



National
Co-ordinating
Centre for
Public Engagement

Working with Museums and Libraries

Introduction

Museums, archives, libraries and other cultural venues make excellent partners. They have a lot to offer and often have unique attributes which can enhance your engagement activity. Museums are not just treasure houses; libraries are not just buildings of books – many are well rooted within their communities, housing a variety of opportunities and highly skilled staff who are well experienced in engaging their audiences.

They are also very diverse, from the smallest local library or museum, through to large national museums and archives. Universities themselves also house museums and libraries, which are often highly tailored to specific subjects and which have their own unique audiences.

Guidelines and approach

What can you do with museums, libraries, archives and cultural venues?

There are a number of different activities you can run with venues such as museums, libraries and other cultural centres. Opportunities include:

- Conducting face to face sessions with specific audience groups
- Giving a lunchtime gallery talk
- Staging an exhibit
- Research
- Providing an advisory role e.g. to provide input into an exhibition
- Developing a workshop, for schools or other groups, to accompany an exhibit or event that is already taking place
- Drawing out aspects of the collection – using a creative approach to find new ways to look at your research (and conversely using your research to find a new way of looking at the collection)
- Getting involved in a community outreach projects they are running including discussions and debates that they may already be planning

What are the benefits of working with museums, libraries and cultural venues?

- They use a range of different and creative approaches to engagement delivery that you can learn from
- They provide a venue for your engagement activity (with carefully planned access and facilities for your audience)
- They may be able to provide equipment and objects of interest
- You can benefit from the support of staff who do this day to day

- These venues are often already frequented by members of the public, providing you with a ready-made audience for your engagement activity
- The venue may have a clear view of the demographics of visitors at certain times of day, allowing you to conduct very accurate audience targeting
- Visitors to venues of this kind are often there for the day, or for a couple of hours. They are therefore more likely to be willing to engage with your activity than people in other public venues, such as shopping centres, where they may be in a hurry to get somewhere else
- They have very strong community links, helping you to gain access to some harder to reach groups
- They can help with project requirements that you might be unfamiliar with such as risk assessments, access requirements and scheduling
- They often have clear frameworks for evaluating success. They can talk you through mechanisms of capturing data about your own activity

Things to remember...

- Make the most of the expertise of staff – they are used to dealing with the public and are very knowledgeable in their subject areas. Take their advice. They may be able to help with preparation and to provide extra hands to help with the delivery.
- Respect the fact that the staff may have their own agendas with their own responsibilities and targets. Museums have responsibilities to both their audience and their collection. Archives are primarily focused on preservation, whereas libraries are very focused on their local community (and of course – books!). It's a good idea to talk to your potential partner early in the planning to ensure that your engagement activity ties into your partners' priorities.
- Some venues, particularly museums, have long lead times in preparing for an exhibit or activity. There are certain times of the year, such as school holidays, which are particularly busy. Make sure you prepare well in advance.
- Be careful not to disrupt other events or exhibits happening at the same time.
- Many venues have project specific opportunities, or may run volunteering schemes. Think about whether these opportunities could work for you, and aid your own skills development.
- Whilst it can be tempting to go to the national museums as potential partners – they can't partner everyone. Try to think of other potential partners – like local museums and archives – who might be interested in working with you.

Problems you might encounter

- You may find that people don't want to talk to you – they may just wish to visit the museum, library or other venue and do not want to be engaged.
- Some venues, such as libraries, require that noise be kept at a minimum – so if you were planning on a loud and raucous event – you might need to leave your trumpet at home!

- You will have to think about risk assessments, not only for the safety of the audience but also in terms of planning where to hold your event – there may be some equipment or consumables which you are not allowed to bring in with you e.g. a water experiment might not be appropriate near some fragile and ancient papers.

Make the most of the unique opportunities presented by museums, libraries and archives

Before designing your engagement activity, take some time to think about the partner or venue itself. Museums, libraries and cultural venues have more to offer than just a roof over your head. They provide a number of opportunities which can contribute to the success of, and add interest to, your engagement activity. It is really important to talk to your partner before you start detailed planning, or you may end up with an activity that no one wants to support.

Museums

- Museums are experienced in presenting a story, or narrative, to guide the visitor through the exhibit. They can help to guide you through this process.
- They may have exhibits (permanent or temporary) which very closely relate to your research or the subject of your engagement activity, which you can exploit.
- Some museums specialise in a certain field i.e. maritime technology or natural history. Their expertise may strengthen the credibility of an engagement project in that field.
- The collections themselves present opportunities for you to find new and creative ways to engage the public. For example, you may be able to develop an audio guide to support a particular exhibit, or perhaps you can use your specialist knowledge to present a new way of considering the collection.
- Their handling collections often contain tangible objects of great interest, which you may be able to borrow to add colour to your engagement activity.
- Museum staff tend to have a clear understanding of the research process, or may be involved in research themselves.
- Museums are not just places to display shiny objects. They have a very serious agenda for conservation. They have responsibilities to their audience but also to the collection itself.
- Museum staff may be delighted to engage with you – as your expertise is valuable to them.

There are many different kinds of museums, housing collections of artefacts. Some are highly specialised and some are more generic. Examples include:

- University museums – that often work with the academics in their institution to provide excellent engagement activities for their audiences
- General history museums – from large, national museums through to smaller, city museums
- Natural history museums

- Science museums and technology centres
- Art galleries
- Maritime museums
- Military and war museums
- Highly specialised museums e.g. Handel House Museum in London which is dedicated to the life and works of the German born baroque composer George Frideric Handel and includes live music recitals.
- Museums situated within other venues of cultural interest such as castles and national trust properties. (From Stately Homes through to historic houses which have been preserved and opened to the public e.g. Shakespeare's birthplace).
- Open air museums which might include zoos, botanical gardens and the Eden Project.

Libraries

- Libraries are frequented by a wide cross-section of the public and are often deeply rooted in their communities. You could therefore capture large audience numbers over a period of time.
- Libraries can also be very useful for targeting particularly hard-to-reach groups, e.g. home learners, the elderly, parents of young children, or people who are unemployed.
- Libraries often play host to regular group meetings which you could tap into e.g. story time for toddlers, adult reading circles or support groups.
- Libraries have collections of books and local history archives which you could use to add colour to your engagement activity.
- Libraries are often sites where public information is displayed e.g. information about health, housing, town planning notices and local events. Therefore it would be an obvious place for you to display information of your own.
- There are a number of different kinds of libraries, each of whom could help you reach a different kind of clientele and which also feature different types or specialisms of books and archives for example:
- Local council libraries: These tend to be fairly small in terms of lending provision but have very strong community links.
- Central city libraries: These tend to be larger and will have more reference and archive material but will not be as strong as local libraries, in terms of community links.
- School, college and university libraries: These are not usually open to the public but you may be able to work in partnership with the institution to reach students. They will be very subject specific so may be easy for you to link your research to.
- National libraries such as The British Library and The National Library of Scotland: These will hold a greater number of important or rare books and national archives.
- Speciality libraries: For example The Wellcome Library, which holds books, manuscripts, archives, films and pictures on the history of medicine throughout history.

- Speciality libraries based in museums: For example Caird library at the National Maritime Museum, which specialises in the sea, ships, time and astronomy; and the Horniman Library at the Horniman museum, specialising in ethnography, natural history and musical instruments.

Archives

- You may choose to develop an engagement activity that uses archives to explore your research. They can be informative in terms of research and preparation but also hold interest to members of the public in their own right – the opportunity to view and explore historic footage/sounds/images/objects/records could be a good way of drawing your audience in.
- Don't forget that archives come in all shapes and sizes. Archives are also often housed in libraries and museums. There are archives in the form of records (usually physical but often catalogued online):
 - Census records
 - Passenger lists
 - Hospital records and databases
 - Cabinet papers
 - Data and statistics i.e. datasets generated by the UK government
 - Newspapers and periodicals
 - Diaries

There are also collections dedicated to the digital preservation of non-physical archives:

- Websites or home pages which have been captured at different periods of time
- Video – collections of film, television news, and amateur footage taken over time. (Television centres and other media organisations often have their own vast archives).
- Still imagery – collections of photographs depicting people, places and important events
- Sound archives – there are also archives of audio clips (e.g. the BBC Sound Archive and the British Library Sound Archive) which can be used in a number of creative ways



National
Co-ordinating
Centre for
Public Engagement



University of
BRISTOL

