



Paul Hamlyn Foundation *Our Museum* Special Initiative

The *OUR MUSEUM* organisations
A summary of the journeys

The Lightbox

Introduction

Our Museum: Communities and Museums as Active Partners was a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Special Initiative, established in 2012 and finishing in early 2016. The overall aim was to influence the museum and gallery sector to:

- Place community needs, values and active collaboration at the core of museum and gallery work
- Involve communities and individuals in decision-making processes
- Ensure that museums and galleries play an effective role in developing community skills and the skills of staff in working with communities

This was to be done through facilitation of organisational change in specific museums and galleries already committed to active partnership with communities. *Our Museum* offered a collaborative learning process through which institutions and communities shared experiences and learned from each other as critical friends.

In early 2012 nine museums and galleries were selected to join *Our Museum* from participants in an earlier consultation and research period.¹ The organisations reflected key differences in the wider sector in scale, character and location. Their different starting-points, different challenges and priorities and the different kinds of resources at their disposal, were recognised by the Foundation. The organisations selected were: Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales; Belfast Exposed; Bristol Culture; Glasgow Museums; Hackney Museum; Museum of East Anglian Life; The Lightbox; Ryedale Folk Museum; Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums.²

Each organisation responded to the *Our Museum* Outcomes and Indicators of Success framework and identified 'strategic change objectives' it anticipated would be the focus of its work during the programme. They also identified the members of their *Our Museum* 'engagement team': five people from the museum/gallery, ideally including the chief officer, and five people from community partners to work together collaboratively. The museums and galleries participating in *Our Museum* experimented with a wide range of approaches to achieving their strategic change objectives and create organisational change.

This document assesses the progress of The Lightbox and the challenges it faced in creating organisational change. It is a supplement to the main evaluation report by Gerri Moriarty and Sally Medlyn:

Museums Galleries Communities-Active Partners-Mutual Benefit: An evaluation of the Our Museum Special Initiative. Paul Hamlyn Foundation. June 2016.

¹ The research was published as: Lynch, B. 2011. *Whose Cake Is It Anyway? A collaborative investigation into engagement and participation in 12 museums and galleries in the UK*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation

² The Museum of East Anglian Life and Ryedale Folk Museum were funded for two of the three years of the programme. After they left the *Our Museum* programme the Foundation supported them with organisational review and business planning.

The four *Our Museum* Outcomes and Indicators of Success

Outcome 1 Rooted in Local Needs

Museums and galleries understand their role within their localities; they are effectively informed of and respond to, the range of their communities' needs and values and are aware of and initiate opportunities for partnerships with communities and other sectors to meet local needs

Outcome 2 Community agency

Communities are sustainably at the core of all the values, strategies, structures and work of museums and galleries: actively and regularly participating and collaborating in dialogue and decision-making about the work of the museum/gallery

Outcome 3 Capability building

Museums and galleries play an effective role in developing community skills, capabilities and creativity: preparing and helping people to be engaged in their communities, to articulate their voices, to find employment or volunteering opportunities in the heritage sector and elsewhere; and supporting staff to learn how to work with communities

Outcome 4 Reflection

Museums and galleries embed reflective practice into their work: internally, with community partners and across the sector, to ensure on-going reflection, dialogue and openness to challenge, alternative values and working methods

Indicators of Success for each outcome set out key assumptions about organisations committed to active partnership with communities: core values; kinds of leadership; ways of working; the nature and purpose of partnerships which might help inform policy and support delivery; how community and staff capacity building might help to deliver all outcomes; what good practice in this area might look like; and the critical role of reflection and dialogue in the work.³

³ The Outcomes and Indicators of Success are set out in full on page 28 of the main report

The Lightbox

This summary assesses the progress of The Lightbox and the challenges it faced in creating organisational change against the four *Our Museum* outcomes; Rooted in Local Needs, Community Agency, Capability and Reflection. It has been written by the *Our Museum* evaluators Sally Medlyn and Gerri Moriarty and is a supplement to the main evaluation report, which contains further details of the outcomes framework: *Museums Galleries Communities-Active Partners-Mutual Benefit: An evaluation of the Our Museum Special Initiative*. Paul Hamlyn Foundation. June 2016.



The Lightbox (TLB) is a purpose built public gallery and museum within minutes of Woking town centre. It was founded by a group of local people; it opened to the public in 2007 after a period during which the founders ran cultural activities in the town without a fixed building base. It is a charity and company limited by guarantee with a Board of Trustees. It is supported by Woking Borough Council, Arts Council England and corporate sponsors, and income generating activities.

Outcome 1 Rooted in Local Needs: Flexibility in exhibition programming

The Lightbox was proud of the considerable amount of consultation and outreach work that had taken place before and whilst its new building was under construction. However, participation in the *Our Museum* programme was seen by the organisation as presenting an opportunity to consider whether its desire to become a nationally acclaimed gallery had moved it too far away from its early roots as a gallery that is relevant to and inspired a sense of ownership in local people. There was a perception that one individual, the Special Projects Manager (who became the *Our Museum* Coordinator), acted as ‘the voice of the community’ rather than this being seen as the responsibility of the whole organisation.

The *Our Museum* Coordinator began by carrying out extensive interviews with community organisations of different kinds, staff, Trustees, funders, existing volunteers and the general public - users and non users - to review their involvement with and perceptions of The Lightbox. This proved a useful way to open up significant conversations about issues such as what advances in collaboration might look like and how to bring about changes in structure and culture.

The Lightbox’s gallery practice began to change; there was increased recognition that some flexibility had to be built into its exhibition programme so that it could be

responsive to community needs and allow the pace of relationships to be driven more by community needs, rather than those of the gallery. It experimented with showing a high-quality exhibition produced through collaboration with community groups in its main gallery space. *Skyscapes* combined works from the Ingram Collection of Modern British and Contemporary Art⁴ with artworks created by people with learning difficulties, working with a print-maker and two installation artists.

The Lightbox noted that this experiment resulted in a reduction in the amount of income generated from the café and the shop during the exhibition compared to periods when other shows were in the main space programme. This was not related so much to fewer visitors as to a different visitor profile, with fewer people purchasing goods in the shop and café. Income from the café and shop is significant to the organisation's overall financial position: so The Lightbox intends to continue to value and exhibit collaborative work whilst carefully considering the indirect impacts of programme decisions on other aspects of its activity, including income generation.

The Lightbox is now in the early stage of reimagining itself as part of a connected network of organisations and communities - of interest and of place.

Outcome 2 Community Agency: 'Starting from Zero'

The Lightbox had always promoted the concept that it had community at its heart. The Director believed that the nature of the organisation's successful operation in its first four years '*had a very troubling effect on our community mission: could we really be all things to all people – a much-loved community facility for all to share, as well as a nationally acclaimed prestigious gallery.*' At the start of the *Our Museum* programme, community engagement practice was seen as centering primarily on projects, which happened when external funding could be secured. Differing impressions of The Lightbox 'core' purposes were given by print and online material.

The Lightbox proposed a radical shift in its community engagement practice. It called this 'Starting from Zero'; instead of the museum going out to communities with preconceived propositions, it would talk to community partners about the kinds of resources it could offer and how they might like to collaborate with the organisation. Community partners would then be active in decision-making about how their projects were delivered. The Lightbox developed practical partnerships with four organisations or groups, some already working with the organisation and some new to partnership, exploring the proposition '*Art makes you feel good.*'

For example, the Shah Jehan Mosque community had contributed to a permanent display within The Lightbox in the past. The *Our Museum* Coordinator was aware

⁴ This private collection of Modern British Art, established in 2002 by Chris Ingram, is displayed and rotated at The Lightbox.

that cultural traditions meant the gallery could be a difficult space for some members of the Muslim community to use. He used existing contacts at the Mosque to begin to discuss possibilities rather than offering an invitation to take part in a pre-determined arts activity. The idea of celebrating Sufi poetry – popular within the community – through a contemporary artist working with sound and video, came from the community and not from The Lightbox. The work addressed important issues for the older generation around fear of loss of cultural heritage and for younger people about cultural identity, whilst also creating an artwork using the language of contemporary art that was beautiful and resonant for people from many communities.

The development of Woking Arts Hub demonstrated how The Lightbox could act as an enabling organisation, working with and supporting the aspirations of local artists for an information sharing, networking and advocacy group. A community partner explained: *'..There's a lot going on here [in and around Woking] but it's not joined up. The priority, particularly in this economic climate, is to make this 'spider web' work: join resources and work together. The Lightbox is well known in Woking – at the heart of the community – so it can act as a hub for this kind of thing...'* From the outset it was clear that the intention was for the Hub to become self-sustaining and independent with a planned shift from The Lightbox as the centre of the Hub, to The Lightbox as a participant alongside other organisations and individuals.

In Year 2, key learning began to emerge from these practical collaborations, supplemented by additional input from members of The Lightbox's *Our Museum* engagement team. These lessons were that The Lightbox needed to make 'active choices' about who to work with and how to use whatever resources they had; to be open with potential partners about what resource they could realistically offer; to consider different types of relationships over time not just projects with a fixed beginning and an end; to remember the scope for community partners to contribute resources – time, expertise, money, facilities; and consider joint bids for funding where there was shared purpose and mutual benefit.

Internally, there was growing recognition that the issue was not about the gallery 'giving' control to the community as originally envisaged but about encouraging a more nuanced dialogue, with different organisations or communities having different types of relationships with it. The organisation and its community partners observed that these 'project' relationships were about active and equitable collaboration between partners who know their own strengths and capabilities and know they can achieve more together than separately.

Appreciation also grew amongst staff and Trustees of the balance between 'national' and 'local' aspects of The Lightbox's work: learning from the *Our Museum* work

began to feed into wider discussions on the organisation's overall strategic direction and approach to financial sustainability.

As the *Our Museum* programme ends, The Lightbox is experimenting with a new mechanism: The Lightbox Ideas Forum. This community forum is based on the Creative Café model developed by Glasgow Museum, adapted to the needs of The Lightbox as a much smaller organisation. This enables community input at the pre-planning stage of exhibitions and projects and generates ideas for future activity; it will have a rolling membership so no one representative has a permanent presence.

Outcome 3 Capability Building: Staff involvement, dialogue with volunteers

The Lightbox's initial plan was that staff training needs would be identified through the initial research phase and a training programme then be devised for Trustees and possibly other stakeholders by an external consultant. It was envisaged that curators, designers, publicity officers, education officers, front of house staff, Trustees and the Gallery Advisory Group, planning the exhibition schedule, would all need to learn to work in ways that were genuinely collaborative; the need for training to help staff work with people dealing with specific issues such as working with recovering drug and alcohol abusers was also noted.

This training did not happen in a formal sense but increasing involvement by a range of staff in the *Our Museum* engagement team and in peer reviews led to informal learning and sharing. There was more explicit discussion about the rationale for selection of exhibitions and about integration of work reflecting art, community and heritage into the programme.

A marketing and communication team member began to make sure that the learning from the work was expressed consistently and was 'visible' in The Lightbox's brochures, online and in social media. The Special Projects Manager job title has been changed to Community Engagement Manager, with the implication that the role has shifted towards a concern with a planned series of future events or activities, rather than delivering individual and distinct projects.

Community partners from the five local organisations working with adults with learning disabilities in the Woking area received fund-raising training and have formed a networked fund-raising consortium with The Lightbox. Members of the Woking Arts Hub offered The Lightbox staff and other community partners informal training and experiences of using digital media to promote creative work. The Lightbox began to use its existing Volunteer Forums differently to encourage more active dialogue and feedback between staff and volunteers and to share knowledge and thinking about what was happening and planned for the organisation.

'Whole organisation' training or facilitation may be needed as The Lightbox enters its next phase of organisational change, focused on integrated strategic planning.

Outcome 4 Reflection: Organisational reflection days

The Lightbox regarded reflection about its practice with community partners and review and re-envisioning of its overall relationship with 'community' as major strands of its *Our Museum* programme. However, at the outset of the *Our Museum* programme, reflection as a process and a tool for the staff team and Trustees was not deliberately built into normal planning; staff thought that the organisation tended to work 'informally' and as a small team, with people talking to each other all the time about what was going on and why.

The *Our Museum* engagement team enabled planned opportunities for reflective practice to be consciously built into working practices. During Year 2 organisational developments were reported including departmental meetings reflecting upon performance, de-briefing after large events and a monthly reflection from each department to the Board. In Year 2, The Lightbox held two *Days of Reflection* for staff and partners to consider the challenges faced and lessons it had learned so far. Staff members were asked to examine their work in the light of the *Our Museum* principles; this resulted in focused discussions and changes in practice. For example: '*... the Days of Reflection threw light on the need to evaluate exhibitions more fully instead of moving straight on to the next one. So now there has been instituted a simple questionnaire for all staff after all exhibitions, with the Senior Management producing Learning Points to be circulated to all staff.*' Trustees received a presentation about The Lightbox's *Our Museum* programme and the *Our Museum* Advocacy Statement, as did all those who attended the organisation's Annual General Meeting. These were used to prompt wider reflection upon The Lightbox's purposes and practice.

As the *Our Museum* programme comes to an end, the proposed Lightbox Ideas Forum should offer a new space for regular shared reflection between staff and community partners.

