



**the happy
museum**

Case Study – real practice, real impact

**Bilston Craft Gallery –
developing outdoor play**

Bilston Craft Gallery is funded by Wolverhampton City Council, has nine staff and welcomes some 14,000 visitors a year.

Bilston Craft Gallery – developing outdoor play

This case study is about how Bilston Craft Gallery developed an under-used outdoor space. Staff worked with craft experts and local schools to create a regular outdoor creative play sessions for schools and children. Supporting creativity with children and early years is now a core part of Bilston Craft Gallery's strategy to navigate the new financial climate as a local authority service.

This case study is relevant to:

- Senior management team
- Learning and community engagement teams
- Activity leaders, front of house staff

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Highlights

“We discovered that outdoor work is a very different thing from indoor craft play – indoors, the children tend to sit down; outdoors they don’t stop moving.”

Jack Shuttleworth
Bilston Craftplay

- The gallery learnt about the special dynamic of outdoor play and what works well
- Staff learnt new craft skills which can be used now and in the future
- The gallery has developed its links with local schools
- The gallery has developed a regular programme of outdoor activities for schools
- The gallery is developing a mobile outdoor play offer for pop-up sessions in parks



Museum profile

Bilston Craft Gallery is one of four galleries funded by Wolverhampton City Council under the banner of WAVE (The Museum, Galleries and Archives of Wolverhampton). The gallery features examples of crafts produced in the area over the

past 300 years, with many objects that can be held and touched. The gallery includes Craftplay, a popular specialist creative play programme for children up to 7 years old with its own dedicated space.

“The school group made three visits and we put less material out each time. Mud and leaves and other things found outdoors are the only play materials needed.”

Jack Shuttleworth
Bilston Craftplay

Happy Museum activities

Bilston used the funding to commission three craft makers to create new works through a number of sessions with a local nursery. A partnership was established with a local school and two classes, together with parents, walked over a mile for a number of sessions where they used the prototype craftworks to explore the environment of the

large garden. Over the sessions, materials were strategically withdrawn, focusing on fewer objects that helped the children engage with the natural materials in the garden. The makers created three final collections, especially designed for use in child-led creative play, which are now part of Craftplay’s suite of resources.



What happened?

“The teacher hadn’t ever done any outdoor work with the children and says she now has the confidence to do that and is making use of outdoor space at the school.”

Jack Shuttleworth
Bilston Craftplay

“We discovered that outdoor work is a very different thing from indoor craft play,” says Jack Shuttleworth of Bilston Craftplay. “Indoors, the children tend to sit down; outdoors they don’t stop moving. The school group made three visits and we put less material out each time, as we found it wasn’t needed. Mud and leaves and other things found outdoors are often all that’s needed.”

“The teacher had done very little outdoor work with the children and says she now has the

confidence to do much more and is making use of outdoor space at the school,” Jack says. “The teacher also said the involvement of the parents had been important and more of them are volunteering to support her on school trips. The children were also noticeably freer and more creative in their play after the outdoor sessions.”

Supporting creativity with children and early years is now a core part of Bilston Craft Gallery’s strategy to navigate the new financial climate as a local authority service.



What's changed?

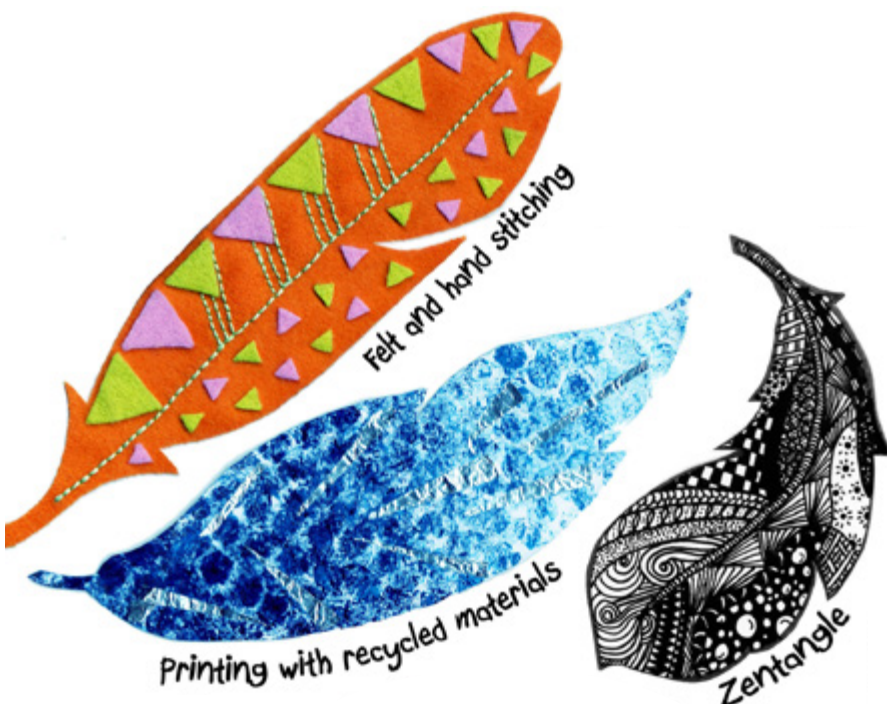
New offerings: Craftplay has been developing models of 'pop-up' sessions, where materials are chosen to encourage children to explore the space around them, whether a garden or a hands-on sculpture gallery. This pop-up model led to "5 Nests", a 4 month installation at Wolverhampton Art Gallery designed to support self-lead play for 0-2 year olds and their carers. Bilston is also exploring new ways to use its excellent garden through multi-session projects, baby-sessions and self-facilitated activities for families.

New skills: Craftplay staff learnt new skills and craft ideas from the external makers and artists commissioned to support the project. There has been an increased emphasis on using natural materials in the regular sessions, strongly evidenced in the summer installation at

Wolverhampton Art Gallery for 0-2 year olds based on nests and bird life. One maker said that although she regularly runs workshops with children, this was the first time she'd used her craft-skills as a jewellery maker to promote play.

Inspiration: Jack says the Happy Museum project was a source of inspiration, as was being part of the community of practice. The experience has inspired him to commit to developing two new projects each year (one big, one small) and to do more to promote the gallery's work and successes (through a blog and other activities). The serious approach to playful activities has led Craftplay to take the theoretic dimensions of its more seriously, and this has led to two proposals to work with the Centre for the Study of Childhood and Youth at Sheffield University in the coming years.

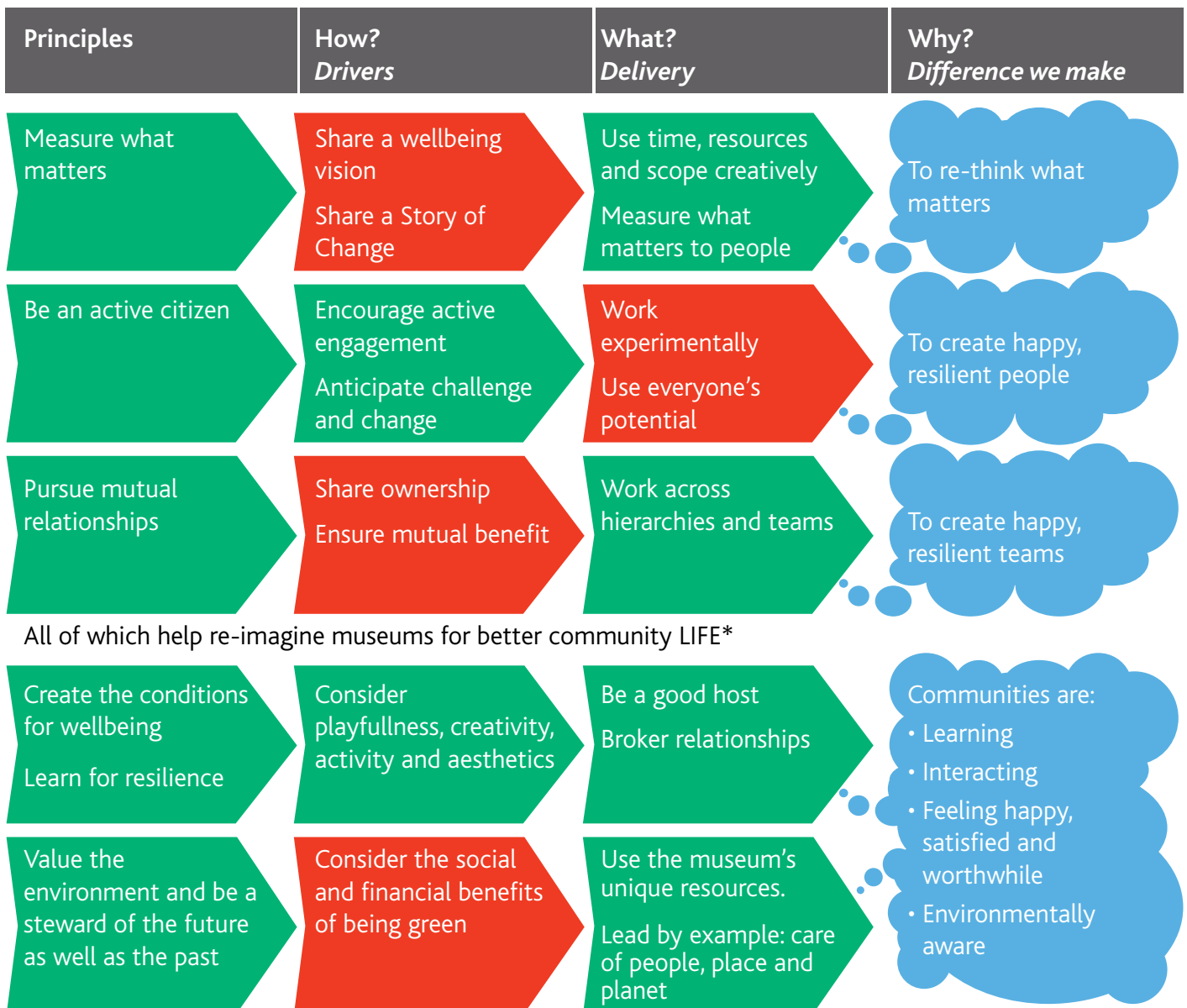
Sustainability: Environmental sustainability is now a higher priority at the gallery. One of the artists working on the project commented that she uses many more natural and freely available materials in her work, reducing her consumption of purchased materials. The school involved in the project walked with the children to the gallery despite crossing several busy roads. This was a departure for them and they noted a difference in energy and attention in the group as a result – as a consequence the gallery would encourage future school groups to walk to sessions if possible.



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.



* 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

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Tools used

The Bilston Craft Gallery 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

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

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.

Online resources

Gallery website: www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk/visit/bilston/

Gallery's craftplay project blog: <http://happycraftplay.wordpress.com/>

Craftspace website: www.craftspace.co.uk/page.asp

