

## **Levels of participation**

Bristol Museums engages  
with a diverse range of community  
partners in many different ways,  
sometimes it's for a lighter touch  
consultation or involvement in a one off event.  
But other times a partnership involves  
a deeper, a more strategic way of working.  
For Bristol's Our Museum programme  
a group call The Hub will set up  
to explore ways for the museum  
to work an active partnership with communities.  
Hub members bring  
a range of skills, ideas, contacts,  
but they also have their own motivations  
for working with us in this way.  
And I've always been involved  
in participatory empowerment work,  
which is how I got involved with Our Museum.  
And the research that I'm involved in at the moment  
is about giving people a voice in settings  
where others normally make decisions.  
Hierarchies make decisions.  
My natural role is as a critical friend  
so I'm a really good fit into that role in The Hub.  
The theme that is common really  
to what I do in my paid job  
and what I do in Our Museum is collaboration.  
And what I'm doing professionally is  
helping people to find more effective ways  
of working together and empowering people.  
And I can bring those techniques  
and approaches into the museum as well,  
but if the museum itself can't work together,  
then it's not going to work  
collaborating with outsiders.

It felt originally, when we came in,  
that we were rather on the margins  
and people were unsure with what their role was.  
But as things have developed  
and actually, as more senior staff  
have become involved, then there has been a shift,  
and one has this sense that Our Museum  
is becoming more of an ethos,  
in another arenas, if you like.  
Whereas before, it did feel it more on the sidelines.  
And I think that's a really positive way forward.  
It turned out, quite logically, that some people had  
real skills and capabilities to offer,  
but they didn't actually want  
to be sitting on The Hub going to what they saw  
as committee meetings every six weeks.  
So we developed a slightly two-tier approach as it were;  
so that they've become community partners  
that we can call on whenever there's something  
that's particularly relevant to their skills.  
So as I got more involved in The Hub,  
I realise that the meetings were actually  
about quite specific museum practices.  
So, for example, caption writing  
and more of the curation of the exhibition.  
Whereas I was more involved  
and interested in the community angles.  
So how the community can be  
more involved in the museum.  
So, after a time, it felt like The Hub  
probably wasn't the best place for me  
to put my energies but I still wanted to be involved  
with the museum in some way.  
I started working with the museum a couple of years ago,  
and I was in the capacity as volunteer,  
but also as Ujima Radio.

Because we felt this is an important story  
that needed to be told of the Bristol Bus Boycott  
that happened in 1963 in the colour bar  
that was against black and Asian drivers.

Well the museum was, you know, a central part  
in bringing people together,  
so you would need that bite of authority,  
that cohesive role in facilitating it,  
but it didn't dominate it.

The museum's role in the collective  
was to coordinate and help disseminate the information  
throughout the council and also to help us  
to plan a series of events.

Our relationship is very piecemeal,  
we'd like a stronger role with them.

For museums and the city council  
to come into the community  
and help us find great stories  
about Bristol and about history,  
and yeah, help other people find their own voice.

Over the years, we developed a number of ways  
for people to engage with the museum.

We have partnerships where there are common goals  
where everybody is bringing something to the table;  
whether it's skills, ideas, energy or resources.

We also co-produce on exhibitions,  
for instance, for 'You Make Bristol',  
communities were enabled to decide  
who went into the display, to write the captions.

And Out Story exhibition is completely different,  
the LGBT community have initiated it,  
they've driven it forward  
and it requires far less support from the museum.

The museum also consults people.

For instance, the forthcoming death exhibition  
people are advising on museum-led ideas.

Some communities don't want to have a strategic overview but want to contribute their own bit, for instance, on the annual Chinese new year celebrations. And of course, visitors to the museum can engage in lighter ways by adding their comments, their stories to many of the interactives in the museum. They're many benefits to taking a flexible approach to the community engagement but it also brings challenges too. By having different levels of participation or different types of partner, it means there's not a simple template to work to. Each situation's new, it's different and to a certain extent, it needs to be tailored. It also means you have to keep up to date with changing circumstances and to adapt. For staff, that might mean they're reluctant to give up their more comfortable, traditional ways of working, or to take on new training. On the upside, there are different ways for staff to engage. If work in active partnership with communities or showing authority seems a little daunting, starting with a lighter touch engagement can be a good way in.