



Democracy at the top

Embedding community participation
in governance and strategic decision-
making in museums and heritage

| Executive summary

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Introduction

Wider participation in decision-making has the potential to fundamentally change museums and heritage sites. Participatory practice has however changed too little across the sector in decades, and we have not seen the shifts in power and approaches needed to create more porous, and more relevant, organisations. Participation needs to move beyond ad-hoc or singular operational decisions focused on temporary projects, collections display, and programming. Museums need to involve a wider range of people in strategic decision-making and governance, with participation in the oversight and direction of institutions.

This report looks at how, and the extent to which, museums are embedding participation in strategic decision-making and governance. It is based on 35 interviews with museums and heritage directors and staff, trustees, and community and academic partners from 16 different organisations. It provides a broad overview of how museum staff, trustees and partners see the role of the museum in the community, the participatory work of museums and their ambitions for change. The report also outlines the barriers and enablers to greater participation, and the factors that have influenced change within museums and heritage organisations.

Summary of findings

A new approach to participation

Co-production is currently popular in museums, and participatory practice is happening across the sector. However, most participation is currently:

1. **Temporary** – It involves projects and ad hoc activity, often with limited legacy.
2. **Restricted** – Focused on programming, the museum decides how and when people can participate, with no potential to be involved in the museum's wider work.
3. **Marginal** – It is seen as the responsibility of certain teams, additional to primary work, and not part of core budgets.
4. **Consultative** – Communities are only consulted on strategic issues, not involved in leadership or governance, and the museum retains power.

To transform the sector, participation needs to become:

1. **Permanent** – Participation is continuous, changing the organisation, with a lasting legacy.
2. **Strategic** – People are involved in oversight and direction, and decision-making across the organisation. They determine the scope of work or projects.
3. **Embedded** – All staff are responsible. Participation is part of everything and linked to core budgets.
4. **Powerful** – The workforce and board are diverse. People have direct involvement in leadership and governance, and power reflects the community.

Greater participation requires a systemic approach. Interviewees posed a wide range of interconnected issues. Creating more porous organisations, with greater community relevance and involvement, required staff and board diversity, flatter internal structures and staff support, alongside broader, deeper participatory processes.

Governance

In most cases, governance provided limited opportunities and support for participation. The issues raised included:

- **Board diversity**
Despite widespread acknowledgement of the need, museums struggled to diversify boards, sometimes complicated by the appointments process. Some also needed more local representation. Trustees from under-represented groups noted a personal conflict in wanting greater diversity, but feeling uncomfortable, and highlighted the need to be able to contribute their knowledge and experience.
- **Relationships**
Trustees had limited relationships with non-senior staff or participants, and few boards included community partners as trustees. Boards were not benefiting from a range of perspectives, hearing directly from those with lived experience, or learning from participatory work.
- **Scope and agenda**
Activity with communities was largely confined to board papers and short presentations. Most trustees did not engage with the subject, and it was unclear whether they understood what was happening in the museum in the community.
- **Board culture**
Board culture mitigated against diversity, increased scrutiny and interest in community engagement, and flexibility in decision-making models. Some trustees felt constrained by formal relationships or were unsure how outspoken they could be.

Emergent practice and ambitions

While existing practice focused on temporary projects and co-produced programming, interviewees also described emergent practice and future ambitions which sought to embed participation and influence strategic decision-making and governance.

- **Staff and board diversity**
Staff and audience diversity impacted on each other, and the former increased the legitimacy of participatory work. Museums had introduced lived experience or perspective based staff roles. Strategies to increase board diversity included direct advertising, associate roles in national museums, and pathways for volunteers and young people.
- **Flatter internal structures**
Directors all expressed interest in addressing hierarchy and creating flatter internal structures. Actions focused on roles rather than seniority, and new groups or forums involving trustees, staff at different levels, and sometimes community members or partners. Some had experimented with or planned to introduce different leadership or governance models.
- **Staff support**
Interviewees stressed the importance of a workplace culture that nourished people and built confidence. Museums explored how to develop staff skills and capacity, encourage a critical and reflective approach, and recognise and support the emotional labour involved in participatory practice.
- **Whole organisation and whole experience**
Museums were shifting their thinking from co-curating content to co-curating the whole visitor experience, acknowledging audiences encounter other spaces and services alongside co-created displays. The whole organisation encompassed every role and part of the museum, and participation in decisions at every level and stage of work.
- **More open approach**
Museums wanted to be flexible and engage in honest, open conversation, for example adjusting permanent spaces and displays over time, responding to feedback, and thinking in public. There were calls to get collections, staff, and trustees out of the building, develop a broader understanding of heritage and culture, and emphasise human stories and everyday experience.

- **Models of participation**
Museums were using open and targeted approaches to participation, more democratically engaging the wider population, addressing underrepresented narratives, and working with children and young people. Other models focused on equality between staff and participants, deliberative processes, and making organisations more community-led.

Change process

Interviewees identified a wide range of internal and external barriers and enablers to embedding participation, including funding and policy agendas, infrastructure, organisational history and culture, staff fear and anxiety, reputation, and communication. They also identified factors that contributed to change.

- **Shape of journey**
For some, change was a continuous process, while others described waves, or key projects that altered the way they work. Some had disrupted major projects to strengthen participation after delivery had begun. Capital works, the pandemic and Black Lives Matter emerged as catalysts for change.
- **Quality of leadership**
Leadership was key to change, with quick progress often attributed to new directors. Interviewees highlighted the need for courage, recognising and working with complexity, and creating a non-hierarchical, empowering culture.
- **Challenge**
Challenge needed to be felt at a senior level and allow community partners and members to tell museums that they are wrong. Interviewees were inspired by young people taking a radical view to museums, and co-leadership.
- **Time and support**
Leaders wanted mentoring and networks to support participatory practice and radical change. Time was needed to slow down, reflect, involve others, and introduce alternative models of decision-making.
- **Learning from elsewhere**
Practice in other sectors and the need to learn from this was widely acknowledged, including interest in a range of frameworks around governance and participation, from co-operatives to deliberative democracy.

Recommendations

Staff and leadership support

- Recognise staff concerns around expertise and the emotional labour involved in participatory work
- Identify the needs of staff and provide support in building skills and confidence, for example, including training and development in participatory practice
- Provide mentoring and networks for leaders seeking to introduce new leadership and governance structures

Boards and trustees

- Establish a network for trustees from under-represented groups
- Create opportunities to develop relationships, discussion, and collaboration across all levels of staff, trustees, and community partners
- Take a systemic approach to diversifying boards, encompassing changes to board culture, improved accessibility, and shifts in the scope of business, alongside recruitment

Learning and advice on practice drawn from other sectors

- Recognise practice and develop networks including small and new museums and the wider cultural sector
- Provide advice on flattening structures and hierarchy, and share examples of alternative forms of governance
- Experiment with deliberative democracy processes

Funding

- Provide practical and financial support for partnership working, and strengthen funding requirements and accountability linked to inclusion, community participation and fair partnerships
- Offer funding based on process, with a more open approach to outputs, and more substantial, long-term funding of work that is not necessarily linked to capital projects
- Increase direct funding of community organisations and support set around community interests and needs
- Funders also need to develop stronger leadership with increased community participation in their own decision-making and governance

This research has been supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Clore Leadership, and supervised by Professor Michael Smets, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford.

This research was an extension of my Clore Leadership Fellowship supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Thank you to everyone who generously provided guidance, feedback and support and to those who gave their time and insight through interviews.



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