

***Is Revisiting Collections* working?**

Has *Revisiting Collections*' focus on engaging people directly with collections helped deliver active participation and change organisations?

Full report

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March 2013

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IS REVISITING COLLECTIONS WORKING?

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IS REVISITING COLLECTIONS WORKING?

If you really take the time to research the object from very many different angles, you understand that it can literally move from being an old bit of pot in the stores to being this incredible vessel of stories that's at the centre of the display.

Isobel Siddons, Head of Engagement, Archives Sector Development, The National Archives

FOREWORD

Our Museum: Communities and Museums as Active Partners is a Special Initiative of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, to facilitate a process of development and organisational change within museums and galleries that are committed to active partnership with their communities.

Through this initiative, we are supporting nine museums and galleries across the United Kingdom through a process of organisational change over three years, to place community needs, values and active collaboration at the core of their work; involve communities and individuals in decision-making processes; and ensure that museums and galleries play an effective role in developing community skills, capabilities and creativity. The distinctive characteristic of the programme is a collaborative and reflective peer-review learning process through which institutions and communities share their experiences and learn from each other as critical friends.

Beyond the individual organisations we are supporting, we are working to achieve significant shifts in participatory practice within the sector nationwide, by documenting and disseminating what works and what doesn't work so well in museums and galleries of different sizes, types and environments. We hope this will help the work of strategic bodies, other funders and other museums and galleries which have not been part of the programme, to embed participatory work and make it sustainable and less vulnerable to the vagaries of short-term project funding.

We commissioned Caroline Reed to evaluate the impact of the *Revisiting Collections* methodology, which is a tool to help museums, galleries and archives open up their collections to scrutiny by community groups and external experts; to build and share a new understanding of the multi-layered meaning and significance of objects and records; and to include these public interpretations as part of permanent collection records. As such, the *Revisiting Collections* approach is in line with *Our Museum* aims and objectives, and is a potential tool for museums, galleries and archives to use in order to extend and deepen true participation in all aspects of their work.

As Caroline explains below, *Revisiting Collections* was developed by the now defunct Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) in partnership with the Collections Trust. It was used by many museums, galleries and archives, particularly as part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad major project *Stories of the World*, but no resources were available to evaluate how effective it was as a participative tool, and whether there were aspects of the methodology and its use which could be improved. The Paul Hamlyn Foundation *Our Museum* programme now provides an opportunity and resources for such an evaluation, so that other museums, galleries and archives can judge its effectiveness as a potential tool to extend participatory practice into their collections interpretation and documentation.

This document is the full report. An illustrated summary report is available on both the *Our Museum* and Collections Link websites (www.ourmuseum.org.uk, www.collectionslink.org.uk).

Caroline's evaluation has examined:

- What *Revisiting Collections* does
- Who has been using *Revisiting Collections*, why and what for
- Its impact, and whether its focus on collections supports active participation

- Outcomes for participants, staff, organisations and audiences
- Relevance of *Revisiting Collections* to the museum and archive sector
- Barriers to using the methodology
- Barriers to raising awareness of *Revisiting Collections*
- How to use *Revisiting Collections* effectively

She makes recommendations to strategic bodies and funders to raise awareness of *Revisiting Collections* as a useful and effective participative tool and to include it in the guidance and support that is given to museums and archives. We hope that, in publishing this report and making it available to museums, galleries and archives which are interested in extending genuine participation, it might stimulate their own explorations and ways of working.

To find out more about the *Our Museum* programme and the individual change management programmes of the nine organisations involved, and to take part in discussions around issues of participatory practice, see the programme website www.ourmuseum.org.uk.

Piotr Bienkowski
Project Director, *Our Museum*
February 2013

1 WHY THIS REPORT, WHY NOW?

Revisiting Collections (RC) is an innovative methodology developed between 2004 and 2009 by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) in partnership with the Collections Trust.¹ The methodology challenges and helps museums and archives to involve communities in the core work of understanding, developing and interpreting collections. It offers tools to support the capture of external voices in collection documentation - so that the process of opening up collections for scrutiny leaves a sustainable legacy, and catalogues and retrieval systems are made more relevant to users' interests and needs. RC's objectives ally very closely with those of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) Special Initiative *Our Museum: Communities and Museums as Active Partners*.

The first RC toolkit for museums was published in 2005.² Revised toolkits for both museums and archives and guidance notes on running group sessions were published online in 2009.³ Since 2009, a growing body of guidance advice and case studies has been developed on the Collections Link website including *Revisiting Collections with young people and community groups*, written in partnership with the National Youth Agency and published in 2011, to share tips and flexible session plans for work across all age groups.⁴

Over the past five years, the RC method has been used to underpin a series of national and regional partnership programmes, including the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad major project *Stories of the World* (SotW), as well as independent initiatives in individual museums and archives. To date, piecemeal, project-focussed evidence of impact has been gathered, but there has been no systematic collation or review.

This report draws on over 50 interviews conducted between May and September 2012 with colleagues in regional and national strategic bodies and in museums (and some archives) of every size, from the largest nationals to tiny independent and local authority services with less than one full time staff member. Consultant Caroline Reed was given access to a number of internal and published project reports and evaluation summaries. Most of her interviews were with practitioners with direct experience of running RC sessions or managing RC-based projects, but in some, very helpful, cases it was possible to speak to senior managers about the adoption of the RC ethos into organisational policy and forward planning. Being commissioned as part of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's *Our Museum* programme, the report focusses largely on RC's use in museums, but many of the findings are equally applicable to archive services. Interviewees included representatives from five strategic bodies that have supported RC-based partnership programmes. In addition, Caroline was supported by Collections Trust to explore the provision being made for accommodating RC-derived data into the museum collections information management systems offered by most of the Trust's SPECTRUM Partner software developers.

¹ MLA's responsibilities for strategic leadership of the museum and library sectors were transferred to Arts Council England (ACE) in 2011

² *Revisiting Collections: revealing significance: an ALM London project*, Caroline Reed, Alice Grant, Val Bott & Jon Newman, ALM London, 2005

³ *Revisiting Archive Collections: a toolkit for capturing and sharing multiple perspectives on archive collections*, 3rd ed, Collections Trust, 2009 at <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/revisiting-collections>

Revisiting Museum Collections a toolkit for capturing and sharing multiple perspectives on archive collections, 3rd ed, Collections Trust, 2009 at <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/revisiting-collections>

Running a Revisiting Collections focus group Collections Trust, 2009 at <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/revisiting-collections>

⁴ *Revisiting Collections with Young People and Community Groups*, Collections Trust & The National Youth Agency, 2009 at <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/revisiting-collections>

The aim of this report is to offer a realistic, evidence-based assessment of *RC's* impact to date for participants, staff, organisations and the communities they serve. The interviewees have been laudably open - willing to share concerns as well as triumphs. Most of the direct quotes included are anonymous. Identifiable case-study information is included with permission. The report's conclusion provides general guidance notes for services considering using the methodology and makes targeted recommendations to stakeholder organisations, strategic sector lead bodies and funders.

2 WHAT DOES REVISITING COLLECTIONS DO?

RC provides a structured approach and tools to support:

- Opening up collections, current documentation and interpretation for challenge and comment - usually focussing on single items or very small groups of objects or records and capturing individuals' responses
- Collating and holding the resulting 'user-generated content' as part of core collections documentation so that it will be readily retrievable now and in the future
- Using that information to inform how collections are interpreted and understood

Through this fairly simple mechanism RC aims high - to support our sector to:

- Recognise and value external voices and, by including them in interpretation, help empower every visitor to feel part of an on-going conversation
- Increase participants' and wider communities' sense of ownership and entitlement to a say in how objects and records are used and interpreted
- Develop and communicate confidence in the relevance and appeal of both 'ordinary' and niche collections – demonstrating their public value and that of the organisations that hold them
- Begin to embed organisational change – especially nurturing new ways of working that pool 'people-focussed' and 'collections-focussed' skills
- Ensure that even short-term projects with small groups of people leave a legacy of knowledge and understanding
- Ensure that our sector's on-going investment in documentation delivers access to a rich understanding of the multi-layered meaning and significance of collections

In principle, the collections in the UK's public museums, galleries and archives are there for everyone. In practice, we know that many communities and individuals in our society make little use of these services and feel no sense of ownership either of the collections or the institutions. They do not see themselves or their interests reflected in the content of collections or in the ways objects and records are presented and interpreted.

The thinking behind RC sprang from MLA London research into how effectively local authority museums were serving their diverse communities. A 2003 report, *Reflections*, showcased wonderful outreach and engagement work, but revealed a real lack of confidence in the relevance of the museums' core collections for 'hard to reach' audiences.⁵ RC's premise is that even the most ordinary objects, specimens and records in our museums and archives hold stories that can spark people's imaginations and link directly to their lives and experience. The UK's collections reflect both our chequered history of international trade and Empire and the centuries-old diversity of our society. Objects' very design and fabric tell us about worldwide exchanges of materials and knowledge, scientific and technological development, aesthetic and cultural influence – and every object has a tale to tell of makers, owners, collectors and use - even within the museum itself. RC proposes that museums and archives can do their core work of building knowledge and interpreting and promoting their collections better if they do it in partnership.

Any museum or archive seeking to democratise its processes and engage with its whole community must be willing to open up its collections for scrutiny, comment and challenge. RC recognises the existence of 'hidden histories' behind the objects and records in our collections and seeks to broker better understanding of their meaning and significance for diverse audiences. RC supports services to explore their collections in equal partnership with individuals or groups from the wider community and to gather, value, record and share external perspectives, insights, opinions and knowledge. The RC toolkits and guidance documents show museums and archives how to run sessions where individuals and groups of external participants are prompted and supported to explore what they know, feel and think about

⁵ *Reflections*, Val Bott, London Museums Agency, 2003

individual objects and records and to critique the language and information contained in current catalogues and interpretation.

The enriched knowledge base developed through this process allows for more meaningful, multi-voiced co-curation of exhibitions and interpretive resources.

*[We use the *Revisiting Collections* approach because] we think it's the right thing to do –... Partially we are doing it because we feel inadequate. We know we only know part of the story – we know what we know; what people have in their own heads is another part of the story and to share that gives us a better picture ... It's the job of museums to engage with your audiences. Every time you engage with your audiences this information starts to appear... It's the job of recording that people maybe think is onerous. It can be, but if you work out what's important and make a plan for it then it's not as hard as it sounds. If people see it as best practice and are encouraged to do it, they will find a way of doing it.*

Senior Manager, city museum service

To date, the methodology has usually been adopted as part of a specific project or programme of work with identified outputs. Of course, *RC* is not the only methodology that supports participants' direct engagement with individual objects. Running since 2008, for example, the British Museum's in-house and now national partnership 'Talking Objects' programme invites small groups of young participants to spend a whole week focussing on and developing a creative response to a single iconic piece. The process and the outputs are filmed and currently appear online.⁶ Started in 2004, The Manchester Museum's Collective Conversations was an award-winning project that made films about people's encounters with objects from the museum's collections. These could be people who identified with or had a personal interest in the objects, people whose work gave them insights into relevant themes, or people who were simply curious. The Collective Conversations are also currently online and incorporated into displays in the Manchester Museum's galleries.⁷

Among such methodologies *RC* is unusual, partly because it places particular value on capturing participants' initial, untutored responses to objects (in contrast to the BM Talking Objects programme, for example, where participants are introduced to their object with a short lecture from an expert curator before asking their own questions and recording their own responses on a 'Shout Out Wall'). In addition, *RC* puts strong emphasis on museums and archives taking steps to ensure that even short-term projects will leave a legacy of new understanding and knowledge about collections that will be retrievable for access by future generations of curators and users. The methodology provides tools to support the capture of external voices and perspectives in the organisation's catalogue and supporting documentation database – its core repository of collections information.

Professionally, *RC* is demanding and requires a breakdown of the organisational structures that can place barriers between 'people-focussed' and 'collections-focussed' colleagues. Using *RC* doesn't have to involve any capital outlay or bought-in support, but it does demand an investment of staff time, a commitment to team working across some of the normal disciplinary boundaries and active, informed support at a senior level.

To use the methodology effectively, museums and archives need to pool staff and volunteers' knowledge and expertise - with outreach and learning teams, curators and collections information managers all working together. Not surprisingly, this can be quicker and easier to achieve in a tiny museum or archive,

⁶ See: http://www.britishmuseum.org/channel/object_stories/talking_objects.aspx
http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/community_collaborations/talking_objects-1.aspx

⁷ See: <http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/community/collectiveconversations/>

where staff regularly multi-task, than in a larger organisation with specialist departments and complex structures for decision making - but the outcomes can be equally rewarding whatever the size of service.

Opening up collections and capturing responses

The methodology can be used with individuals and small or large groups. Participants might be subject experts with a wealth of relevant research, cultural knowledge or life experience behind them - or people who have never seen objects or records like those in the collection before. They could be people with a particular interest in or perspective on the material because of their age, ethnicity, faith, sexuality or physical or mental health issues. They might be from communities with strong current local representation or from a widely dispersed diaspora.

Museum and archive staff need to prepare for the sessions carefully, selecting a range of material according to the objectives of their project and/or the special interests of their participants. They need to have to hand copies of current catalogue records and perhaps display captions or other written descriptions. They need to provide guidance, gloves and any equipment necessary for safe handling. Unlike a traditional handling session or stores/gallery visit, staff won't usually introduce any of the objects in great detail – although they will be on hand to answer questions and participate in conversations. The idea is for participants to start by exploring the material's physicality and meaning for themselves.

Participants are invited to choose an object or record from a prepared selection of material. They usually work with just one item at a time – or perhaps a closely linked group of objects or records. They are provided with written descriptions, but are encouraged to focus first on the actual item – absorbing its shape and feel, speculating about its purpose, design and history. The key difference in the methodology from museums' and archives' traditional good practice, both in handling sessions and in gathering community-based knowledge about collections, is that RC empowers participants by prompting them to explore not just what they might *know* about the things they are looking at, but what they feel, what memories or associations the items stir for them and what questions they have that the current captions or catalogue records don't answer.

This is done by asking a series of basic prompt questions:

Looking at the object/record:

- *Why did you choose this object / specimen / record? - Is there anything about it that you particularly like or dislike? Can you say why?*
- *How do you think it might have been created and used? You might want to think about: who by, when, where and why?*
- *Does it remind you of anything you've seen, used or done yourself?*
- *What questions do you have about it?*

Looking at the written description of the item:

- *Does it tell you what you want to know?*
- *What does it leave out – what information could you add? What questions do you have?*
- *What do you think of the language used – is it helpful?*

Simple questions, but museums and archives using the approach have found them enough to provoke heartfelt discussion and challenging, often unexpected, responses - giving a solid base for building sustained, creative, co-produced programmes of work that are deeply rooted both in the collections and in participants' reactions to them.

By running *RC* sessions structured around the prompt questions, the service will learn what it is about the objects and records that inspires and excites their participants, what assumptions people make, and what questions they have that the current captions or catalogue records don't answer.

Young people working with museums as part of *Stories of the World* commented on the prompt questions:

'If you didn't have the questions you wouldn't know where to start'. They 'leave it open for you to speculate'. There are 'no right or wrong answers'. They prompt 'brainstorming' and 'spark discussion and debate'.

It is key to the *RC* approach that participants' responses are collected in a way that genuinely reflects their immediacy and power – and the language people have used. Not only listening, but making the effort to capture and record people's opinions and the questions they want answered demonstrates the respect and value that the museum or archive is willing to give to external voices.

Adding external voices to the record

Once responses have been captured, the *RC* framework provides tools and guidance that help embed this new user-generated content (UGC) into collections databases, catalogues and archival subject guides. The process is intended to enrich documentation and make it more relevant to current and future users' needs by including participants' contributions and ensuring that they will be retrievable to enhance curators', archivists' and users' understanding of collections in 10, 20, 100 years' time.

For museums, the *Revisiting Museum Collections* tools are fully compatible with SPECTRUM, the Collections Trust's UK (and increasingly international) standard for museum documentation. SPECTRUM versions since 2009 have included all the 'Units of information' necessary to capture and attribute 'viewers' responses' and to hold the information that using *RC* has revealed people want to know about objects, their makers, owners, context and history.⁸

For archives, the *Revisiting Archive Collections* toolkit outlines approaches to capturing user-generated content in or alongside the General International Standard Archival Description - ISAD(G).⁹ New hard facts offered by participants, such as the identification of a building in a photograph, can be verified and added straight to the catalogue. New perspectives on the material might be captured through revising the use of subject keywords and/or the generation of new subject guides.

As digital asset management systems become more sophisticated, it is increasingly possible to link and retrieve not only user-generated written and verbal content, but digitised content in all media to object or collection records in the core catalogue.

Using external voices in interpretation

Revisiting Collections is intended to be used flexibly and organically to support a variety of community engagement work. The methodology offers a way of working and a set of tools that can help an organisation and its users get better value, better outcomes and a sustainable, tangible legacy from the investment of staff time and resources across a range of project types. As services experiment and become more familiar with *RC* and its potential, it is hoped that staff from every discipline will simply embed it as part of their normal working practice.

⁸ SPECTRUM: the UK Museum Collections Management Standard, Collections Trust, at <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/spectrum>

⁹ ISAD(G) at <http://www.ica.org/10207/standards/isadg-general-international-standard-archival-description-second-edition.html>

For visitors and service users, seeing and hearing external voices reflected in displays and catalogue descriptions is involving and empowering – making them feel part of an on-going conversation with the wider community.

The methodology can also be used to support the knowledge-transfer element of succession planning and to broaden community participation beyond short-term projects - so that external voices are included or reflected in collections management processes such as: decision making on new acquisitions; writing and implementing collections development policy; and undertaking collections reviews to inform rationalisation, disposal, and digitisation or documentation initiatives. The methodology is specifically recommended as part of the Significance Assessment Process that is part of the Reviewing Significance Framework for collections review developed for Renaissance East Midlands and now hosted on the Collections Link website.¹⁰

¹⁰ Reviewing Significance 2.0, 2nd ed, Caroline Reed Consulting, 2012, at <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/reviewing-significance>

3 WHO HAS BEEN USING REVISITING COLLECTIONS AND WHY?

Since 2005, a number of individual practitioners and services have opted to use RC because they felt it would help them achieve their objectives for specific partnership projects including: co-curation of real or virtual exhibitions; developing interpretive resources like loan boxes; research to enhance documentation; or collaborative contemporary collecting.

Rather more services have been introduced to and experimented with RC as part of wider initiatives sponsored by regional and national strategic bodies. In some of these, participating services were required to use the methodology in order to qualify for small grants. In others (including SotW), partners were encouraged to use the methodology by being offered access to training workshops and a level of consultancy support.

3.1 INDIVIDUAL SERVICES USING REVISITING COLLECTIONS

Research for this report has revealed the tip of what may be a small iceberg of independent users of RC, many of whom have heard about the methodology by word of mouth, through a Renaissance or MLA regional training workshop, or have simply carried it with them as they move on from organisations where it has been used. Some recognised that RC could help them deliver work already in the pipeline:

When [two Renaissance-funded community curator posts] came up I went to [the senior curator] and said I was interested in managing them – it was exactly the same week that Revisiting came out and I remember reading about it and, being a curator and documentation officer, it made so much sense – it was the start ... Revisiting Collections is now integral to the way the museum works with collections. Revisiting as a way of thinking has been the catalyst for so many things.

Senior Curator, large independent museum

At the Crafts Council in 2009-2010, the Participation and Learning Officer followed up a chance reference to RC in an Institute of Education seminar and used it to underpin *In Touch: Co-Curating a Handling Collection*:

I came across Revisiting Collections by accident ... I was thinking a lot about co-production ... really thinking about curatorial methods, research techniques ... as a set of practices that can be shared and used to engage audiences – show some leadership and share skills ... so Revisiting Collections really excited me as a concept.

As part of the Crafts Council project, groups of young teenagers selected objects for inclusion in six loan boxes. Their choices, responses and questions shaped the interpretation given in the boxes, so that the information provided genuinely reflects the interests and learning needs of the target audience (schools and museum education departments).

In 2009-2011, the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter (RAMM) secured Renaissance funding to support an exploration of the diverse histories and stories of people who have moved to the city. The museum's *Moving Here* project used RC to support 69 people from six different community groups to work directly with museum objects. RAMM's collections, both local and global, were 'used to stimulate conversations about migration, origin and identity in a 21st century post-colonial world'. The methodology was seen as an exciting new way of working that:

... differs from RAMM's usual approach to audience development ... Renaissance funding has allowed Moving Here to experiment with bringing people, museum objects and curators together directly from the start.

In 2009, a curator with Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton decided during the course of a SotW RC training workshop that he would use the methodology to support a project with Brighton's elderly South

Asian community looking at the Pavilion's use as an Indian military hospital during WWI: *'It was a done deal by the end of the session!'*

3.2 PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMMES

There have been a number of partnership projects underpinned by RC and sponsored by regional and national strategic bodies. Between 2008 and 2011, Renaissance East Midlands, Renaissance South East and Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) funded roll-out programmes introducing RC to museums and some archives. They provided training workshops, funding for small pilot projects and a level of consultancy support.

In the East Midlands (2008-2009), the aim was to pilot the methodology and inform future business planning for museum collections development across the region. After the pilots, RC was endorsed by the region's 2010 strategy for collections *At the heart of all we do*.¹¹ As noted above, the methodology informed the approach taken in assessing the significance of individual objects and whole collections in Renaissance East Midlands' *Reviewing Significance* collections review model.

In the South East (2011-2012), Museum Development Officers (MDOs) chose RC because it *'ticked all the boxes'* for smaller museums in the region and would help them improve their dialogue with local communities, explore new approaches to partnership working and develop their planning to meet Accreditation standards. The MDOs were aware that many of the region's museums were small, wholly or partly volunteer-run and without specialist education or outreach staff. Some of the museums were known to lack confidence in their ability to consult and engage with new, non-traditional audiences. The MDOs felt that RC's clear focus on working directly with collections played to the museums' strengths and would encourage paid staff and regular volunteers to use their own enthusiasm and curiosity about objects as a bridge to working with external participants. The part-time curator who ran one of the projects said that the approach *'sparked my interest because it was so focussed on collections and that's my thing – and [that] so often gets lost in museums. I liked the idea of different audiences giving their slant'*.

In Scotland (2009-10), the aim was *'to increase awareness of the Revisiting Collections methodology across the sector in Scotland'*. Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) felt the method

*... provides museums with a fresh approach to engaging their local community with collections, and to enabling the creation of user-generated information, knowledge and interpretation ... It has the potential to help museums develop new audiences and align their product development to meet the needs of those audiences, thus taking MGS a major step forward in delivering on its priorities of product, audience and business development.*¹²

Strengthening community links with collections and sharing community knowledge are seen as fundamental to Scotland's national strategy for museums and galleries, *Going Further*.¹³ MGS sees RC as a key mechanism to be included in the development framework that will support delivery against the strategy. They feel the methodology will support museums to fulfil the strategy's ambition that they become more efficient and effective – and contribute to Scotland's health and well-being agenda:

¹¹ The heart of all we do: a collections development strategy for East Midlands' museums 2009-2019, Caroline Reed Consulting, Renaissance East Midlands, 2009

¹² *Revisiting Collections* Pilot Evaluation, Museums Galleries Scotland, 2010, at <http://www.museumsgalleryscotland.org.uk/publications/publication/334/revisiting-collections-pilot-evaluation>

¹³ *Going Further: The National Strategy for Scotland's Museums and Galleries*, Museums Galleries Scotland, 2012, at <http://www.museumsgalleryscotland.org.uk/publications/publication/460/going-further-the-national-strategy-for-scotlands-museumsand-galleries>

I don't think there's any other methodology that's comparable – when people have had training and really get Revisiting Collections, it really chimes with their aspirations for their services - people love it once they get it.

Sector Account Manager – Collections, MGS

RC was chosen to underpin two of our sector's major London 2012 Cultural Olympiad projects. Between 2009 and 2012, MLA Council / Arts Council England encouraged more than 60 museums to use the RC methodology to underpin their work of engaging more than 2000 young people (14-24) with collections as part of the national *Stories of the World* (SotW) programme. Together they used it to support the co-curation of temporary exhibitions and permanent galleries and the development of activities ranging from dance and fashion shows, through deeply analytical gallery tours, to meticulously revealing re-cataloguing of 100-year-old textile samples – enhancing their retrievability for both research and income generation.

At the heart of SotW is a desire to engage proactively with a diversity of individuals and communities and work with them to assess, select and reinterpret the collections to be used in each of the projects ... The research, assessment and interpretation of collections should be open to many voices, not just a few. Our knowledge and understanding of artefacts, books and records can be improved immeasurably through dialogue with users and potential users from every part of our society. Engaging proactively and openly with groups and individuals from across the community can help to build a shared sense of entitlement and ownership of collections in the public domain.

SotW internal project report 2010

We wanted to make sure that we would develop exhibitions that we really could share with the World - where thought and care had been taken to understand the meaning of this stuff - Why is it here? What do we know about it? So Revisiting Collections fitted perfectly with that.

Isobel Siddons, former Director, Museums & Libraries 2012, Arts Council England

In the South East region's *Mandeville Legacy* (formerly *Paralympic Region*) programme, RC supported five archives and six museums to explore and re-interpret their collections in partnership with marginalised young people and adults with physical disabilities, learning difficulties and mental health issues. Outcomes included temporary exhibitions, a permanent gallery reinterpreted with an audio guide for blind people, a radio play, a cabaret and new catalogue entries and archival subject guides re-presenting images and patient records from 19th century mental hospitals through the eyes of contemporary MIND members.

All of these multi-partner programmes offered free training and support and most offered a funding incentive – or the opportunity to frame bids for external funding as part of a recognised initiative.

4 WHAT DID THEY DO?

From the initial piloting in 2005 to date, museums and archives have used the *RC* prompt questions as the starting point for a huge range of projects and programmes of creative work. *RC* has underpinned cross-generational and cross-cultural collaborations and the gradual building of trust between museums and archives and groups who felt marginalised, exploited, angry and sometimes suspicious of tokenism. For many services, their partners and participants, the experience has been genuinely revelatory – exposing and reinforcing the power and relevance of collections and the importance of the organisations that care for them.

At a more internal / strategic level, some museums have identified *RC*'s potential to help clarify their thinking about collections and users – especially as they prepare their applications for Arts Council England's Museum Accreditation scheme. The methodology is informing their approach to drawing up Collections Development Policies and Documentation Plans and strengthening their planning for delivery against Accreditation's 'Users and their experiences' criteria.

4.1 RUNNING REVISITING COLLECTIONS SESSIONS AND CAPTURING RESPONSES

Most services have run their *RC* sessions in education or search rooms, laying out the objects and information for selection. Others have adapted the approach to working with small groups in stores or galleries. Most have worked with groups of around five to 10, but some with as many as 30 people and some with individuals – either looking in depth at collections with a subject specialist or working with objects and using the prompt questions as an adjunct to oral history interviews.

During *RC* group sessions, staff found that some participants welcome the quiet focus of thinking about and expressing their thoughts in writing. *RC* offers a sample 'response' form which poses the prompt questions, and some participants found the form on its own to be a perfectly usable tool. Some museums adapted the written-response approach and found that using the form as a basis for encouraging participants to generate mind maps worked well - especially with secondary school pupils.

The ability of the participants to write as well as speak meant that we sometimes got things that they were too self-conscious to say and the quieter people were able to have their say

Collections access officer, town museum

For many participants, however, the response form is much better used as a questionnaire with a partner or staff member using the prompt questions to trigger discussion and acting as a scribe to capture the participant's responses. Other participants might prefer discussing objects in small groups with one person nominated to write down responses, then feeding back as a team to everyone in the room.

It's good to put all our ideas on piece of paper so we can include everyone's comments

Young participant in *SotW* project

The *SotW* programme, in particular, spurred services to be imaginative and flexible in the way they organised their *RC* sessions – using the prompt questions and capturing responses in ways that would best suit their young participants' preferences and needs. The outcomes of this informed the 2011 online publication *Revisiting Collections with Young People and Community Groups*, which also addresses issues around attribution, copyright, ethics, consent and data protection, especially when working with young or vulnerable people.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Revisiting Collections with Young People and Community Groups*, Collections Trust & The National Youth Agency, 2009 at <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/revisiting-collections>

Increasingly, as audio and audio-visual recording equipment becomes cheaper, easier to obtain and use and more familiar to participants, services have chosen to record all or part of their *RC* sessions. This can generate a rich resource – capturing and communicating the vitality of participants’ reactions to seeing, handling and discussing objects and records for the first time.

At the Oriental Museum at Durham University, young *SotW* participants found ‘*instant gratification*’ in being provided with RNIB PenFriend audio labellers to audio record their own reactions and thoughts about the objects they’d worked with.¹⁵ ‘*Their own voices can go straight into the exhibition: ‘my voice, my thoughts are as valid as anyone else’s’*’. Currently the pens are being used by visitors both as audio guides and for them to record their own responses for sharing.

4.2 ADDING NEW VOICES TO THE DATA RECORD

All the available evidence shows that the weakest area in delivery of *RC* to date is in following the methodology right through to the documentation phase – incorporating new perspectives and user-generated content into catalogues and databases in a way that will make it retrievable and attributable in the future.

Some services have managed this part of the work well. In an evaluation report written in early 2011 on their complex *Moving Here* project – involving six curators as well as learning and outreach staff – the Royal Albert Memorial Museum noted:

229 comments from Moving Here participants have been added to the museum’s new collections database. New comments are being added by RAMM staff every week.

At one *SotW* museum, staff trained the young curators themselves to use the Adlib database to search the collections and then created a field for them to record their own reactions.¹⁶ The museum team was able to make the necessary adaptation to Adlib themselves. The project lead checked the input for relevance before making it a live part of the catalogue.

The use of Adlib by the young people was highly successful. It provided them with a knowledge and overview of the collection which would be difficult to obtain using other means. The use of Adlib was also more successful than had been expected by the museum. The technically dry nature of the database and its perceived difficulty of use was unexpectedly (by the museum’s curators) no barrier to the young curators. The latter spent large amounts of time navigating the database, both individually and in groups, and were interested in its features. This enthusiasm for the museum database and the overview it provided resulted in less mediation being required between the young curators and the collections manager.

Capturing data about new acquisitions

In one important area of collection documentation, a few museums have taken the initiative to use what they have learnt from their *RC* sessions. They are incorporating their new understanding of what users and potential users might want to know about objects and records directly into the processes they use when collecting information about new acquisitions. Almost inevitably, it is the back stories, both specific and contextual, that people want to hear or piece together – stories that have traditionally not always been recorded when material is accepted into collections.

¹⁵ See: <http://www.rnib.org.uk/SHOP/Pages/home.aspx>

¹⁶ See: www.adlibsoft.com

You always get really interesting information when you sit down and have a conversation in the gallery, but when you complete the object entry form you tend to focus just on the factual stuff - 'that's it' – you don't capture the rest. The most interesting conversations you have in museums are what people tell you.

Senior Curator, independent museum

For museums, the current standard Collections Trust 'Object entry form' doesn't make provision for collecting the stories that breathe life into an object. In the light of *RC*, some museums have reviewed their object entry practice and now automatically complement the standard entry form with an object history form – for filling in at the moment the object comes on site – often the moment where the information will be most vividly recalled and communicated and sometimes the only moment it will be available at all.

Some are considering basing part of their object history forms on the *RC* prompt questions, ensuring that the museum always probes and records what donors feel about the material, and the reasons behind its donation, as well as hard facts about dates and provenance.

Succession planning

One organisation stressed *RC*'s potential as a way of supporting succession planning, particularly in relation to capturing and retaining colleagues' collections knowledge. The methodology's tools for prompting, recording and attributing personal responses to objects and records could be very helpful in encouraging curatorial and other staff and volunteers to enrich the database by sharing their feelings and anecdotal or contextual knowledge about whole collections and individual items alongside 'hard fact' information.

4.3 USING 'USER-GENERATED CONTENT'

All of the services interviewed had already used, or were planning to use, participants' contributions to inform interpretation of their collections – at a most basic level just including a few quotes in the gallery, at the most complex using a co-curation / co-production approach, shaping their projects in partnership with participants and using their responses as the whole basis for interpretation: selecting items for display or inclusion in a loan box or gallery tour; developing an interpretive theme; deciding how to juxtapose objects or records and the ideas they inspire; or developing the language to describe them.

5 IMPACT AND EVALUATION

5.1 WHAT EVALUATION HAS BEEN DONE?

To date, much of the evidence for RC's impact remains anecdotal and patchy – even from the major programmes supported by national and regional strategic bodies. Evaluation models have been created for both the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad programmes *SotW* and *Mandeville Legacy*, and these require some systematic gathering of evidence on RC's effectiveness in delivering change for participants, staff, organisations and audiences. At the time of writing, this data has not yet been fully collected or analysed.¹⁷

The RC support materials currently available online include sample evaluation forms, and most services have used versions of these to gather participants' and sometimes staff members' responses to individual RC sessions or whole projects. In some museums and across at least one partnership programme evaluation responses have been analysed using the *Inspiring Learning for All* (ILFA) *Generic Learning Outcomes* (GLOs).

In January 2011, the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter produced a wonderfully comprehensive and informative internal evaluation report to assess outcomes of the museum's *Moving Here* project (basing the assessment on the 2010 *SotW* evaluation model, which includes both ILFA GLO and *Generic Social Outcome* (GSO) analysis).¹⁸

There has been much less gathering of evidence to assess the impact for audiences of seeing multiple voices and community-generated content included in exhibitions and other interpretation.

5.2 DOES FOCUSING ON COLLECTIONS SUPPORT ACTIVE PARTICIPATION?

One of MLA London's primary motivations for developing *Revisiting Collections* was to boost museum and archive practitioners' confidence in the relevance and power of even the most 'ordinary' objects and records to engage and inspire groups and individuals from across their communities. As we have seen, the key elements of RC's focus on collections are: enabling external participants to spend time with and explore individual objects and records; capturing and valuing participants' responses; making these external voices accessible as part of the core recorded information about collections; drawing on these external voices to inform and enrich interpretation.

Focussing on objects and records

Many of the practitioners interviewed for the report felt that RC's close focus on gathering individuals' responses to objects and records was the most profoundly empowering element of the projects they had delivered. For both participants and staff the process gave a starting point for exploration and discussion of deeply held feelings and values - very different from the 'top-down' approach offered by more traditional gallery visits, store tours or handling sessions.

People ... relate an object to something in their own life or experience. The object can be just the start of a conversation – a trigger for a memory of home that they want to share, or a story about their cultural history.

¹⁷ *Stories of the World: Collections and communities evaluation framework: data collection and reporting* April 2010 - March 2013, Cultural Consulting Network & Collections Trust, MLA Council, 2010
Stories of the World evaluation framework, 2nd ed, Emma King Consultancy & Collections Trust, MLA Council 2011

¹⁸ *Moving Here: an evaluation report for the Royal Albert Memorial Museum*, Claire Gulliver, Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, 2011

I am surprised at what connections people can make with objects which ostensibly have no connection with their lives or culture.

I believe that people are honoured to get up close and touch objects – it makes them feel special and valued. This is particularly gratifying when we work with people who can be on the edge of society and go ‘unnoticed’ on a daily basis.

The project has reinforced my belief in the power of objects – that they are an essential element for understanding our past. I was surprised by people’s reactions – some were keen to touch things and had a strong connection, others were scared of holding things that were ‘museum’ objects. It was interesting that the objects I was expecting an emotional response to didn’t always get it.

Staff involved in a city museum project

For ex-miners at Snibston in Leicestershire, it was the familiar tangibility of individual objects that sparked both quiet journeys of private recollection and uproarious group discussion. For young men at Captain Cook’s Birthplace Museum in Middlesbrough, both the strangeness and the strong human resonance of Maori carving and design from the other side of the world inspired an awareness of similarities and difference, and new perspectives on their own lives and culture – and the role of the museum in their community.

I enjoyed having the chance to hold actual Maori artefacts ... and respecting the objects.

Although I have very little respect, I can and do respect other cultures who have been wronged.

I have learnt that there is a lot that can be learnt from the older generations.

This makes me proud of where I’m from and working with the Captain Cook Birthplace Museum.

Museums are giving a soul that has been lost back to the communities, giving them a history and a sense of worth.

I feel more involved with the community. It brings it closer and helps people to understand others.

Young people working to explore the worldwide context and connections of objects held in Yorkshire’s museums as part of the regional SotW Precious Cargo project said:

I just think ‘wow, that comes from Bradford’ and for me that’s really important because I love Bradford and not many people do ... The collections make it so inspiring – to see what people did all those years ago and what they achieved.

They had an object and it was spiritual, I think it was like a shrine and a Buddha and the way it was presented at the time, [a fellow participant] wasn’t happy with it and she was like ‘Can you please...’ and she had to put gloves on and change it, I think it was a very religious thing, the way they had it laid out was completely wrong. So having people from all over the place, cultures and religious backgrounds helped as well because obviously we had input on things that maybe some of the curators might not have had that history in.

It’s not just about putting paintings up on the wall, there’s a reason for why one painting would be here and an object would be there and that I thought was good for us to know, about how it’s all planned out ... at first before I worked with the museums I thought these are decided by ‘this is how it looks nice’. Obviously there’s more reasons behind it, the objects, like the care for each object, they need to protect them from other materials.

And at the Crafts Council:

...I wasn't interested in crafts, but I have seen that some ... have a story and a meaning.

Archives have found it very possible to use the RC approach with written material, such as school and hospital records, as well as more the obviously visual maps, photographs and film. Participants working with archive documents in a *Mandeville Legacy* project commented:

....we are talking about the time of the First World War and it was the condescending attitudes that really struck me. In some documents and old newspapers, disabled people were referred to as 'poor creatures'. Reading between the lines, so to speak, we were portrayed as somehow lesser beings!

The project gave us all an insight into the lives of disabled people. Old attitudes and language about disabled people informs the present.

Almost all the museum and archive staff interviewed had enjoyed the close working with objects and records that RC demands. Practitioners were intrigued and challenged by the unexpected associations participants made between objects, the assumptions they made and the questions they wanted answered. Curators and collection managers were surprised and heartened by participants' fascination with the behind-the-scenes world of museums, their very genuine interest in the processes and choices inherent in managing and developing collections: acquiring, researching and documenting objects; selecting and grouping material for display; holding and caring for reserve collections in store.

For many non-curatorial staff, the experience of in-depth working with collections was itself revelatory. This was especially true of learning and outreach staff. In some services, there was a culture of these departments working at arm's length from the core collections, particularly from material in store.

It's been great for me. I've seen objects that I would never have had opportunity or reason to see – normally I would just work with what was in an exhibition and leave it at that. Now the education team feel more part of the bigger museum team. It's really broadened my horizons ... Revisiting Collections has really opened my eyes on how objects might be used in museums. The penny dropped when on training we talked about how a person's response to an object might be something to document – I had never even thought about that - and now it's almost like a sixth sense – I watch someone and their response and think 'I'll make a note of that'.

Learning officer, small local authority museum, part of SotW

Sharing participants' excitement could be doubly stimulating and illuminating for non-curatorial staff:

A young Pakistani girl [a fashion student] got very excited because some of woven blankets in the collection are in a fabric still made and used ... she ended up asking her grandmother in Pakistan to send some – she made it into high fashion garment as part of project. [She] realised something so familiar to her had these roots going back – an amazing moment for the museum – makes you look at collections differently – not dead objects – miraculous stuff that has a real meaning for people. If you are not in the room or don't hear about this directly it can be difficult to communicate the impact. It was so exciting for people at the time - it made staff feel differently about the collections' potential.

Senior manager, city museum, part of SotW

For some curators, working so closely with participants changed their thinking on how to select and present objects in a way that would have more meaning for audiences:

It's definitely given me a different way of looking at interpretation and display ... really helped me to select objects in a different way ... Revisiting Collections has given me 'mental guidelines' for writing

an object caption - I mentally use the questions I used in the sessions when I'm planning what to put in an object caption on display - why this object – what's important about it – who would have used it etc. – for online descriptions as well – it was kind of like a training for myself – as a curator.

Project curator, large city museum, part of SotW

Two interviewees flagged up the benefits of using RC as a way of engaging and drawing input from, respectively, museum friends and front-of-house staff:

Don't underestimate 'Friends' – there is still so much more they can be involved with and be a part of – we could do this sort of [Revisiting Collections] session with them before any temporary exhibition.

Curator, very small museum with two p/t paid staff and active volunteers

Some items caught their imagination – they chose objects they wanted to look at – some objects stood out as favourites – those made it to the exhibition ... For all exhibitions we should involve front of house people in that way ... People need to know the gallery and understand the objects – they get asked questions all the time. [This was] a morale-boosting thing for front of house people – they are always interested in curatorial work. They don't always get kept in the loop and this is good way to involve them.

SotW project curator, city museum

A curator working as the sole museum professional in her organisation (a local authority libraries department) suggested that, because of the methodology's clear focus on objects and what they can mean, running an RC session with her manager and colleagues would be a very engaging way of communicating some of the fascinations and complexities of museum work: *'an excellent taster of what a museum does'.*

It was often the larger museum services - those with dedicated teams used to running sophisticated learning and outreach programmes - that had most concerns about relying on the simplicity of close contact with objects as a basis for community participation, especially with young people. In the SotW programme, some partner museums felt that just objects and information wouldn't be enough to stimulate and inspire their 14-24-year-old participants. They thought teenagers and young adults would require more instant gratification, more technology. They were certain that young people wouldn't be interested in the thinking or processes behind cataloguing and documentation:

The museums went on a 'journey of understanding' about what would interest young people. The really exciting process was the young people's fascination with the museums as 'factories of knowledge' - that there are these weird curators who have specialist knowledge, conservators and research processes - and how that knowledge about collections is generated and managed. Their reaction to that was a very passionate stance around this really amazing thing, that all these collections are ours – so why are they locked up in stores? Why can't the public see the catalogue? Why is the catalogue access limited to a handful of specialist staff in the museum? So it's not even that the public can go into the museum, search on the catalogue and call something up from the stores. [They developed] this sense that the catalogue is the key to unlock collections, so a really quite powerful thing. [They had] a really sophisticated understanding of how important the knowledge is: objects are just things, when you add the knowledge to them they become valuable – not in monetary terms, valuable as cultural objects.

... the whole process was understanding that things were kept in stores, how they were managed, what the environmental conditions were, security ... and also understanding how things were selected for display and what that process might be about: why this thing is on display and not that stuff and how, if you really take the time to research the object from very many different angles, you understand that it can literally move from being an old bit of pot in the stores to being this incredible vessel of stories that's at the centre of the display.

[They had a] *feeling of privilege that curators wanted to work with them and share their knowledge and understanding and that their [own] ideas would enrich that process as well.*

Isobel Siddons, former Director, Museums & Libraries 2012, Arts Council England

Documenting and using the results

Having run RC-based projects and programmes of work, most museum and archive interviewees were keen to incorporate the outcomes into displays and interpretative resources. Beyond this, most services appreciated the value of capturing external voices more permanently and felt that, in theory, they should become part of the contextual documentation held on the service's collections information management system. Not all had taken the steps necessary to achieve this – this issue is explored further in Section 7: *Barriers to using the methodology*.

Some felt that RC had merely reinforced an approach that they would normally take anyway.

It hasn't radically changed how I view objects or how I'll interpret them – I've always focused on [capturing] visitors' personal responses to objects as well as the more 'academic' side. This project has reinforced that this is a valuable approach to take.

Curator, city museum

A few individuals were more sceptical, particularly where the responses were gathered from participants without any specific experience or expertise relating to the collections. They saw these 'non-expert' comments as of only ephemeral value – perhaps adding a contemporary, collaborative feel to an exhibition, resource or activity, but not of long-term interest.

[Young people] can only say what they feel – they don't have experience. Older people's responses would be more considered, informed, so worth recording formally ... you can brush off young people's nitty gritty comments. Get them to research – then they can challenge.

Curator in a large museum - working on a SotW project

Where documentation and collections management staff were actively involved in RC projects, they were enthusiastic about the value the methodology puts on rich, user-friendly documentation as a tool for access. Many welcomed the idea that they might be in at the start of an exciting, community-focussed project, rather than being asked to pick up the pieces at the end. Some were especially happy to report that their 'people-focussed' colleagues, and some senior managers, had become much more aware of the potential of collections documentation to be about more than basic housekeeping '*only noticed when something gets lost or damaged*'.

For some 'people-focussed' staff in museums, however, it is clear that the documentation element of RC remained daunting or even mystifying. In a surprisingly high number of services, use of the collections database wasn't part of learning and outreach staff's daily work. They often didn't have unmediated access even to consult the core database. This meant that recording external participants' voices in the database system didn't always seem especially important to them. This is discussed further in Section 7: *Barriers to using the methodology*.

Set against this, participants themselves, especially the young people involved in SotW, greatly valued the opportunity offered by RC not only for them to express their own and to hear other peoples' opinions about objects and records, but for those opinions to be valued and set beside the museum's own knowledge.

A SotW report written one year into the project (late 2010) said:

For the young people the idea of documentation and legacy was clearly important. They felt very strongly about the importance of recording contextual (who, what, when, why) information about objects and about their own work leaving a legacy.

Young curators at Bradford said: 'Everything has a story – important to capture – should have someone whose job it is to do that – dedicated team to research and document'.

SotW Youth Steering Group said: '... [participants] would like to know from the start how their views on objects and their responses to objects will be used. Will they be part of an exhibition? Part of permanent records of object? They don't want to invest their time and then their views not be included'.

Interviewed in 2012, Isobel Siddons, former Director, Museums & Libraries 2012, Arts Council England, said:

... message that came across clearly was that 'if you are going to sit down and talk to us and hear our opinions, what are you going to do with them? We're not going to sit in a room for 3 hours, give up our Saturday morning and you put it in a drawer'... [they were] really interested in 'how does that follow through, so that our ideas and opinions are valued, become part of that knowledge, that core product of the museum?'.

5.3 OUTCOMES FOR PARTICIPANTS, STAFF, ORGANISATIONS AND AUDIENCES

Participants

Most services using RC have gathered some evaluation response from participants, either using versions of the RC sample evaluation forms downloadable from the Collections Link website or much more informally. Little of this evidence has been fully analysed, but the interviews and other evidence reviewed for this report show that participants welcome RC's emphasis on giving parity to external, non-museum voices. They relish having their own opinions sought and taken seriously. They welcome hearing other people's perspectives and having the opportunity to engage in in-depth, challenging discussion with curators, archivists and fellow participants on an equal footing. They expect and are proud to have their own input integrated into how collections will be described and displayed in the future and they understand the importance of their voices being held as part of the core documentation that a service holds about its collections. They develop a strong sense of entitlement and ownership, not just with regard to the specific collections and knowledge held by the museum or archive they have worked with, but to all publicly accessible collections and the wider heritage sector.

Interviewees shared some insightful comments from participants:

It's surprising me. It's taught me to be more open minded.

It's made me understand that I can give more than I do, that I can be more than I am.

It gets you thinking about your own culture. It's getting back a bit of your own identity.

It's good to have a curator presenting stuff. It's good that a curator has knowledge of other cultures. It's good for black people to know that.

In a more structured assessment using the *Inspiring Learning for All* (ILFA) *Generic Learning Outcomes* (GLOs), an internal report on the Renaissance East Midlands' pilot said:

For participants the quantifiable responses show a high score (77%) for 'Knowledge and Understanding' and scores of 40% and 44% respectively for 'Attitudes and Values' and 'Enjoyment, Inspiration, Creativity'. Analysis of the participants' comments shows almost three-quarters indicating 'Attitudes and Values' and a quarter 'Knowledge and Understanding'.

The Royal Albert Memorial Museum evaluation also reports strong evidence for these three ILFA GLOs as well as for the 'Stronger Safer Communities' and 'Strengthening Public Life' ILFA GSOs.

Staff

For staff, the available evidence is that using RC can be both tough and stimulating. The methodology challenges the comforts of silo working and undermines the protectionist defences organisations might seek to place around collections knowledge. In the main, interviewees felt that using RC has: strengthened their confidence in the relevance and appeal of both 'ordinary' and 'niche' collections; helped them develop new skills and ways of working across traditional boundaries; raised their awareness of the power and importance of full, rich and accessible collection documentation; helped them appreciate the value of including external voices in both documentation and in interpretation; and supported them to experiment with new, co-creative approaches to display.

The Royal Albert Memorial Museum project evaluation report notes:

Three curators said that they had developed new skills, including 'speaking and listening' and 'connecting with audiences in a different way'.

Two curators said that they had not gained any new skills, but had developed existing ones such as 'people skills' and 'a heightened awareness' about the way people engage with objects.

It has helped in developing teamwork and organisational skills (curator)

Most interviewees agreed that they found using RC inspiring, illuminating and helpful, although they were keenly conscious of the amount of preparation and follow up work involved – and of the fact that their service could never offer the same level of scrutiny to all its collections – or to all potential users.

Many individuals felt that their own way of working had changed irrevocably: curators would always be looking to understand external perspectives on collections and to include external voices in their interpretation; learning or outreach specialists would aim to work much more closely with objects and records and to collect and record people's responses to them.

In terms of ILFA GLOs, an internal report on the Renaissance East Midlands' piloting of RC said:

The quantifiable responses [for participating staff and volunteers] show consistently high scores for each of the GLOs. All are above 70%, while 'Knowledge and Understanding' and 'Attitudes and Values' are in the high 90s. Analysis of the staff's comments shows almost a quarter each indicating 'Enjoyment, Inspiration, Creativity' and 'Activity, Behaviour, Progression', with the remainder equally divided between the remaining three GLOs.

Comments included:

The [museum] site needs to build stronger community links and Revisiting Collections has helped towards this. My expectations of the sessions were they that they would be hard work and exhausting, as I had not done anything like this before. I was forgetting that the people coming wanted to talk to us about what they knew. The sessions were enjoyable and positive.

The sessions were a great way to strengthen ties to the local community.

We have had several comments since the session that the participants would like to come back and do this again. I will certainly recommend that this approach is used in future as it is an important way to engage with and involve the community as well as enriching our understanding of collections.

This is definitely something that I would like to see become part of the integral work we do ... I would particularly like to encourage more working in partnership between the collections access assistants and the community learning officers. I think this is key and that Revisiting should be built into future project plans for both teams.

Cross-disciplinary working

Delivering successful RC group sessions demands both a willingness to share curatorial knowledge and some expertise in managing group dynamics, so that everyone has a say and is listened to. This cross-disciplinary working can be one of the methodology's major benefits, particularly for larger services with specialist departments, but it can present a steep learning curve for both organisations and individuals.

Some practitioners embraced cross-disciplinary working between curatorial, learning, outreach and documentation staff from the outset and relished the opportunities it offered:

The best training day I've been on – reassuring and exciting! I've never been in a room where community people and documentation people have had such a strong common goal!

Community Engagement Officer at an RC workshop

[It has helped] in developing teamwork and organisational skills

I like working across teams anyway, but I've noticed how both Curators and Conservation staff have enjoyed working with us and the public. I personally have had little to do with the Conservation team before and have enjoyed working with them and learning from them.

Staff from city museum project team

Others were more resistant – on both sides of the 'collections-focus' / 'people-focus' divide.

The Learning Department never really understood, got behind it or took it on

Curator

One learning officer said that if her museum hadn't been part of SotW she would have been unlikely to attend the training:

There are so many things out there – you are bombarded all the time – the name [with 'collections' in it] wouldn't have attracted me.

Some curatorial staff were unwilling or reluctant to engage with RC – even to the extent of attending training. They saw the approach as straight outreach work, not part of their brief. Two SotW workshop learning officers whose curatorial colleagues had declined to attend workshops wrote wistfully:

I would have liked to attend this event with a member of the collections team to develop a mutual understanding.

It would have been better if curatorial people had come along to the workshop as well - you need everyone singing from the same song sheet at the outset.

Silo working practice is unlikely to be overcome without leadership and support at senior level. One senior manager in a small city museum commented on the general anxieties that community-focussed working can set up in some curatorial staff

... who see wanting to change the way the organisation is working as an implied criticism. It is important to think about what originally brought curators into museum work. They have a strong loyalty to their specialism and their peers. It can distress people to feel that their idea of what their job is being challenged: 'I didn't get into museums to be a social worker'. One of the solutions to that anxiety is to develop a consensus, re-examining issues around engagement and to respect and to embed the specialism of curators as a very valuable resource to be drawn on by the Revisiting Collections way of working - a rich resource that we value and could use better.

Organisational change: aspirations and experience

RC guidance notes suggest that the beneficial outcomes for organisations might include:

- Supporting strategic objectives for collection and audience development
- Building meaningful external partnerships
- Bridging gaps between 'people-focussed' and 'collections-focussed' activity
- Ensuring that investment in documentation delivers tangible benefits for staff and users
- Demonstrating how public engagement with collections delivers against core and external funders' priorities

While generally enthusiastic about their own and colleagues' personal learning and development, many of the practitioners interviewed were more cautious about the extent to which using RC has (so far) delivered genuine organisational change, especially in larger, more complex services.

A small number of the interviewees felt that their services had bought-in to the methodology so completely that using it had become easy second nature. This was particularly so where the hands-on use of RC had been actively supported from the top, or near the top, of an organisation and been planned and implemented with genuine leadership and involvement of all relevant staff and departments.

Revisiting Collections is now part of what we just do – we don't necessarily always follow every aspect, but we add it to any projects we do – we capture data that then gets added to the Collection Management System as and when possible – we constantly think about how we might collect information that people hold about our collections.

Senior manager, city museum

Others felt they had run successful projects with some great outcomes for participants and staff. They felt that using RC had instigated a process of change that they were committed to carrying through.

[before this] there was theoretical awareness, but what makes you really aware is doing stuff – there are lots of reports about changing practice, but because [Revisiting Collections] was used to underpin SotW it became more real to us. Now that kind of thinking is flowing through the organisation - not a smooth flow, not entirely coherent, but there. We are aware that there are lots of other elements in our collections that could be explored in this way.

Senior manager, city museum

Now that we've got the structure and methodology, I think this is a great way to solicit information and participation on all sorts of objects. For example, it's great to see our ethnography curator asking for a session with members of the Hindu community to see if anyone can help shine light on some pictures in his collection.

Project curator, city museum

These services expect to use the approach again and with more confidence about adapting the tools to meet their specific needs, but they cautioned: *'Revisiting Collections is a new way of doing things – it takes time'*. They emphasised the need for active buy-in to the RC ethos at senior management level, but stressed that, even then, the process of change could be slow.

A number of the museum services interviewed had written, or were considering writing, a commitment to collaborative working with external partners into the new Collections Development Policies that they were writing in preparation for their next Museums Accreditation application – some specifically citing RC as the methodology they intended to adopt.

A few had already referenced the methodology in funding bids and grant applications e.g. to the Museums Association's Effective Collections funding programme and to the Heritage Lottery Fund.

One interviewee explained how, for his large independent museum, community engagement, and the inclusion of community voices in interpretation, are increasingly seen as both commercially and politically important. Profile-raising with communities *'is not just the right, socially responsible thing to do, it makes the organisation more viable and relevant'*. In the early days of his team's using RC, he remembers being challenged by the finance officer and the marketing and design teams for spending time on creative projects with community groups and looking to insert the results into the museum's galleries. After five years this has changed completely:

From saying 'I can't market this sort of stuff' – [the marketing head] now says 'this is fabulous darling – let's get it into the local press' - same with the design department – formerly 'we've got standards, we can't have this sort of stuff in the gallery' or, from head curator 'you can do this sort of stuff, but I don't want it in the exhibition, it can go round the corner' – now it's 'definitely, must go in the exhibition'.

A senior manager from a Scottish local authority service explained how, having piloted RC on one display case for a new museum, her team used the approach almost automatically as they developed the rest of the exhibition. Using RC has helped the service deliver against a locally politically significant community engagement agenda:

[Since piloting Revisiting Collections in 2009-10 what we do as a service] has more and more to do with 'other voices', a lot of what we do is more community driven than it ever was. That's partly political, but also partly because we are in an area that's reasonably affluent, lots of retired people, a very willing audience who are keen to engage in that way. It's not easy, but we are pushing at an open door so we have quite a lot of community developed displays – the way that they are developed is absolutely within Revisiting Collections methodology ...

[For our local authority] the emphasis is about devolving decision making to communities and engaging communities with their own decisions. We are a rural area with a lot of small towns - they all have a closely defended identity and all feel they should have their own museum - we end up quite at the forefront of things - we've been quite lucky in that sense. [Our council has just changed to a coalition] it's quite different, we are uncertain now of where it's going. What we've been able to show – hopefully – is that there's lots of people of all sorts engaging with museums and cultural heritage type activity - so quite a strong imperative here.

A few interviewees felt that, while they personally liked much of what came out of the work, using RC again is unlikely to be an organisational priority for their service. They usually cited cuts in staff and resources and felt that these will impact on any further adventurous or experimental participation work with communities. They think these activities might not be regarded by their service's senior management or funders as 'core'.

The impact for external partner organisations

Very little formal evaluation has been undertaken to assess the benefits of using RC in terms of partnership development – or of outcomes for external partners. Several services reported that RC's clear framework and its collections focus has given them confidence to work collaboratively with 'difficult' community partners, or with contentious material, for the first time. They found the emphasis that the methodology puts on listening to external voices had helped to dispel negative expectations of tokenism or unequal power sharing. They felt this was evidenced by formerly mistrustful partner organisations now taking the lead to initiate and raise funds for future joint working.

One small museum used the methodology to underpin their first contact with any of the local secondary schools. Another made its first contact with the county youth service. The youth workers involved commented on the particular benefit for the young people of working in a sustained way with the museum and its collections, and they are keen to come back and work with them again.

An outreach and learning officer from a county record office showed remarkable persistence and tact in building relations and working collaboratively with a local self-help group for disabled people, who were initially very suspicious of being sucked into a tokenistic or unequal partnership. Together they explored the records of a local school for children and young people with complex physical and learning disabilities – an offshoot of the Victorian 'Guild of the Brave Poor Things'. As the project progressed, members of the group hugely valued *'being able to work creatively and contribute something of lasting value to [the record office] from their own context and view point'*. They were keen to sustain the relationship and work with the archive again:

[The group] consulted with [us] to write and submit an application for a project inspired by the Mass Observation Archive recording the daily lives of people with disabilities

One participant put forward a new project idea to revisit the archive of a closed-down special school with the view to adding the experiences of the students and their families to the archive. [The record office] co-wrote a funding bid with the [group] member and they have been awarded the funding...

Also, and more importantly [the group] has started their own community archive and three scrapbooks have been deposited with [the record office].

Audiences and communities

In theory, using RC demonstrates an organisation's commitment to giving external stakeholders not just access to collections, but a say in how they are used, interpreted and understood. For both new and existing audiences, seeing and hearing external voices reflected in displays and descriptions will be involving and empowering. There is an increased chance that interpretation will answer their real questions. Seeing not only their own, but a multiplicity of cultures and viewpoints reflected in the ways objects and records are presented and described can help to build a community's awareness of shared experience and interlinking histories - as well as increasing people's sense of ownership of the museum or archive and its collections.

Beyond their commitment to achieving these socially responsible benefits, all the interviewees were keenly aware that hard-nosed commercial and political imperatives were increasingly important to their organisations: raising profile with council members; demonstrating relevance; raising external funding; and reaching new audiences. Yet very few museums or archives seem to be collecting evidence systematically about the impacts that any of their engagement work (not just RC work) is having for visitors, or on how their organisations are perceived in the wider community.

There is some anecdotal evidence of the impact:

... some of the comments we have received have been relevant enough to be displayed with the object concerned. This shows that the museum has created a real sense of access and ownership for the public. This may encourage members of the public to take more of an interest in their local heritage.

Curator, city museum

... When people come, they get a much better picture, they don't come and get a one-sided story, they're able to get a much more rounded viewpoint, they participate, they feel part of the experience ... When you talk to people in the galleries, the reason that they like things is that they are able to participate and be much more engaged. They feel excited to be part of it – happy that they've been able to leave something of their own – share in what's happening, see what other people have said.

Senior manager, city museum

6 RELEVANCE TO OUR MUSEUM AND THE WIDER SECTOR

Engaging external participants directly with collections and with how they are used, understood and interpreted brings participation deep into what is indisputably the core of a museum or archive's work and remit – *'the heart of all we do'*.

6.1 REVISITING COLLECTIONS AND OUR MUSEUM

The Paul Hamlyn Foundation commissioned this research report into the impact of RC as a model for participation to test how effectively it might support the overarching objectives of the Foundation's *Our Museum* Special Initiative to:

- Support and develop museums and galleries to place community needs, values, aspirations and active collaboration at the core of their work
- Involve communities and individuals in core decision-making processes and to implement the decisions taken
- Ensure that museums and galleries play an effective role in developing community skills, through volunteering, training, apprenticeships, etc.
- Share exemplary new models with the broader museum sector

Writing in the *Museums Journal* in February 2012, *Our Museum* project director Piotr Bienkowski stressed that the *Our Museum* initiative

...is not about short-term project funding, but about facilitating organisational change so that participatory work becomes core, embedded, sustainable, less at risk of being marginalised when specific funding streams run out, and gives genuine agency to communities.

He notes that *'the initiative so far has already highlighted a few key issues, which seem to be central to successful, embedded participation'*:

First, an organisation has to have a culture of honest reflection, both internally and with its communities, which means having a trusting dialogue with critical friends who can challenge assumptions without being branded as disloyal. It takes serious training and practice to make this work effectively.

Importantly, this reflective culture must be sustainable and self-renewing: once you've developed it, you must put in place a mechanism whereby new staff, partners and board members are introduced to this way of working through induction and training. Otherwise it gets lost very quickly.

Second, embedded participation is not just about what activities you do: to succeed, it requires a process of transformation which affects the whole organisation's culture and structure.

Organisational change reaches deep into the heart of everything you do and affects every member of staff: it means re-evaluating values; behaviours; decision-making and governance; communication; policies; as well as activities.

Third, the creation and sustainability of a truly participatory museum will not work unless there is clear buy-in and championing from the top – from the director and from the board. When the going gets tough – and believe me, it will get tough – everyone needs to know that the director will not suddenly shy away and change course.

This report demonstrates that RC can be a powerful tool in achieving objectives that are closely attuned to *Our Museum's* key aims. The methodology demands, nurtures and supports an openness to *'trusting dialogue'* within and between organisations and between our sector and the wider world. The evidence

shows that *RC* is empowering for participants and can be revelatory for museum and archive practitioners – giving them a new confidence in the power and relevance of their collections to excite and inspire non-traditional audiences and a new awareness of the real importance to their service of listening to and valuing external voices.

Of course, the methodology is highly targeted. It can only ever be used in depth with small sections of a collection and with a tiny number of participants. What it can achieve within an organisation, however, is a radical change of perspective – from assuming that the service can and should strive to be the fount of *all* knowledge about the collections it holds, to realising that there will always be something else to be said, knowledge to be added, significance to be understood.

Relevantly, in its 2012 *Museums 2020 Discussion Paper* the Museums Association says:

Museums seem to have their greatest impacts when working closely and intensively with relatively small groups of people. Sustained, long-term work with a marginalised group might have greater impact than less intense work with greater numbers.

*Active, intense engagement will never be possible for most audiences but it should be possible to offer every visitor ‘a legitimate way to contribute to the institution, share with other people and feel like an engaged and respected participant’.*¹⁹

6.2 THE WIDER PARTICIPATION ZEITGEIST

Our Museum is firmly part of the participation zeitgeist currently shaping both exploratory thinking and strategic development right across the heritage sector. For most of the key strategic bodies and funders supporting museums and archives this clearly includes participation in building knowledge and understanding about collections and their meaning. In his keynote address at the Museums Association’s conference in November 2012, Director of Policy and Research at Glasgow Life, Mark O’Neill, spoke about the ‘ghettoization’ of outreach and outreach staff - with community engagement seldom reaching into the permanent collections that lie at the museum’s core.²⁰

Strategic leaders

RC’s focus on collections and participation is increasingly echoed in museum sector strategies. In its 2011 strategy document *Culture, knowledge and understanding: great museums and libraries for everyone*, Arts Council England (ACE) comments:

Communities ... want to participate in the interpretation of collections; they want to discuss and debate the issues raised and share their views with others.

*... We will support those museums and libraries at the forefront of embracing diversity through co-production with users, giving priority to those who are developing their offer in consultation and partnership with the people using their services.*²¹

¹⁹ Museums 2020 discussion paper, Museums Association, 2012, at <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020/23072012museums2020-consultation>

²⁰ http://www.museumsassociation.org/video/27112012-mark-oneill-conference-video?utm_source=ma&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=28112012

²¹ *Culture, knowledge and understanding: great museums and libraries for everyone*, Arts Council England, 2011, at <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/browse-advice-and-guidance/developing-great-museums-and-libraries>

In the community engagement section of its online guidance for archives, The National Archives (TNA) stresses that as part of *'establishing an on-going, mutually beneficial relationship with community groups, based on trust and commitment to shared priorities'* archives should *'access their expertise and acknowledge and celebrate their input'*. TNA cites RC in its listing of 'Key resources to support community engagement and involvement'.

Similarly, in its Museums Strategy for Wales 2010 – 2015, the Welsh Assembly Government (working through its division CyMAL: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales) stresses:

*Museums should provide opportunities for our communities to engage with us in determining how they are represented in our collections and exhibitions' and be 'exploring opportunities for community engagement with mainstream museum operations'. It stresses that 'identifying hidden histories when working with a specific community group, can provide good opportunities to collect information', but notes 'many museums currently lack capacity in time, staff and relevant skills to develop sustainable relationships with seldom heard groups.'*²²

Also:

Although the financial climate will be difficult, all governing bodies must accept that collections are fundamental to everything museums do, and that resources must be allocated to collections management.

The 2010 Northern Ireland museums policy makes an impressive and very clear commitment to transparency, inclusion and representation of diversity in NI's museums: *'museums can make a very important contribution to a shared and better future for all based on equity, diversity, interdependence and mutual respect'*.²³ It stresses that *'museums have the inherent capacity to generate memorable and sometimes life-changing experiences through encounters with collections'* and notes specifically:

Public engagement is also enhanced through the availability of high quality, well-researched information about the objects and the collections, which can extend to involving the public in the process of establishing the meaning and significance of objects, and through exploiting digital technologies as a means of capturing and disseminating such information.

... Museums must document and record what is held in collections and develop the knowledge base about their collections in order to be able to interpret them appropriately for the public.

As has been noted above, Museums Galleries Scotland is including RC as part of their delivery plan to support *Going Further: the National Strategy for Scotland's Museums and Galleries* (2012). The strategy *'emphasises the importance of strengthening connections between museums, people and places to inspire greater public participation, and maximising the potential of museums' collections'*.²⁴

²² A Museum Strategy for Wales, CyMAL: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales, Welsh Assembly Government, 2010, at <http://www.wales.gov.uk/topics/cultureandsport/museumsarchiveslibraries/cymal/museums/strategy/?lang=en>

²³ A Museums Policy for Northern Ireland, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, 2011, at http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/pdf_version_of_final_museums_policy.pdf

²⁴ *Going Further: The National Strategy for Scotland's Museums and Galleries*, Museums Galleries Scotland, 2012, at <http://www.museumsgalleryscotland.org.uk/publications/publication/460/going-further-the-national-strategy-for-scotlands-museumsand-galleries>

Museums Association – Museums 2020

The Museums Association's 2012 *Museums 2020* discussion paper quotes heavily and helpfully from a series of strategy documents, practitioner and academic publications from the last few years – over the period since its own *Collections for the Future* report was published in 2005.²⁵ About collections' potential for 'making a difference to society' it says:

As well as creating and holding collections, museums create, hold and share knowledge for society. Once the preserve of the lone expert, a new concept of museum research is emerging with the goal of 'deepening knowledge and generating new insights to animate collections ... Effective knowledge is essentially a process of learning – social, interactive and experiential ... Sharing knowledge is not a 'download' of information from 'expert' to 'lay': it is dynamic and expansive, including 'how do we know?' as well as 'what do we know?'" Effective sharing gives confidence to others: to ask open questions and interrogate assumptions.

...The challenge is to find ways to share the creation of knowledge and benefit from user-generated content - and relate that to society's expectation of museums as reliable, trustworthy and authentic.

Among the conclusions it proposes in its *Implementation* section are:

The MA's vision is that far more museums become responsive and socially engaged. This implies a shift away from museums as largely didactic, definitive and fixed, presenting expert information and narratives in unchanging 'permanent' displays. Museums in 2020 will include many more voices, will share responsibility in varied partnerships, will house increasingly varied activities and will change constantly.

... Museums will work more inclusively, drawing on the ideas, creativity, knowledge and skills of a diverse range of people inside and outside the organisation.

... People working for museums will continue the shift from being keepers to being sharers.

The research undertaken for *Is Revisiting Collections working?* suggests that RC has the potential to play a positive role in advancing and supporting that shift.

The Happy Museum Project

It is part of the ethos of the Happy Museum Project (initially funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's Breakthrough Fund and subsequently by ACE) that museums should 'explore how museum staff and public can work together, with different expertise but equal status'.

In a 2011 project report paper *The Happy Museum: A tale of how it could turn out all right*, the joint authors say

...through their physical collections of objects and the careful work they do in piecing together the context and narratives that give them meaning, museums play a role in communities as keepers of collective memory. Museums are able to make real ... different ways of living ... and in so doing offer new perspectives on the way that we live now. Perhaps even more potently, museums can provide a direct confrontation with other ideas, values and cultures.

²⁵ *Collections for the Future*, Museums Association, 2005 at <http://www.museumsassociation.org/collections/>

... many museums have rather one-dimensional strategies, whereby exhibits are developed by curators with little in the way of external consultation (beyond, perhaps, consumer focused research) and then 'marketed' at targeted groups. But museums could do so much more here They are well placed to facilitate connections and interactions between groups who might otherwise have little to do with one another, and we know that this erodes fear, prejudice and the sense of community, all of which is important to happiness.

Too often there is a one-way monologue whereas what is needed is dialogue that produces lasting change in both visitor and the museum itself. (Museums may be surprised to find that they have as much to learn from their audience as the audience does from them!). This is important to happiness because, in properly listening to their audiences, museums demonstrate that they value what people have to say; and that improves people's sense of self-worth and validates their opinions in a way that shows they matter in the world.

A shift in focus from museums seeing themselves as didactic educators to 'co-creators of well-being' might see the enabling of a more active and engaged role for the visitor. Where museums offer the chance for reciprocal relationships, where visitors are providers as well as receivers of knowledge and learning, they can engage the assets and resources of a community.²⁶

The paper also says that 'museums are more accustomed to telling than to listening... they may be less adept at helping audiences find answers for themselves'. From the evidence in this *Is Revisiting Collections working?* report, it is clear that RC provides a tested methodology that can help with this process.

Funders

Funders too are increasingly looking for evidence that their intervention is supporting meaningful participation that reaches to the core of an organisation and what it does.

The Heritage Lottery Fund's focus in assessing funding applications is on the lasting difference a project will make for heritage, people and communities. In its 2010 guidance document for applicants '*Thinking about community participation*', it stresses that '*real participation is active and gives people a meaningful personal stake in a project*'. It cites five levels of participation: '*Informing; Consulting; Deciding together; Acting together; Supporting others to take the lead*'. As evidenced by this report, RC will be helpful in moving organisations beyond the 'consulting' level.²⁷

The Art Fund is increasingly interested in identifying structured approaches to assessing the public benefit of its grants, including assessment of the significance of acquisitions to potential audiences and users.

²⁶ The Happy Museum: A tale of how it could turn out all right Sam Thompson and Jody Aked, with Bridget McKenzie, Chris Wood, Maurice Davies and Tony Butler 2011, at <http://www.happymuseumproject.org/>

²⁷ Thinking about...Community participation, Heritage Lottery Fund, 2010 at <http://www.hlf.org.uk/HowToApply/furtherresources/Pages/Thinkingaboutcommunityparticipation.aspx>

7 BARRIERS TO USING *REVISITING COLLECTIONS* SUCCESSFULLY

The research for this report has revealed both real and perceived barriers to successful uptake and implementation of *RC*:

7.1 THE *RC* METHODOLOGY AND TOOLS

Key issues about the methodology itself:

- Most interviewees felt that it would be difficult to plan or lead an *RC* project without basic training in the methodology.
- The toolkits and supporting materials don't offer a quick 'off-the-shelf' solution. They need tweaking to meet the specific needs of a service, its project and its partners.
- Some services felt that *RC* has too strong a focus on gathering written or verbal responses to objects and records (rather than going straight to more creative hands-on activities).
- Several of the services interviewed regretted that the methodology doesn't include a self-assessment component: *'It is difficult to self-assess against Revisiting Collections – it would be great if it were used as some sort of benchmarking tool'*.

Not an off-the-shelf solution

While stressing the key importance of the prompt questions and of capturing and recording people's responses, *RC* expects services to adapt the 'front end' of the methodology to suit their own capacity and their participants' needs and preferred style of communication. The 2009 toolkits were backed up by a '*Running a Revisiting Collections Focus Group*' guidance note giving advice and models for organising and facilitating groups. Further advice on running sessions with a variety of participant groups was provided in the 2011 *Revisiting Collections with Young People and Community Groups*. Both guides stress that the method was always intended to be flexible.

We tailored it to our own needs – made it work for us – we didn't come up against anything and think 'we couldn't possibly do that'. We took bits that we liked and made it work. We learnt from experience e.g. we learnt from our volunteers session that should get out more objects. We knew we were a very small museum [just two part time staff] – we had to tailor to what we could achieve. We had to manage it within the time we had.

Curator, small independent museum

Further input of time and thought is needed once successful *RC* sessions have been held and a body of participants' responses collected. The methodology provides helpful tools to support the sifting and analysing of this new user-generated content, but doesn't obviate the need for each museum or archive to take its own decisions about what to keep and what to discard.

Some objects evoked memories related to the object / time (e.g. WWII items). Some were emotional responses – 'ooh, that's nice', 'that smells funny' type of thing. Others were more useful – comparing the object to similar items from their own culture.

Curator, city museum project

Some interviewees felt that hard-pressed practitioners won't always have the time to read through the *RC* guidance in detail and work out how best to apply the approach in their own situation.

When you are in a project and you've got lots to do you want things to be simple – you tend to just download and use – 'OK we're going to do this' - download this form, then later think 'we should have tweaked this'.

SotW project manager, city museum service

Too many words

Both the museum and archive RC toolkits focus on approaches to gathering responses from external participants that can be captured directly in the core records that hold collections information: collection databases, catalogues and word-based search tools. The aim is to give external perspectives parity in terms of longevity and retrievability with the museum or archive's own 'voice'. To achieve this parity demands a strong emphasis on collecting written or verbal reactions to objects and records and on recording participants' specific use of language. Collections information management and retrieval systems are still largely language-based.

Also, because it is important both to use participants' own words and to attribute them to a level that gives them context, copyright and other permissions need to be secured: a certain amount of administrative paperwork is essential.

... an ethics for 'co-curation' needs to address the issue of authorship on the part of the participants, as producers of interpretative materials and text for [our] collection documentation. As the outcomes entail entrance of their contributions to the public domain, I was mindful of legislation on Intellectual Property Rights and invited them to negotiate the terms of their attribution on the evaluation form.

Project curator working with young people

The RC resources available online include sample forms not only for gathering responses to the prompt questions, but also for collecting attribution information (to a level that is acceptable to the participant), consents and evaluation. These forms are presented as drafts for editing and adapting.

Several interviewees said that the forms in general initially made them fear that the methodology would be inappropriate or irrelevant to the needs and preferred communication styles of their participants.

I feared these tools might have deterred some participants with preferences for non-verbal learning and communication, or those uncomfortable in group situations ... In such cases, any lack in confidence in the authenticity of their knowledge may incline them to echo the words of more vocal peers; while I became increasingly sensitive to these dynamics as rapport deepened, this would have been difficult for even a judicious observer to detect ... I tried to offset this possibility by continually testing my previous data through group and one-to-one questioning, as well as non-verbal instruments (drawing and mapping). Thus, in determining the 'dialectical' rigour of interpretations that didn't neatly triangulate (for example, where their spoken and written views were significantly different) I remained conscious of the effect of the group dynamic and bore this in mind in my analysis.

Project curator working with young people

While consent forms do have to be written and signed, all the other information needed will often be much better captured by audio or audio-visual recording. RC guidance stresses the importance of capturing participants' own language and strongly recommends audio and audio-visual recording to supplement the written word. In the pre-2009 piloting phase, several partner museums and archives were resistant to the idea of recording their *Revisiting Collections* sessions. They either didn't have access to equipment or felt that participants would find it intrusive. Some felt that their services would be burdened by data overload – with far too much recorded material to sift and transcribe. Managing written responses would be easier.

In 2012, RC users have access to far cheaper digital recording equipment and many are now able to add digital content to their websites and interpretation. With notable exceptions (e.g. children in care), recent project managers have found external participants to be increasingly relaxed and familiar with being filmed or recorded. In many cases this has added great vitality to projects' output and to audiences' experience.

A few project leaders opted to avoid either scribing or recording the words people spoke as they experienced their first contact with collections. They focussed instead on capturing the creative works they produced as a response: craft and visual artworks, short YouTube films, poetry, stories and at least one radio play. These services now have some inspirational material that can be shared in exhibition spaces, or, if digitally recorded, online. Until digital asset management systems are fully secure and integrated with collections information management systems, however, it could be argued that this material's longevity and retrievability, as part of the core information that the service continues to hold and share, is likely to be less secure than that of words embedded in a catalogue.

Benchmarking

Some Interviewees felt their service was already using RC as '*part of what we just do*'. They and some who wanted to build on their first experience of using the methodology regretted that the support tools don't include a self-assessment component:

It is difficult to self-assess against Revisiting Collections – it would be great if it were used as some sort of benchmarking tool ... for me there are things that lots of us are doing that are best practice, but we don't big ourselves up enough – if we could do a benchmarking exercise against Revisiting Collections [our service] would come out as 'good' or as 'best' practice – whereas we don't against Benchmarks [in collections care]²⁸ - because we are in old buildings and can only do the best we can do within our budget.

Senior manager, city museum

Some SotW project leads contrasted RC with the National Youth Agency's *Hear by right standards framework for the participation of children and young people*, which they felt had a more highly structured format and easy to use self-assessment tools.²⁹

7.2 BARRIERS WITHIN ORGANISATIONS

- The methodology demands a relatively slow-build approach. Organisations need time to: develop external partnerships and recruit participants; cascade awareness of RC to internal cross-departmental teams; prepare collection materials and information; and to work collaboratively and responsively with individual participants to develop and deliver projects and programmes of work. This was especially a problem where services were using the methodology for the first time as part of a time-limited, externally funded project.
- Embedding the approach across a service demands not just theoretical support, but informed, active involvement and leadership from senior management.
- Delivering the documentation element of RC is time consuming and collections information management systems can't always be modified without input from software suppliers.
- In a very few instances there was resistance in principle to compromising the objectivity and authority of the catalogue by adding external voices.
- More significantly, the research for this report shows that very many non-curatorial museum personnel (especially learning and access teams, senior management and front of house staff) do not use or even have access to their service's collections information management system – so do not necessarily recognise the potential that enriched documentation offers for enhancing user access and sharing multiple perspectives on objects.

²⁸ See: <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/benchmarks-for-collections-care/410-benchmarks-in-collections-care-20>

²⁹ Hear by right standards framework for the participation of children and young people, Revised Edition, The National Youth Agency, 2008, at <http://www.nya.org.uk/quality/hear-by-right>

Slow build

RC isn't difficult to understand and, of course, its thinking isn't all new. People who attend RC workshops or 'taster' sessions grasp the principle quickly and recognise how it could be applied to their own roles. For the methodology to work across a whole organisation, this learning has to be cascaded and a team created that has all the skills and knowledge needed. As has been noted, this is likely to involve curatorial staff with collections knowledge, collections information managers and, if the service has them, learning and outreach staff. Senior managers and colleagues across the service, including front-of-house staff, need to be fully aware of the cross-cutting work about to take place and its likely implications for colleagues, their workplans and the organisation as a whole.

New voices, new perspectives are making the organisation feel much more permeable - not working behind closed doors ... it's perfectly normal for there to be other people coming through.

Senior manager, city museum

Because of this, applying RC can be a slow-build process, especially in a large and complex service. However, once an organisation has used it to support just one or two projects, the approach tends to be very efficiently absorbed as part of working practice.

We don't think 'this is a Revisiting Collections project', we automatically integrate the approach to a greater or lesser extent as appropriate to the object of a project – it may be about exploring collections from a new perspective, or it may be more about participants learning new skills'

Senior curator, large independent museum

One of the major positive aspects identified by services participating in SotW was the time allowed in a four-year programme to 'be experimental', 'take risks' and dedicate time and resources to both skills and organisational development. Those SotW museums that have now incorporated RC into their policy documents and forward planning thought this would have been unlikely if they had used the approach just briefly, in a one-off project, rather than benefitting from the slow building of confidence and experience fostered by a sustained programme of supported use.

Some of the sector strategic bodies that had led partnership programmes with a shorter turnaround time (usually within a single financial year) felt they should have done more to familiarise potential partners with the RC methodology before inviting them to sign up for consultant support or bid for grants..

In future, I'd run a familiarisation workshop as part of advertising any funded programme – so people had time to consider and plan

Regional partnership programme manager

As with any work perceived as imposed on staff simply for political, public relations or 'fund-chasing' motives, an RC project can stir resentments, and perhaps a mismatch of expectations and objectives. One curator interviewed described a 'top-down' suite of projects where curators 'had to do something with [hard-to-reach] communities' and felt they'd just been 'told to get on with it'. Aware of RC, the interviewee had suggested the method to her manager, feeling that using it would help ensure she would get 'something for me' as well as 'something for them' [the participants] out of the project. She delivered, her four sessions without learning staff support and, despite not having especially high levels of literacy, the participants were asked to write down their responses to the objects. The curator was disappointed by not getting especially good 'quotes' to integrate into a forthcoming exhibition (the 'something for me'). She recognised that the process had been hugely enjoyed by the participants - 'they loved it' and 'wanted more'. At least two from a group of eight participants had signed up to become museum volunteers. A partner organisation, a service for jobseekers, was delighted with the collaboration, feeling it had given their members confidence and skills development. However, the curator summarised the project as involving 'a lot of effort for not much return' for the museum.

One senior manager interviewed had considered how best to avoid the potential for such mismatches between strategic organisational objectives and project delivery. While appreciating the *Our Museum* initiative's concerns about the distorting impact of funding participation work purely from external funding streams (i.e. not from of core budgets), she echoed many interviewees in accepting that dependence on external project funding will continue to be a given reality:

Project funding is a fact of life – it's how we do most of our interesting work. Our museum is well funded for a very small population – the town pays although our catchment area is much wider. Much of the funding has to go on maintaining our building ... So we have to look for external funders whose core values match our own – be 'funding fed not funding led'.

Senior level buy-in

As noted above, many of the practitioners interviewed for this report were cautious about the extent to which using RC had delivered a real, organisation-wide change in attitudes and working practice. Especially in larger services, the impetus to use the methodology had very often come at middle management level. The staff involved felt that there was benign acceptance at senior level, even strong verbal support for the work they were doing, but not always the real, well informed buy-in that would ensure that the RC ethos becomes core, sustainable, written into policy documents, budgets and workplans and protected from being marginalised when specific funding streams run out.

We need senior management not just to nod this through, but to engage in the process of change – do they really have time to focus on that? It needs a Cultural Revolution!

Curator, university museum

Even in some cases where a commitment to community engagement with collections, perhaps specifically to on-going use of RC itself, had made it into policy documents, some middle-ranking staff weren't completely confident that senior management had fully understood the implications in terms of forward planning, budgeting and resource allocation – especially as regards staff time and skills.

Revisiting Collections is a new way of doing things – it takes time – like many other museums we are saying 'we will use Revisiting Collections in the future' – change the way we do things – our changed [Collections Development] policy was approved in 2011. [That came out of our] experience of SotW. But not enough thought was given to what that means – we need a strategy about how to follow that up and enact – that's not in place.

Collections officer, city museum, part of SotW

The most pessimistic forecasts came from staff in services where current cuts were resulting in a loss of curatorial and collections management expertise – or in the loss of the type of 'community curator' or 'collections access' posts formerly funded by the MLA / ACE Renaissance programme. In one organisation that has been successfully using the RC approach for more than five years, it was felt that, even though the approach felt embedded and the results were widely appreciated within the organisation, there was limited understanding at senior level of what the work entailed - it might just 'fizzle out' as middle managers with relevant expertise and commitment move on.

In at least three of the organisations interviewed, cuts-led restructuring was resulting in the amalgamation of learning and collections teams. In theory, this could be hugely beneficial for the adoption of RC as a path to joint working. Some interviewees saw this as an opportunity, but others as a threat. One new department head in a city museum service was confident that RC will get into the new departmental policy document when that's written. 'Gaining knowledge about our collections from communities who know about them is key to what we do'. That had 'traditionally been part of Learning and Engagement project

practice ... Now we need to look at how we work' to ensure that the new knowledge about collections will actually get into the collections database.

A seasoned RC veteran was more cautious about departmental merger:

[Without genuine commitment at the top] It will be interesting to see what's happened in one or two years' time... it could be a fantastic opportunity – but only if there's joint working.

Tackling the documentation end of RC

For many of the services interviewed for this report, tackling the documentation 'back end' had proved the major stumbling block to delivering their RC based projects 'properly'. This was true for both museums and archives, but was especially the case in those museum projects where there had been insufficient involvement of documentation staff at an early stage.

Some services clearly saw the legacy assured by user-generated content capture as the vital component that makes an RC project different from any other community engagement approach they might try. They had planned carefully and adapted their documentation systems as required at an early stage in the project.

In rather more of the services, even some time after more immediately public-facing outputs had been achieved, data entry had either not begun or was progressing slowly. It was seen as a desirable, even an essential, outcome but as an in-house final phase to be completed once exhibitions were up and events programmes delivered. One museum team flagged up as a barrier their senior managers' reluctance to include any collections management element in bids for external project funding – on the assumption that funders would feel this is 'housekeeping' that the museum should be doing anyway.

In some cases, even where capturing external perspectives and voices in their museum's core database was seen as important to the ultimate success of the project, it was recognised that this was the part of the work that was going to be the most demanding in terms of inter-departmental collaboration and organisational buy-in – so there was a temptation to let it get quietly shelved – and hence to be left undone as staff moved on.

Where low priority was given to the documentation element of RC by project leads, this often resulted in documentation staff not being involved in the project planning and not attending RC training. A 2010 SotW progress report notes that:

... Collections management staff weren't always allowed / encouraged to attend [the free training offered as part of the programme] by their line managers. In one case the documentation officer was very keen to attend a workshop on site at his own museum, but his line manager wouldn't release him. Where they did attend, documentation staff were both inspired and enthusiastic: '...thanks for a very interesting session. I look forward to having some data from our projects here to fit into our database'.

In archives, where the catalogue is recognised as vital to providing users with information about a collection and its contents, project leads were more fully committed to ensuring that the processes of sifting, collating and recording new information would be addressed in the project plan, even if not to be achieved immediately. Despite this, writing in December 2011 about on-going outcomes of the *Mandeville Legacy* project, archives consultant Jon Newman commented:

Have [the participating record offices] ... found a route to allow in 'the voices of our users'? This after all is the key outcome for any Revisiting Collections work as proposed by the toolkit.

Nothing like so much as hoped or intended, but enough to be encouraging and to demonstrate value is probably a fair assessment. The evidence so far suggests that the record offices have yet to fully integrate their user contributions into their catalogues, although some are clear about how this will be done. Others have focussed instead on incorporating these into other types of finding aid like subject guides, or into more short-term project outcomes like exhibitions.

... In conclusion, the interim findings from the Mandeville Legacy projects demonstrate that [Revisiting Collections] works extremely effectively as a framework for using archives in community engagement with a range of different groups and for acquiring new information and enriched understandings of archive collections. The evidence for its effectiveness as a tool for enhanced cataloguing, which was always at its core, is, on current evidence, more qualified and if not moot then at least deferred. It will be very interesting to see the fuller conclusions that the participating projects come to once they have completed this stage of their work.³⁰

The most frequently cited barrier to engaging with the documentation process was simply lack of time, although one senior manager in a city museum pointed out:

We realise that if we don't do the documentation part now while we're working on the project, we'll never do it. So it's ... time consuming and not always very noticeable, but it is systematically done. We add new information to the record not only of objects chosen for exhibition etc., but also things that are considered but not selected – saying why we didn't select – saying if that process had involved communities in decision making. At this stage we haven't seen any real benefits of this yet, but we know that they will be there for curators and anyone working with the collection in fifty or a hundred years' time.

Technical issues

Where cataloguing staff were involved and looked closely at the technicalities of capturing user-generated content (UGC), they tended to find fewer difficulties than they might originally have feared. Most museum documentation officers interviewed said they had found the technical information in the *Revisiting Museum Collections Toolkit* adequate for their needs – although several had opted to hold both participants' responses and attribution data in basic 'notes' fields, which could make searching for specific data difficult in the future.

One museum had concerns about the process of sifting and categorising the large amount of complex information that had come out of a successful project – and particularly about being able to retrieve and re-collate attribution data so that a sense of the power of the project could be pieced back together. They were concerned that 'squeezing' their responses into SPECTRUM Units of information did participants a disservice – detaching their contributions from the context in which they had been made:

Revisiting Collections is trying to put stuff into a shoebox that doesn't quite fit. I'm not sure that our CMS works for the kind of community engaged way of emerging museum practice. We need to challenge the shape of the box that the stuff is going into. Are our systems adequate for the 21st century museum way of working? They are based on very didactic form of knowledge – I think the way the relationship between knowledge and collections is changing so much at the moment – with new social media etc. – Collections Trust needs to think long and hard – do we need to change the shape of that box or take down its walls?

Similarly, some museums were concerned about their system's ability to capture participants' comments that linked to themes or contextual information rather than to specific objects.

³⁰ Revisiting Archive Collections: developing models for participatory cataloguing, Jon Newman, *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, Vol 33, no 1, April 2012

Many services anticipated being able to tackle some of these issues in the near future by increasing and exploiting the capacity of their collections information management systems and new digital asset management systems to absorb and link digital content to object records. London Transport Museum, an early adopter of RC, has developed and populated a UGC Record database running in parallel to and linking directly to object records in their core catalogue. This was designed to overcome what they perceived as a potential skewing of the catalogue if UGC were added directly to the database - with large amounts of data added to some objects' records (simply because they had been looked at as part of a project) while other equally interesting objects had none.

A small point, but one that cropped up repeatedly in interviews: the RC tool which seemed to have caused project leaders most trouble was an Excel spread sheet developed in 2006 and published online and on a CD with the toolkits in 2009 to support *SotW*. This was originally developed as a completely optional aid to help museums experimenting with RC to organise and hold data for which there was as yet no structured provision in their collections management database. Some interviewees said they had initially read the spread sheet as a detailed questionnaire that they *have* to fill out, or as a manual showing fields for data capture that they *have* to absorb into their system. One volunteer museum manager's instant response to seeing the spread sheet was '*we can't do this – we don't have all these fields*'.

It needs to be stressed in training sessions and online that the spread sheet is an optional interim tool, not a vital part of RC.

Working with software providers

Sadly, given that providing capacity to accommodate and attribute the sorts of data generated by RC work is a requirement of Collections Trust's documentation software's SPECTRUM 'compliance', remarkably few museum interviewees had contacted their commercial software providers to seek advice. This reflects the findings of a *Revisiting Collections Implementation Research Report* compiled by the Collections Management Network for Collections Trust in 2010 - looking mainly at issues around data capture:

*A strong message to emerge from the software suppliers is that they will and do respond to client demand. So far, only three of those interviewed had received direct requests for help with Revisiting Collections. Most of them, however, suggested that they would adapt their standard systems if they understood this to be a common need from their users.*³¹

As part of the research for the present report, Caroline Reed worked with Collections Trust to probe the current situation. During autumn 2012, Collections Trust surveyed SPECTRUM 'compliant' software providers to gauge their level of awareness of and provision for RC data capture in their systems. Their responses indicate that they have been asked to explain how their systems meet RC's requirement to absorb and attribute UGC by only a handful of users. Four of the providers said they had assessed their systems. Two had definitely looked at the *Revisiting Museum Collections* toolkit on a field-by-field basis. Two said that the fields required were now incorporated as standard in their latest updates, two others that provision would need to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

Face-to-face interviews with a larger number of software providers showed that most were generally aware of and interested in the issues. As in Collections Management Network's 2010 report, the advice has to be:

Museums planning Revisiting Collections projects would ... be advised to speak to their CMS suppliers as early on in the process as possible.

³¹ *Stories of the World* Collections and Communities Revisiting Collections Implementation Research Report, Collections Management Network, Collections Trust, 2010

Curatorial resistance

In very few cases, interviewees reported that the lack of progress in delivering the documentation element of their RC projects was because of a lack of commitment or outright resistance from curatorial staff to the principle of including user-generated content in the main database.

Especially in larger services, curators might be defensive of their own specialist expertise, or simply sceptical of the value of external perspectives – even including those from groups with strong cultural connections to the material under scrutiny. The Victoria and Albert Museum has been very open about this issue in a published report on their piloting of RC in 2006 (as part of a wider HLF-funded programme of work). The museum explored relevant faith-related collections with seven faith advisory groups including academics, religious practitioners and students. The report notes:

Initially members of the project team were keen that contributions from the advisory groups be added to the V&A official documentation, as under the Revisiting Collections initiative. There was resistance internally, these records being the responsibility of curators. A compromise was reached by integrating 'community responses' into the relevant collections part of the website ... Towards the end of the project, the Intercultural / Interfaith Officer brought all the groups' responses together into a final report. This was presented and circulated to people across the Museum [with the Head of Collections as intermediary]. Curators cross checked the information and revised and added the advisory groups' suggestions to the V&A official documentation where appropriate.³²

In the main, the V&A curators were willing just to add new search terms, although one curator was pleased to change the actual wording of an object description to reflect a participant's comment about the use of the word 'Guru': *'Bhupinder Singh's comment was absolutely right... I changed [the Collection Information System entry] as soon as I saw it'.*

The report goes on:

This was not always the case. For example a member of the Islamic group found the labelling of an object in the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art entitled 'Tile with Beheaded Birds' offensive: 'By saying 'beheaded birds' it sounds barbaric and poses the question 'why are they beheading birds?' It would be better if the title was changed both on the Collections Information System and in the gallery to 'scratched out'...The point of view was not accepted by the curator: 'The 'defacing' of the birds was very specific – their heads were chipped off. 'Beheading' therefore seems an entirely reasonable term'.

The caption in the gallery remains unchanged. Despite these setbacks, the original project team members say *'Revisiting Collections is now so much part of the way we work that we don't cite it'.* They feel that in any future project it would be important to identify and address resistance at the start and to reach compromises – perhaps stressing that the process is one of adding to and complementing curators' existing knowledge, *'so they could still feel ownership'.*

We did learn that there is something to be gained – there's a lot of knowledge out there. If that could be harnessed in support of curators rather than set up in opposition to them that would be very helpful – seen as feeding in to curators' knowledge, not taking away from it.

³² Capacity building and cultural ownership: working with culturally diverse communities, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2010

Not all staff use catalogues

Much more widespread than outright resistance, one of the major factors militating against effective delivery of the documentation element of RC in museums appeared to be that many of projects were led by managers for whom access to the collections catalogue was just not part of their regular working routine. It was hard for them to understand or prioritise this aspect of the work – or to negotiate colleague support for it.

Research for this report and earlier reporting on SotW reveal that right across the museum sector remarkably few interviewees from learning and outreach teams have regular access to, or understand how to consult and use the collections databases in their organisations. If they want to find out what objects the museum holds that might support a particular learning project, they have to ask a curator. Many said that in their traditional (i.e. pre-RC) project work they had tended to use only handling collections or what was currently on display in the galleries. In addition, although in the past they might have garnered some wonderful insights from exploring the collections with community groups, this new knowledge remained unrecorded, left sitting in project files and hence effectively lost to future generations of museum workers and users.

Commenting on this, an internal 2010 SotW project report said:

Staff access to museum catalogues

A key premise of Revisiting Collections is that rich, searchable catalogues are key to access – for staff and public. The methodology shows a way to ensure that investment in documentation delivers tangible benefits for staff and users.

However, it has become clear during Revisiting Collections training workshops delivered in 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 that there is a great variety in the levels of access to core catalogue information made available to staff and the public by SotW partner museums. It emerged that all professional, back-of-house staff, including education and outreach teams, had ready access to catalogue database in only a handful of the partner museums participating in the workshops. In by far the majority only a very few staff had access to the catalogue – even for viewing only. Access was routinely restricted to a small number of curatorial and documentation staff. All their colleagues – learning, outreach, conservation, marketing etc. could only access collections information mediated by a curator. In just one museum service, front of house staff had ready access and could use the catalogues to answer visitors' enquiries.

Not surprisingly (as we talked about broadening the role of documentation to embrace external voices) there was a certain amount of anger about their lack of access to vital collections information from staff who were unable to see the core database within their museum, and some defensiveness from those who could – usually citing software companies' licensing restrictions [on the number of terminals that can be used] as the cause.

Lesson learned: *This has meant that the 'get external voices into your documentation' message of Revisiting Collections has been very hard to convey. In some cases there were quite senior public facing staff who had never seen the core documentation and ... one Head of Education admitted in a workshop session that she didn't understand what the trainer and fellow delegates meant by 'the catalogue' – on her evaluation form she said she was 'least interested' in: 'Documentation info – not because I don't think it's important but because I didn't understand it – not an area I'm involved with'.*

The Royal Albert Memorial Museum evaluation report notes a learning officer's response: 'I'm not really knowledgeable in this area – but I know that Moving Here comments are already enriching information about objects as comments get added to the database' and comments:

This could represent an area of further development for RAMM – an opportunity to demystify collections and collections information systems while encouraging ‘people-focussed’ staff to use them.’

One university museum curator felt that the problem lay more with senior managers: if they had no day-to-day familiarity with catalogues and the cataloguing process then they might not understand the allocation of the staff time and resources needed to implement RC fully.

If you reach out to the world when you open one door you are sometimes shutting another. So we need to try to get that web of a completely open network where there are no doors. For me Revisiting Collections is about keeping all the doors open and trying to find a robust architecture – and about believing the database is an ally in achieving this ... People at the top need to engage - to do things differently. The nature of senior management practice will have to change - e.g. using the collections database being part of their normal daily life – unless you are using that tool yourself how do you know what’s happening, what resources are there? So [the manager] can say ‘yes by all means let’s have another field’, but understanding the resource implications of that depend on use of database being part of your practice.

8 BARRIERS TO RAISING AWARENESS

Revisiting Collections' current status

Because of the endorsement *RC* has received from some of the key strategic bodies supporting the sector, many interviewees made the assumption that the framework forms part of a centrally supported, semi-official armoury of tools and standards centrally maintained and offered for use by museums and archives.

At present, however, no stakeholder organisation is actively responsible for promoting or updating the *RC* methodology, for monitoring its use, supporting peer-to-peer skills sharing or validating training. Because of its involvement in the original development of the methodology and as a legatee from MLA London, Collections Trust 'owns' the framework and hosts all its components on the Collections Link website - as well as case studies and a vestigial users' network. The tools are all readily available to people who know they exist and who know where to find them. Since 2008, however, the Trust has been largely unable to allocate resources to supporting the methodology except on an externally funded, project-by-project basis (e.g. Collections Trust was commissioned by MLA to manage *RC* training and support for *SotW* and used that opportunity to improve the tools and guidance materials available to the whole sector).

Interviewees regularly mentioned the methodology alongside standards like '*Benchmarks in Collections Care*'³³ or officially recognised guidance documents such as the Museums Association's *Disposal Toolkit*³⁴ and the recognised evaluation methodology *Inspiring Learning for All*.³⁵ They regarded it as akin to a standard to have to hand, to aspire to and to cite in funding applications and Museum Accreditation submissions.

RC was not originally designed as an aspirational standard. It was developed and promoted to support practitioners rather more informally in their work of engaging communities with collections – to be used as and when relevant and helpful. However, the sector's thinking about enabling participation as a vital part of museums and archives work has now moved on. Good participatory practice is more widely recognised as central to good service provision. It could be very helpful to services, and relatively easy, to develop an *RC* self-assessment tool for assessing delivery and evaluating impact.

Revisiting Collections on Collections Link

One participation and learning officer (although an enthusiast for *RC*) described the online materials as '*dry – giving you all the information you need to undertake a project and fine for people who are already interested and know they want to use the methodology – but not immediately inspiring*'.

Interviewees suggested taking a more dynamic and engaging approach to conveying how exciting and stimulating an *RC* session can be. Everyone wanted to see more case studies and worked up examples of catalogue records amended to include user-generated content. People liked the existing six-minute video (on YouTube / Collections Link), which shows young people engaging with collections at Bradford.³⁶ They suggested that Collections Link should host more of this type of video material showing extracts from sessions and / or people talking about how the methodology has worked for them. Comparison was made with short videos that the Museums Association has made recently to showcase the outcomes of its Effective Collections projects.³⁷

³³ See: <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/benchmarks-for-collections-care/410-benchmarks-in-collections-care-20>

³⁴ See: <http://www.museumsassociation.org/collections/disposal-toolkit-and-training>

³⁵ See: www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk

³⁶ See: <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/revisiting-collections/725-revisiting-collections-with-young-curators>

³⁷ See: <http://www.museumsassociation.org/collections-learning>

Documentation officer interviewees noted some omissions in the support offered to RC by Collections Trust, particularly that RC isn't covered by the Trust's SPECTRUM 4.0 information sheets (it was in SPECTRUM 3.2). Also, until this year there has been no regular checking to ensure that 'SPECTRUM compliant' software systems successfully accommodate RC units of information.

In the 2012 survey, responding SPECTRUM compliant software providers suggested that they would welcome additional support, guidance and information sharing in this area from Collections Trust. In addition, one respondent felt:

... if new units of information / procedures are formally adopted into SPECTRUM, then some 'official notification' of the requirement to include them, and subsequent program of compliance checking, needs to be instigated by Collections Trust to the software vendors. Otherwise 'SPECTRUM compliance' begins to lose its meaning and value ... suppliers will not undertake work unless there is an established demand for it. We have implemented some fields ... to hold viewers' contributions, but this was in response to a specific customer's request and (as far as I'm aware) was made without reference to Revisiting Collections.

Training for new entrants to the sector

As far as it has been possible to ascertain as part of the research for this report, while RC certainly does get mentioned tangentially, the methodology does not appear to form part of the taught curriculum on any of the major museum studies post-graduate courses in the UK. It is covered in some post-graduate archive training, including the Archives and Records Management course at University College London's Department of Information Studies.

Continuing Professional Development

A small handful of freelance consultants currently offer introductory full or half-day workshops and advice for museums and archives looking to use RC. To date, these workshops have usually been commissioned and delivered across the UK as part of national and regional partnership programmes or Renaissance-funded regional training schemes. Some have been delivered as part of Museums Accreditation skills development training programmes and some commissioned by larger services for in-house training (e.g. by London Transport Museum and the V&A). There is no mechanism for validating the training offered or for supporting the trainers to update their knowledge and ensure that their delivery is in line with current good practice. Interviewees indicated that, with both training budgets and staff complements under pressure, there needs to be a very strong motivation for attending off-site training sessions.

For training to really appeal it needs to offer a package – come on this training and you will get x – or someone will come into your museum and help you with application of what you have learnt – 'long term aftercare'

Learning officer, small local authority museum

Many interviewees felt that, rather than expecting museum and archives staff to attend full or half-day workshops, there was potential for attaching short 'taster' sessions to national, regional and specialist professional group meetings, conferences and seminars - including meetings of sector support workers such as MDOs, Accreditation Advisors etc. It would be very possible to develop and make available a 'taster session' training module that could be confidently delivered by experienced RC practitioners at such events.

Revisiting Collections and wider sector objectives

Although, as this report shows, *RC* has considerable potential to support delivery against the participation and co-production objectives of strategic leaders and key funders in our sector, the methodology is currently not much mentioned in their resource lists or actively recommended to applicants or assessment panels.

At the time of writing, there is no mention of *RC* in publications supporting the 2011 revised ACE's Museums Accreditation Standard. Although generally supported and advocated by ACE, the methodology is not mentioned in either 'guidance for Accreditation Section One – organisational health', 'Guidance for Section Two – collections', 'Guidance for Section Three – users and their experiences' or the 'Resource list'. This is currently under review.

Reference to *RC* is expected to be made in guidance support documents for the Archives Accreditation standard currently being developed by The National Archives.

The thinking behind *RC* is closely in tune with that of the Museums Association's 2005 report *Collections for the Future*, which called for curators to become 'collections activists' and concluded that '*too many museum collections are underused – not displayed, published, used for research or even understood by the institutions that care for them*'. The MA has since launched its far-reaching Effective Collections programme in partnership with the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund aims to '*develop a series of projects that demonstrate the inspiring and engaging potential of collections ... facilitate research, development, understanding and – ultimately – use of collections*'.

To date, however, *RC* has not been much acknowledged by the MA as supporting these objectives, although the methodology is sometimes recommended by individual Effective Collections project coaches and cited by applicants – including Derby Museum and Art Gallery in their funding bid for *Down behind the Sofa* (2011) - one of Effective Collections' most high-profile projects to date.

As far as it has been possible to ascertain, the situation is similar with other key funders to the sector whose priorities and objectives might be seen to ally closely with those of *RC*, e.g. Heritage Lottery Fund, Art Fund, Pilgrim Trust, Wellcome Trust, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education etc. The methodology is not generally recommended as something for applicants and assessors to consider, nor covered by resource lists – although it is given a high profile in development advice to HLF applicants given by The National Archives.

Peer-to-peer championing and skills sharing

A small group of museum services have fully embraced *RC* as part of their daily practice or are well on the way to doing so. This includes major services such as Derby Museums and London Transport Museum and small, part volunteer-run organisations like East Grinstead Museum. There is clear evidence from interviewees that this 'embedding' has been a great boost for volunteer and professional development in those organisations – and that staff are taking the ethos and practice with them to other museums as they move on in their careers.

Simply because it *has* become embedded, however, there is a clear tendency for people using *RC* in these organisations to 'forget' that that is what they are doing. Staff and volunteers use the methodology with confidence and enthusiasm, but often fail to cite *RC* in their published articles or presentations to the wider sector – or even to cite it directly as part of the induction given to new colleagues – they are left to '*breathe it in*'.

In [our local museum] the way that the community displays are developed is absolutely within the Revisiting Collections methodology – it's interesting that we are having this conversation – I'm only

just realising that that's what we are doing without realising that that's what we are doing! – That probably does say we need to [cite Revisiting Collections] in our Collections Development Policy - to tie the policy back to something that's concrete and explainable.

Senior Manager, local authority heritage service

It would be helpful to encourage peer-to-peer skills sharing in this area. Several staff in these services expressed a keen willingness to share their experience of using *RC* and to review and communicate the methodology's impact within their own organisation. At the simplest, *RC* users should be encouraged to join and use the current *RC* online network and to share their experiences via case studies on the Collections Link website. Where appropriate, they should be encouraged to make reference to the methodology when publishing and presenting information about relevant work programmes and projects.

Two interviewees from experienced organisations suggested hosting short 'shadowing' visits or more extended work placements from colleagues interested in learning about and using *RC*. This could be extended so that the placement became a part of an internal practice review and impact assessment. It was suggested that supporting this sort of peer-to-peer skills sharing could be a much more effective way of using any available external funding for the promotion of *RC* than making further project grants. Any grants that *were* made should come with a firm requirement that the funded organisation will disseminate outcomes to the sector, so building a wider understanding of how the methodology can be used by differently sized organisations, with a variety of external partners across a range of work programme and collection types.

9 USING REVISITING COLLECTIONS EFFECTIVELY

This report recommends the following keys to successful delivery of *Revisiting Collections* to support active participation:

- Training / familiarisation for project leads in the *RC* methodology and cascading that learning to project teams
- Thorough planning and allocation of staff time – involving everyone needed for delivery at the start of the process, always including documentation staff
- Ensuring that all staff to be involved in the project have access to and know how to use the service's collections information management system
- Genuine, well-informed commitment from senior managers
- Understanding and acceptance of the potentially status-challenging implications of democratic working across departmental and disciplinary boundaries and with external partners
- A flexible approach to partnership working and to adapting the *RC* session plans and tools to meet participants' needs
- Where necessary, opening discussion with commercial software providers at the outset so that modifications and changed usage of the collections information management system are agreed and provided for
- Commitment to communicating and promoting the outcomes of the *RC* work both internally with colleagues at all levels and externally to raise your organisation's profile and to inform the wider sector

This report shows that impressive and meaningful outcomes can be achieved without ticking *all* of these boxes, but that the resulting projects are less likely to leave a tangible legacy or be a trigger for effecting organisational change.

In addition, services are encouraged to:

- Consider using *RC* to support succession planning and knowledge transfer before or as curatorial and other staff and volunteers plan to move on.

10 RECOMMENDATIONS

Since its development in 2005, *RC* has made a valuable contribution to shaping and delivering active, collections-focussed participation in museums and archives. Its tools and guidance could benefit from some updating and re-presentation, but there is no evidence that the methodology has been superseded or overtaken either by major changes in professional practice or by technology. It still has a very valuable role to play.

However, there can be barriers to services using the methodology successfully. Organisations and individual practitioners will continue to need support to overcome these, as well as to find out about the methodology and its potential.

This report commends the methodology to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation as a useful tool for inclusion in the *Our Museum* programme, both as part of the training programme being delivered to the nine *Our Museum* partner museum services and as part of any package of recommended approaches and methodologies that PHF might be looking to promote to the wider sector.

The targeted recommendations below are made to stakeholder organisations, including Collections Trust, strategic sector lead bodies and funders. They offer a series of action points that could provide a cost effective, sustainable approach to promoting awareness and understanding of *RC* so that:

- Services and individuals that might benefit from *RC* are encouraged and supported to consider and use the methodology.
- New entrants to the heritage professions, grant applicants and services preparing to meet relevant sector wide standards (e.g. Museum and Archive Accreditation) are informed about the methodology and can readily access the necessary tools, guidance, case studies and peer group support.

To Collections Trust

This report acknowledges that Collections Trust ‘owns’ *RC*, but has no specific budget allocation for actively promoting the methodology. We recommend that Collections Trust should consider allocating, or approaching funding bodies to identify, resources to support delivery of a time-limited profile raising initiative to include:

- A schematic review of the current *RC* support materials to ensure they are simple to access, understand and use and that they communicate the method’s potential to be used flexibly to meet services’ and participants’ interests and needs
- Raising or reviving awareness among sector support bodies, networks and workers - e.g. ACE; TNA; National Museum Directors Council; Association of Independent Museums; CyMAL: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales; Museums Galleries Scotland; Northern Ireland Museums Council; Museums Association; Engage (the National Association for Gallery Education); Specialist Subject Networks; regional development teams (Museum Development Officers etc.); Museum and Archive Accreditation Advisers and Museum Mentors; AIM museum advisers; MA Effective Collections project coaches etc.
- Raising awareness among sector leaders – and identifying potential advocates
- Providing advice to *RC* freelance trainers so that they can update their understanding of the methodology in line with current good practice
- Developing a short ‘taster session’ module for delivery by either freelance trainers or by experienced practitioners at conferences, seminars etc.
- Promoting the inclusion of reference to *RC* in professional training courses for new entrants to the museum, archive and heritage sector and on relevant formal CPD training programmes, mentoring and self-help schemes
- Raising or maintaining awareness of *RC* among current and potential funders to the sector, e.g. Heritage Lottery Fund, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Art Fund, Pilgrim Trust, Wellcome Trust, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, and encouraging funders to include reference to *RC* in their guidance to applicants, assessment panels and project mentors

- Facilitating peer-to-peer skills-sharing initiatives including work placement, practice review and impact assessment
- Researching and developing an *RC* practice review self-assessment tool

This would need to be followed up by on-going, light-touch monitoring and support to ensure the dissemination of good practice updates.

In addition we recommend that Collections Trust should:

- Ensure that *RC* is cited in all relevant Collections Trust publications and guidance documents, including SPECTRUM advice factsheets
- Raise awareness of *RC* among all members of the online 'SPECTRUM community' and SPECTRUM Partner Scheme for collections management software suppliers
- Be proactive in promoting awareness and understanding of *RC* to suppliers of 'SPECTRUM compliant' collections management software systems and monitoring how effectively they are making provision for the inclusion of user-generated content and all *RC* 'Units of information' in those systems
- Re-activate and promote the *RC* online network as a forum for sharing expertise, experience, advice and technical problem solving (as part of the Trust's commitment in its current forward plan to '*Deliver Collections Link as a social / professional networking application*')
- Campaign to promote and support enhanced access to core databases and collections information management systems for *all* museum staff and for end users
- Consider modification of the standard Object Entry Form and / or SPECTRUM 4.0 advice sheet on object entry to include *RC*-based questions that will prompt collection of specific and contextual data about an object at the vital moment when it arrives in the museum
- Continue to work with museums and software providers to develop approaches to preserving digital content that reflects participatory work with collections accurately and retrievably

To Arts Council England and The National Archives

We recommend that these bodies:

- Include references to *RC* as appropriate as part of the guidance and support given to museums and archives preparing for Museum and Archive Accreditation
- Raise awareness of *RC* among Accreditation advisers and mentors

To the Museums Association

We recommend that the MA

- Includes reference to *RC* as appropriate as part of guidance and support given to both applicants and assessment panels for Effective Collections and other relevant initiatives, including the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund programme
- Considers citing *RC* as part of any resource list developed to support delivery against the *Museums 2020* initiative

To other key sector funders

- We recommend that key sector funders whose priorities and objectives might be seen to ally closely with those of *RC* should consider including reference to *RC* as appropriate in guidance given to both applicants and assessment panels, e.g. Heritage Lottery Fund, Art Fund, Pilgrim Trust, Wellcome Trust, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

Peer-to-peer support

We recommend that individuals and services that have used *RC*:

- Share their expertise by acting as advocates and / or critical friends for *RC* users
- Submit relevant case studies to Collections Link
- Consider hosting work placements to help review and share their good practice
- Raise or maintain awareness of *RC* among colleagues at all levels within their own organisation - especially senior management
- Include reference to *RC* in the induction programme for new staff and volunteers – perhaps using ‘taster’ sessions
- Promote awareness and understanding of *RC* when reporting on, or making presentations about, relevant projects

11 SOURCES AND RESOURCES

TOOLS AND STRATEGIES

Collections for the Future, Museums Association, 2005, at:
<http://www.museumsassociation.org/collections/>

Culture, knowledge and understanding: great museums and libraries for everyone, Arts Council England, 2011, at: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/browse-advice-and-guidance/developing-great-museums-and-libraries>

Going Further: The National Strategy for Scotland's Museums and Galleries, Museums Galleries Scotland, 2012, at: <http://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/publications/publication/460/going-furtherthe-national-strategy-for-scotlands-museumsand-galleries>

Hear by right standards framework for the participation of children and young people, Revised Edition, The National Youth Agency, 2008, at: <http://www.nya.org.uk/quality/hear-by-right>

A Museum Strategy for Wales, CyMAL: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales, Welsh Assembly Government, 2010, at:
<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/cultureandsport/museumsarchiveslibraries/cymal/museums/strategy/?lang=en>

A Museums Policy for Northern Ireland, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, 2011, at:
http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/pdf_version_of_final_museums_policy.pdf

Reflections, Val Bott, London Museums Agency, 2003

Reviewing Significance 2.0, 2nd ed, Caroline Reed Consulting, 2012, at:
<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/reviewing-significance/1196-reviewing-significance-20>

Revisiting Archive Collections: developing models for participatory cataloguing, Jon Newman, Journal of the Society of Archivists, Vol 33, no 1, April 2012

Revisiting Collections Pilot Evaluation, Museums Galleries Scotland, 2010, at:
<http://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/publications/publication/334/revisiting-collections-pilot-evaluation>

Revisiting Collections with Young People and Community Groups, Collections Trust & The National Youth Agency, 2009 at: <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/revisiting-collections>

Revisiting Collections: revealing significance: an ALM London project, Caroline Reed, Alice Grant, Val Bott & Jon Newman, ALM London, 2005

Revisiting Museum Collections a toolkit for capturing and sharing multiple perspectives on archive collections, 3rd ed, Collections Trust, 2009 at: <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/revisiting-collections>

Running a *Revisiting Collections* focus group, Collections Trust, 2009 at:
<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/revisiting-collections>

SPECTRUM: the UK Museum Collections Management Standard, Collections Trust, at:
<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/spectrum>

Stories of the World Collections and Communities Revisiting Collections Implementation Research Report, Collections Management Network, Collections Trust, 2010, at:
<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/revisiting-collections>

Stories of the World evaluation framework, 2nd ed, Emma King Consultancy & Collections Trust, MLA Council, 2011

Stories of the World: Collections and communities evaluation framework: data collection and reporting April 2010 - March 2013, Cultural Consulting Network & Collections Trust, MLA Council, 2010

The Happy Museum: A tale of how it could turn out all right, Sam Thompson and Jody Aked, with Bridget McKenzie, Chris Wood, Maurice Davies and Tony Butler, 2011, at:
<http://www.happymuseumproject.org/>

The heart of all we do: a collections development strategy for East Midlands' museums 2009-2019, Caroline Reed Consulting, Renaissance East Midlands, 2009

Thinking about...Community participation, Heritage Lottery Fund, 2010 at:
<http://www.hlf.org.uk/HowToApply/furtherresources/Pages/Thinkingaboutcommunityparticipation.aspx>

ONLINE INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Our Museum: Over the next three years, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation is delivering Our Museum: Communities and Museums as Active Partners, a Special Initiative supporting nine museums and galleries to develop active partnership with their communities. For more information on Our Museum see:
www.ourmuseum.org.uk

Revisiting Collections: For more information on RC see:
<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/revisiting-collections>
where the museum and archives toolkits, additional guidance notes and case studies are available for free download.

Inspiring Learning for All: ILFA is an improvement framework for museums, libraries and archives originally developed by the Museums, Libraries, Archives Council. See: <http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/>

Reviewing Significance: This framework for assessing museum collections' significance, management and use was developed for Renaissance East Midlands in 2010 and updated by Caroline Reed Consulting in 2012. See: Reviewing Significance 2.0 at: <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/reviewing-significance>

SPECIFIC PROJECT WEBSITES AND REPORTS

Capacity building and cultural ownership: working with culturally diverse communities, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2010

Evaluation of 'Down the Back of the Sofa' at The Vintage Festival, South Bank 2011, Finbar Lillis, Derby Museums and Art Gallery, 2011. See also: <http://www.derbymuseums.org/vintage-sofa/>

In Touch: Co-Curating a Handling Collection, Master of Arts in Museums and Galleries in Education [Institute of Education], Miriam Craik-Horan, 2010

Mandeville Legacy: This partnership project has involved 11 museums and archives across the South East region working with marginalised young people and adults with physical disabilities, learning difficulties and mental health issues. Part of *Accentuate*, it is inspired by the Paralympic Movement and is seeking to change perceptions and offer opportunities to showcase the talents of deaf and disabled people. For more information see: http://www.mandevillelegacy.org.uk/category_id_24_path_0p5p.aspx

Moving Here: an evaluation report for the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Claire Gulliver, Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, 2011

Precious Cargo regional evaluation report, Emma King Consultancy, 2012

Religion and Material Culture at the Victoria & Albert Museum of Art and Design: The Perspectives of Diverse Faith Communities, Nightingale, Eithne; Greene, Marilyn, *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*, Volume 6, Number 2, July 2010

Revisiting Collections Pilot Evaluation, Museums Galleries Scotland, 2010, at: <http://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/publications/publication/334/revisiting-collections-pilot-evaluation>

Stories of the World: Part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, *Stories of the World* supported museums across England and Scotland to work with over 200 young people to tell inspirational stories about the UK's relationships with the world. The project was led by Arts Council England in partnership with the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG). For more information and links to individual projects see: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/our-priorities-2011-15/london-2012/stories-world/>

Stories of the World Durham: Durham University Oriental Museum Project Evaluation, 1st June 2010 – 31st August 2012, Durham University Oriental Museum, Dr Matt Greenhall et al, Durham University Oriental Museum, 2012

12 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Caroline Reed Consulting are pleased to thank everyone whose generosity with their time, expertise and enthusiasm has contributed to the writing of this report:

Isilda Almeida-Harvey, Outreach and Learning Officer, East Sussex Record Office
Helen Armstrong, Collections Manager, University Museums and Heritage Collections, Durham University
Anne Atkinson, History Services Project Manager, Centre for Kentish Studies
Kevin Bacon, Digital Development Officer, Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton and Hove
Maria Bojanowska, Talking Objects UK project lead, British Museum
Michelle Brown, Community Curator, London Transport Museum
Janet Browne, Programme Manager, Black Heritage & Culture, Victoria & Albert Museum
Sarah Corn, Curator, East Grinstead Museum / Museum Development Officer, South East Consortium
Laura Cotton, Archives and Local Studies Manager (Senior Archivist), Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies
Miriam Craik-Horan, former Participation and Learning Officer, Crafts Council
Melissa Crane, Community Engagement Co-ordinator, Nottingham City Museums & Galleries
Rib Davies, Special Projects Manager, The Lightbox, Woking
Reethah Desai, Learning and Community Partnerships Manager, Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives
Gill Findlay, Senior Curator (History), Edinburgh City Council Museums Service
Ruth Gidley, Community Participation Officer, Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter
Sue Gosling, Curator, Sevenoaks Museum
Marilyn Greene, Community Programme Manager, Victoria & Albert Museum
Dr Matt Greenhall, former Project Officer Cultural Olympiad, University Museums and Heritage Collections, Durham University
Martin Harrison-Putnam, Senior Curator, London Transport Museum
Susie Hillhouse, Museum Consultant
Katie Hobbs, Royal Pavilion and Museums Project Lead – The Keep, Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton and Hove
Ann Inscker, Collections Access Officer Archaeology & Industry, Nottingham City Museums & Galleries
Lynsey Jones, Collections Officer, Harris Museum, Preston
Jennifer Kavanagh, Audience Engagement Manager, Science Museum
Jo Kemp, Learning Engagement and Collections Manager, Nottingham City Museums & Galleries
Emma King, Museum Consultant, Emma King Consultancy
Andrew King, Registrar, Nottingham City Museums & Galleries
Alan Kirwan, Special Projects Officer for the Culture Service, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, London
Heather Lomas, Museum Consultant, Heather Lomas Consulting
Kate Maynard, Principal Officer, East Lothian Museums Service
Helen Mears, Keeper of World Art, Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton and Hove
Kyra Milnes, Access & Inclusion Officer, Harris Museum, Preston
Eithne Nightingale, Head Of Diversity Strategy Unit, Victoria & Albert Museum
Sharon Paton, Sector Account Manager – Collections, Museums Galleries Scotland
Jenny Phillips, Education Officer, The Captain Cook Birthplace Museum
Sarah Philp, Head of Programmes, Art Fund
Nick Poole, CEO, Collections Trust
Dr Emma Poulter, Talking Objects project lead, British Museum
Dr Stephen Quirke, Professor of Egyptology and Curator of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, Museums and Public Engagement, University College London
Louise Ray, former Programme Manager (Development Advice), The National Archives
Samuel Rowlands, Accreditation Manager, Arts Council England
Anna Siddall, former Vision 2012 - Museums and Libraries Manager, Arts Council England
Isobel Siddons, Head of Engagement, Archives Sector Development, The National Archives
Janet Simmonds, Museums Manager, Central, Department of Regeneration and Culture, Bradford

Tracy-Ann Smith, Co-ordinator, Diversity Heritage Group
Clare Starkie, Senior Curator of Decorative Arts, Museums Sheffield
Sheauran Tan, former Project Curator (World Cultures), Museums Sheffield
Alex Walker, Head of Arts and Heritage, Preston City Council
Jonathan Wallis, Assistant Head of Museums, Derby Museums and Art Gallery
Laura Whitton, Partnerships Manager, Collections Trust
Bryan Wills, Head of Digital Resources, London Transport Museum

Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Paul Hamlyn (1926–2001) was a publisher, businessman and philanthropist who was concerned about social injustice and disadvantage – particularly as it affected children and young people, and those ‘outsiders’ seeking to integrate into British society. In 1987 he set up the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for general charitable purposes, and on his death he bequeathed the majority of his estate to the Foundation, making it one of the UK’s largest independent grant-making organisations.

The mission of the Foundation is to maximise opportunities for individuals to realise their potential and to experience and enjoy a better quality of life, now and in the future. In particular, the Foundation is concerned with children and young people and with disadvantaged people.

Paul Hamlyn Foundation works across the UK through three programmes – Arts, Education and Learning, and Social Justice. Each comprises an Open Grants scheme, to which organisations can apply with proposals for funding innovative activities, and Special Initiatives, which are more focused interventions that aim to have deeper impact on a particular issue. The Foundation also has a programme of support for NGOs in India.

The Arts programme Open Grants scheme encourages innovative ways for people in the UK to enjoy, experience and be involved in the arts. Arts programme Special Initiatives include the Our Museum: Communities and Museums as Active Partners, PHF Awards for Artists, ArtWorks: Developing Practice in Participatory Settings and the Breakthrough Fund.

Detailed information on the Foundation’s work, and case studies related to past grants, can be found on the Foundation’s website, www.phf.org.uk

The Collections Trust

The Collections Trust is an independent UK charity working to open up collections for use and enjoyment by the public. It works internationally to share best practice, encourage innovation and support collaboration between arts and cultural organisations.

Further information about the Collections Trust’s work is available at www.collectionslink.org.uk

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