

The Network Newsletter: tackling social exclusion in libraries, museums, archives and galleries

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The Network's Website is at www.seapn.org.uk and includes information on courses, good practice, specific socially excluded groups, as well as the newsletter archive.

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Black Lives Matter

Communicating decolonisation guidance

This is very useful, practical new guidance¹ from the MA, which:

“[...] is meant to be a starting point for building a robust communication strategy to support your work. There isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach because across the museum sector there is a diversity of capacity, size, and tactics.

Take what works for you, and what’s possible institutionally, and embrace it. The more we do this work together, the stronger our work will be and the easier it will get next time.”²

Their starting-point is what fits for your organisation:

“We recognise that many institutions struggle with the word decolonisation. The work of decolonising museums involves creatively reimagining the way museums work, who they work with and what they value. That’s what’s important. If there’s pressure to use alternate [sic] words for your project, that’s fine. Use the language that enables you to do the work.” [p17]

It also includes the notion of bravery in our work:

“The instinct to protect the organisation from negative press or feedback is natural but pushing through those hesitations is essential. Remember, we must be brave in this work. Be ready to challenge norms and encourage taking risks within your institution. Sometimes ethical practice may not align with traditional ‘best practice’ standards. To allow self-censorship to become the modus-operandi of a museum means undermining the role of the museums to challenge audiences with new and different perspectives.” [p4]

The guidance runs through how to set objectives for the work – and the questions to ask if this isn’t clear, for example:

- “Where does this project fit within our larger organisational strategy?
- Who is this project for?” [p6]

¹ *Communicating decolonisation guidance*. Museums Association, 2022, https://ma-production.ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/app/uploads/2022/10/14095229/HS305-%E2%80%93-MA-Decolonisation-toolkit_AW4.pdf.

² Taken from: https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/communicating-decolonisation/#msdyntrid=0ljZpMfilHuf3Cfc2wwMd4ReNxEEM1ND5FxyJ_WLsvw.

It also has tips on writing clear messaging.

The second section looks at how we learn about our audiences; it suggests that we can group our audience into one of four categories:

“Engaged/Passive Allies: This audience is likely to engage in social justice work and broadly support the project.

Curious Neutral/Passive Critics: These audiences will have some concerns about the project but not lash out or attack right away. There is a clear opportunity with this audience to engage them, demonstrate that you’re listening, and recognise their needs and fears.

Engaged Critics: This audience is likely to engage in stronger but civil confrontation. There may not be a way to convince or pacify them but we can still show that we value their engagement with the project. Be open to scrutiny.

Malicious Critics: This audience, otherwise known as ‘trolls,’ are not interested in good-faith discussions about the project. They likely have a surface understanding of the objectives and will be responding to incendiary media coverage or key words. They are also likely to use racist or prejudiced language.” [p14]

and recommends strategies for working with each.

There is good practical advice on how to adapt messages, build shared ownership, and so on.

The next section looks at external communications, including engaging with the media and being as prepared as possible for likely reactions to your work. This also includes “Productive engagement worksheets” which help analyse and respond to conflict; and a section on “Building a shared impact narrative” which uses a framework:

- Institutional – a focus on the direct impact of this work
- Collective – working together with our peers
- Cultural – finding common ground with wider audiences
- Structural – shining a spotlight on the tangible impact

It includes some case studies (eg on the issues around Thomas Picton; dealing with human remains).

Finally, there is a very short reading list, and a link to the resources area on the MA website³.

Recommended.⁴

³ See: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/resources/>.

⁴ Source: Museums Association email updates, 1 Nov 2022.

Tackling social and digital exclusion – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

How council library services can support children and families in the earliest years

Earlier this year, the LGA published a report⁵ of a peer review of “[...] library services in eight councils, specifically with regard to how they worked to enhance the local early years offer and, in particular, support for speech, language and communication development.”

The report identified that “[...] there is much work that already takes place within council library services to support children and families in the earliest years, as well as partnership working across council and health partners.”

It also “[...] identified that there are existing strengths in how libraries already work to support the following areas:

- pre-literacy skills including speech, language and communication development
- mental health support for adults and children
- reducing social isolation and creating networks / friendships
- access to information, skills development and learning for adults
- delivering area-wide messages and support from the council, health and social care partners
- engaging with ‘under-served’ communities, families and individuals
- libraries used as a community resource.”

In addition, the peer review noted that:

“Across the eight councils, there were recurring themes that were then noted as recommendations for closer connections between library services, early years and family hubs. These included:

- involving libraries in planning for the development for family hubs
- clarifying the library offer
- communicating the offer to families
- aligning strategies with key partners.
- responding to families’ needs
- demonstrating impact
- recognising libraries as part of the local speech and language pathway
- considering library staff as part of the wider children’s workforce within the council.”

⁵ *How council library services can support children and families in the earliest years*. LGA, 2022, <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/how-council-library-services-can-support-children-and-families-earliest-years>.

The report includes a number of brief – and longer – case studies of work that is taking place, as well as providing links to further case studies on the LGA website.

This is a really useful resource, recommended.⁶

Equality, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

If nothing changes, nothing changes: a report examining the status of anti-racism, equity, diversity and inclusion in the heritage sector across England

This important new report⁷ was published in Sept.

Although it addresses “the heritage sector”, in fact it focuses primarily on museums and “heritage attractions”.

It sets current developments within their context (eg the importance of the BLM movement), and notes that:

“It was clear that there has been a push towards greater equity, anti-racist and effective EDI work across the sector. However, there is still a long way to go see a sustained and sector wide positive change.” [p7]

It identifies a number of reasons why this change has not fully happened, including:

- Absence of concrete action plans and budgets to support statements of intent
- A lack of whole organisation approach to anti-racist EDI work
- Poor relationships with Global Majority communities – for example: “[...] community interviewees frequently reported disrespectful or exploitative practices: a lack of recognition of their skills, expertise and knowledge; no financial recognition of the work they do to make collaborations possible; and limited (or no) decision-making powers for groups.” [p8]
- An unrepresentative workforce and an uncomfortable environment for Global Majority staff
- A lack of co-ordination and collaboration from funders and networks.

⁶ Source: post to LinkedIn from Kathryn Boothroyd, Jul 2022.

⁷ Maya Sharma, Marta Riccardi and Safina Islam. *If nothing changes, nothing changes: a report examining the status of anti-racism, equity, diversity and inclusion in the heritage sector across England*. Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Education Trust, 2022, <https://www.racearchive.org.uk/download/if-nothing-changes-nothing-changes-september-2022/?wpdmdl=6561&refresh=6352779439f181666348948>.

The report makes a series of recommendations, including:

1. “EDI work needs to be treated as an essential and core part of the sector’s business. It is as important as collections care, marketing and promotion, and financial management. Therefore, it should be embedded it into all aspects of organisational life.” [p9]
2. “Statements of intent, broad policies and commitments to EDI are not enough [...]” [p9]
3. “Funders and sector support organisations need to make significant resources available for heritage organisations to develop a vision and plan for their EDI work, and to build their EDI skills, knowledge and confidence.” [p9]
4. “There needs to be a greater accountability for EDI work across the sector. Heritage organisations should ensure that EDI work is everyone’s responsibility, although it is the leaders who are accountable and responsible for driving the work forward. Funders and sector networks should take a tougher approach where they see poor practice, and a lack of interest and commitment.” [p9]
5. “The sector needs to take a more nuanced approach to global histories, which treats them as part of our collective history, rather than only relevant to Global Majority audiences. This means not shying away from contentious, painful and traumatic histories, and taking an honest approach to the legacy of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Heritage organisations should improve their collections by working ethically with Global Majority communities to include their perspectives and knowledge, and consider updating collections by acquiring new items to better represent Global Majority communities.” [p9]

The report concludes by recognising that some organisations and individuals have made enormous progress, and that others are hoping to, but also says:

“This research confirmed what we had long suspected: despite decades of sector-wide discussions and initiatives designed to diversify audiences, workforce and collections, and a more recent move (in some quarters) towards decolonisation, essentially very little has changed. For all the statements of intent, funding programmes, mentoring and development schemes, the sector workforce remains unrepresentative, particularly so at higher levels, audiences are predominantly White, and there is little evidence of contemporary collecting to ensure future generations can explore the diverse heritage of the UK.” [p85]

And:

“The sector needs to understand that this work is not optional. We ask you to take a bold and assertive stance. Be prepared to fund activities that might feel risky or untested but also be prepared to challenge and take sanctions towards organisations that demonstrate an unwillingness to take any active steps towards a more equitable way of working.” [p86]

Recommended.⁸

Disability issues – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

Heritage access 2022

This new report⁹, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund:

“[...] brings together a partnership of sector support organisations, sector leaders in access and inclusion, and a team of 61 volunteer researchers, to explore the state of access at UK museums and cultural heritage sites through a survey of the online access information that they provide.

This report presents the findings of this research, identifies best practice and, for those working at museums and heritage sites, helps you identify, detail and create online information about access barriers, aids, facilities, resources, and events at your venue [...]” [p6]

In terms of heritage:

“Reflecting the remit of VocalEyes and the partner organisations, we limited our research to museums and galleries, historic buildings, and industrial, maritime and transport heritage: thus cultural heritage in the form of buildings that are open to the public and with staff present onsite. Venues also had to be open to the public at the time of the research.

Active places of worship, libraries and archives, intangible heritage and natural heritage, such as wildlife centres and zoos were not in scope. Gardens were only included if connected to a historic building.” [p8]

The report draws three main conclusions (and also draws comparisons with *State of museum access 2018*¹⁰):

1. There was no change in the overall proportion of museums and heritage sites that have, or do not have access information on their website.
2. The amount of information about access provision at museum and heritage sites has increased significantly since 2018.
3. There were significant increases in the proportion of sites that mentioned aspects relevant to all or a large proportion of visitors with access

⁸ Source: *Heritage Update*, 479, 20 Oct 2022.

⁹ *Heritage access 2022*. VocalEyes, 2022, <https://vocaleyeyes.co.uk/research/heritage-access-2022/>. Available to download as Clear Print, large print (text only), and audio.

¹⁰ Matthew Cock *et al.* *State of museum access 2018*. VocalEyes, 2018, <https://vocaleyeyes.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/State-of-Museum-Access-2018.pdf>.

requirements, while the increases are less marked for information for groups who have historically been under-recognised as requiring accessibility measures.

The report includes lots of recommendations of good practice, eg:

“Instead of simply presenting access information on the webpage, many museums and heritage sites put all or some of the access information within a downloadable document. While downloadable documents can be useful, we recommend putting all the access information you have on the webpage, for accessibility reasons. If you do have a downloadable document, then ensure this has exactly the same information.” [p15]

and links to resources, guidance and advice, eg:

“Resource

Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Assistance dogs: a guide for all businesses*, [EqualityHumanRights.com/en/publication-download/assistance-dogs-guide-all-businesses](https://equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/assistance-dogs-guide-all-businesses) [11]

Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Take the lead: a guide to welcoming customers with assistance dogs*, [EqualityHumanRights.com/en/publication-download/take-lead-guide-welcoming-customersassistance-dogs](https://equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/take-lead-guide-welcoming-customersassistance-dogs) [12]

Assistance Dogs UK, [AssistanceDogs.org.uk](https://www.assistancedogs.org.uk) [13]

Hearing Dogs for Deaf People, [HearingDogs.org.uk](https://www.hearingdogs.org.uk) [14]” [p23]

and examples of good practice, eg:

“New Lanark Visitor Centre provides good information about accessible parking via their accessibility guide

[NewLanark.org/your-visit/accessibility](https://www.newlanark.org/your-visit/accessibility) [15]” [p25]

The “Conclusion and next steps” section includes “10 ways to improve your access information” [pp63-64], incorporating “Consider the full visitor journey, from the journey to the venue, the entrance, front desk, heritage site/museum galleries, outdoor spaces, shop and cafe.” [p65]

It also includes a “Heritage accessibility checklist”.

In addition:

¹¹ Links to: <https://equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/assistance-dogs-guide-all-businesses>.

¹² Links to: <https://equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/take-lead-guide-welcoming-customers-assistance-dogs>.

¹³ Links to: <https://www.assistancedogs.org.uk/>.

¹⁴ Links to: <https://www.hearingdogs.org.uk/>.

¹⁵ Links to: <https://www.newlanark.org/your-visit/accessibility>.

“VocalEyes are also launching the *Heritage Access 2022* benchmark tool [16], an online search and map interface where you can find the benchmark score for the access information provided by the 2,258 UK museums and heritage sites covered by the project.

This tool is aimed at supporting the heritage industry to identify best practice across different regions and encourage local collaboration and knowledge-sharing between heritage professionals.

Highly recommended.¹⁷

Broader issues – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

“Contested heritage” and “Culture wars”

“Abolish Arts Council and its ‘Left-wing, woke agenda’ say critics”

Just in case you haven’t seen this recent round¹⁸ in the so-called “culture wars”: claims by artist Alexander Adams and David Lee, editor of *The Jackdaw* magazine¹⁹, that the Arts Council’s priorities are “now political, not artistic”, while “hostile to the taste and values of the majority population”.

The article describes how:

“They describe ACE’s ethos as ‘rotten with politicisation and disregard for taxpayers’, adding that ACE-funded venues ‘allow creators resentful of native British people, their history and their majority demographic status’.”

The authors’ position is summed up by a quote from Alexander Adams:

“Staff are expected to agree with the Left-wing identity-politics views of ACE regarding racial bias and historical injustice.”

¹⁶ See: <https://vocaleyeyes.co.uk/research/heritage-access-2022/benchmark>.

¹⁷ Source: Museums Association email updates, 21 Oct 2022.

¹⁸ Dalya Alberge “Abolish Arts Council and its ‘Left-wing, woke agenda’ say critics”, *The Telegraph*, 8 Oct 2022, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/10/08/abolish-arts-council-left-wing-woke-agenda-say-critics/?mc_cid=f741972876&mc_eid=e91604b40f.

¹⁹ I have to say that I had not come across this magazine before. It describes itself as: “The Jackdaw was founded in 2000. Its purpose is to keep interested parties informed and entertained about aspects of art that are in the news. By and large it’s pretty nasty and critical of many things, and especially of the corrupt, self-serving art establishment which stinks like a rotting carcass. If The Jackdaw isn’t amusing in parts then it has failed. It’s pretty childish sometimes too and do beware because parts of it are not entirely true – I’ll leave it up to you to believe whichever bits you like and to disregard the rest. Some of it is serious. Some of it is just downright bad. Some issues are better than others. But no other art publication dares to be like it.” [Taken from: http://www.thejackdaw.co.uk/?page_id=13].

This is depressing – particularly the vitriolic comments that appear after the article.²⁰

Abbreviations and acronyms

ACE = Arts Council England

BLM = Black Lives Matter

EDI = equality, diversity and inclusion

LGA = Local Government Association

MA = Museums Association

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²⁰ Source: Left Foot Forward *Right Wing Watch*, 15 Oct 2022.