



the happy  
museum

## Case study – real practice, real impact

Manchester Museum –  
developing skills to  
support child-led play

**Manchester Museum** is run by the University of Manchester and attracts some 450,000 visitors a year.

# Manchester Museum – developing skills to support child-led play

**This case study is about how, through two projects, Manchester Museum aimed to embed playfulness. The first project trained the museum’s visitor team to develop their understanding of play and reflection techniques. In the second project, the museum developed *Rules for a Playful Museum*, a playful and accessible handbook to capture the learning and experience of their experiments in playfulness.**

**This case study is relevant to:**

- Front of house staff
- Senior management team
- Learning and community engagement teams

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# Highlights

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*“The training helped some of our staff change the way they worked. For some, the experience helped them to reveal a really playful side of their personality.”*

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**Anna Bunney, Engagement Manager,  
Manchester Museum**

- The museum used external specialists to train 25 members of the visitor team
- The training was in awareness and support for child-led play and use of observation, reflection and sharing for evaluation
- Museum developed its playful side and increased its play offer for children
- A handbook on play in museums created for internal development and for sharing with the sector





## Museum profile

Manchester Museum has a world renowned collection spanning archaeology, anthropology and natural history and is owned by the University of Manchester. It attracts some 450,000 visitors each year. It is the UK's largest university museum and serves both as a major visitor attraction

and as a resource for academic research and teaching. In 2003, the museum re-opened after a major refurbishment. The museum was joint winner of the Clore Award for Museum Learning 2012 and was longlisted for the Telegraph Family Friendly Museum Award 2012.

## Happy Museum funded activities

*"The concept plays with the tension between the idea of a rulebook and the idea of play, with the aim of challenging our ideas about the rules that operate in a museum space."*

**Charlotte Derry, consultant and project lead**

Since reopening, the museum had worked hard on being a welcoming, informal and accessible place for visitors. Activities for children and families are well established. To develop its offering for younger visitors further, the museum decided to focus its Happy Museum project on developing policy and practice to support child-led play. Working with play specialists, the visitor team worked to develop sensitive awareness of play processes for children, to value techniques of

observation and reflection, and to understand and evaluate children's use of the museum space. The museum now offers playful days and playfulness features in museum strategy documents and in induction materials. A second Happy Museum project built on this work. Working with an external consultant, the visitor team developed *Rules for a Playful Museum*, a handbook for the museum's own staff and for other museums and galleries.



# What happened?

*“A playful museum is an attitude of people and the environment. Our museum is a living organism and our gallery staff have coined the term ‘relaxy staffitude’ as one of the key ingredients in creating the right conditions for play.”*

**Anna Bunney, Engagement Manager,  
Manchester Museum**

“Since our relaunch in 2003, we had done a lot of work on tone of voice and how we approach our audiences,” says Anna Bunney, Engagement Manager at the Manchester Museum. “We want to be witty, friendly, accessible, knowledgeable and fun despite our home being a large Victorian building. Since the refurbishment we have become a much busier museum, we have had success at attracting people and we have met and passed our target of 420,000 visitors a year.”

“We had wanted to look at child-led play for some time and the Happy Museum commission project enabled us to do that. Around 25 members of the visitor team were trained by visiting play specialists in leading facilitating child-led play and in the use of different techniques for observation and evaluation. The key aim was to widen their engagement with visitors and to broaden the scope of the role.”

Through the training and ten sessions running playful days, staff learnt from innovative work in the playwork sector and tried new, creative ways of working which helped develop their understanding of play and provide more playful opportunities for visitors. They were encouraged and supported to challenge the institutional and their personal perceptions about how play and space is used, to try out playful nonsense, and to observe children and adults’ playful movements.

“As well as running playful days, we held a playful Olympics during school holidays, as well as other sessions that were about simply encouraging visiting children to be playful or about just recognising a playful encounter in the museum space.”

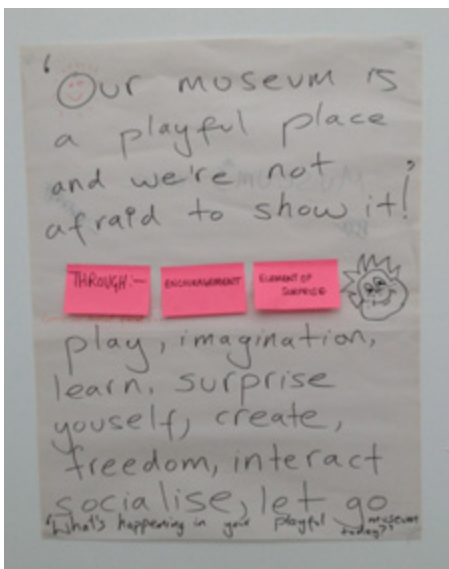
“I think we were quite a playful place already, but the training helped some of our staff change the way they worked. In the case of some individuals, the experience helped them to reveal a really playful side of their personality, an innate ability that they hadn’t brought to work came through.”

Evaluations and interviews carried out during the project showed that staff found their shifts passed quicker and they felt more comfortable working with children. Playfulness is now more prominent in the museum’s culture – though embedding play was slowed down slightly by key staff moving on.

Building on this work, in autumn 2014 the museum started work on a second playful project with Happy Museum funding. The project involved an external consultant working with the visitor team to develop a ‘rulebook’ for play.

Play and Museums Consultant Charlotte Derry worked with visitor service manager at museum to develop the rulebook. “We started with two sessions for all of the visitor team to reflect on the playfulness of the museum. This gave us confidence as staff had a good general approach to play and





had lots of ideas. We wanted this handbook on play to come from them and be owned by them.”

A smaller project team of staff then used three long sessions, as well as short meetings, over a period of months to develop the content of the handbook. “I had a clear design concept in mind, and as the project team collaborated creatively it became a much shorter book, more of a quick reference guide, very accessible and practical, introducing the key concepts and ideas and giving some practical examples. In other words, a handbook for those who don't have a lot of time or access to a computer during work time.”

“The visitor teams of other settings helped to test the book and this made us clarify everything very carefully, they wanted fewer rules. We had lots of discussion about how effective a rulebook as a format could be. The concept plays with the tension between the idea of a rulebook and the idea of freely-chosen play, with the aim of challenging our ideas about the unspoken rules that operate in a museum space.”

The key ‘rulebook’ themes that emerged were:

- Create the conditions to enable play to happen – whether through a smile, a wink, through flexible resources set out in the gallery, or by playful actions
- Get the support you need from across the organisation – to be able to experiment and try new things, whether it is giving permission or initiating playful happenings
- Keep being willing to fail and keep trying

- One size does not fit all – not all staff want to be playful, everyone's position must be respected and accommodated

“A playful museum is an attitude of people and the environment,” says Anna Bunney. “Our museum is a living organism and our gallery staff have coined the term ‘relax staffitude’ as one of the key ingredients in creating the right conditions for play.”

The *Rules for a Playful Museum* was launched in May 2015, with 3,000 copies printed. A network event to share the rulebook is going to be held in autumn 2015. Copies have been requested by around 40 different UK cultural organisations, from large national museums to small local independent museums. There has been international interest too, with contact from museums in Australia and Germany.

“We have had a fantastic response to the Rulebook,” says Anna Bunney. “The project has also been a brilliant way to engage new members of the visitor team – and it will help us embed playfulness across the museum and ensure it stays alive in the organisation.”

Evaluation evidence following the rulebook project showed that playful behaviour from staff and visitors has increased. For Charlotte Derry, the project has “really helped the museum have even more confidence with what they're doing. It is helping to embed play, which is a quite an ephemeral, fleeting thing. Having this handbook underpins great practice making it something concrete – playfulness is part of what staff do now.”

# What's changed?

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*“Developing the rulebook is really helping the museum to embed play, it underpins great practice making it something concrete – playfulness is part of what staff do now.”*

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**Charlotte Derry, consultant and project lead**

**Confidence:** Visitor team is now more confident and their role has been broadened.

**Playfulness:** Staff are now being playful and encouraging play, drawing on the skills, experience and techniques they have learned. The museum is working to embed its playful side, and the rulebook will help new staff as a practice guide.

**Evaluation techniques:** Visitor team learnt to value simple observational techniques and to share their stories.

**Community of practice:**

“We really benefited from the networking and development opportunity offered through the Happy Museum community of practice,” says Anna Bunney. “The Happy Museum Project celebrates what museums can do, what’s possible, and being positive about change. We found the input from other practitioners helped to shape what was happening, gave us a chance to think about our work, and reflect in a different way.”



# Happy Museum success factors

Since 2008, The Happy Museum project has been testing a set of working principles through commissioned projects. These 'action research' projects have helped us identify critical success factors of how, what and why museums might re-imagine

themselves in the light of these principles. The table below is a summary of our 'Story of Change' tool (More information here: [www.happymuseumproject.org](http://www.happymuseumproject.org)). This case study best demonstrates the aspects of practice highlighted in red.

Principles	How? Drivers	What? Delivery	Why? Difference we make
Measure what matters	Share a wellbeing vision Share a Story of Change	Use time, resources and scope creatively Measure what matters to people	To re-think what matters
Be an active citizen	Encourage active engagement Anticipate challenge and change	Work experimentally Use everyone's potential	To create happy, resilient people
Pursue mutual relationships	Share ownership Ensure mutual benefit	Work across hierarchies and teams	To create happy, resilient teams
All of which help re-imagine museums for better community LIFE*			
Create the conditions for wellbeing Learn for resilience	Consider playfulness, creativity, activity and aesthetics	Be a good host Broker relationships	Communities are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning</li> <li>• Interacting</li> <li>• Feeling happy, satisfied and worthwhile</li> <li>• Environmentally aware</li> </ul>
Value the environment and be a steward of the future as well as the past	Consider the social and financial benefits of being green	Use the museum's unique resources. Lead by example: care of people, place and planet	

\* The Happy Museum Project is conducting a national LIFE survey, where LIFE = Learning, Interactions with others, Feelings and emotions, and Environmental awareness. More: [www.happymuseumproject.org](http://www.happymuseumproject.org)





## Tools used

### Story of change

The Manchester Museum team used the 'story of change' to define their vision for the project and to plan the route to achieve that vision. The purpose of this tool (which is similar to theory of change, or logic modelling) is to make sure we start by focusing on the difference we want to make rather than on the activities we may use to achieve those ends.

Using a story of change challenges 'business as usual' thinking by starting with the overall purpose and working backwards. The process of 'measuring what matters' can then start at the planning stage – by defining the success factors for a project, a strategy or a change of direction. The tool is also valuable for helping to communicate a vision to staff, volunteers and all stakeholders, as well as the thinking that underpins it.

More on using a Story of Change can be found here: [www.happymuseumproject.org](http://www.happymuseumproject.org)



### Observational Analysis

Manchester's Playful Museum approach was based on research showing that play led to wellbeing. The Manchester team collected informal observational evidence of good quality play, confident that others had proved that would lead to wellbeing.

Below are three types of observational evaluation (standard techniques used by psychologists) that produce formal evidence:

**Interval observation** – observe every five minutes, for example. Log only the behaviours that you have planned to look for

using pre-agreed codes. Use two observers at the same time to validate the approach. If the logged observations are very different something is wrong and the process needs refining until they are similar, when the average score can be used.

**Frequency observation** – target a limited number of people for 10 minutes, for example. Count the number of times they show a defined behaviour, e.g. every time they smile.

**Blow by blow account** – this is a more complex approach in which everything that happens is recorded.

More on observational analysis can be found here: [www.happymuseumproject.org](http://www.happymuseumproject.org)

# Online resources

Museum website: [www.museum.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk)

Download *Rules for a Playful Museum*: [www.happymuseumproject.org](http://www.happymuseumproject.org)

Happy Museum development day report: *The Serious Benefits of Fun*

Manchester Museum blog post: <https://playfulmuseum.wordpress.com>

Article: [www.artspromotional.co.uk](http://www.artspromotional.co.uk)

Playful museum images on Flickr: [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)

