

The challenges of embedding participation

Not surprisingly, most of the barriers to participation that we identified at the beginning of the Our Museum programme continued, in some way, to affect the work in individual organisations, and some remain to be addressed as the change journeys continue beyond the funded programme.

Diversity of community partners and sharing of authority

A characteristic of the Our Museum programme was that museums and community partners were expected to manage the change programme jointly. In some cases this worked very well. In others, throughout the programme there was a lack of diversity in the community partners, so that the group was not representative of the diversity of the area; or the museum/gallery never succeeded in developing an effective joint team to manage the programme and make decisions.

Analysing the reasons behind this, it seems that it is easier for some museums and galleries to develop mechanisms for co-production around programming of exhibitions and events – as these are little more than an extension of consultation processes which they are mostly familiar with; but it is harder for them to develop mechanisms for truly sharing authority and long-term strategic decision-making.

In some cases, strategic decisions are made at a level ‘above’ the museum, at which community partners can have little involvement and impact. This is an issue particularly for local authority museums and museums that are part of larger parent bodies (though see case study on page 30 of Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, a large local authority service, who have experimented with involving community partners in strategic decision-making).

The tension between income generation and participation

One of the original aims was for participatory work to become core, embedded, sustainable and less at risk of being marginalised when specific funding streams ran out. The picture across the Our Museum cohort was varied. We continued to hear that finance departments were not supportive of this work, as it did not generate income – and so there still appears to be some expectation that community engagement requires separate funding, or it is at risk. One approach, taken by Hackney Museum and The Lightbox, has been for the museum or gallery and community partners to develop proposals together and fundraise for them jointly.

Nevertheless, some of the organisations have made changes by financially underpinning participatory work from earned income or core budgets. There was recognition that different audiences or events generate different levels of income. In cases where participatory work generates less income or even makes a loss, its cost can be covered by other activities. This so-called ‘Robin Hood’ strategy pays for high priority ‘poorer’ activities by using income from the ‘richer’ activities. However, we have yet to see this approach embedded into a clear business model with participation firmly at the centre.

Keeping community partners interested and involved

Community partners get involved with museums for different reasons. They have varied interests, priorities and capacity. Some of the Our Museum organisations found that initial enthusiasm waned, and fewer people maintained their interest and attendance at meetings or responded to information.

Despite museums' interest in involving community partners at a leadership, governance and strategic level, very often the partners are interested in project work which directly matches their own interests and activities.

There are still lessons to be learned about how to keep them involved. It is important to constantly revisit and review community partner membership. The introduction of new people changes the make-up and focus, and ensures that discussions are not stagnant, and that the space is still used to challenge and evaluate the work. The challenge is to find a balance between fluidity and sustainability in the group.

Impact of restructures and staff changes

The Our Museum programme overlapped with a period of financial austerity. Most of the organisations were subject to restructures, redundancies and staff changes. This resulted in reduced staff capacity, lack of continuity and of transferring learning about the programme, and in some cases poor understanding of what the organisation had previously committed to.

The challenge remains how to pass on institutional learning about a participatory way of working, and keep the relationships with community partners going, in the face of such a lack of staff continuity. Hackney Museum, a local authority service, maintained momentum through a series of council restructures because of the support of senior managers and elected members, which was crucial.

The 'real work' of the museum

Convincing all staff of the importance of working with communities remains an ongoing process. This is normal in any organisational change: not everyone is persuaded of the need for change at the same time. Some staff still see participatory work as secondary to the 'real work' of the museum; and some are defensive rather than supportive, worried that professional issues could be de-prioritised. It is a major cultural change to shift the notion of this work away from consultation to one of strategic partnership and co-production with communities. There has been undeniable progress, and there are mechanisms in place to address this, but for many of the Our Museum organisations there is still a long way to go to get full staff buy-in.

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Extract from: No Longer us and them: How to change into a participatory museum and gallery.
Available on the Our Museum resources website <http://ourmuseum.org.uk/>