

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 ...?

Museums Journal

The Sep/Oct issue¹ includes:

- Geraldine Kendall Adams “Negative energy” [“Analysis” column] [pp4-5], which looks at the debates around private sponsorship in the sector
- Caroline Hamson “Creative activities play a role in healthcare” [“Comment” column] [p12], which outlines the work of the “Sharing Historic Barts”² project which “[...] aims to embed heritage within healthcare by delivering creative activities within Barts North Wing [...]”
- Carl Newbould “Museums must do more when it comes to accessibility” [p13], which argues that accessibility is a core issue, not an add-on
- Errol Francis “Ethical issues can be explored with diverse audiences” [p13], which looks at how “[...] ethical issues involving sensitive topics such as human remains can be explored successfully with diverse audiences
- Geraldine Kendall Adams “Troubled history” [“Reviews”] [pp46-47, 49], which reviews the recently-opened Peacemakers Museum, Derry-Londonderry and includes a helpful list of “Principles for Remembering in a Public Space” [p47]

The Nov/Dec issue³ includes:

- Simon Stephens “Creative freedom” [pp8-9], which looks at art in prison, focusing on work by Ikon (Birmingham) in HMP Grendon and Fact (Liverpool) across Liverpool, Rochdale and York; the article stresses the opportunities these initiatives offer for rehabilitation and for treating people as individuals
- Damian Etheraads “We need to think differently about class” [“Comment” column] [p14], which argues that “[...] class remains one of the least confidently addressed aspects of inclusion.” Too often, the focus is on groups that feel easier to advocate for – which also means that White working class people are omitted – and museums need to gain confidence in (and possibly learn more about) working class communities
- Jiten Anand “Leicester highlights need for community-led heritage” [p15], which argues that “Leicestershire offers a glimpse of what the future of the UK might look like: a society where multiple histories co-exist, interact and evolve together. It invites us to think beyond the binary of inclusion versus exclusion, and to embrace an intersectional approach to heritage that reflects the realities of our contemporary world.”

¹ *Museums Journal*, Sep/Oct 2025.

² See: <https://bartsnorthwing.org.uk/about/>.

³ *Museums Journal*, Nov/Dec 2025.

- Sam Bowen “Harness your staff’s lived/loved experience of SEND” [p15], which celebrates the “great strides” that museums have made in disability access inclusion for children⁴
- Helen McConnell Simpson and Steven Bradley “Bringing humanity to a polarised debate” [“Comment” column⁵] [p17], which looks at the “Gender Stories” exhibition⁶ in which “[...] we set out to create a safe and inclusive space for us all to consider gender through art, objects and people’s personal stories.”

“Headlines and voices on social media pass judgment on other people’s identities all too easily. We wanted this exhibition to bring the humanity back to what has become a polarised discourse. The show includes contributions from people from across the spectrums of gender, sex and sexuality, as well as inviting visitors to reflect on their own experiences. The exhibition’s objects take a back seat – they are catalysts for stories, with radical solidarity as the guiding theme.”

- “Europe after Empire”, a series of articles commissioned by guest editor, Gary Younge, including:
 - Introduction by Gary Younge [pp18-19], which looks at key issues about empire: “Given the broader cultural, racial and political dysfunction it has never been more important that [museums] lead our culture to a more enlightened and informed place, rather than follow it into the shadows.” [p19]
 - Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann “What’s in a name?” [pp20-23], which follows her search for her ancestry using her last name
 - Dan Hicks “Return the bones” [pp24-27], which argues that “Museums need to address the issue of the ancestral remains in their collections with transparency, openness and accountability [...]” [p24]
- Geraldine Kendall Adams “Back for good” [“In practice” column] [pp58-59, 61, 63, 65], which is a series of articles looking at repatriation policy and practice

The Jan/Feb issue⁷ includes:

- Museums Journal staff “Culture after conflict” [“Analysis” column] [pp6-7], which looks at the devastation caused by the war between Israel and

⁴ Sam Bowen was the founder of the SEND in Museums website, <https://sendinmuseums.org/>.

⁵ See also: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2026/01/bringing-humanity-to-a-polarised-debate/>.

⁶ See: <https://collections.bristolmuseums.org.uk/exhibitions/gender-stories/>.

⁷ *Museums Journal*, Jan/Feb 2026.

Hamas. It also includes a list of Gaza's heritage which has been destroyed⁸

- “Museums Change Lives Awards” [pp16-20] – see below
- Rachael Lennon “Great again” [pp28-31], which looks at some of the issues around greatness: “What are the areas of greatness in our nation's past? Who has defined them before us and who gets to define them today?”

The article concludes:

“As the call to return to an ambiguous past threatens our communities, we must be wary of complicity in the injustices, oppressions and exclusions of the past being celebrated, repeated or amplified in the present [...] As custodians of the nation's heritage, we cannot shy away from our place in this landscape.” [p29]

The School Librarian

The Autumn⁹ issue includes:

- Rachel West “Supporting readers with a visual impairment” [“Feature”] [pp10-11], which gives a brief background to local authority provision; looks at the impact of visual impairment on reading; recommends some ways of supporting readers a visual impairment (including links to the RNIB¹⁰ and Living Paintings¹¹); and suggests ways of making library spaces more inclusive

The Winter¹² issue includes:

- Sarah Mears “The Reading-Empathy connection” [“Feature”] [pp10-11], which introduces the preliminary findings of a research project that looked at the relationships between reading ability, reading enjoyment, and empathy¹³. The article concludes by emphasising the importance of reading for pleasure – and linking this to the National Year of Reading.
- Nicky Cox “The information advantage” [“Feature”] [pp14-15], which stresses the importance of school libraries and librarians being “[...] on the frontline of media and information literacy.” [p14]

⁸ The article draws on the report by PEN America: *All that is lost: the cultural destruction of Gaza*, 18 Sep 2025, <https://pen.org/report/all-that-is-lost/>.

⁹ *The School Librarian*, 73 (3), Autumn 2025.

¹⁰ Bookshare, <https://www.rnibbookshare.org/>

RNIB Library, <https://www.rniblibrary.com/iguana/www.main.cls?url=a1>.

¹¹ See: <https://livingpaintings.org/>.

¹² *The School Librarian*, 73 (4), Winter 2025.

¹³ See also: <https://empathylab.uk/>.

- Rumena Aktar “Excluded Voices report reveals some shocking trends” [“Feature”] [pp24-25], which looks at the findings of the *Excluded voices 2025* report¹⁴

Youth Library Review

The latest issue¹⁵ includes:

- Emily Thornton “The journey to well-being: Pets as Therapy in action” [pp10-11, 13], which looks at the support offered to students at Kirklees College by Pets as Therapy¹⁶

Pen & Inc.

The latest issue¹⁷ includes:

- Jake Hope “Emotional connection and recognition for looked after children” [pp24-27], which looks at the importance of representation of care-experienced children in books (which remains relatively low). The article mentions the Lancashire Library Service programme, “NE1 for Reading”, and outlines the key learning from it; and the more recent “Picture Book Party” project
- Q&A Interview with Fidan Meikle “Journeys in search of refuge” [pp28-31], in which the author talks about her life as a writer and as an Azerbaijani migrant living in Scotland
- “Tracking who is speaking for whom” [pp32-33], which looks at the original *Excluded voices* report¹⁸ covering 2022-2024

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

Museums Change Lives Awards

As noted above, the Jan/Feb issue of *Museums Journal* includes information about the winners, with full info online¹⁹.

Best Museums Change Lives Project

¹⁴ See: <https://www.inclusivebooksforchildren.org/excluded-voices-report>. This was assessed in *The Network Newsletter*, 291, May 2025, <https://seapn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Newsletter-NS-291.pdf>, p4-5.

¹⁵ *Youth Library Review*, 55, 2025.

¹⁶ See: <https://www.petsastherapy.org/>.

¹⁷ *Pen & Inc.*, Autumn/Winter 2025.

¹⁸ *Excluded voices: Own Voice representation in the creation of UK children’s books published from 2014 to 2023*. Inclusive Books for Children, 2024, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eJwpAZ-BSf3yXG5H-dC6oMc6aO_5p9Wo/view?pli=1.

¹⁹ See: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/museums-change-lives/awards-2025/#>.

Winner: Birmingham Museums Trust – Citizens’ Jury²⁰

The Citizens’ Jury gave:

“[...] power to people of the city to answer the question: ‘What does Birmingham need and want from its museums, now and in the future; and what should Birmingham Museums Trust do to make these things happen?’

Finalists:

Cornwall Museum and Art Gallery – Early Bird Explorer Breakfast Club

“Cornwall Museum recognised that local families facing financial hardship often couldn’t visit the museum, and evidence from Truro foodbank highlighted that financial pressure peaks when free school meals and breakfast clubs stop during school holidays. The museum launched the Early Bird Explorers Club, offering free breakfast, unlimited museum access and activities for families over school breaks.”

Mansfield Museum – Green Power

“Green Power has delivered creativity and empowerment for women’s recovery journeys since 2022 (when the project began as Art Power). The project has provided support, healing and improved wellbeing for survivors of domestic and sexual abuse. Since its inception the project has expanded its remit and now supports vulnerable women from a wider range of Mansfield’s population.”

Best Small Museum Project

Winner: Timespan (Helmsdale Heritage and Arts Society) – The People’s Mobile Archive²¹

“The People’s Mobile Archive (PMA) is Timespan’s outreach programme tackling rural isolation, health inequalities and cultural exclusion in East Sutherland. Developed during Covid recovery, it brings collections, digital tools and creative resources to marginalised groups – older people, carers, refugee families, those with mobility or mental health challenges – through home visits, activity packs and low-barrier public programmes.”

Finalists:

North Lincolnshire Museum – Documenting Northern Lincolnshire’s History²²

“[...] a two-year collaborative documentation project opening up access to the museum’s local history collection by enhancing the records for

²⁰ See: <https://www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/about/what-we-do/citizens-jury>.

²¹ See: <https://timespan.org.uk/pma/>.

²² See: <https://northlincolnshiremuseum.co.uk/service/documenting-northern-lincolnshires-local-history/>.

15,000 objects and digitising 15,000 objects. The project connects a team of over 30 volunteers from diverse backgrounds with the museum's collection of ephemera and photographs, with documentation and interpretation tasks emphasising wellbeing and aiming to promote community cohesion."

Stourbridge Glass Museum – Recycled glass sculpture workshops and Greener Glass exhibition²³

"[...] tackles urgent environmental issues through innovative partnerships with artists, the University of Birmingham, and local schools and families. By showcasing glass art made from 100% recycled materials and renewable energy, saving 12 tonnes of CO₂ annually, the project merges heritage craftsmanship with contemporary sustainability debates, directly linking to the collection's industrial legacy."

Equitable Partnership Award

Winner: Horniman Museum and Gardens with partners, creatives and young people – The Great Kingdom of Benin²⁴

"Following the return of ownership in 2022 of 72 looted belongings from the Benin Kingdom, the Horniman worked together with communities on updating the permanent museum display. This approach is part of a long-term commitment to working with, rather than for, communities. The project was guided throughout by six Nigerian and Nigerian-diaspora community members as co-curators."

Finalists:

British Library with Leeds Children's Services – Leeds Children's Social Work Services x British Library Partnership

"The British Library forged its ongoing partnership with Leeds Children's Services during the pandemic, with shared values clear from the start. The library brings time and money, with the support of collections, engagement and design teams. Social workers contribute time, knowledge and passion for the young people they work with. The partners have regular meetings, totally honest communication and shared decision-making.

During Cooked with Love (2020-22), 29 young people seeking asylum created a recipe book, published in print and online [²⁵]. For Mapping Life Stories (2023-24), 18 young people took inspiration from historic maps to make their own maps communicating stories of identity, journeys, home and belonging. Participants experienced fun, learning, relaxation, pride and self-esteem, while making friends, building strong relationships with

²³ See: <https://cgs.org.uk/news/greener-glass-exhibition-at-stourbridge-glass-museum/>.

²⁴ See: <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/project/benin-redisplay/>.

²⁵ See: https://wearechildfriendlyleeds.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Food-Means-Home-Final-Cookbook-DIGITAL_compressed-1.pdf.

adults, and beginning to process some of their experiences and focus on the future.”

National Museums Liverpool (NML) with Spirit Level, GYRO, Sahir and LGBT Foundation – Trans Day of Visibility 2025²⁶

“In a cultural climate where transphobic narratives are increasingly accepted, it’s more important than ever to uplift trans and non-binary voices, celebrate trans joy and show solidarity with trans and non-binary communities. Trans Day of Visibility 2025 was NML’s largest ever and was fully co-produced, with decision-making divested to trans and non-binary community champions to create an event that centred their voices and stories.”

The Postal Museum with Dollar fo’ Dollar, Caribbean Social Forum and Royal Mail Culture Bearers – Voices of Resistance: Slavery and Post in the Caribbean²⁷

“Since 2019 the Postal Museum has worked with African Caribbean community partners and academics to research and co-produce an exhibition exploring the links between our collections and transatlantic slavery. The museum worked collaboratively to address traditional power imbalances, deepen its understanding of the collection and learn from others to enrich its practice.”

Radical Changemaker Award

Winner: Elizabeth Scott (Guildhall Art Gallery)

“Social impact has been a focus of Elizabeth’s career through leading by example, from programming and collections to audiences and the workforce. Her leadership of the Revealing the City’s Past project [²⁸] at the Guildhall Art Gallery (GAG), to reinterpret two controversial statues, is a recent example of her collaborative and inclusive style – she designed the project to amplify the voices of those most affected by Beckford and Cass’s legacies today.”

Finalists:

Afia Yeboah (V&A East)

“Afia pioneered a deep engagement project with a controversial piece of architectural history, Robin Hood Gardens estate in east London. She prioritised the stories of residents and young people to tackle the live conversation around social housing in the UK, as opposed to focusing on

²⁶ See: <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/whatson/museum-of-liverpool/event/trans-day-of-visibility-0>.

²⁷ See: <https://www.postalmuseum.org/visit-us/what-to-expect/exhibitions/voices-of-resistance/>.

²⁸ See: <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/attractions-museums-entertainment/guildhall-art-gallery/revealing-the-citys-past-project>.

architectural history – a radical feat of social justice within a design museum.”

Jenny Durrant

“For ten years, Jenny has transformed disposal practice by questioning norms of perception. Encouraging a reflexive ethical mindset, she tasks practitioners to balance idealism and pragmatism, use risk as a change driver, and create transparent communication to build trusting relationships.”

Community cohesion – Government, Government Agencies and Local Government

Common ground: building cohesive communities

This new online guidance²⁹ from the LGA has been written by the Belong Network³⁰ and supersedes *Building cohesive communities: an LGA guide* which the LGA published in 2019³¹.

As the LGA say:

“The aim of the guidance is not to be prescriptive. Rather, this guidance on social cohesion aims to give local authorities the tools to address the challenges they face and to share good practice. Specifically, this guidance will:

- help councils consider what social cohesion means in practice

²⁹ Belong. *Common ground: building cohesive communities*. LGA, 2026, https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/common-ground-building-cohesive-communities?utm_source=Dynamics%20365%20Customer%20Insights%20-%20Journeys&utm_medium=email&utm_term=N%2FA&utm_campaign=Culture%20to%20urism%20and%20sport%20bulletin%3A%20February%202026&utm_content=Culture%20Tourism%20and%20Sport%20bulletin%3A%20February%202026#msdynmkt_tracki ngcontext=acdf84e8-8ed4-4eec-bf8f-21a30f5d0300.

³⁰ Belong – the Cohesion and Integration Network.

“We are the UK’s leading membership organisation on social cohesion, offering academic research, consultancy, training, networking, thought leadership and events for members across sectors in the UK. We exist to connect, support and mobilise all those working to build stronger, more resilient, connected communities.

Our members span local authorities, charities, civil society organisations and businesses – and we’re growing as more people and organisations realise the importance of building social cohesion. It’s the ‘social glue’ that holds us together: creating a feeling of trust, belonging and pride in where we live and enabling communities to remain resilient in times of crisis and change.” [Taken from: <https://www.belongnetwork.co.uk/what-we-do/>]

³¹ This was assessed in *The Network Newsletter*, 220, Jun 2029, pp10-13, <https://seapn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Newsletter-NS-220.pdf>.

- set out relevant legislation and government policy priorities
- provide a framework and set of principles to guide local authority work
- look at the processes involved in developing a local authority social cohesion strategy
- discuss current challenges to social cohesion and how they might be addressed
- use case studies to share good practice
- provide links to further resources and reading.”

The guidance is arranged in six sections:

1. Introduction and legislative and policy background
2. Developing a social cohesion strategy
3. Partnerships and partner organisations
4. The roles of elected members and different local authority service areas
5. Responding to social cohesion challenges
6. Monitoring, learning, evaluation and sustainability.

There are large sections on library and information services, eg:

“Shropshire Libraries, working in partnership with public health, deliver a wide range of social prescribing opportunities across the county. This includes around 150 reading groups held in homes, libraries, and even pubs, alongside personalised induction programmes that help residents engage with cultural and wellbeing activities. These groups foster trust and mutual support within similar demographic or interest-based communities.”

and:

“Public libraries contribute to social cohesion in several ways:

- libraries are shared spaces for the whole community. Activities run in libraries can bring people together, fostering bonding and bridging connections
- libraries can champion basic skills, such as literacy, English language learning for migrants and IT skills. Community based classes are sometimes run in public libraries, which can also provide information and advice about other learning opportunities
- libraries have been involved in campaigns to increase volunteering and voting
- libraries are increasingly becoming involved in campaigns to counter misinformation and disinformation”

There is also some key information about provision under “Arts, culture and heritage”; and “Sport, recreation and leisure” in Section 4 (good to see the cultural sector included!), with some practical examples quoted, eg:

“Arts, culture and heritage can play a vital role in fostering social cohesion by bringing people together, creating shared experiences,

encouraging volunteering, strengthening shared identities and building pride in place.

Taking part in arts activities can increase bonding and bridging social capital.”

There are also lots of interesting case studies throughout, which give practical ways of developing this work locally; these are supported by references and weblinks for further reading.

However, the guidance also seems quite thin in places. For example, in relation to “Managing immigration issues”:

“While many migrants settle, learn English and become part of their local community, immigration, particularly asylum, is a highly salient issue of public concern in many parts of the UK. There was widespread public unrest in 2024 and 2025 including protests outside asylum hotels. As such, asylum has become a major challenge to social cohesion in the UK.”

and:

“The echo chamber effect on social media can reinforce polarisation. Algorithmic personalisation prioritises the content that people see. Alternative views are filtered out and people tend to follow accounts that hold similar views. Debates about immigration, race and gender identity have been particularly divisive on social media. Local authorities should consider working with partner organisations to provide spaces for dialogue.”

It would have been useful to have included a wider range of contacts and weblinks to support this area of work – for example to City of Sanctuary, especially as there is a growing Local Authority Network³².

There is also some guidance which seems to me to be over-simplistic – for example:

“In some local authorities debates about gender identity have led to conflict. The 2024 Supreme Court ruling clarified that terms ‘woman’ and ‘sex’ in the Equality Act 2010 mean biological sex. Services, facilities or organisations that provide single-sex spaces, for example, women’s changing rooms, women-only refuges, or single-sex sport teams must restrict access on the basis of biological sex. This does not prevent these organisations from also offering non-sex specific services. Furthermore, the ruling does not remove protections for transgender people under the Equality Act 2010 for the protected characteristic of gender reassignment – but those protections do not override the requirement to respect biological-sex distinctions when operating single-sex spaces.”

³² See: <https://la.cityofsanctuary.org/>.

So – this is very important and timely guidance, but, in my opinion, not as helpful and thorough as it could have been. Nevertheless, recommended.

Abbreviations and acronyms

LGA = Local Government Association

SEND = Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

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:

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