

# Museums Matter

# Communities

Being a steward of the civic infrastructure to support peaceful and prosperous communities is a critical function of both central and local government. Ensuring no group in society feels marginalised or isolated is fundamental to making communities safe, raising aspiration and creating vibrant and thriving places to live. Fostering a sense of community – understanding differences and sharing commonalities – is a powerful way of encouraging civic engagement and participation in civil society to celebrate, commemorate or help in times of crisis.

## SAFE AND SOCIAL CIVIC SPACES

Museums are safe and social spaces: warm and welcoming to the whole community. A visit to the permanent collections of the national museums, university museums and the majority of local authority-supported museums in the UK is free. Museums are one of the few genuinely egalitarian civic spaces and many people view the collections as a common treasury for all. The profile of museum visitors shows that they span all ages, socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic groups. The RAF Museum and Science Museum both provide special support access for people with autism, and there are projects to welcome vulnerable people such as *Burrell for Blokes* for older men in Glasgow and the issuing of free passes to all looked after children by Norfolk Museum Service. Museums have saved much-loved community assets, such as the Hetton Silver Band Hall which was moved brick-by-brick to Beamish. Some museum buildings have been re-designed specifically to be more welcoming. The Whitworth is within one of the most deprived wards in Manchester and wanted the local community to become a greater part of the life of the institution. Following the major refurbishment large glass windows, dedicated spaces for noisy activities and an extension have made the building much less intimidating. It worked: the Whitworth met its annual visitor target within twelve weeks of opening.

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The nature of museum collections provides museums with the opportunity to actively engage groups in their communities and ensure their stories are documented. The Discovery Museum in Newcastle has developed the *Destination Tyneside* gallery to present the long view of immigration to the area; working with OutStories Bristol, MShed documented the experiences of the LGBT community in the city in *Revealing Histories*; and the British Museum exhibition *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam* was visited by approximately 60,000 British Muslims – many travelling from across the UK on a family day out.<sup>1</sup>

The proportion of visitors to museums from hard-to-reach communities, as well as the number of black and ethnic minority visitors, has grown substantially.<sup>2</sup> Almost a third of adults living in hard-to-reach communities in Northern Ireland visited one or more National Museums Northern Ireland sites in 2014.

## MEMORY AND IDENTITY

Museums tell local, national and international stories, giving a sense of shared heritage and a long view of our social and political evolution. Few other civic institutions have the public trust, collections or infrastructure to mastermind large scale acts of remembrance, as demonstrated by the UK-wide commemorations of the First World War led by Imperial War Museums. Regimental and military museums are particularly important to veterans and their families. Historic anniversaries allow for the reaffirmation and reassessment of community values: from the creation of Magna Carta; to the Battle of Waterloo; to the fight for women's suffrage.

Exhibitions, events and digital programming – and the process of developing these – allow communities to address difficult histories in a measured way with the museum as the mediator. National Museums Northern Ireland worked with Wolverhampton Art Gallery to bring together sixty paintings associated with the history of the Troubles. The purpose of the exhibition and associated events, about a subject where there is an unresolved legacy and continuing sensitivities, offered a way of exploring recent history and reflecting on the impact of violence and division in the community.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/13/hajj-exhibition-british-museum>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/360009/Taking\\_Part\\_2014\\_15\\_Quarter\\_1\\_Report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/360009/Taking_Part_2014_15_Quarter_1_Report.pdf), p. 51. From 2005 to 2014, the proportion of museum visitors from lower socio-economic groups had increased to 38.1% – the fastest growth of any socio-economic group. Similarly, there have been substantial increases in BME visitors since 2005/06, from 35.4% to 43.4%.