



Case Study – real practice, real impact

Abergavenny Museum – co-curation, partnerships and resilience

Abergavenny Museum is funded by the county council and attracts some 26,000 visitors a year.

Abergavenny Museum – co-curation, partnerships and resilience

This case study is about how the museum used Happy Museum funding to test a new approach to co-curation with local vulnerable young people. The success of the project has led to a new openness to collaboration with local organisations and community members.

This case study is relevant to:

- Senior management team
- Learning and community engagement teams

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Highlights

- The museum was able to try out new approaches that it had wanted to use for some time
- The project was a confidence boost for the museum during a difficult and uncertain period
- One legacy is a willingness to work in a flexible way with external groups and individuals
- Staff team working in a new way, more creative approach, more confident about the future.

"The learning experience from the Happy Museum Project has given us the confidence to use a co-curation approach in the future."

**Megan de Silva, Object Conservator
Abergavenny Museum**



Museum profile

Abergavenny Museum is set in the grounds of a Norman castle. It was founded in 1959. The museum is funded by Monmouthshire Country Council run as part of a group including three other local

museums. Abergavenny Museum has a team of full and part time staff, supported by a team of volunteers. The museum, attracts over 26,000 visitors a year.

"Now we look to work collaboratively with community groups and local organisations, take on more of a facilitator's role, using our space and expertise to create something on their terms."

**Megan de Silva, Object Conservator
Abergavenny Museum**

Happy Museum funded activities

Happy Museum funding was used to test a new approach to co-curation with local vulnerable young people. Two craftspeople led workshops in weaving with eight

young carers and bee-keeping with 20 primary children with special needs. The workshops took place both inside the museum and outdoors.



What happened?

"The Happy Museum project gave us a little boost at a difficult time. We are trying to become a more resilient team. The Happy Museum principles and ethos have guided and influenced what we do."

**Rachael Rogers, Curator
Abergavenny Museum**



"The Happy Museum Project has helped us to have the confidence to follow a co-curation route," says Megan de Silva, Object Conservator. "This is something people in the organisation were already open to and the learning experience from this project has given us confidence to use this approach again."

"We were recently contacted by local women's groups who wanted to do an exhibition. In the past we would have taken the idea and done an exhibition on our own terms. Now we look to work collaboratively, take on more of a facilitator's role, using our space and expertise to create something on their terms. Also, the local Transition Town group wanted to plant wild flowers in the castle grounds. In the past, we would have decided where to plant them and would probably have carried out the work ourselves. Instead, we let them lead."

With the Happy Museum funded bee keeping project, the museum approached the school with the idea. "We were very much driving the partnership and we have learnt that we can work better with schools when we are more aware of their specific needs to begin with."

Evaluation of the bee-keeping project found that the 20 primary school children taking part were 'gripped' by making the bee skep

(a woven hive) and learning how bees establish a colony. Teachers reported social and relaxation benefits of pupils being absorbed in the activity. The bee-keeper found their enthusiasm 'deeply refreshing'. The children went on to learn about nature, food and diet, which was a good fit with teachers' learning plans for the term. (A learning assistant with Forest School skills has since become actively engaged with the museum).

Evaluation of the weaving workshop for young carers also revealed the participants found working with their hands addictive. Some of the young carers dropped out due to school and family commitments. Those that continued said afterwards that they sorely missed the workshops. "It's changed my perspective on museums, the museum's pretty cool," one said. Several have continued to weave at home.

Both groups, school children and young carers, made reference to the immersive experience of the activities. The "busy with your hands thing" is a way of describing 'flow', which researcher Mihály Csíkszentmihályi described as a mental state in which a person is fully immersed in 'energised focus'. As one young carer put it: "Every time I went home [after weaving] I was chilled out. I went home and had a shower and I was happy." Another said: "I'm so chilled here."

"We are operating differently as a team. We are looking at things such as how we generate more income, how we can give members of staff more job security, how we can work more efficiently."

**Rachael Rogers, Curator
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It's the atmosphere here, the concentrating on doing something, more than the people." Staff noticed the same experience with the younger children who built stoops for bee-keeping, describing them as "gripped" by the activity.

The legacy of the projects has been greater resilience in the organisation at a difficult time. "We are a small team working across three museums," says Rachael Rogers, Curator Abergavenny Museum. "There's lots of cuts and insecurity at the moment. The Happy Museum project gave us a little boost at a difficult time. We are trying to become a more resilient team. We have discussed the Happy Museum principles and ethos and they have guided and influenced what we do."

"We are operating differently as a team. We are looking at things such as how we generate more income, how we can give members of staff more job security, how we can work more efficiently", says Rachael Rogers, Curator Abergavenny Museum.

The museum has benefited from links with other museums through the Happy Museum community of practice – in particular the Welsh commissioned projects who are working in partnership with Animate Arts Company to bring a version of the Paper Apothecary project to Wales. (The Paper Apothecary was an original Happy Museum Project created for the Beane House of Art and Knowledge in Canterbury).



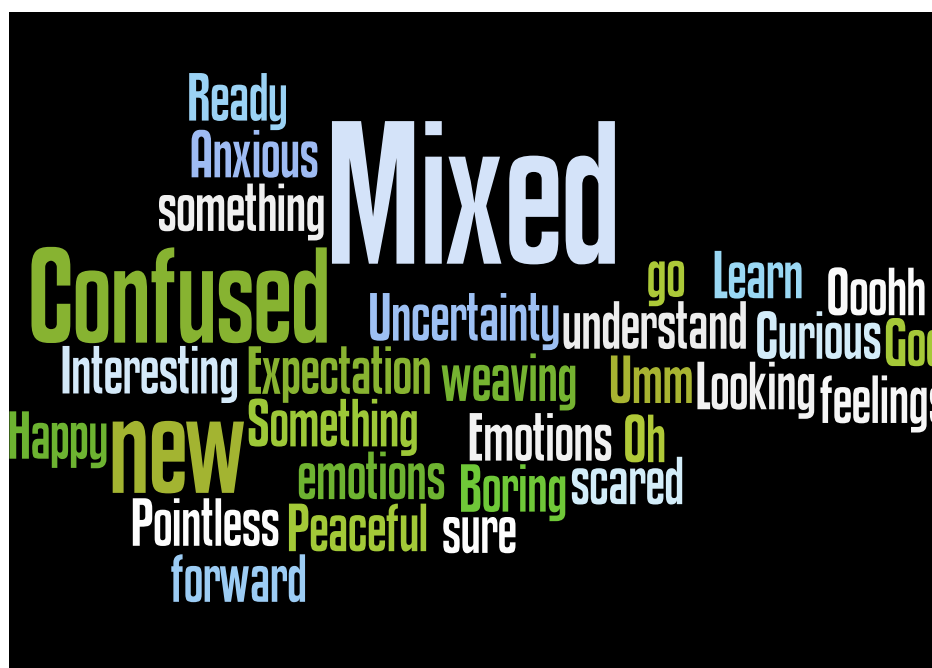
What's changed?

Confidence: The Happy museum project has given the museum staff the confidence to allow external partners to lead joint projects.

Partnerships: Being open to co-curation has helped the museum develop new links with schools and local organisations. The museum has also benefitted from partnerships with museums and galleries in the Happy Museum community of practice.

Resilience: Happy Museum principles and ethos have given the museum service staff ideas and inspiration as they face challenging times.

Participation: The school and young people taking part also benefited. One highlight was the improved wellbeing and 'flow' experienced by the young people taking part.



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? <i>Drivers</i>	What? <i>Delivery</i>	Why? <i>Difference we make</i>
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"> • 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



Story of change

Abergavenny Museum 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

"We have anecdotal evidence that their wellbeing increased, through new friendships, fun and being involved in a group activity."

**Rachael Rogers, Curator
Abergavenny Museum**

Online resources

Museum website: www.abergavennymuseum.co.uk

