A MANIFESTO FOR MUSEUM LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

Museums Association

Over 20 years ago David Anderson's report, A Common Wealth: Museums in the Learning Age, was published. The report was based on extensive research and called for learning to be placed at the centre of the development of museums.

We now live in a very different world from when that report was published. Digital technologies are embedded in every aspect of our life and work. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own governments and culture is a devolved responsibility.

Now, in 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has sharply revealed the realities of contemporary inequality, in ways that can no longer be evaded or concealed.

It has disproportionately impacted people from the African Diaspora, those from South, East and South East Asia and those that are ethnically diverse, those who live in overcrowded accommodation or have no permanent home, and those who experience poverty and the consequential harm that poverty brings. It has widened the gap in educational opportunities for learners of all ages in our society.

The murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement have laid bare the racism that still impacts society and our museums. Museum partnerships, collections, programmes and exhibitions do not represent the diversity of society.

Those from the African Diaspora, South, East and South East Asia and those that are ethnically diverse make up under 3% of the workforce in museums and libraries – and almost all of these are in the lowest paid jobs.

The origin and spread of the coronavirus crisis is intimately connected to the way humans treat each other, but also to the way we treat the environment. The climate crisis poses a serious threat to the future of the planet and museums must play their part in protecting the precious resources that we have left.

These crises are interrelated. They make it imperative that we make a transformational change to the role of museums in society. This is a time that requires radical social innovation.

Until now, arts and culture have had only a minor role in the process of civil renewal and social change, but we should commit to them being central to the rebuilding of our societies.

This manifesto has been built on two years of research, engagement and consultation with those that work in and with museums. It provides a framework for all museums, whatever their history, scale, funding or model of governance, to reflect on their purpose and develop their practice.

01

CULTURAL RIGHTS AND CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

Access to and participation in culture is a basic human right. Everyone has a right to representation and agency in museums, and communities should have the power to decide how they engage.

The UN Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community”. This is based on the principle that citizens are not just consumers of cultural capital created by others; we have agency and the right to contribute through culture to the wider good of society.

The most significant function of museums is as centres for cultural democracy, where children and adults learn through practical experience that we all have cultural rights. Having the opportunity to create, and to give to others, may be one of our greatest sources of fulfilment. Culture is everywhere and is created by everyone.

02

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Museums have a responsibility to work with their communities to overcome the challenges of poverty and exclusion and to achieve equality of outcomes.

Social justice in museums is based on the principle of the right to equality of access and participation for all. It means that the whole of the public can benefit from the collections and resources of museums and that everyone can participate and contribute equally.

Social justice means museums working with their communities to enhance health and wellbeing, create better places to live and work, and provide opportunities for debate and reflection.

Meaningful participation and volunteering can promote self-confidence and improve the life chances of participants, including overcoming social isolation and providing opportunities to develop skills and improve employability.

03

ACTIVISM

Museums are not neutral. Museum activism should be based on listening, acting and delivering with our communities.

Museum activism is about taking positive action to make the world a better place. Museums are part of the fabric of society and are impacted by and can have an impact on events outside their walls.

Museum activism can mean supporting campaigns that our communities care about in an open and collaborative way. This could be working on issues where museums, through their collections, interpretation and programming, can add understanding, knowledge and perspectives on issues such as anti-racism and the climate crisis.

04

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Museums should develop innovative models of engagement which represent the cultural context of their communities and nations and that are brave and challenging. Community groups should be valued and fully engaged with all functions of the museum.

Communities are complex, multi-layered and fluid and their participation in museums is not passive or static. Participation should challenge institutions, staff, the communities we work with and our visitors.

The challenge can sit just as much with what a school group expects of its workshop, as with an exploration of the food and drink served on site with a under-represented group.

The uncertainty of the journey of community participation is a sign that it is true in its intent. Community participation has no end date, and there is always more that can be done.

05
COLLECTIONS

Collections belong to communities and without people museums are just storage warehouses. Collections are for public use.

Collections matter to many people, and for them to be a source of understanding and empowerment, people need access to them. Museums should work with their communities to ensure that collections are empowering, relevant and dynamic.

This means adopting a proactive approach to the democratisation and decolonisation of collections; reinterpreting collections with communities; and supporting partnerships and knowledge sharing.

Museums should be transparent about the objects they hold and work with communities to understand, interpret and rationalise collections.

06
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Museums should support people-centred research that responds to the challenges in society and leads to positive change.

Museums are a way of thinking, and these ways change over time. Research – purposeful, public-focused and meeting contemporary needs – is essential if museums are to be effective as centres for social justice and transformation.

Museum research is not undertaken only by specialists focusing on museum collections. New knowledge developed with the support of museums may be created and led by activist researchers using cultural resources in their own localities. This research and new understanding can be used by communities to achieve change in society.

07
PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships should bring communities together and be based on the principle of equity. Museums should work with a diverse range of partners and think beyond traditional partners and audiences.

Partnerships between museums and communities, and the organisations that represent them, can bring fresh perspectives and insight to all areas of museum work. Partnerships that are forged equally with communities will enable us to engage with new ideas, networks and people.

Strong partnerships can help museums to understand the issues their communities are facing, support collaborative community participation, and bring them into contact with new networks of people that can then become new audiences, volunteers and staff.

08
WORKFORCE

Museums need a workforce that represents their communities, is respected and rewarded equally, and delivers and supports the ambitions of this manifesto.

When people from under-represented backgrounds enter institutions, their rise to decision-making positions is often rare or short-lived because of systemic issues and unsupportive environments.

Museums must implement fair recruitment practices, create development and progression for the under-represented staff they already employ, and ensure safe spaces and support for these staff when entering the workforce and arriving in leadership roles.

A representative, creative, and supported workforce is an essential foundation for this manifesto, and is critical to achieving its goals.

This Manifesto was written by David Anderson, director-general, Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, Dhikshana Pering, head of engagement and skills, Somerset House, and Sharon Heal, director of the Museums Association, after extensive consultation and engagement with museum workers throughout the UK. It has been produced in collaboration with Engage and the Group for Education in Museums, and with support from the Art Fund.

Engage
Bringing people and art together

Gem
the voice for heritage learning

Art Fund_

Further resources

- Museums Association: Museums Change Lives
- Museums Association: Ethics
- Museums Association: Empowering Collections
- Museums Association: Power to the People
- GEM: Resources
- Engage: Resources
- Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance: Resources
- OF/BY/FOR ALL
- Runnymede Trust and CLASS: 'We Are Ghosts': Race, Class and Institutional Prejudice
- Creative People and Places: Power Up
- Paul Hamlyn Foundation: Asset-based Work with Young People – Findings from the Youth Fund evaluation
- Durham University: Durham Commission on Creativity in Education – final report recommendations

CASE STUDIES

CULTURAL RIGHTS AND CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

Access to and participation in culture is a basic human right. Everyone has a right to representation and agency in museums, and communities should have the power to decide how they engage.

01

01
A case study from Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 27) states that everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts.

Simply being free to people of all backgrounds is not enough on its own to eliminate barriers and inequality. At Amgueddfa Cymru, we have adopted a rights-based approach to our work, challenging inequality and championing social justice. This work focuses on three strategic areas: participation, representation and agency.

An important example of this work is the exhibition Who Decides? Making Connections with Contemporary Art – a large-scale exhibition at National Museum Cardiff. The exhibition was created with clients from the Wallich – a Welsh charity supporting homeless adults.

Over nine months, a group of ten Wallich curators worked with colleagues across the museum. A series of workshops empowered the group to lead on all aspects of Who Decides?, including selecting and interpreting objects, marketing the exhibition and delivering public programmes.

The project aspired to be an honest and open partnership of equals, questioning established values and structures. Many of the Wallich curators had never previously visited a museum, so their lived experiences brought new knowledge and skills.

The curators changed the way we see and understand contemporary art. For example, they challenged traditional interpretation approaches by writing object labels describing personal connections with the art displayed. Together we delivered an accessible, welcoming and powerful exhibition, visited by over 40,000 people.

Following the exhibition, the Wallich curators took on wider volunteering roles at the museum. Their contribution signalled new ways in which museums can become active civic spaces in our communities.

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02

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A case study from National Museums Liverpool

Following the killing of George Floyd, National Museums Liverpool (NML) released a statement condemning his racist murder and calling for change. Beyond words, NML set up a steering group with colleagues from across the organisation, to ensure Black Lives Matter activity is embedded in everything we do.

As our museums and galleries reopened, a visible statement about the organisation's stance on Black Lives Matter was displayed across all sites. We set up an email address dedicated to Black Lives Matter, encouraging visitors to get in touch if NML's interpretation, collections or language should be changed.

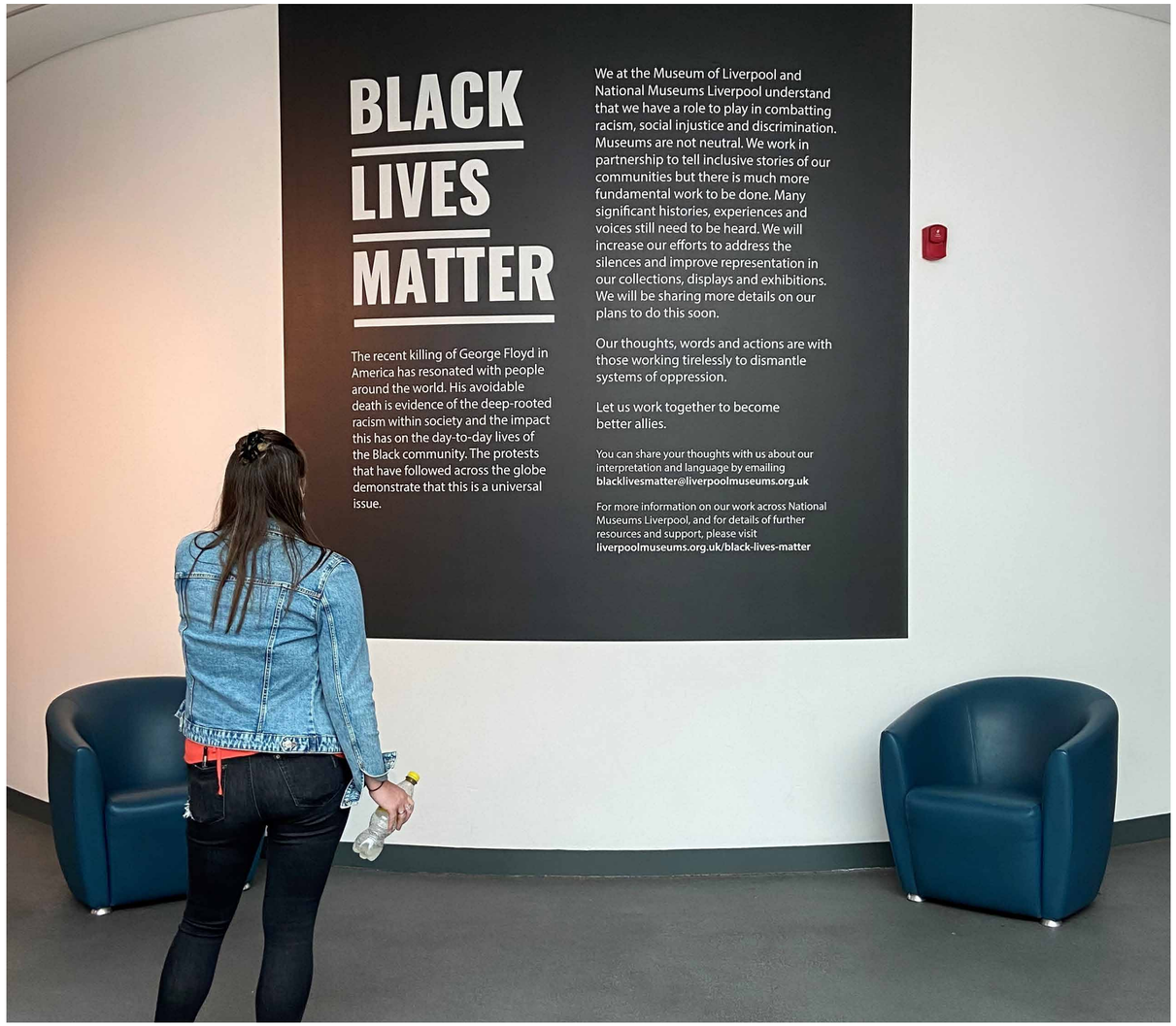
A Black Lives Matter resource webpage has been created, platforming Liverpool's Black experience, sharing relevant literature and podcasts, and providing information on how to support the movement locally.

The ongoing activity of the International Slavery Museum continues to be a vehicle for social justice at the forefront of museum activism, community engagement and inclusion. For many decades, NML has worked with Black communities and organisations to collaborate, engage and co-create.

Communities are taking part in recent online events and discussions, and NML has joined a city-wide education partnership addressing the lack of Black British history in the national curriculum. The World Museum's World Cultures gallery is moving away from displays that segregate peoples into distinct cultures, towards displays addressing global issues and ideas.

NML is working in collaboration with Black-led creative industries, including educators, poets, artists, filmmakers and comedians, to change which stories are told and how they are shared.

The recent appointment of a Historian in Residence represents a significant step to ensuring we embed an understanding of the history and legacies of slavery across all our museums and galleries. We're also establishing a repatriation policy that recognises the importance of returning objects, which can heal and revitalise community relationships and trust.



ACTIVISM

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03

03
A case study from the Museum of Homelessness

Covid-19 is a huge risk to the homeless and vulnerably housed population who we work with daily.

In March, as museums closed their doors and the streets of London emptied, day centres, food banks, handouts and other homelessness services were cancelled on masse. Faced with silence from the authorities, we took action to save lives.

We repurposed all resources to campaign and directly support our community. Ahead of the government, we published a plan, later adopted as national strategy, to utilise empty hotel accommodation for homeless people.

We successfully lobbied the Secretary of State to reopen the closed Mildmay Hospital and provide specialist Covid care for homeless people.

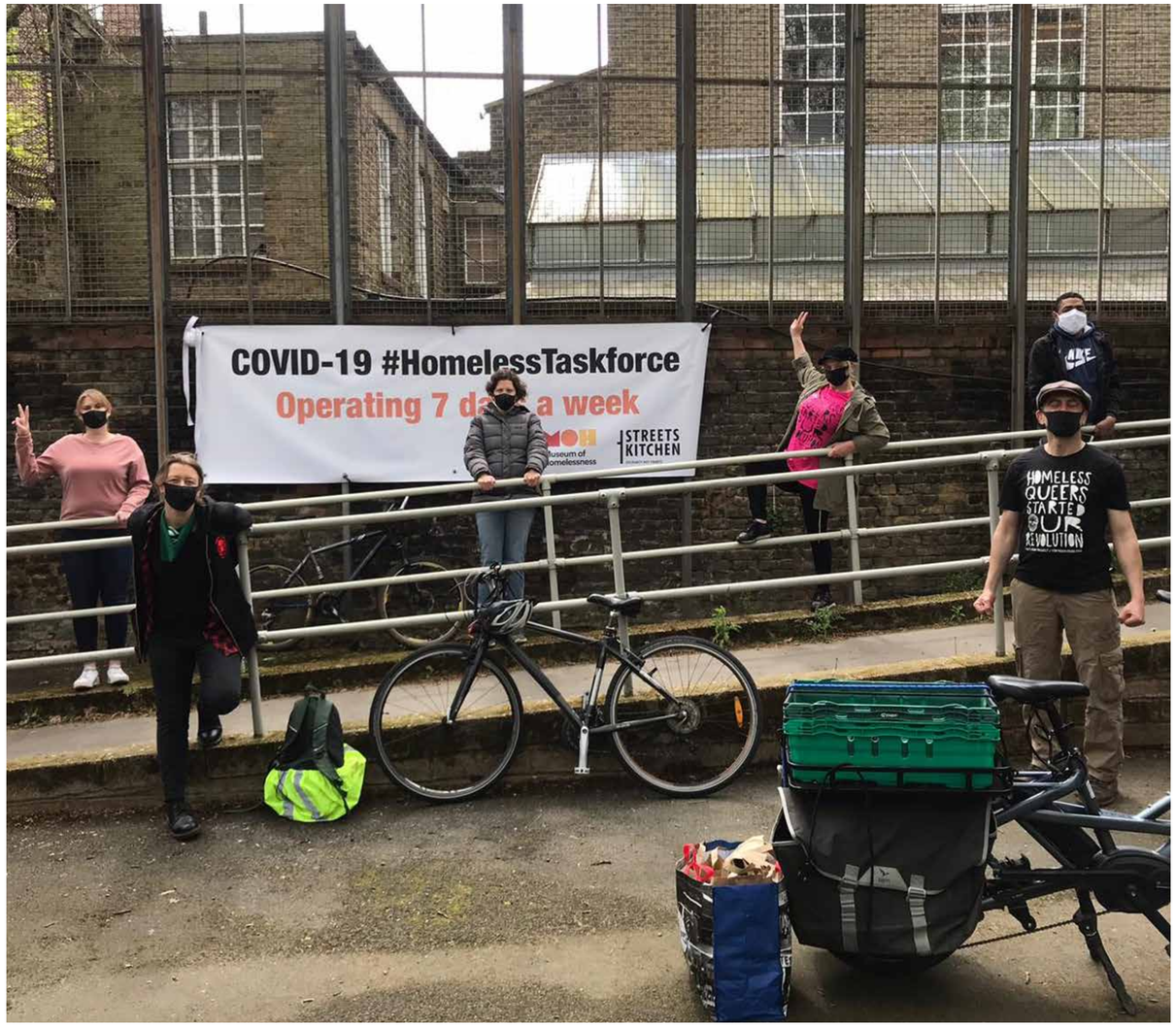
We worked with homelessness health teams, the government's Rough Sleepers initiative, local partners and UK-wide grassroots groups. We formed the Covid-19 Homeless Taskforce, teaming up with Streets Kitchen, the Outside Project, Simon Community, Union Chapel, Greenpeace, Mutual Aid groups and many others.

With our cultural activity firmly on the back-burner, we borrowed a vacant council community centre to launch a seven-days-a-week operation, even repurposing our museum shelving for dried goods and cans.

All of this happened in three short weeks, and throughout the summer over 50 volunteers helped dispatch almost 9,000 meals to people in temporary accommodation and on the streets.

We continued lobbying and coordinated with the migrant rights sector to campaign (unsuccessfully) for the government to waive 'no recourse to public funds' rules. We also submitted evidence to select committees and worked with Liberty to challenge the coronavirus bill.

The council has since asked for their borrowed community centre back. But, with the pandemic continuing and a second wave looming, our activism continues. Until we get our own building, you can find us on the streets every Thursday at Highbury Corner, between 12 and 2.



COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

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04
A case study from Jon Sleigh, Learning Officer and Learning Curator

Are practitioners as brave as the collections we represent? Recognising our limitations of lived experience and where this starts in others is at the heart of community participation.

In 2018, I had the privilege to work with Birmingham Museums Trust, the Arts Council Collection and the Precious Trust, which works with young women at risk of violence and exploitation, on a project that changed my life.

I faced a major engagement barrier – an artwork in the exhibition 'Women Power Protest' made using a real gun that talked about violence against women. How could I honour this narrative with integrity and for a meaningful purpose?

My answer was to build a collaboration with The Precious Trust. Every day the team hear first-hand accounts of girls and young women being exploited for criminal purposes and forced to become a form of sexual currency.

The reality of this hidden abuse is that girls often suffer in silence. The Precious Trust's mission is to fight on their behalf and enable the young women to keep safe, rebuild their lives, and enjoy a more positive future.

The Trust's founder, Marcia Shakespeare, used the artwork on violence as a practical tool in advocating for change. In the gallery, some of Birmingham's most vulnerable residents claimed space for powerful and emotive sharing. The girls reinterpreted the exhibition in their voice, connecting challenging lived experience to visitors.

Following this, the Precious Trust joined me in Parliament to meet MP Jess Phillips and tell their story. Their testimony fed directly into Jess's work advocating nationally for women's safety. A private tour of parliament completed our journey.

Starting with a deficit of lived experience, we used community participation as a tool for change and amplified this to influence national politics. This all started with true intent, a willingness to face the challenge, bravery and a cup of tea.

COLLECTIONS

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05

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A case study from the Pitt Rivers Museum

The Pitt Rivers Museum's collections have a wealth of stories to reveal. We're passionate these stories should be told from different perspectives, in all their complexity.

We actively build partnerships and establish relationships of trust with stakeholders across the globe, but also with our local communities. In past years, this has brought a great range of people into the museum to activate and mobilise the collections in new ways, including indigenous knowledge keepers, researchers, students, and a wide variety of community bodies.

One example is the Maasai Living Cultures project started in 2017, when Samwel Nangiria visited the Museum as part of NGO Insightshare's Indigenous Leadership programme. Maasai representatives from Kenya and Tanzania visited three times over three years.

During these visits, the delegates expressed concerns about the presence of five of the 188 objects and indicated that without spiritual intervention their continued presence in Oxford would cause great anxiety.

We are awaiting further guidance from the Chief Laibon (spiritual leader) of the Maasai, Laibon Mokompo Ole Parit, to find ways forward with the Maasai community. Conversations have also started about how the museum speaks about the Maasai in displays, databases and education programmes.

These partnerships offer creativity and learning, but are also complex and challenging. Facing this complexity is integral to ensuring we welcome everyone and tell honest, multi-voiced stories fit for the 21st century.

The nature of our collections makes decolonisation an urgent priority, with curatorial authority to be shared and/or handed to Indigenous curators, knowledge keepers and artists. In programming we prioritise community members over curatorial voices and in our interpretation we aim to include epistemologies of the South.

By offering more meaningful understandings, we can work towards a more hopeful future that will keep the museum and its collections relevant for generations to come.

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

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06

06
A case study from Glasgow Women's Library

Glasgow Women's Library (GWL) is the only Accredited Museum in the UK dedicated to celebrating women's lives, histories and achievements, with a library, archive and innovative programmes of public events and learning opportunities.

In 1995, GWL became custodians of the London-based Lesbian Archive and Information Centre (LAIC) after its closure because of funding cuts. Spanning the 1920s to the present day, this collection now makes up a third of GWL's archive and is the only lesbian archive in the UK.

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It includes evidence of close-knit, inclusive and intersectional communities, crossing a range of materials, from community group meeting minutes, to international publications, campaign materials and much more.

Despite GWL's longstanding care of the collection, there is still a wealth of materials waiting to be discovered and presented to empower new communities of women.

The Museums Association-Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund Lesbian Lives project was developed in collaboration with independent curator Freya Monk-McGowan to further unleash its potential by interpreting and digitising materials.

A commission will see award-winning artist and participant in LAIC's history, Ingrid Pollard, create work to be showcased at Glasgow International in 2021. Pollard's social art practice brings to light pertinent narratives around representation and difference.

Alongside Pollard's residency, the archive trainee, Lauren Kelly, will be focusing on improving access and delivering events to give people first-hand experience with materials.

With support from GWL's experienced team of staff and volunteers, this project centres social justice and transformation. The need for this work is captured by lead curator Monk-McGowan: "As a queer woman, I understand and have lived the experience of coming out without the representation of my life in either heritage institutions or wider society.

"I know the damage that this can do to a person's understanding of their place within society, their self-esteem, and importantly, their health and wellbeing."

PARTNERSHIPS

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07

07
A case study from the Cornwall Museums Partnership

The Rural Diversity Network was initiated in 2017 by Cornwall Museums Partnership (CMP) and freelance curator Tehmina Goskar, as part of the Arts Council England-supported Change Makers leadership programme.

The network is a method of trying to tackle geographic exclusion through partnership work. Rural geography impacts many; it can intensify the effects of race, socio-economic deprivation, sexuality, gender, disability and access to services and opportunities.

Cultural policy around diversity has often centred on the visible diversity of cities. The network aims to balance this by providing another view and campaigning for equity across rural regions.

Cultural investment in rural regions has often been biased towards creating an offer for tourists, resulting in inclusion challenges for organisations engaging with local communities. The network is helping to challenge, inform and develop new practice.

The aims of the network are:

- Representation/advocacy to policy-makers and stakeholders (including communities)
- A place to put diversity into practice – training to help apply practical diversity in businesses and programmes
- Networking with colleagues and each other's organisations to find common cause
- A safe space to challenge and be challenged, including having difficult conversations without giving/taking offence
- Use of Cornish diversity as action learning that others can draw understanding from, particularly how the Cornish National Minority intersects with other categories of diversity

The network enacts a rights-based practice that depends on recognising the agency of those most impacted by issues, believing they are able to articulate their own 'priorities' and make change happen.

Working in partnership with organisations offering expertise in the chosen subject and coordinated by CMP, monthly Twitter 'takeovers' pose questions to CMP's followers and spark discussion.

Topics explored to date include homelessness, mental health, older people, volunteering, young people, arts education and LGBTQ+ support, and the role museums and galleries can play.

WORKFORCE

Museums need a workforce that represents their communities, is respected and rewarded equally, and delivers and supports the ambitions of this manifesto.

08

08
A case study from Museums and Galleries Edinburgh

When a pandemic shuts down a museum service three days before your traineeship starts, what do you do?

This was the situation faced by trainees Susie and Thessa, who joined Museums and Galleries Edinburgh in the middle of the Covid-19 crisis.

The NLHF-funded Inclusive Museums Heritage Project, in partnership with social enterprise Next Step Initiative, creates opportunities for people of Black and minority ethnic heritage to access the Scottish museum sector.

We know a diverse and representative workforce directly increases participation with under-represented communities. As a sector we must commit to real and sustainable improvement in this area.

The trainees quickly built relationships with new colleagues and adapted to the challenges of a collections engagement role with no collections, venues or people. Embracing digital opportunities, they produced a podcast examining our relationships with objects in the home, influenced by lockdown.

Susie created a digital resource collecting individuals' histories from a photography collection of a fishing community in north Edinburgh. Thessa is exploring different perspectives on dolls from Asia, within the Museum of Childhood collection, contributing to the Empire Museum online.

Both are working with the city's library service to create online exhibitions exploring Edinburgh's development in the 1920s, and contemporary collections of protest material.

With the Black Lives Matter movement rightly dominating the public agenda, our trainees have challenged the museum service on programming, interpretation, collections classification and recruitment practice.

Our service needs their creativity, enthusiasm and skills. Increasing diversity in museums and heritage is long overdue. At Edinburgh museums service, our experience with the trainees has cemented our commitment to creating a pipeline of opportunities for people of colour to join, and remain with, the service.

We aim not just to attract short-term placements, but to develop a more diverse staff, structurally reshaping our workforce and becoming more representative of the people of Edinburgh.

Museums Association

Photography credits

Wallich Curators, opening night of Who Decides exhibition by Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales

Museum of Liverpool, Black Lives Matter statement by Sahar Beyad

COVID 19 Homeless Taskforce June 2020 by Matthew Turtle

Women, Power, Protest exhibition by Jon Sleigh

Maasai Representatives at Pitt Rivers Museum by John Cairns

LAIC Badge Collection from Lesbian Archive at Glasgow Women's Library

Wadebridge memory café, Cornwall Museums Partnership

Susie Cavill, Museums & Galleries Edinburgh Trainee

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