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

Activist Museum Award 2024

“Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) has announced the winners of the prestigious Activist Museum Award 2024.”^{1, 2}

The winners are:

- “Museum X, based in London, is an experimental museum bringing people, places, and stories together to test ideas and reimagine African and Caribbean heritage in a whole new way.”³
- “Salt Museum in Messolonghi, Greece works to promote sustainable salt harvesting through education and awareness. More than half of the salt produced by Greece comes from Messolonghi.”⁴
- “Lusophone Museum of Sexual Diversity works to recover the history, reaffirm the present, and design the future of LGBTQ+ communities across ten countries and regions in Africa, America, Asia and Europe, whose official language is Portuguese.”⁵

Inclusive histories: narrating our shared past in polarised times

Apologies for being slow to include a piece on this important report⁶.

For many of the reasons discussed in The Khan Review [see below], reassessments of our past are proving problematic:

“These divisions over our past can be difficult for practitioners in the arts and culture sector to navigate in a way that promotes constructive discussion around the legacies of Empire, or the histories of underrepresented groups, without being derailed by excessively heated polarisation. Yet it would be a significant mistake for organisations to lean out of these debates, or to define the success of inclusive history work as

¹ “Activist Museum Awards 2024 winners announced by Research Centre for Museums and Galleries”, University of Leicester, 2024, <https://le.ac.uk/news/2024/march/activist-museum-2024>.

² Source: Research Centre for Museums and Galleries *Newsletter*, 7, Mar 2024.

³ See: <https://www.themuseumx.com/>.

⁴ See: <https://saltmuseum.gr/en/>.

⁵ See: <https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/mlds-museu-lusofono-da-diversidade-sexual>.

⁶ Jake Puddle and Sunder Katwala. *Inclusive histories: narrating our shared past in polarised times*. British Future, 2023, https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/History-report.Final_.pdf.

the avoidance of controversy. Indeed, avoidance carries risks – as public appetite to learn about these histories is growing ever-stronger.

Rather, within a context where criticism of this work has become more intense, organisations will need to be better prepared to step up, deepen and extend their work on inclusive histories with confidence.

This report therefore compiles a set of insights and examples of good practice, through which arts and culture stakeholders can undertake work on inclusive histories in ways that successfully navigate polarised responses.” [p4]

The report sets the current debates in their context, particularly “The emergencies of Black Lives Matter and Covid-19 [...]” [p6], and the effects of what it calls “[...] major ‘history war’ flashpoints – namely the responses received by the National Trust for its report on colonialism and historic slavery”, and the wider ‘culture wars’.

It draws out some common approaches which demonstrate good practice, including in:

- Reinterpretation
- Incorporating historical narratives of under-represented groups (including “linking local with global”)
- ... and, more rarely: Removing assets and renaming organisations.

Drawing on a range of pieces of work and the expertise of a number of key figures working in this area, the report draws together eight ‘conditions for confidence’ (“[...] insights and principles from the research that we hope can support strategic and practical thinking for organisations to engage in and navigate these heated debates.” [p37])

These are:

1. Get a clearer baseline on audiences’ attitudes – especially to communicate effectively: “This should include more detailed research of groups whose histories have traditionally been underrepresented.” [p38]
2. Communicate strategically – and bring communications strategy into project development from the outset
3. Consult across audiences and gather detailed feedback
4. Prepare better: but don’t be too risk averse: “Communications practitioners should establish a media and communications plan well in advance of new activity on inclusive histories ‘going live’, with a risk register that anticipates how each stakeholder group (from media spokespeople to front-of-house workers and volunteers) could be impacted by a polarised ‘flashpoint’. At the same time, the risk register should strike a balance: risk aversion should not be taken too far, with fear of opposition leading organisations to under-communicate on new

work or to duck away from engagement with potential critics and opponents.” [p38]

5. Harness the catalytic power of anniversaries
6. Dialogue matters: “There is value in bringing a mix of important voices to the table, through pluralist forums that discuss how work on inclusive histories could successfully engage with both left- and right-wing audiences, as well as ethnic minority communities and wider public audiences.” [p39]
7. Recruit unusual allies: “Certain arts and culture organisations will be strategically well-placed to initiate new activity on inclusive histories – particularly where these organisations have stronger connections to audiences, politicians or media outlets that are typically sceptical of work on these themes.” [p39]
8. Benchmark practice on diversity, equity and inclusion: “There have been long term shortcomings in the arts and culture sector to boost diversity [...] particularly at a senior and leadership level. As part of this, benchmarking targets for sector diversity [...] should be set for all levels of an organisation, backed up by action plans on how to support the wellbeing and retention of staff – especially when addressing contentious themes which may incur public and media challenge. For example, all organisations increasing their engagement with inclusive histories should consider the necessary care and aftercare plans needed in instances of ‘culture war’ polarisation.

As the sector looks to increase its focus on work to tell more inclusive stories about our shared past, it will be important that these efforts are developed and led by staff that can draw on diverse lived experiences.” [p40]

Recommended.

Tackling social and digital exclusion – Government, Government Agencies and Local Government

The Khan Review – threats to social cohesion and democratic resilience: a new strategic approach

This important – and lengthy – assessment⁷ of progress on social cohesion by the Independent Adviser to the UK Government for Social Cohesion and Resilience was published in Mar 2024.

⁷ Sara Khan. *The Khan Review – threats to social cohesion and democratic resilience: a new strategic approach*. DLUHC, 2024, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fdbfd265ca2ffef17da79c/The_Khan_review.pdf. There is also a summary at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-khan-review-threats-to-social->

It helpfully defines what its understanding of social cohesion is:

“Social cohesion is concerned with how we live well together in a diverse democracy and how we peacefully navigate disagreements for the common good, despite the differences among us. As we outline, this remains as important today as it has ever been. Previous independent reviews and reports into social cohesion identify the characteristics of a cohesive community and society. These include: [...]

- being able to provide a positive and common vision of our country
- nurturing a sense of belonging for all citizens
- cultivating a stronger sense of an individual’s rights and responsibilities
- providing similar opportunities and access to services to people from all backgrounds
- appreciating and recognising the value of diversity among people
- encouraging meaningful relationships between people from differing backgrounds in their local areas

Cohesion does not mean consensus or conformity. Instead, cohesion embraces and recognises the importance of pluralism, dissent and debate in a liberal democracy and the need to protect it.” [Taken from web summary]

It goes on to define this further:

“The reports and reviews of the last 20 years have focused predominately on the racial and religious tensions and clashes between white majority communities and ethnic or religious minority communities. While this is an important area to consider, cohesion can break down along many other fault lines, such as political affiliations, protected characteristics, class and the holding of certain beliefs and opinions. Similarly, we also need to consider tensions at an intra-racial and intra-religious minority level. This Review understands cohesion in this broader, more holistic sense.” [Taken from web summary]

and makes some valuable and important points, eg:

“There have been twenty years of reports, recommendations and strategies on social cohesion, yet government focus has been intermittent, and the outcomes have been mixed. Today, there remains a continuing failure to institutionalise social cohesion. This is due to ongoing structural obstacles – identified as the 3Ps – where *policy*, *practice* and the *politics* of social cohesion have hampered progress.” [Review, p14]

The web version includes a handy diagram illustrating the multi-dimensional approach to social cohesion, which the Review has adopted.

[cohesion-and-democratic-resilience/the-khan-review-executive-summary-key-findings-and-recommendations](https://www.khan.co.uk/insights/cohesion-and-democratic-resilience/the-khan-review-executive-summary-key-findings-and-recommendations).

The main focus of the Review is on ‘freedom-restricting harassment’, “extreme forms of harassment leading individuals into silence, self-censoring, or abandoning their democratic rights” [Taken from web summary]. This is seen as the major threat to cohesion at present, exemplified by the case of the Batley Grammar School teacher who was forced into hiding in March 2021 following accusations of blasphemy.

The Review goes on to cite different examples in local government, media and journalism⁸; academia; arts⁹/culture¹⁰; the police; as well as group harassment (eg of LGBTQ+ people, trans people, disabled people, “ethnic minority Britons”).

The Review comes up with a set of recommendations, possibly best summarised as:

“The [Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience] strategy and action plan should be framed around the following seven strategic priorities:

- 2a) Promote social cohesion through a dedicated government effort, amplifying and reinforcing democratic freedoms and norms; and supporting evidence-based local cohesion initiatives.
- 2b) Build resilience in local communities against extremist ideologies and narratives, including conspiracy theories and disinformation.
- 2c) Engage people using an audience segmentation approach to help deliver bespoke interventions and programmes to different audiences and ensure a more targeted approach. This includes those who are sympathetic to extremist narratives.
- 2d) Develop an early tension warning system that monitors and alerts DLUHC, the local authority and other key local partners about growing tensions.
- 2e) Marginalise and isolate extremist and other malign actors to prevent the mainstreaming of extremist ideologies and dangerous conspiracy theories which are causing severe harm and disruption in local areas.
- 2f) Respond quickly and effectively to flashpoint incidents and triggers.
- 2g) Repair relationships and engagement between local communities where they have broken down following serious conflict and flashpoint incidents.” [p17]

⁸ “The problem is particularly pronounced for women, with one in three female journalists stating they do not feel safe operating as a journalist in the UK.” [Review, p56]

⁹ “Arts Professionals believe the research suggests that the arts and cultural sector is intolerant of viewpoints outside of dominant norms. Anything that might be considered ‘politically incorrect’ to the liberal-leaning sector – including expressing support or sympathy for Brexit, the Conservatives or other right-wing political parties – was felt to be risky territory. Other taboo topics such as religions, gender and sexuality were also considered a ‘minefield’ and no-go areas for many.” [Review, p60]

¹⁰ This mentions the CILIP survey:

“Research carried out by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals found that a third of librarians had been asked by members of the public to censor or remove books. 82% of librarians are concerned about the increase in such requests [...] The most targeted books as reported by The Guardian involve empire, race and LGBTQ+ themes.” [Review, p60]

In addition:

- “Government departments should proactively engage with local authorities in a timely manner in advance of taking action, where there is concern that those actions could fuel serious conflict and violence or undermine social cohesion in a local area – for example in relation to asylum dispersal or other issues.” [Review, p18]
- “Government should officially recognise the phenomenon of freedom-restricting harassment and publish an Action Plan detailing how they will work to prevent and respond to it.” [Review, p18]

In terms of the DfE, it should, for example:

- “Put forward legislation that restricts the ability for protests to occur immediately outside primary and secondary schools as is the case outside abortion clinics. We recommend a buffer zone of 150m be placed around schools, with the possible exception of pickets relating to industrial action by school staff.” [Review, p18]
- “The Unit should collect cohesion data to assess the progress of key cohesion indicators e.g segregation – ethnic and other – and other relevant issues.” [Review, p18]

The EHRC – with adequate funding – should:

- “Hold local authorities and public bodies to account on part 3 of the Public Sector Equality Duty (s.149 of Equality Act 2010) which places a legal duty on public bodies to ‘foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.’ The Act describes fostering good relations as tackling prejudice and promoting understanding between people from different groups.” [Review, p19]

Recommendations to local authorities and local partners include:

12a) All local authorities should ensure social cohesion and democratic resilience is embedded in their long-term strategic plans. Social cohesion should not be treated as an ‘add-on’ but instead recognised as foundational to the successful delivery of a local authority’s overall strategic plan and wider policies.

12b) Local authorities should conduct regular polling, mapping exercises and other initiatives, including open events to encourage greater participation in local democracy. This will ensure local authorities have in-depth understanding of the views, beliefs, grievances and sense of belonging of the local population they serve. This includes the extensive intra-diversity that exists within ethnic and faith-based minority groups in their local area of which there is often little understanding and where outdated notions of engagement with self-appointed and self-representative ‘community leaders’ continue to persist.

12c) Local authorities should consider adopting deliberate democracy models to help encourage greater citizen participation and engagement in the democratic system. This includes the setting up of a local cohesion and democracy forums or citizens assembly to support these objectives.

12d) Local authorities should improve their ability to respond to conspiracy theories, disinformation and incidents of high tension and conflict. Responding to such activity can be difficult and complicated but has become necessary in modern times. This should include:

- Developing the skills and expertise to know when and when not to intervene, what kind of messaging should be issued and how.
- Ensuring relevant officials and councillors have conflict resolution skills and training to deal with local incidents more effectively. The OSCDR would work to deliver such training.
- Ensuring those appointed to support and deliver social cohesion policy have the right skillset and experience.

12e) Local authorities in the implementation of Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 (the Public Sector Equality Duty) should ensure they fully comply with Part 3 of the Public Sector Equality Duty, which places a legal duty on public bodies to ‘foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.’ Local authorities should demonstrate when publishing information on how they are delivering on the PSED, how in particular they are meeting Part 3.

12f) Local businesses, charities and philanthropists should support long-term funding for local civil society organisations, charities and academic research. This would help deliver vital social cohesion and conflict resolution programmes, projects and interventions.” [Review, p20]

Recommendations to professional bodies, unions, universities, charities and regulators include:

15a) Conduct an annual survey to understand the extent and severity of freedom-restricting harassment faced by people within their respective professions and what censorship impacts this is having on them. This would help provide useful year on data to senior leaders to understand the scale and address accordingly.

15b) Draft guidelines to ensure that they have the right protocols and approaches in place when dealing with incidences of FRH and ensure sufficient support for victims.” [Review, p21]

The Review concludes by stating:

“We can and must do more. Since 2001, reviews, inquiries, reports and commissions have been published in an attempt to improve our country’s approach to social cohesion. To date, insufficient progress has been made and we do not have the comprehensive cohesion assessment

framework or the analytical capability to assess social cohesion and democratic resilience trends in our country. We have not built a good evidence base of how to prevent and respond to incidences of conflict, or how to repair broken relationships following such incidences and local tensions. The recommendations made here attempt to strengthen our approach. Institutionalising social cohesion will help prevent and respond to acute and local incidents; and yield a range of long-term benefits beyond any election cycle. This should be embraced and acknowledged by government, while demonstrating investment and a clear strategic approach.” [Review, p148]

This is all helpful and does point to some positive ways forward.

However, there is what is almost an aside which just shows how much there is still to do – and also how the Review has not really addressed a major current concern:

“One concerning challenge is where different rights, freedoms and protections appear to conflict or come into serious tension with each other. We have seen this play out in a range of ways: the biological sex versus gender identity and trans rights debate; protests outside schools which teach LGBT equality but which some religious parents oppose; the debate about freedom of expression and intolerance, to name just a few. Both ‘sides’ may or may not believe in the importance of all these freedoms. Yet conflict often arises over the lack of immediate clarity and which freedom should take precedence at the point and time of contention.

In some of these cases, important judgements have been made by the courts after a lengthy, costly and timely process [...] While the eventual clarity provided by our courts is critical, there is a risk that a failure or inability to determine which freedoms take precedence quickly and in real-time, in response to live incidences can potentially fuel hate crime, harassment and undermine social cohesion [...] How this can be addressed is a complex challenge the Equality and Human Rights Commission also recognise and which requires greater consideration. A multitude of different approaches will most likely be needed including improving societal and educational awareness.” [Taken from web summary]

Really important background – but its impact will only be if these issues all start to be addressed.

Finally, an important footnote: MRN have written a blogpost¹¹ arguing that we need to be careful about the term ‘cohesion’:

“By creating an additional barrier that migrants and migratised people in Britain have to surpass for the bare minimum inclusion [referring to the “Life in the UK” test], the language of integration and its policies

¹¹ “Integration is an internal border”, Migrants’ Rights Network, 3 Apr 2024, <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/2024/04/03/integration-is-an-internal-border/>.

effectively construct an internal border. This continues to be backed up by 'British Values' – an arbitrary set of values that migrants and People of Colour have to embrace, whereas it is seen as an innate part of White British people. What this shows is that racialised and migratised communities are viewed as 'less' British through having innately different values systems that threaten societal 'cohesion'; they have to learn to adapt."

Abbreviations and acronyms

DfE = Department for Education

DLUHC = Department Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities

EHRC = Equality and Human Rights Commission

MRN = Migrants' Rights Network

OSCDR = Office for Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience

PSED = Public Sector Equality Duty

RCMG = Research Centre for Museums and Galleries

This Newsletter was compiled by John Vincent, and all items are written by him, unless otherwise stated. Please send any comments or items for the next issue to:

John Vincent
Wisteria Cottage
Nadderwater
Exeter EX4 2JQ

Tel/fax: 01392 256045
E-mail: john@nadder.org.uk

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