

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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Did you see ...?

Information Professional

The Winter 2025 issue includes:

- Sue Lacey Bryant “How shall we count the ways in which libraries make a difference?” [“Insight” column] [p14], which includes a brief but very

useful overview of the key benefits of being involved with public library initiatives, eg encouraging/promoting reading (and the benefits of that for health); support for economic growth and job creation

- Rob Green “Investment paves the way for success as Bromley backs libraries” [“In Depth” column] [pp28-31], which looks at the importance of financial investment in public library services
- Morag Clarkson “Conversations about health literacy” [Disability Network “Insight” column] [p37], which stresses the importance of not only supporting people’s health literacy (eg by writing clearly and in plain English) but also reassessing language used (eg to use inclusive language – and, in the article’s context, looking at all this in relation to disability and ableism¹)
- Patrick Malone (interviewed by Rob Mackinlay) “Is democracy in trouble: can public libraries help?” [pp41-43], which outlines a democracy project which he led in GLL Libraries, looking, for example, at how to promote voter registration²
- Beth Montague-Hellen “Feeling isolated? Build a community” [“Insight” LGBTQ+ Network column] [pp44-45], which stresses the importance of making and maintaining contacts
- Marissa Gisbourne “Improving creative provision for pupils with SEND” [“In Depth” column] [pp46-49], which looks at how Creative Learning Services³ developed an offer to highlight provision for students with SEND
- Leia Sands and Bev Kinahan “Stronger together: how collaboration between public and school libraries can benefit a shared community” [SLG “Insight” column] [p50], which looks at how school and public libraries are developing closer working partnerships in West Sussex.

GEM Case Studies

The latest issue⁴ has just been released, focusing on “The Sensational Museum”:

“Between April 2023 and October 2025, The Sensational Museum project explored what happens when museums embed multi-sensory thinking in their working practices.

¹ Morag cites, for example: BBC Equality Matters “The harmful ableist language you unknowingly use”, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/worklife/article/20210330-the-harmful-ableist-language-you-unknowingly-use>.

² There is a further outline, “Democracy Drive”, at: <https://ldnlibraries.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Greenwich-Libraries-Democracy-Drive.pdf>.

³ “Creative Learning Services Leicestershire (CLS) is a subscription service for schools providing resources and sessions from librarians, museum and arts specialists which enrich the learning experience.” [p46]

⁴ *Case Studies*, vol 35, 2025. Available to download as a pdf from: <https://gem.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/GEM-Case-Studies-35.pdf>.

The project focused on two areas of museum work: recording information about museum collections and communicating objects' stories to visitors. This disability-led project was based on two important principles. Firstly: provisions put in place to improve accessibility for specific groups benefit all visitors, not just the people who it was originally designed for. Inclusive content works best when it is offered to all visitors. This idea, known as 'disability gain', describes how the lived experience of disability can improve how museums work for everyone. Secondly: no one sense should be necessary or sufficient to experience a museum [...]

This volume explains what happened when some of the pilot museums tested The Sensational Museum's resources and tools. It also shows how museum practitioners are finding inclusive ways of bringing the non-visual senses into the museum experience for both visitors and workers." [p3]

Case studies include:

- Nicola Lawson "The Power of Choice: Embedding Equitable Engagement in Curatorial Work", which looked at how "[...] the Keswick Museum team worked with a pan-disabled group of co-creators to develop a multisensory installation for our gallery." [p5]

The outcomes were exciting:

"We were lucky to work with a group with a wide range of experiences, an interest in museums, and experience of disability advocacy in other areas of their lives, who engaged thoughtfully and passionately with the project. This led to a huge change in thinking for the museum team, and some of our co-creators have also told us how much they learnt from the experience, which they have taken into other areas of their life. Facilitating our group's advocacy for wide and choice-based access has shown me what is possible and given me confidence to implement new ways of working." [p5]

- Amanda Hart "Sensing the Roman Bathing Routine":

"The Roman Baths, a site of immense historical significance, is in the development stage of a transformative project to reinterpret and enhance its displays. This project aims to incorporate multi-sensory interventions to make the museum more accessible and engaging for all visitors." [p12]
- Lewis Monkley "Sensing Change", in which "Herefordshire Museums and Galleries partnered with The Sensational Museum project to explore how sensory experiences could enhance not only accessibility and inclusion but also the museum experience for all visitors. Using the History Store as a testbed, a co-production approach was taken, involving local participants with lived experience of disability. Together, they developed

a new display called ‘Sensing Change’ that embedded sensory and accessible design from the outset.”⁵ [p10]

- Emily Bradfield “Seeing the Unseen: Rethinking the Museum Experience”:

“*Take a Walk in My Shoes* [⁶] is a research project exploring the multi-sensory experiences of adults with non-visible disabilities at The Fitzwilliam Museum (University of Cambridge), and how these experiences can inform museum practices that support health and wellbeing.” [p14]

- McKenzie Lynch “The Community Garden”:

“The Community Garden is an inclusive, multisensory garden developed by the Garden Museum in Old Paradise Gardens, Lambeth [...]”

[It] is wheelchair accessible, includes native, medicinal and wildlife-friendly planting, a handwoven hazel fence, food-growing areas, a bug hotel, dye beds and a wormery.” [p16]

- Francesca Chinnery and Alex Rankin “Beyond Sight: Sensory Learning in the Walled Garden at Fulham Palace Trust”:

“Working with our partner school over the academic year allowed us to form a much closer relationship with them, making multiple visits to the school and vice versa. During the pilot sessions, we witnessed moments of curiosity, joy and independence. The learners who took part in the outreach workshops engaged with sensory activities they might typically avoid.” [p20]

- Sam Bowen interviews Leanne Macdonald and Murray O’Grady “Embedding Sensory Engagement at The Beaney” [pp22-23]:

“[This piece of work] highlights how embedding multisensory inclusive provision into the museum’s work can have substantial wellbeing benefits for both visitors and staff.” [p4]

- Shanna McNamee and Lucinda Lewis “Smelly Science” [pp24-25]:

“The Catalyst Centre’s soap workshop project uses smell to engage the local community and make the science of chemistry more meaningful through connections with everyday experiences.” [p4]

- Jack Guy “Disability Audio-described Trail” at Hastings Museum & Art Gallery:

⁵ See: <https://sensationalmuseum.org/resources/the-history-store-hereford-museum-and-art-gallery-audio-description-and-transcript/>.

⁶ See: <https://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/take-a-walk-in-my-shoes>.

“The trail has been a highly successful addition to the museum, with visitors of all ages regularly engaging with the displays. The scented plinths have proven especially popular across all age groups.” [p27]

- Hannah Clapham-Clark, Felicity Paynter, Kate Fox, Steven Leech, Andrea Lathrop and Faith Yianni “You are Sense-sational”:

“In 2025, the Science and Industry Museum in Manchester opened *Operation Ouch! Brains, Bogies and You*, a major new exhibition for children and families that invites visitors on a delightfully gross, high-energy adventure through the incredible world of our senses.” [p28]

“A standout feature is the audio description guide, co-curated with young people with visual impairments in collaboration with Henshaws and the sound of his cane to navigate the world through echolocation. Representing children’s voices authentically helps all visitors feel the museum is ‘for them’. For interactives, we followed a ‘two ways in’ approach, ensuring everyone could explore each exhibit through at least two senses combining visual, tactile and auditory experiences. An audio quiz provides answers in sound as well as writing. A vibration pad plays remixed versions of the theme tune. Select objects, such as a large 3D coin alongside Henry VIII’s coins, are available to touch, making history tangible for young hands. Visitors can experience scents from a vinaigrette diffuser just like the original object and manipulate optical illusion replicas from the Science Museum Group Collection. Hideout Youth Zone, and audio describer Vicky Ackroyd. Two groups added their own descriptions and were recorded for the guide. This meant that the authentic perspectives of young people were conveyed and that all visitors were able to experience the exhibition in a rich and more meaningful way.” [p29]

- Samuel Goldstone Brady “Sensing Digital Exhibitions: Sensational Thinking in the National Paralympic Heritage Trust’s Global Virtual Museum”⁷:

“Feedback received from blind and partially blind individuals or groups has shaped our approach to content creation. This has encouraged us to draw on the principles of W-ICAD [⁸] and participatory exhibition design in subsequent projects. We have also explored other methods of access to our virtual museum for blind and partially blind audiences, such as keyboard controls for

⁷ See: <https://www.paralympicheritage.org.uk/global-virtual-museum>.

⁸ “W-ICAD stands for the Workshop for Inclusive Co-created Audio Description. The core principle is that W-ICAD provides museums with a tool (the workshop model) through which they can produce audio description based on co-created discussions between blind, partially-blind and sighted co-creators.” See: <https://w-icad.org/>.

easier navigation, screen readable versions of content external to the gallery and guided tour videos.” [p31]

- Kyle Jordan “Nothing Without Us: Disability Equity, Co-Production and The Sensational Museum”⁹.

“*Nothing Without Us: Experiences of Disability* is a co-produced gallery trail at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford [p32]

“The project clearly demonstrated that disability histories are of strong interest to audiences. The trail was initially planned to run from November 2023 to May 2024 but was extended until March 2025 due to its success and continued public engagement. A key learning was the need to develop accessibility materials, like BSL interpretation, Easy Read guides and touch tours, alongside the main interpretation, not as an afterthought. When these are planned together from the start, it reduces burnout and ensures accessibility is embedded, not added on later. [p33]

- Lucy McDonald “The Sensational Museum: Planning Accessible Events”, which looks at the thinking behind devising the programme and some of the challenges the team had to overcome [pp34-35]

There is further information about The Sensational Museum and its work¹⁰; resources to help organise accessible events¹¹; a showcase recording¹²; a publication, “The Art of Multisensory Storytelling” (in which “postdocs Sophie Vohra and Charlotte Slark reflect on their work exploring how museums can tell stories in ways that engage all the senses – beyond the default use of sight.”)¹³.

ARC Magazine

The Jan/Feb 2026 issue¹⁴ includes:

- Gary Tuson “Change Minds: a transformative archival adventure supporting mental health recovery” [pp20-23], which outlines the development of Norfolk’s “Change Minds” projects¹⁵:

“Over the course of 12 workshops, Change Minds participants use County Asylum and other records to explore the life of patients who were admitted to the hospital in the 19th and early-20th century and who were later discharged. (This is important as it means participants are looking at a whole life which, like theirs, should not be defined by their mental health condition). After a gentle introduction to the Record Office – including a behind the

⁹ See: <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/nothing-without-us>.

¹⁰ See: <https://sensationalmuseum.org/>.

¹¹ See: <https://sensationalmuseum.org/resources/accessible-events/>.

¹² See: <https://sensationalmuseum.org/resources/showcase-recording/>.

¹³ See: <https://sensationalmuseum.org/resources/article-art-of-multisensory-storytelling/>.

¹⁴ ARC Magazine, 408, Jan/Feb 2026.

¹⁵ Further info at: <https://changeminds.org.uk/>.

scenes tour, participants select their own individual case record which becomes their focus, learning new skills as they research their life. Following a group visit to a relevant site – in Norfolk we use the Gressenhall Workhouse Museum – participants express what they have learnt and reflect on their own experiences through a series of creative workshops. All this culminates in an end of project celebration.” [p23]

- Alina Congreve “Working Together: lessons from the New Jerusalems Project” [pp30-33], which outlines how this project brought together people working on New Town archives in Britain and Ireland¹⁶, ¹⁷
- “In the Footsteps of Exiles: a Bloomsbury Walk” [p40], which focused on refugee stories in Bloomsbury:

“As part of the Being Human Festival 2025, the archives team at Senate House Library developed a history walk about the refugees that came to Bloomsbury in the first half of the 20th century. As well as telling the stories of the refugee experience, the walk signposted the various archives in Bloomsbury that contain collections relevant to refugee studies. Walkers were guided to places where different groups of refugees lived, worked, or socialised including academic refugees, Hungarian students, Basque children and Jewish refugees. Our archive team were able to engage participants with how refugee stories are preserved in archive collections in the local area.”

- “Finding Hidden Treasures” [p41], which provides some advice on resources¹⁸:

“A vast array of material held in archives and libraries across the United Kingdom (UK) tell the rich history of Jews in Britain and their contribution to British life. But caring for Anglo-Jewish material can also present challenges, whether it's deciphering Jewish languages or understanding aspects of Jewish religious life, and it's sometimes difficult to know where to get advice.”

Books for Keeps

The Jan 2026 issue¹⁹ has just been published. It includes:

- Farrah Serroukh “All we need is Love (and a continued commitment to inclusive literature)”, in which the Research and Development Director, CLPE looks at the latest *Reflecting Realities* report²⁰ [p3]

¹⁶ See: <https://www.newjerusalems.info/>.

¹⁷ I linked with Alina two years ago when she was looking at work with new arrivals.

¹⁸ See particularly: <https://celebratingjewisharchives.org/>.

¹⁹ Books for Keeps, 276, Jan 2026, <https://booksforkeeps.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/BfK-276-Jan-20261.pdf>.

- Charlotte Hacking “How to get children reading because they want to, not because they have to”, which looks at, for example, reading together; the importance of libraries; the value of different types of reading [pp12-13]
- Rebecca Gediking “One Year On Celebrating the First Year of the GLL Literary Foundation”, which notes the achievements of the first year:

“During our first year, GLL Literary Foundation supported 20 children’s authors to deliver over 60 events in Bromley, Greenwich, Wandsworth, Dudley and Lincolnshire, engaging more than 3,000 children and over 500 adults in reading.”

and looks ahead to year 2 [p17]
- Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O’Connor “Beyond the Secret Garden: Poems by Black Poets” [pp18-19]

LGBTQ+ issues – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

Banning of LGBTQ+ books and other library materials [continued] and Protests against Drag Queen Storytimes

“The LGBTQ+ book industry is struggling amid attacks by the Trump administration”

According to an article²¹ in *PinkNews*:

“The Trump administration’s anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric is making it more difficult for authors and publishers to place queer stories on shelves, amid book bans sweeping across the US.”

In a climate where:

“[...] several big name US businesses – including Walmart, Target, Ford, Lowe’s, Harley-Davidson and Jack Daniel’s – drop their DEI policies, programmes and targets [there has been] a chilling effect that is impacting industries across the US, as well as business and the third sector in other countries such as the UK.”

The article continues:

²⁰ Noted in *The Network Ebulletin*, 426, 19 Nov 2025, p5, <https://seapn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Networkebulletin-no-426.pdf> .

²¹ Sophie Perry “The LGBTQ+ book industry is struggling amid attacks by the Trump administration”, *PinkNews*, 12 Jan 2026, <https://www.thepinknews.com/2026/01/12/books-lgbtq-dei/>.

“The publishing sector is no exception, with authors, literary agents and publishers all describing a climate in which it is more difficult to place queer stories, notably queer literature for young people, on shelves due to anti-DEI book bans.

Research carried out by PEN America, a not-for-profit organisation promoting freedom of expression, found book censorship in 2025 was ‘rampant and common’, with 6,870 book bans enacted during the 2024-25 school year, across 23 states and 87 public school districts.”

The article also argues that “big” publishers may be obscuring the queer content in their books to evade a ban.

“Queer authors have previously spoken out about the negative impact that book bans have on LGBTQ+ young people.

‘I know firsthand how vital education and support are for the LGBTQIA+ community,’ author Owl Fisher, who grew up in the era of Section 28, told PinkNews.

‘Growing up during a time when being different was deemed shameful and perverse, I struggled with a lack of understanding and vocabulary regarding my identity.

‘If you don’t see anyone like you growing up, or only see negative depictions, you’re going to internalise that guilt and shame, and suppress who you are. That’s hugely damaging to people’s mental health.’

‘Banning books with LGBTQIA+ themes echoes the actions of the Nazi book burners, who destroyed significant texts 90 years ago,’ he added.”

“US Supreme Court turns away appeal of Texas library book ban”

This news story²² has had coverage elsewhere, but just in case you haven’t seen it ...

“The U.S. Supreme Court in a free speech case on Monday opted not to hear an appeal by a group of residents of a rural Texas county of a judicial decision allowing local officials to remove 17 books that these officials deemed objectionable from public libraries.

The justices let stand a lower court’s decision allowing the removal of books including ones dealing with themes of race and LGBT identity, from its public library system.”

The article continues:

²² Jan Wolfe “US Supreme Court turns away appeal of Texas library book ban”, Reuters, 8 Dec 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-supreme-court-turns-away-appeal-texas-library-book-ban-2025-12-08/>.

"There has been a surge in book banning in public schools and public libraries in recent years in many locations around the United States, driven by conservative groups and new state laws limiting what kinds of books children can access.

Llano County is a rural area about 80 miles (130 km) from the Texas state capital Austin. The dispute began in 2021 when one faction of local residents asked the Llano County library commissioner to remove the disputed books, which covered topics including transgender issues, race and slavery in the United States, puberty and bodily functions like flatulence."

And:

"The 17 works at issue include the 1970 book "In the Night Kitchen" by acclaimed author Maurice Sendak due to the depiction of its main character, a boy named Mickey, as nude in some of its illustrations as he visits a surreal kitchen in a dream."

It's important that we keep a watch on these sorts of developments.²³

Abbreviations and acronyms

CLPE = Centre for Literacy in Primary Education

DEI = Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

SEND = Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SLG = School Libraries Group of CILIP

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²³ Source: *LJXpress – Library Journal*, 6 Jan 2026.