisions. In a recent re-structuring, for instance, he appointed staff with experience, commitment and passion for community participation to key positions across the whole organisation. NMW has also addressed one of the biggest barriers to community engagement and participation: that it isn’t central to what the organisation does, that it is often the responsibility of a person or a small team at best. ALL staff across the whole museum, no matter what their role or specialism, have community engagement written explicitly into their job description.

At Belfast Exposed the new director immediately reviewed all organisational change and engagement objectives to ensure they were ambitious enough and – perhaps equally importantly – clearly aligned to the overall future of Belfast Exposed as a sustainable and relevant cultural organisation.

### **Active and ‘championing’ leadership Trustees**

Of course it is trustees or their equivalents that are legally responsible for their organisations. So it is crucial that trustees are also part of organisational change.

Four trustees of the National Museum of Wales formally act as champions of the principles of *Our Museum*, attending all meetings with community partners; whilst a training day was organised for the whole trustee board. This focused on crucial issues: ‘what is the meaning and importance of participation for the organisation?’ ‘How can it be rolled out, embedded and sustained across the whole organisation: a national museum with seven venues spread across Wales?’ .

The Lightbox is another example where the implications of the *Our Museum* experience were discussed with their new Board of Trustees: generating understanding, awareness and support for new ways of working.

### **Active and ‘championing’ leadership The management team**

Leadership is also - especially in larger and structurally complex organisations – about the wider management team championing commitment to participation and actively exploring the implications of participation for all parts of the museum or gallery. Glasgow Museums’ extended management team, for instance, attended training aimed at deepening their understanding of the principles and practice of community partnership.

### **Working with the Active Funder The ‘project mind set’**

Many participants have made the significant shift from ‘doing projects’ - with one off funds offered by funders - to understanding project activity as being fundamentally about action as a means to an end: a catalyst for organisational change.

So, for example, MEAL is systematically experimenting with different ways of co-producing exhibitions with distinct geographic communities and communities of interest with the overt aim of identifying best practice – or even ‘next practice’ – for the future as well as putting on great shows in the short term.

Similarly Bristol Museums Gallery and Archives’ recent ‘You Make Bristol’ project, involving over 60 community groups, resulted in new approaches to exhibition making and engagement of diverse organisations and individuals in a productive creative process with museum staff. It also enabled all the participants to reflect on ‘what worked’ and ‘what could be better’ and identify practices and principles that will change how the museum works in the future.

### **Working with the Active Funder Risk and going out of the ‘comfort zone’**

Museums and galleries traditionally have people [or teams] charged with ‘outreach’ or ‘education’ work with people or organisations outside the museum. It is more challenging to engage with ‘outsiders’ to change how your organisation works.

Hackney Museum has developed two separate mechanisms for collaborating with community partners with written terms of reference to confirm expectations and decision making powers: an Advisory Panel with borough-wide members asked to commit time over three years to consider strategic issues. Their Community Partners Group is considering an exhibition or programme of specific interest to the particular participants to happen over a shorter time period.

### **Working with the Active Funder Top down v bottom up**

The Lead Contacts Group now brings together people from each of the OM organisations with the OM director so that the OM model - of co-production,

collaboration, shared reflection and so on - extends into the nuts and bolts, the detail, of how OM works as a Paul Hamlyn Foundation programme.

Perhaps the most obvious example of the difference this approach makes is the way the programme for the next 2-day annual Peer Review has taken shape: the museums and galleries with the *Our Museum* director have identified together the issues that 'it's important to talk about' or 'get out into the open' or to share and how best to structure the event so that it feels 'right' and helps everyone share thoughts, ideas and reflections – even if they are a bit difficult or a bit uncomfortable.

### **Facing the Fear Survival**

In the current economic context simply remaining viable and sustainable is understandably at the top of 'to do' lists. Many *Our Museum* participants are closely aligning their OM work with achieving long-term sustainability. Belfast Exposed, for instance, is considering this in their relationships with core funders and in the development of new capital projects.

The management team of Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums held a facilitated day to consider the implications of deeper community engagement for decision-making across the service and for their other - critical - strategic imperatives: income generation and increasing visitor numbers. They concluded there was no conflict in principle between the deeper community engagement and the other strategic objectives but recognised the needed to be more aware of and more open to directly addressing potential tensions, as well as opportunities, when making hard decisions.

### **Facing the Fear Professional status**

Introducing programmes around community engagement and participation within the museum or gallery to develop all-staff buy in, understanding and skills makes a difference. Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums realised that the principle and practice of community engagement [and what it even means] seems simple and easy to some staff, but profoundly obscure and frightening to others. They are developing a training programme that will help identify core steps and building blocks clearly.

Glasgow Museums struggled in Year 1 of their OM programme to get staff to understand that it was about changing the way everyone worked with communities. They designed their Staff Ambassadors programme to address this. Very different from traditional training programmes, it 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 six months. You choose from a menu of opportunities: visits to community projects, involvement in live projects, work swaps, coaching and mentoring. It has changed the way staff across this large, complex organisation understand the purpose of their work.

## Facing the Fear 'We're doing it already...'

Change always starts somewhere – so creating change inevitably involves reflection on 'what we do now' and 'how we've always done things.' This can be scary and inviting people from outside the museum to join you in this reflection can make it more so. The Lightbox began its OM programme by organising a series of open meetings, consultations, listening sessions and conversations asking precisely this kind of question: 'what do you think of what we do?' It learnt a lot. Similarly TWAM's Peoples Parliament allowed free and open conversations about 'now' to learn how to build on the past and create a different future.

One of the key messages emerging so far from the *Our Museum* programme is that **small changes add up**. Organisational change towards meaningful and sustainable community participation takes time, patience and commitment from everyone involved [the museum or gallery, its community partners, strategic sectoral bodies and its funders]. Effective organisational change means changing lots of small things across the whole organisation. And of course the process goes on and on: change is constant after all.

END OF CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

## Year 3: Last Opportunities!

The coming year will be our last opportunity as an evaluation team to make sure we record the progress your organisation has made towards its OM strategic objectives. It is also the time for us to draw out the valuable learning from your experiences to share with the wider sector. You may have read the last section of the newsletter asking yourself '*Why haven't they mentioned this challenge?*' or '*Why didn't they talk about how we are dealing with that issue?*' or feel that we didn't describe your work as well as we could. If you did, please let us know, that's exactly what we need to hear from you.

We know that some of your work will only come to fruition in the final year of the programme. We will need to capture that learning and we also know that there is a very important story to tell about whether and how you can sustain developments into the future.

This final third year of the OM programme is also a period of enormous risk: it's possible that some people are looking forward to the end of the programme so they can forget all about the idea of communities as active partners. It's also possible that delays in new appointments or in planning schedules could lead to a loss of momentum or wasted opportunities. And new directions or priorities could start to crowd out agreed programmes of work.

Our Annual Evaluation Visit this autumn will be critical. Sally and Gerri will visit together each of the OM museums/galleries and their community partners. This will

give us more time to learn, ask questions and talk to more of the people who have been involved in your work. We can also return for one more informal visit during the third year: we have found the visits we have made this year (to Hackney, AC-NMW, The Lightbox, Belfast Exposed and BMGA) enormously helpful.

Those organisations that consistently and regularly send us the additional information - produced as a core part of 'what they do', which also relates to their strategic change objectives - are inevitably well represented in our evidence database. This is what we will be using in writing our final report. It's important that everyone's experience is well represented in the database. We are aware that organisations are working to different programme finishing dates and will bear this in mind in our work with you.

We are likely to make direct contact with you again in the spring of 2015 (by phone or email) to follow up specific questions as we begin to shape our report. Please remember to stay in touch!

Gerri and Sally ... and Helen