



# The Happy Museum Symposium

## 12/13 January, Snape Maltings



A key part of the Happy Museum Project, the Symposium gathered forty thinkers from museums, culture, economics and wellbeing to consider the challenges involved in a “transition” to a high wellbeing sustainable future. Practical exploration of the Happy Museum Manifesto was led by representatives of the six Happy Museum Commissioned Projects.

- *finding practical, realistic ways to sustain and grow the work*
- *...within a useful, practical and honest event.*

These topics served as a structure for further discussion and collaboration, providing a check-back for the symposium that objectives were being addressed.

### Day 1: Preparing for the Symposium



Creating focus and generating a framework for engagement occupied the morning of 12 January. 15 people from the Happy Museum commissions worked together with the Symposium coordinating team to generate objectives and issues, prior to the arrival of an additional 24 guests from the Museum and Cultural Sector.

This generated a working set of headings:

- *understanding wellbeing with less consumption*
- *sharing experience with other commissions*
- *understanding the wider programme*
- *being better equipped to influence wider world*
- *confidence and values that support mutual relationships*

### The Symposium begins

Tony Butler, Happy Museum Director, welcomed all to the Happy Museum Project and the process of collectively re-imagining a higher-wellbeing, more sustainable society. He emphasised the links to be made between wellbeing and environmental stewardship.



### Introductions to the Happy Museum with the work of the commissions\*

Short presentations were given by each commission. More information can be found in the repository of Symposium presentations and other reference material.

The **Cinema Museum**, Lambeth and **Godalming Museum** described the close integration of their work with their communities: participants in everything from design and curation to administration. “*Placing the museum within the town’s civic life.*”

Oxford’s **Story Museum** outlined how the HM principles are informing their development – a real opportunity to build in wellbeing and sustainability from the very start.

**The Lightbox**, Woking addresses the relevance and connections of mental health issues to the

work and role of a museum; exciting and challenging topics, playing a real part in defining the way they operate. At the **Manchester Museum**, “playful” is used as a guiding concept from happiness to wellbeing to sustainability, and the **London Transport Museum** has developed a strong, charitable community relationship, exploring “community conversations”.

A diverse range of commissions, all exploring aspects of the HM manifesto and providing rich source material for learning and development during the Symposium.

\*these are vignettes, for reporting purposes. Full detail of the work of the commissions can be found via content and links here on the [HM site](#).

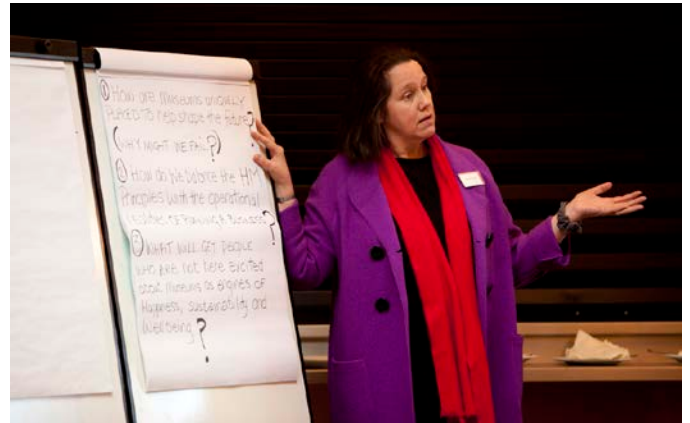
### The Symposium's “Three Questions”

Having considered the objectives, and the emerging experiences of the commissions, three key questions were identified. These framed the first major working session of the Symposium. They were:

- *How are museums uniquely placed to help shape the future? (and why might we fail?)*
- *How do we balance the HM principles with the operational realities of running a business?*
- *What will get people who are not here excited about museums as engines of happiness, sustainability and wellbeing?*

Through the lens of these questions, the Symposium moved to “interrogating the manifesto”, as contained within the Happy Museum Paper, an objective that Tony Butler describes in a short video clip [here](#).

The Happy Museum Paper frames a creative enquiry to re-imagine the purpose of museums. It includes a set of pathways, described in a Manifesto under eight principles. They examine how museums might cement the linkage between wellbeing and environmental sustainability, how they might pursue more mutual relationships within civic society and how they might better articulate the possibilities of a good life to help people in the transition to a low-carbon world.



Mandy Barnett, Project Evaluator, set out the process by which the evaluation of the Happy Museum programme is structured around a logical model of what we expect to change. She explained that this logical “story of change” will be added to with records of the unexpected, creative things that happen recognising that “logic will get you from A to B, but imagination will get you everywhere” (Einstein).

We are collecting information about each of these elements. Clearly we can’t claim to have made a difference without collecting evidence about our outcomes, but we also need to evidence our investments and activities to legitimately claim an impact.

The story of change is underpinned by the eight principles:

#### **More well-being with less consumption (our impact)**

- *Make people happy*
- *Value past, present and future environments*

#### **A different role for museums**

- *Find your niche*
- *Lead on learning towards transition*

#### **A community of practice**

- *Support learning for resilience*
- *Measure what matters*

#### **Culture change**

- *Think global, be networked*
- *Developing mutual relationships*



Each commission has its own story of change which is locally owned. After these have been developed, we will ensure that they contribute to the overall story.

### Working with the HM principles

There is much to interrogate in these principles. Are happiness and sustainability one and the same concept? How do we evaluate culture and wellbeing?

The six commissioned projects are exploring the eight principles over the next year, to see how they make sense to them as a way of looking at museums' role in re-imagining a society committed to a high wellbeing and sustainable future.

In this way, we're creating a living manifesto informed by a community of practice, personal anecdote, experience and policy.

Day one discussion of the Symposium placed a focus on the first two, and perhaps the most key of the eight principles of the HM manifesto. Tony Butler gave an outline of these:

- *Make People Happy*
- *Value Past, Present and Future Environment*

He explained how essential they are to the pursuit of a higher wellbeing, more sustainable future and outlined how the New Economics "Five Ways to Wellbeing" give a dynamic language for active engagement in these principles.

### Impact

From the beginning of the discussion, a critical question was apparent:

#### **To what extent are these objectives in tension?**

This developed into a fascinating discussion—one in which many issues of "operational necessity" versus "strategic objective" emerged and were analysed.

Table by table, participants presented and developed the following points:

Is there a compelling link between a more equal society (the Spirit Level<sup>1</sup> argument) and wellbeing? Inequality—particularly health and social inequalities and policies—raised the question: are issues of inequality covered

1 Kate Pickett & Richard Wilkinson: The Spirit Level, why more equal societies do better.

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sufficiently in the project?

Do museums genuinely present “a force for narrowing social inequality”?  
And “do the projects see their mandate as being to influence wider policy thinking (within government, funding bodies etc.) or should their priority be their own projects and what they deliver at grass-roots?”

The wish to see a move from passive nouns to active verbs: a focus on processes rather than just ends. Where are synergies with other programmes to be found?

Can the Symposium be used to explore international relationships and contacts?

...with wide enthusiasm for learning over the two days within an informal, fun environment - exploring experiences of play, and discovery of comfort zones. Manchester Museum got the participants drawing a partner, with pen and paper on their head, as part of their presentation!



The Symposium then heard from two keynote speakers:

### Keynote presentation 1: Paul Allen, Centre for Alternative Technology

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Paul tells the story of energy; how we access it, how it can define how we live, how we see ourselves, how we relate to others, and how see the future. Paul's full presentation can be viewed [here](#).



### Keynote presentation 2: Andrew Simms, New Economics Foundation

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A “big picture” view of linkages and dynamics between sustainability, economics, behaviour, society and change.

What is the role of the artist? And the roles of “non-commodities” like culture, play, story and empowerment?

Without a major external threat, as obvious as a war, where does mass-scale motivation come from? Experiences of behaviour change around smoking give some hope. There is a fine balance between naming and engaging with the issues, and disengaging from them through fear.

There is ready connectivity to the role of museums: the arts of preservation and recollection to drive thinking and attitude, and the use of innovation to lead to transition.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Rio Earth Summit—instead of a mass exodus round the world, there will be a Festival of Transition, with different events and opportunities for museums to link in the work of the HM project.

Andrew's full presentation can be viewed [here](#).

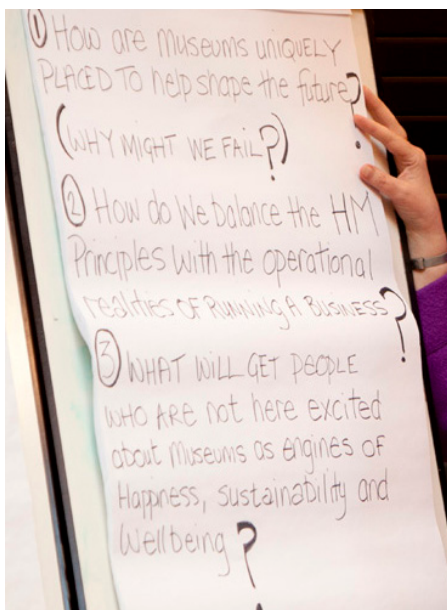


A striking question in response to Andrew's talk explored the human need for gratification and immediate reward: we can build images of utopian, rather than dystopian, futures, but how do you let people experience this in ways which make their lives better in the very short-term?

We are sure there is a link, but how can museums show that individual behaviour and community agency can make the change?

Perhaps this is met in a variety of ways: through dealing with debt, meeting neighbours, finding sense of purpose, bonding families together—different answers for different circumstances.

## Day 2: Revisiting the Three Questions



Maurice Davies of the Museums Association chaired three informal panels of Symposium

delegates including Piotr Bienkowski, Shelagh Wright, Hedley Swain, Alison Turnbull, Nick Winterbotham, Ben Cowell and Dave O'Brien.

This marked an opening-up of debate—returning to the frame of the previous day set by the first two principles of the HM manifesto.

- *Make People Happy*
- *Value Past, Present and Future Environment*

Do they fit together? Again this question seemed to resonate. Is there a tendency for wellbeing to mean “do better” at the expense of activities directed towards environmental considerations? Is there a disjoint between these two agendas?

The response from Mandy Barnett was robust: wellbeing and environmental sustainability are two sides of the same “resilience coin”. But do resilient individuals and communities have a benign relationship with the environment?

Nick Winterbotham raised the “importance of having a positive future image”—along the lines that “all we have to fear is fear itself”—that intention itself brings something positive.

Through paired group work, the Symposium now explored issues such as a challenge to Big Question 2: How to balance the HM principles with the operational realities of running a business? Indeed would a better question be: “what do you need to do in order to get buy-in at the highest level of organisations to HM principles?”

On the question of the potential for overreach: should we remember first and foremost that “we are museums”—does it over-claim or unduly raise expectation to talk about museums saving the planet?

The Symposium moved to explore boundaries and the activity/passivity of the sector's role: is it the role of museums to raise awareness of, or reflect back, the mess that society has made of the world? Should an arts museum say anything about climate/environment, for example?

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Andrew Simms had suggested a vital opportunity for museums to show us how previous times and cultures interpreted and reacted to their challenges, and perhaps therefore to show us how a new world might be: this projection from past to future is inherent in the nature of museums.

The first panel discussion generated one of the most provocative questions discussed at the Symposium. It can be posed as: “at a policy level we can't afford to deal with global warming because we have to deal with year-on-year cuts”.

Though might there perhaps be a form of relief, in that economic collapse might result in less economic activity and therefore to some extent be less damaging for the environment?

The second panel also explored challenging territory: are we on a hiding-to-nothing trying to measure wellbeing at all? Here the HM manifesto has particular value: it helps us understand what does count, and that net social return on investment is certainly a sound principle, if sometimes raising difficulties in practice.

What of the danger of turning participants in the projects into lab-rats with too much measurement? And shouldn't it be the role of the health sector to instigate wellbeing measures (in both the design and operational senses)?

Certainly, came an answer, dialogue and interplay with the health sector are essential, and we should we be trying to get medical bodies/foundations interested.

### What does wellbeing really mean?

The language used needs to become shared terminology. In developing the National Museum Strategy for Scotland words like wellbeing and sustainability feature, but what do they really mean in our understanding?

Perhaps, as Piotr Bienkowski points out, attempts to define wellbeing and happiness tend to start from a feeling of comfort, but this is incorrect: “no, they should be driven by inspiration, not comfort”. Feelings of challenge, of being out-of-control, can be strongly associated with wellbeing, and lie far from “comfort”.

Museums can struggle with talking, listening, and challenging assumptions without being threatening.

However the definitions are arrived at, we must learn how to listen, and to renew that learning constantly, if we're to get the language and understanding right. And it must become part of the DNA of an organisation to have mechanisms for listening and the renewal of listening.

### Exploring the remaining HM principles

Using a model of divergent, emergent, convergent thinking, the Symposium worked in small groups to discuss the remaining HM principles.



Recalling Paul Allen's phrase from the previous day: “the future is dappled in the present”, we considered what current practice tells us about connections to these principles, bringing the manifesto to life through example, anecdote,

personal experience and a community of practice.

The principles and summary discussions are as follows:

### **Find your Niche**

How niche is niche? —bear in mind the examples we see of museums with very different characters.

Museums are in a unique position to address issues that affect our lives (not just the “happy” things). But beware niches becoming a means of exclusion or a route to being too inward-looking. Use positive engagement practice and involvement of communities to counter this. How many museums have got their “big idea” embedded at staff level, not just as a Board statement? A hierarchy is suggested here: lead in your own market or sphere of influence, enthuse others, then allow this to be transmitted virally to others.

### **Think Global, Be Networked**

This presents something of a Catch 22: we need to think globally about climate change, but behave locally to address it (choices of food, transport links etc.) How can links via partners e.g. NHS help to amplify “place” in the debate? - a fuller report of the discussion can be found on the HM website [here](#).

### **Measure What Matters**

Measure what matters—define what does matter, then look at the methods. Perhaps there is no “best” form of measurement, but it's important to stay the course with what has been chosen, and continue with it to get a longer term picture. Evaluate through the life-cycle of work and projects. Use some experimentation with adding or changing measures, involve those being measured in the measurement and think about measuring unintended consequences. Don't just record what's important to the funders but also to you as organisations. A fuller report of the discussion can be found on the HM website [here](#).

### **Pursue Mutual Relationships**

How do museums choose partners? Do they develop existing ones or find new ones? “Who would be the most difficult person to work with” can often provide a good place to start. And how much control would a museum relinquish (as a public space) to pursue a goal. What if the public do something that the museum hadn't envisaged? Where are the ethical lines? - a fuller report of the discussion can be found on the HM website [here](#).

### **Lead on Innovation Towards Transition**

Don't get too hung up on “innovation”—many solutions already exist, and the priority should be on just getting on with sharing and implementing them. Many museums began with a big idea, but through form-filling end up stifling it.

Let people bring their own personal values to work, and try bringing in others from completely different media or disciplines to enrich the work of museums. Read a recent blog on this subject by Tony Butler [here](#).

### **Support Learning for Resilience**

Learning might extend to learning what needs to be learnt! Should learning be explicit in museum business plans? Can this learning be intentionally used to alter what we see in society and how we value it? Are museums sharing their own learning well enough? - a fuller report of the discussion can be found on the HM website [here](#).

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The Symposium here touched on the issue of the closing down of public space, and the rise of privately-restricted “semi-public” space—such as Liverpool One. Management activities here can exclude local communities; restricting the say they have in the way the space is used and enhanced.

But there are positive examples, too: the Broadgate development in London works as a great example of open “public space”. And is a museum any more of a public space than is a “Liverpool One”? With the rise of Internet-enabled “virtual space”—very public and very vibrant as it is—are we really seeing a contraction of public space as we understand it?

Public/private is perhaps too crude a demarcation—there are lots of flavours of each. Commons are private, they just allow access,



under controlled circumstances. And museums share many “commons” characteristics.

### How can we build these concept into the running of museums?

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The role of the leader is vital (Piotr Bienkowski) especially in projects like HM—if you're going to be involved, the role of the director is “terribly important”. Don't just turn up at the beginning and delegate, and end up having no clue what's going on.

There was an observation that the symposium participants were not very diverse, though the commissions are already engaging with very diverse audiences—homeless people at LTM for example, disadvantaged children at the Story Museum, mental health service users in Woking.

Conversations start here, in the symposium, in the wider project, and in the commissions, but it's a fundamental responsibility for all, not just the commissions, to go away from here and carry these principles onwards.

### Planning and Measuring Wellbeing without Consumption

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This session was led by Mandy Barnett, evaluator and Sam Thompson, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Liverpool.

Within the overall evaluation is a specific task to look at how we assess the wellbeing (with less consumption) of our participants. Sam and Mandy gave presentations to explore ideas around well-being generally and the museum's role.

Sam and Mandy are at the forefront of work in this area and their guidance is well worth looking at. A couple of years ago they were responsible for developing the Five Ways to Wellbeing as part of the government-sponsored Foresight project. The task was to identify “what would be the equivalent of five fruit and veg a day?” Like five-a-day, the five ways seem to have captured people's imagination and several of our commissions are inspired by them. For the record, they are: Be active, connect and give, take notice and keep learning.

Sam shared some popular footage of Robert Kennedy's speech in 1968 in which talks about the weakness of GNP as a measure, which “counts air pollution, and cigarette advertising and...the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl” but “does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play...the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages”.

He then shared the economic, psychology and public health arguments for measuring wellbeing: that life satisfaction tails off as income continues to grow; the importance of striving towards flourishing; and the importance of a quality long life over an unhealthy one. Finally he made the case for the role of wellbeing in policy, from the little known Local



Government Act giving them responsibility, to David Cameron's 2010 position: "To those who say that all this sounds like a distraction from the serious business of government, I would say that finding out what will really improve lives and acting on it is actually the serious business of government."

So leading on from that, Mandy was able to identify a key opportunity for museums: that there is both the need and a national agenda focusing on wellbeing.

Our earlier discussions had talked about museums as places to build resilience for individuals, communities and society. But there are two quite different ways to do this: through meaning—using the collections to explore issues, and through place—providing public space to develop mutual relationships. The way this is acted out in the commissions ranges from Godalming Museum's community curation project, with conversations "part of a long heritage of thought regarding using and using up the power we have available", from Domesday Mills, through Victorian Hydro to the present – to LTM's Conversation Hub, which provides neutral space for St Mungo's and others to build a local community.

Mandy suggested that measuring wellbeing for individuals must be based on the same plan, do, review cycle as our overall project, using a logical story of change to plan and then review. She drew on various national research to suggest we ask participants to comment:

- I feel
  - safe
  - supported
  - connected
  - useful
  - happy
  - good
- I was doing what I wanted
- I was active
- I learnt in creative ways
- I could give something
- We changed values that were individual or materialistic
- We celebrated success

But at the same time, she reminded participants to Measure what Matters—making sure their approaches were locally owned.

## Concluding session

Drawing the discussion to a conclusion, it's important to recognise the "massively ambitious" nature of the Happy Museum manifesto.

One comment was that the manifesto principles are relatively activity-based. What would be the impact of more behavioural- or values-based objectives. Perhaps it could be the "why you do it" attitudes that would really excite people.

The symposium had provided useful information about the developing community of practice, but it also highlighted an element missing from the evaluation framework; that of personal change as a key outcome. In their "final thoughts" over a third of participants talked about personal change, with around a quarter mentioning culture change in their organisation and another quarter mentioning a community of practice in the sector. In particular, the role of leadership often arose. As a result the evaluation framework will be amended to take account of personal change too.

The idea of a LinkedIn forum was discussed, as was the great start that the HM website already provides in terms of a space for content, guest blogs and other contributions. And bear in mind the value of having ambitious, bold targets: remember (as Andrew Simms told us) the whole railway network gauge that was [widened in one weekend!](#)

### The takeaways from the Symposium

**Responsibility:** whether as manager, artist, maker, curator, or any engager with the process of culture, all bring inherent responsibilities—whether moral, ethical or ecological. And growth and fortification of that sense of responsibility has been experienced in this Symposium.

**Management:** the Symposium has also provided valuable nourishment in how to manage day to day over-extension and under-capitalisation of our lives.

**Forward-looking:** many conversations with museums in recent months have focused on issues of grant or funding deprivation. This area has been notable by its absence from discussion at the Symposium, which has been about ambitions, far horizons, and future wishes; not just grant dependence.

**Collective joy:** reducing emphasis on soulless consumerism in place of collective joy.

**Communication:** the Symposium provides rich material to communicate with other colleagues the huge diversity of expertise and interest in the HM project so it can continue to “punch above its weight” (Piotr Bienkowski), not just now, but continuing into the future.

**Energy and empowerment:** these past two days have provided this in great measure, not only through the direct experience of the Symposium, but also through immersion in the issues and context of a wider world.

**Balance:** increasing recognition of the environmental side of wellbeing, not just individual and societal happiness.

**Call to action:** using the energy and zeal of the Symposium to develop an interim programme with events that manifest what's been talked about, especially the Festival of Transition and the opportunity to find out more about the transition movement.

**Depth:** the quality of the conversations is something that won't go away.

**Purpose:** from a feeling that much work on the cultural impact of museums “all goes into a black hole” there is a very real feeling that its time is coming now, and what's been heard at this Symposium will feed this.



### Final comments

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- *We're small, HM has so much impact for us, and this will help us to prioritise*
- *We'll take away the fact that the project is so much bigger than we've portrayed it so far; we have to start talking about it as being as massive as it really is*
- *Can be difficult to make connections in my head to the wider project, but we now have an idea how we communicate this to the rest of our museum, not just for its own ends, but what it shows us about a wider trajectory of development and change.*
- *This is first funded project for us—we had thought of it as a discrete activity, but now we realise how it informs all of our work, and our connections with other organisations.*
- *Looking forward to changing attitudes towards evaluation—away from a feeling of “being marked” and towards using evaluation as a way of learning on the job about what we do and how to do it better.*
- *Be bold. The time has come.*

### Additional material

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Detailed presentations can be found here [<boxnet>](#).

Video snapshots can be found [here](#).

Photo captures of detailed working notes are [here](#).

Tony Butler's post-Symposium blog and a round-up of other blogs from Symposium guests is [here](#).

Comments that came through on Twitter on the day and following days can be found on Storify [here](#).