



the happy
museum

Case Study – real practice, real impact

The Story Museum –
wellbeing and sustainability
from the start

The Story Museum in Oxford, which opened in 2013, is independently funded and aims to attract 100,000 visitors a year.

The Story Museum – wellbeing and sustainability from the start

This case study is about how The Story Museum team put wellbeing and sustainability at the heart of its ethos and vision for the museum as it prepared to open to the public. The project’s aim was to ensure the museum was ‘happy from the beginning’.

This case study is relevant to:

- Senior management team
- Learning and community engagement teams

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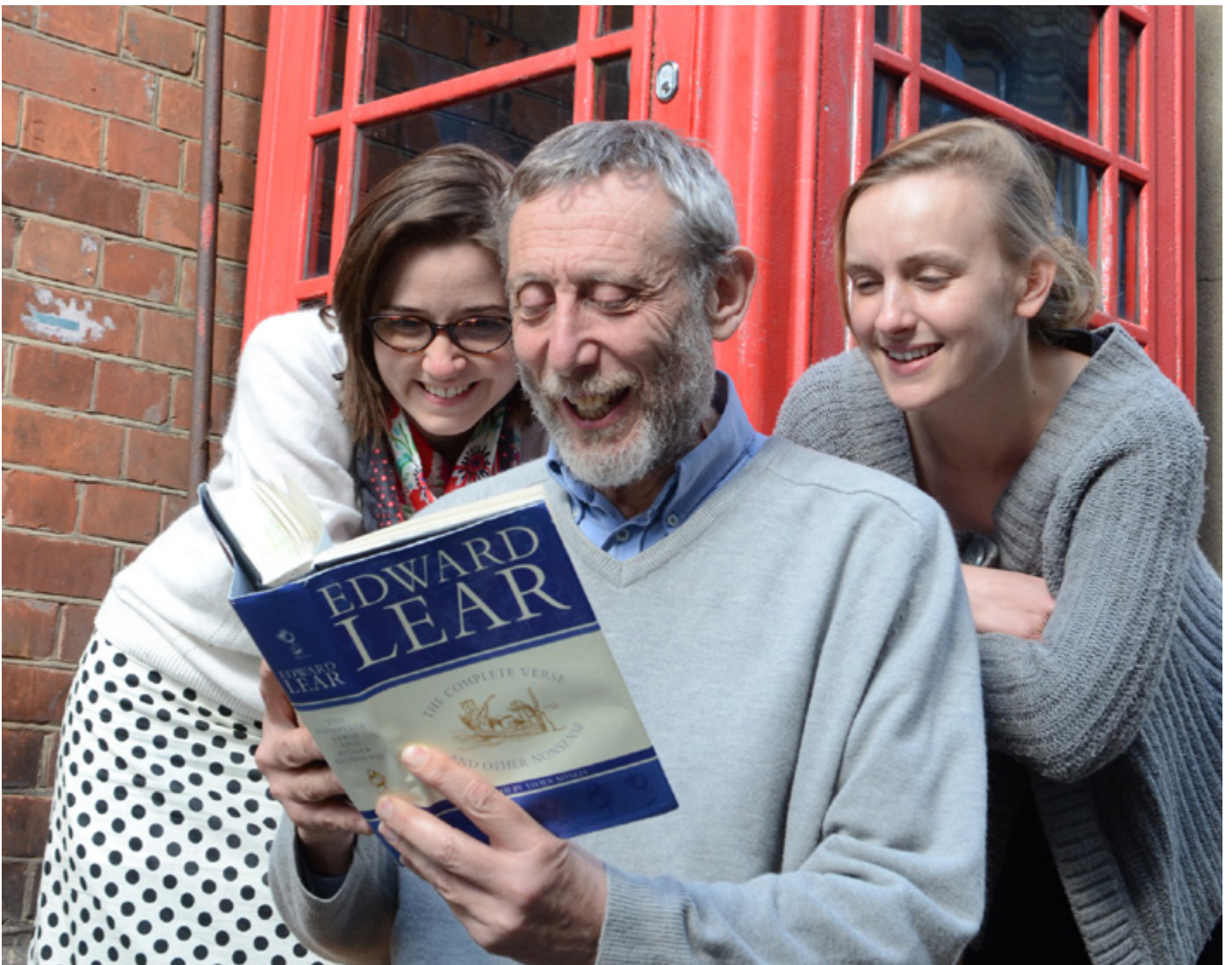


Highlights

“We decided to build the Happy Museum principles into imagining the museum from the start, it informed our thinking about everything from the collections to organisational behaviour.”

**Kim Pickin, co-director,
The Story Museum**

- **The project funding was used to develop the museum’s ethos and vision**
- **The result influenced organisational practice and approach to audiences**
- **Staff wellbeing is a priority, with tracking tools used in weekly staff meetings**
- **Impact evaluation tools embedded into the experience and exhibits**
- **The project made sure the refurbishment was as sustainable as possible**



Museum profile

Founded in Oxford in 2003, The Story Museum started out by taking stories and storytellers into schools and communities. Since 2009, the independently funded museum has gradually been transforming a large, dilapidated building in the centre of Oxford into an unusual museum, with the help of authors, artists, teachers and other cultural organisations

and volunteers of all ages. The first phase of development was completed in Spring 2014 with the opening of gallery spaces and a café. In its first five months of operation, the new museum attracted 11,500 visitors, 4,200 pupils and 700 teachers. Eventually, the aim is reach 100,000 visitors a year.

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**Kim Pickin, co-director,
The Story Museum**

Happy Museum funded activities

The funding was used to bring museum staff and senior museum team members together at a crucial time in its development. The Story Museum proposal was that the museum should be ‘Happy from the beginning’, with wellbeing and sustainability expressed

through the collection, through building and refurbishment choices and through the organisation’s working policies and practices. The process led to wellbeing tools and measures being introduced and a stronger focus on sustainability during building and fitting out.



What happened?

“The happy count has been a very good tool for us. The fact we do the count and write it down is a way of saying wellbeing matters in this organisation.”

**Kim Pickin, co-director,
The Story Museum**

“It felt impertinent to apply for funding to re-imagine a museum that wasn’t even open yet,” says Kim Pickin, co-director of The Story Museum. “We decided to build the Happy Museum principles into imagining the museum from the start, it informed our thinking about everything from the collections to organisational behaviour.”

“Before the Happy Museum project, environmental sustainability was something we felt we understood a lot about. Our Happy Museum work had fed into the masterplan for the architects and builders. But one thing we learnt through the refurbishment and building process was that we needed to put more effort into it than we thought. Sustainability wasn’t always taken as read for all our contractors – some were very clued up, others weren’t – and this is something we are still battling away on.”

“Things have improved throughout the process and the builders started coming up with their own ideas. We’ve been getting the hang of it, and we’ve managed to incorporate much more ‘upcycling’ into the fitting out than we originally thought would be possible. For fitting out, we’ve used people who are good at being ‘Borrowers’ and the spaces and exhibitions are made out of odds and ends.”

The Story Museum has ten full time employees, as well as up to five interns and three or

four volunteers. Organisational wellbeing was another focus for the museum as it planned to be ‘Happy from the beginning’. Wellbeing features explicitly in contracts and policies.

The museum uses a ‘happy count’ at weekly staff meetings, with each person sharing a score on a happiness and wellbeing scale from 0 to 10. The scores are noted down and tracked by individual and by team. Crucially, the scores are not commented on or discussed in the meeting. The happy count is treated as an order of business at the start of the meeting.

“We are used to doing it now. If someone gives a score of two, we don’t pounce on them and ask them what the matter is. A line manager might follow up separately if needed. Little things come out of it – if someone is low, someone else will do something nice for that person during the day. We find it brings out the kindness in people.”

“The happy count has been a very good tool for us. Every six months we review using it. When new people start we ask them if they find it a bit weird, but people say that it is a good thing. The fact we do the count and write it down is a way of saying wellbeing matters in this organisation.”

“Wellbeing for staff took a dip in the first few months after we opened, but I understand this is typical after finishing a capital project. Things are stabilising now, roles are settling down, though



everyone still has slightly too much to do.”

Wellbeing measures and evaluations have also been used with visitors. The Story Museum used a ‘mood tree’ with visitors putting a coloured leaf representing their mood on the tree when they arrive and another when they leave.

“Evaluation of visitor experience remains a challenge – how can you capture the effect on someone who’s come in for an hour without the act of measuring effecting the experience? It’s easier if you are working with smaller groups who are with us for a whole morning, though the value of the information does largely depend on the skills of the person asking the questions.”

The Story Museum is having success with an exit questionnaire linked to a small gift. “We had a donation of little tins of tea from Whittards, with Alice in Wonderland on them. They proved to be very popular and for our last exhibition about 90% of people agreed to answer the questionnaire.” One of the questions asked visitors to choose three words to describe their experience – and ‘fun’ was the most popular choice.

Overall, the Happy Museum work the museum did at a cost of £6000 has been “unexpectedly influential”, says Kim. “Happy Museum thinking helps when trying to make a decision, it says wellbeing is an important part of our ethos. One of the things the Happy Museum work did for us was to confirm some of the hunches we were operating on – such as leaving a lot of space for visitors to participate and leave bits of themselves behind.”

Some exhibits allow visitors to tie labels with their own thoughts and comments on and leave them. “This is something we have incorporated throughout the building, allowing for living conversations with our visitors.”

Wellbeing has explicitly informed the design of exhibitions and the appointment of a theatre designer has helped to create the ‘deep human interconnections’ and emotionally intelligent spaces the Story Museum were aiming for. Evaluation shows that visitors respond to this with many saying their visit was ‘an emotionally satisfying. The museum’s first exhibition – ‘Other Worlds’ – had a remarkable level of engagement, with 6,000 written contributions in 18 days.

What's changed?

“The Happy Museum work confirmed some of our hunches – that we needed to leave a lot of space for visitors to participate. This is incorporated throughout the building, allowing for living conversations with our visitors.”

**Kim Pickin, co-director,
The Story Museum**

Stronger focus on sustainability:

The museum has pushed for high attention on sustainability with contractors during the building and fitting out. As a result, the museum and exhibitions feature a high level of upcycled and recycled objects, fixtures and fittings.

Wellbeing key element of ethos:

Wellbeing has informed development briefs and recruitment and is embedded in understanding and practice, especially with the directors. It has helped the staff to be resilient

and to communicate when they've been overworked.

Confidence and connections:

Happy Museum inspired the Story Museum to bid for HLF 'Intangible heritage, tangible skills' project to train 'NEET' young people (not in training, education or employment) to be story guides. The team believes being part of the HM community of practice has raised its profile in the museum sector, with more applicants for jobs and growing social media traffic.



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). 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: • Learning • Interacting • Feeling happy, satisfied and worthwhile • Environmentally aware
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



Tools used

The Story 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.

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.

Using a story of change challenges 'business as usual' thinking by

More on using a Story of Change can be found here:
www.happymuseumproject.org



Online resources

[Windows into other worlds](#)

[Signs of the times](#)

[Just the ticket](#)

[The Mood Tree and Happy Tracker](#)

[Heritage Story Guides](#)

Museum website: www.storymuseum.org.uk