

The role of policy and strategy

Our Museum: Communities and Museums as Active Partners was a Paul Hamlyn Foundation programme to facilitate a process of development and organisational change within museums and galleries committed to active partnership with their communities, with the ambition of affecting the museum sector more widely.

The programme involved several museums and galleries and years of action research, learning and development. Among the many aspects of an organisational change journey that came to light was the role of strategy and policy.

This sort of 'instrumental' change, such as written documents and public-facing commitments, can help with staff buy-in and allocation of resources. Policies and strategies embed participatory practice into the day-to-day workings of the organisation, and sustain the change by committing it to institutional memory.

In 2009, Bernadette Lynch's action research with a group of museums and galleries laid a foundation for the programme. One method (of several) Lynch used was to analyse the language used in policy and organisational documents. Her findings revealed that while practitioners were talking about partnerships and sharing decision making, their organisational policies revealed an underlying philanthropic bias. Lynch argued that the community member was too often cast as a beneficiary or 'suppliant' on the periphery, with senior managers and staff as 'carers' in the centre. This imbalance of power, maintained Lynch, can be subtly replicated in the wording of museum and gallery policy documents. It is a pertinent reminder for those writing strategy and policy to rethink the museum or gallery as one slice of a wider network/partnership. Careful attention to language is necessary to ensure that proposed mutuality and shared authority are not simply rhetoric but a reality.

Full report: <http://ourmuseum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Whose-cake-is-it-anyway-report.pdf>

Institutional documentation should reflect the core value of participatory community engagement if that is at the heart of the organisation's work. Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales brought its new vision into line with its values. Its new vision clearly aligns the organisation with a commitment to participation and inclusion. Director David Anderson talked about the vision, making clear that this 'was part of the work of every member of staff'. The vision also enabled senior management to 'set resources against the participation inclusion strand...and it does link planning with purpose perhaps very directly.'

Full interview here: <http://ourmuseum.org.uk/leading-participatory-community-engagement/>

Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums' (TWAM) Alternative Management Team (made up of staff, volunteers and community partners) identified that '...there was no clear strategy how partners who wish to engage with TWAM actually do that.' The service was disjointed and community partners received different information depending on which member of museum staff they spoke to. 'The Alternative Management Team has now established a framework and a process for our engagement with community partners' (Maria Barrell, Community Partner). So, they worked together to develop a Community Engagement Framework, 'Valuing Voices'. This leaflet-style document gives potential community partners background information about TWAM, including how decisions are made, different ways to engage and clear priorities. Communication channels and what to expect are made clear for both staff and communities.

Full report: <http://ourmuseum.org.uk/alternative-management-team/>

While it's all very well having ratified and written policies and strategies in place, this won't, necessarily, guarantee action. Here are a few ways the community engagement team at Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales, have used a community engagement strategy to support organisational change:

1. It was developed collaboratively using open-space techniques and workshops. These reinforced the input and role of organisational champions and brought new staff on board.
2. It is not a stand-alone document. It is implemented through other strategies and departments. So for example, the digital strategy and action plan is influenced by, and partly delivers, the community engagement strategy.
3. It is not expected to be delivered by just one small team. That small team is visiting other teams, supporting, advocating and training so that the strategy can be delivered across sites and departments. They are scaling up delivery by building capacity across the organisation. This means visiting each site and listening to the community-facing work already happening. It is supported with practical action and shared lessons and policy that emerged from the deep partnership model during the Our Museum programme.
4. It is a live document. While the principles remain the same, it is updated in line with changing government and local policy contexts. Also, regular meetings of champions and managers on implementation and any arising issues enable the document to be related to action.
5. It is aligned to the new corporate vision and has been ratified by the board of trustees, giving the strategy authority and unlocking potential resources.

Full interview here: <http://ourmuseum.org.uk/strategy-and-organisational-change/>

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