
Review of ways of working in *Our Museum*

Report to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation

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Summary

About the *Our Museum* programme

Despite years of project funding for engagement and participation work in UK museums and galleries, research suggests this has not always led to fundamental change in organisational culture and practice. The Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) created the *Our Museum* programme to support a cohort of museums and galleries to undergo an organisational change process to properly embed participation, and to use insight from this experience to help the wider sector to change the way it works.

From January 2012 to the end of 2015, *Our Museum* supported the following organisations: Hackney Museum; Bristol Culture; the Lightbox, Woking; Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales; Belfast Exposed; Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums; and Glasgow Museums and Galleries. *Our Museum* supported Ryedale Folk Museum until June 2014 and the Museum of East Anglian Life until February 2015. Each of these nine participating organisations received a mix of funding and support to help them achieve the programme's four overarching aims, which were to ensure their institution is rooted in local needs; involve communities in decision-making and promote community agency; build the skills and capacities of community members and staff; and embed reflective practice and encourage alternative working methods.

Our Museum was overseen by the PHF Arts Programme Committee and a programme Steering Group, and was managed by an independent Project Director. It was supported by two independent evaluators who, later in the programme, also provided some developmental assistance to participating museums and galleries (as 'Critical Friends'). Each participating organisation appointed a Lead Contact and identified a number of community partners to work alongside them on the programme.

About this review and this report

In the autumn of 2015, as *Our Museum* drew to a close, PHF commissioned our team, as independent researchers, to carry out a piece of work to help those involved in the programme to reflect on what they had learnt about how the Initiative was structured and how participants had worked together. The purpose of this review was not to assess the impact of the programme or its success in meeting its objectives, as this was the focus of the main evaluation. Rather, the aims were:

- A. To enable PHF and partners involved in *Our Museum* to understand the range of perspectives on:
 - the strengths and weaknesses of the structure of roles and responsibilities, and the ways in which they were carried out; and
 - how these impacted on the success or otherwise of the Initiative as a whole, and whether or not they were fit for the purpose and objectives of the Initiative.
- B. To examine the processes used by the Initiative to enact these roles and responsibilities – e.g., evaluation visits, peer reviews, Lead Contact meetings, Steering Group meetings, and Critical Friend meetings – and to analyse participants' views of their effectiveness.
- C. To enable PHF and others to consider the implications of the findings for work in other contexts in the future.

The review took place between November 2015 and March 2016 and involved individual and group discussions with more than 50 programme participants, including PHF staff, Steering Group members, the Project Director and evaluators, staff from the museums and galleries that took part, and some of their community partners. This report captures the main findings from our consultations and our assessment of what we heard.

Overview of findings and key messages for participants

We have been really struck by the huge commitment of everyone involved in *Our Museum* to the programme's mission to properly embed excellent participatory practice so that it is sustained for the long term. It seems to us that the experience of taking part in the programme has been very challenging at times, but this is hardly surprising given the demanding nature of the task and the difficult context in which the programme has been operating.

There has been much about the programme arrangements that has worked well and has contributed to programme objectives. In particular, it seems that participating museums and galleries have benefitted from sage advice from a skilled central team, insightful challenge from experienced evaluators/Critical Friends, encouragement and support from respected peers, and exposure to some novel and inspiring ideas and practice. Some museums and galleries also received additional financial and other support (on top of the standard *Our Museum* funding and support offer) to address wider organisational challenges that might have jeopardised their participation in the programme. This also seems to have been very valuable, and much appreciated.

Our Museum was designed to encourage experimentation and learning, and programme arrangements should be approached in the same spirit. In carrying out this review, we have found plenty of evidence of learning and improvement in ways of working during the course of the programme. Notable examples include the instigation of Lead Contact meetings, the development of a more collaborative approach to the design and facilitation of peer reviews in years two and three, and the emphasis on a principle-based approach to change rather than on particular structural models in the latter part of the programme. Overall, everyone we spoke to recognised that ways of working on *Our Museum* became much more collaborative as the programme progressed. As several participants told us, the decision to commission this review is in itself evidence of PHF's commitment to collaborative learning and improvement.

This report sets out programme experience and learning under 10 themes that seem to us to be worth thinking about before embarking on a similar long-term change programme in future. Under each theme, we identify what worked well in terms of the programme arrangements on *Our Museum* and is worth repeating in future. We also make some suggestions about things that might be tackled differently.

Drawing on both what worked well and what might be tackled differently, we suggest that the main points that PHF/programme leaders may wish to consider in future include:

1. *Designing the journey with the end in mind*: investing in a collaborative approach to programme design, developing a shared theory of change that articulates how working with a particular cohort will support sector-wide change, and drawing more explicitly on relevant experience and learning from other sectors in designing programme arrangements
2. *Creating the best starting point*: checking participants' appetite and capacity to get involved in a long-term programme, negotiating roles and expectations carefully, engaging leaders within participating organisations at an early stage, and building in a scoping/testing period at the start of a long-term programme to allow participants to check and consult more widely on their plans to ensure they are still appropriate and feasible
3. *Balancing direction with flexibility*: promoting core change principles rather than particular structural models, and exploring ways to surface and share assumptions about what 'good practice' looks like
4. *Balancing support with challenge*: taking care with feedback and delivering challenging messages in person where possible, building in bespoke organisational support and targeted training from the start, and encouraging participating organisations to involve community partners in designing and delivering training
5. *Creating the right conditions for peer support and learning*: establishing a forum for peer exchange and support from the beginning and using this to co-design other arrangements, helping participants to get to know each other and understand each other's plans as early as possible, and developing some shared principles/protocols for communicating with a network of funded organisations
6. *Modelling what you want to achieve*: trying to ensure ways of working reflect the nature of the task and the spirit of the programme, creating early opportunities for those taking part in any programme to get to know those making judgements about their progress, agreeing some principles to guide ways of working, and encouraging all participants to take responsibility for proactively contributing ideas about how to design and improve programme arrangements and ways of working
7. *Forging a new funder/grantee relationship*: communicating the intention to create a new kind of funder/grantee relationship at the start and throughout the life of a programme, and identifying symbolic opportunities to demonstrate that commitment
8. *Harnessing the power of formative evaluation*: building in evaluation from the start, keeping evaluation and support roles separate, and designing evaluation to gather the range/types of evidence required to make the case for this work with different audiences
9. *Deploying skills and expertise in support of programme goals and wider strategic agendas*: supporting the Project Director to navigate and link up with PHF internal decision-making structures, exploring possible team structures for programme leadership, identifying other ways to harness the expertise of Steering Group members, and contracting for additional expertise with care and with programme goals and wider strategic agendas in mind

10. *Creating a shared vocabulary and narrative*: helping participants to understand key concepts, having a strong, overarching narrative that sits above programme outcomes, and exploring possible external support to help participants communicate programme goals and learning in a compelling way.

Drawing on both what worked well and what might be tackled differently, we suggest that the main points that participating organisations might wish to consider include:

2. *Creating the best starting point*: thinking really carefully about what they want to get out of any long-term funded programme and the time and effort that might be involved in carrying out the work and liaising with the funder and other participants, consulting widely on and testing plans at bid-writing stage and on joining a programme to ensure they are appropriate and feasible, and ensuring leaders and senior managers are on-board and actively championing participation
4. *Balancing support with challenge*: ensuring programme Leads are adequately supported and appropriate mechanisms are in place to take forward programme learning and remove barriers to change, and involving community partners in designing and delivering training
6. *Modelling what you want to achieve*: helping to agree some principles to guide ways of working, and taking responsibility for proactively contributing ideas about how to design and improve programme arrangements and ways of working
8. *Harnessing the power of formative evaluation*: embedding self-evaluation to ensure progress is sustained
9. *Deploying skills and expertise in support of programme goals and wider strategic agendas*: recruiting Leads with the appropriate blend of personal qualities and positional authority for the task.

At its heart, *Our Museum* has been about forging new types of partnerships: between museums and galleries and their communities, and between PHF as a funder and the organisations it supports. In our experience, good partnership working is based on a sense of shared endeavour, clarity about roles and expectations, mutual respect and recognition of divergent pressures and interests, and good mechanisms for reviewing progress and working arrangements. We hope that this report provides some helpful pointers on these issues and will prove useful in designing future programmes – particularly those involving networks of organisations working together, concerned with organisational development and change, and characterised by an ‘engaged funder’ relationship with grantees.