
Working Equitably:

A toolkit for museums and community organisations

Contents

01	Introduction	03
02	Establishing equitable partnerships	05
03	Equitable working practices	09
04	Maintaining longer-term equitable relationships	12
05	Conclusion	17
06	Acknowledgements	18

Introduction

01



Equity in a partnership is about working in a way that is fair, acknowledges and addresses power imbalances between museums and communities and accelerates progress towards long term outcomes for all parties.

Community groups and museums have been working together in increasingly participatory ways, often to use collections to engage, empower and better represent audiences and users. As the custodians of collections, it can be easy for museums to fall into the role of leading partner and this will create a power imbalance that can create barriers for participants. This can prevent partnership working from achieving its full potential and can limit the impact the work can have on all partners in achieving their goals.

This toolkit supports museums and their community partners to form and maintain mutually beneficial relationships in a way that is equitable.

The toolkit pulls together resources from museums and community focussed organisations alongside thoughts and reflections from those already working as part of equitable partnerships between museums and community organisations. It is born out of research the Museums Association (MA) undertook before launching the Esmée Fairbairn Communities and Collections Fund where we consulted community organisations who regularly work with museums. They told us that guidance was needed to ensure that both types of organisations can achieve long term benefit from this funding.

“Museums have a long track record of working with their communities, but often from a top-down position of power. The first step towards a more equal relationship is for museums to acknowledge this imbalance and to have open and honest conversations about how communities might want to work with museums. We hope that museums and their community partners can use this toolkit to develop and sustain more equal and mutually beneficial relationships.”

Sharon Heal, Museums Association

Establishing equitable partnerships

02



Introduction

In this section we will explore the early stages of relationships between community organisations and museums. This can be through a formal approach from either party, or the relationship might develop more organically. Your organisation might already have an idea of who you want to work with before this stage even begins but it's important to be flexible – all parties in the partnership should work together to shape an idea.

Alison Pattison from Blackhall Community Centre explains how their work with Durham University Museums was developed:

“The introduction was from them, they came to me with their idea, which we kind of blew out of the water and recreated it into Street Museum.”

[This film](#) explains how the project developed and the partnership has since evolved to include additional community partners and university departments as part of the [Street Cosmos Project](#).

Identifying potential partners

If you don't have a potential partner in mind, the first step in working equitably will be to identify who you might wish to approach. It is important for both museums and community organisations to think about this step. For museums, considerations might be around who isn't visiting, or which voices are missing from collections and interpretation, or what expertise is lacking. Or there might be some natural links between the type of programmes and exhibitions the museum runs and particular community groups that would make a partnership desirable for both parties.

“The motivation for the project is important. Is it a tick box exercise for a museum to say we've done our bit for 'black history month' for example or is it a genuine desire to uncover histories.”

Chantel Noel, Descendents

It's just as important for community organisations to think about which museums share their aims and interests, and whether a museum can be a useful partner. PurpleSTARS Rix Inclusive Researchers have provided the following list of things a community organisation might want to consider if they plan to work with a museum:

- Seek museums open to listening to and supporting your ideas with time, space, and funding.
- Work with museums that share power, ensuring you work with staff across all levels, such as directors, curators, and engagement teams.
- Work with museums open to alternative ways of experiencing collections.
- Partner with museums that compensate you fairly for your time and contributions.
- Look for museums providing space, materials, and other resources to support your work.

[The Collaboration Guidebook](#), by Take Note provides lots of great guidance for equitable partnerships including [Preparing for your Partnership Journey](#), a useful set of questions you should try to answer before talking to potential partners. These include:

- What is the challenge in our community that we're addressing?
- What change do you hope to see in your community?
- What activities would we deliver to make this change?
- Which partners can help us make this happen?
- What are the potential risks of working with these partners?
- How could the project be funded?

It is worth taking some time to consider these and other questions, especially if you have not yet made an approach to another organisation.

Power dynamics

Having an awareness of how power dynamics might affect relationships is a critical part of working equitably.

In 2021 National Museums Scotland and Royal Museums Greenwich funded museum partners to undertake community led collections projects as part of its “Exchange” initiative. They have produced a [report](#) and recommendations to help museums and community organisations who want to work in this way.

“Becoming a more participatory institution requires addressing power dynamics between museum and community participants. There will always be power dynamics and imbalances in participatory practice but what was important for participants was that these power dynamics were recognised and, where possible and appropriate, mitigated.”

National Museums Scotland, Exchange Community-led Collections Research Recommendations for more Equitable Participation, p.18.

This requires honest conversations and, for people in museums, a willingness to accept community perceptions of the way museums have historically worked and to accept expertise in all forms, from all parties.

You won’t be able to remove all power imbalances in a project or piece of work. However, by having open and early conversations you can address potential barriers and find solutions wherever possible. For example, one organisation may have to be the budget holder, but you can set up a system for shared decision making about the use of the budget.

Francisco Carrasco of Luma Creations offers the following advice for community organisations to address some of the power imbalances at the outset of a relationship:

“Community groups and communities are used to compromising to be able to do things. But you have to make a decision about what you will and won’t do, how these things move forward, and who drives the project, and who controls the parameters of the project.”

Establishing shared goals

Agreeing shared goals for a piece of work is absolutely vital to create equitable partnerships. Finding things that all partners have in common gives an essential reference when you need to make decisions or to adapt your plans. Partners will also have points of difference and acknowledging individual goals will help to create an open and trusting relationship. Take Note suggest an approach to establishing [shared partnership values](#) as a way to achieve a more equitable relationship.

Partnership agreements can be a useful tool to overcome power imbalances and to clarify shared goals. These can be flexible to your needs, ranging from large formal documents detailing all the ways in which the partnership will work, down to smaller agreements covering particular elements of the relationship such as how people will communicate.

Rix Inclusive Researchers used a clear “[ground rules](#)” approach when establishing how meetings should work during their Tower Project with the British Museum. This can be a useful tool to set clear boundaries from the outset of a relationship.

Take Note suggest that the following elements should form part of a [partnership agreement](#):

- Statement of intent
- Project details
- Roles and responsibilities
- Marketing and communications
- Cancellation or termination

The agreement should be produced collaboratively to ensure that it meets all parties needs and those of the communities they represent.

Francisco Carrasco shared the experience of producing a partnership agreement between Luma Creations and National Museums Liverpool for their “[Cuerpos del Tiempo \(Bodies of Time\)](#)” work:

“The creation of an equitable partnership agreement had to be done in partnership, so that we were all very clear and very transparent about how we would work together. I want to ensure that when communities are engaged, they’re engaged in a way in which they feel that that they do have a voice.”

Partnership agreements should recognise different perspectives as well as shared goals and should clarify how different elements of a project or piece of work will be carried out, for example who will do what and when, how decisions will be made, how you will communicate with one another and how regularly you will review the partnership. Take Note provide a useful guide to creating an [impact map](#) as a tool to agree various critical elements of your work such as outcomes, mission and vision.

There are other tools you might use in order to ensure equitable working from the start of a relationship. For individual goal-oriented pieces of work you might wish to create a Theory of Change and the following resources can be of help here:

[The NCVO Theory of Change guidance](#)

[Museums Association Measuring Socially Engaged Practice Toolkit](#)



Cha Chai Tea Exhibition, Horniman Museum and Gardens

Equitable working practices

03



Introduction

In this section we will look at tools to maintain the day-to-day elements of equitable working relationships. Even with a partnership agreement in place, equitable relationships require maintenance. Allowing time for input from all partners and taking a flexible approach to ways of working will provide opportunities to tweak processes and get the best from the partnership. It's also important to provide real opportunities for community participants to contribute to the partnership and to consider paying people for this work.

Checking in

Communication is critical for the success of an equitable partnership.

Deciding how often you will meet to check in and evaluate the work and partnership is something that should be set out at the start of a partnership, but you should always allow scope to change this. If you've agreed to monthly catch ups, review this periodically and ask, "is this approach still working for everyone?"

National Museums Scotland suggest:

"Negotiate and list any key milestones or activities that are essential for your project from the start and keep them as part of the scope of any decision making but be clear that non-essential plans can be changed. Build in scheduled and ad-hoc moments for reflection where project aims, objectives and outputs can be reviewed and revised if desired. Return to the question 'why' are we doing this and allow for flexibility with the 'what', 'who', 'how' and 'when' of activity planning."

National Museums Scotland, Exchange Community-led Collections Research Recommendations for more Equitable Participation, p.30.

Take Note have produced a [Partnership Health Check](#) guide as a helpful tool to regularly evaluate the partnership and ensure that it is still equitable and effective.

Shared decision making

Regular check ins can also be used as a forum for shared decision making. Your partnership agreement should set out how you will make decisions together, but be prepared to revisit this and check that it is working for everyone.

"I think the key thing is, is don't lose yourself. Don't be sucked into the world of museums. They've come to you for a reason. They can be big enough and bold enough to trust in your decisions. There are lots of things that museums do because they've always done it that way, but if they want to get new people in and they want to work with you to do this then they've got to be willing for everybody to be equal."

Alison Paterson, Blackhall Community Centre

Budgeting is one area that requires some thought. It is likely that one partner will hold the budget but decisions on how it should be spent should be equitable.

The Nonprofit Finance Fund provides a helpful [guide](#) to equitable budgeting that can be applied to short-term or project budgets as well as to a wider organisational approach.

Paisley Museums Reimagined worked with project partners to adjust the budget for their Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund grant. Aileen Strachan, Content Delivery Manager, shared this experience:

"Unsurprisingly the budget has been one of the trickier conversations but we want it to be seen as jointly held, just administered by us."

Conversations resulted in some critical changes, for example in the way salaries were decided:

"We had a chat where we suggested a payscale in line with our curators. That initially met with approval but then was queried and a slightly higher rate was suggested and discussed. This chimed with some discomfort we'd been feeling as we discussed the strategic nature of the work the partners would be doing, so we instead suggested the same day rate as managers are paid. Each time we were transparent about the calculations we'd made. Each partner was happy with that suggested rate."

Considering how you reimburse people for their time is one area of the budget that you should allow time to discuss. Here are some resources that can help you with this:

[Museums Journal, In Practice article on Reimbursing participants](#)

[The Social Change Pod episode on Payment for Involvement](#)

[The Scottish Government Guidance: paying participant expenses and compensating for time](#)

Case study:

Shared decision making to co-produce the 茶, चाय, Tea (Chá, Chai, Tea) exhibition at the Horniman Museum and Gardens

The Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund supported the Horniman Museum to increase its audiences from London's South Asian and East and South-East Asian communities by co-producing a temporary exhibition, 茶, चाय, Tea (Chá, Chai, Tea), exploring the global history of tea and addressing the museum's colonial legacy, led by South Asian and East and South-East Asian community partners.

Equally shared decision-making and community-led and inclusive practice were key to collaboration. Each community partner was responsible for its own budget and for creating content for its chosen exhibition area. They led on every aspect of the exhibition, including it deciding upon a target audience, developing content narratives, interpretation and design.

The level of collaboration challenged the museum's expectations. For example, it became clear that community partners saw it as the museum's responsibility to discuss colonialism and its impacts. And, contrary to traditional museum thinking, when a partner included its appropriately edited 14-minute film, the museum found that people stayed to watch it in full.

The funding enabled the museum to pay every participant fairly for their time, lived experience and skills. Partners shared copyright in their content and are free to use it in other contexts.

Chá Chai Tea showed the museum that a genuinely participatory model is effective in creating sustainable community engagement that improves the museum's impact, and that building money and time for it into core development costs means that full collaboration can begin from the start. The museum is already applying what they have learned to engage other local communities in contemporary collecting and the evaluation of the project will inform future work across the museum.



Cha Chai Tea Exhibition, Horniman Museum and Gardens

Maintaining longer-term equitable relationships

04



Introduction

In this section we will explore what to consider if you want to take your equitable partnerships beyond short-term projects or funding periods. You'll need to consider how to make sure that the relationship was meaningful for all partners and how you can continue the dialogue even if the funding has run out. Advocating for the benefits of the partnership can be a big part of this, whether it's to funders or senior stakeholders.

“The difference with museums is that they do a thing and then the thing's over, they don't look for the next thing. They need to ask ‘when can we work with you again?’ It's about not dropping everybody just because that piece of work is over. We had such a great time. Why wouldn't we want to do something else? Why would I want to find and build a whole new relationship when I've already got a working relationship that really, really works? And if somebody else happens to come into the fold as a result of that, then we'll work with them too. And that's how a family tree should grow. Don't lose those connections. Don't just see us as a one-trick pony. We're here for a long time.”

Alison Paterson, Blackhall Community Centre

Evaluating Impact

The process of maintaining long term equitable relationships should have begun before any formal or funded partnership concludes. The Museums Association's [Measuring Socially Engaged Practice](#) toolkit is a helpful guide that you might want to use before work has even begun so that you can put the right evaluation approaches in place. All partners should consider if the relationship has worked for them as part of the evaluation process. Francisco Carrasco of Luma Creations explains how important this is in their work with National Museums Liverpool:

“Legacy wise, I think it's a lot better to create something that can be built on. With National Museums Liverpool, when we were discussing the evaluation plans, I told them that I wanted one part of the evaluation to be about the partnership. Within a project this can be the one thing that could be a true legacy. And the legacy doesn't have to be a big thing, but it does have to be something that will make a difference. Sometimes that's something as simple as a display or exhibition that creates something that people can remember and that gives people a voice so that they feel heard. Sometimes it's about infrastructure. But it's not about the money, it's about the relationship.”

Reflective practice can be a useful tool for all parties to use throughout their relationship that can provide insights into the success and impact of the relationship. This involves using various tools and techniques to look carefully at the actions you have undertaken and reflect upon what you have learned and how you have developed. It requires a critical thinking approach and the ability to recognise that we can learn from the things that did not go well alongside the things that did. The Thinking Museum provides a useful [web resource and podcast](#) as a guide to this process.

Continuing the conversation

Sometimes community organisations can feel dropped by museums following short term project work, especially if the work has been led by the museum. As Kate Allen of PurpleSTARS explains:

“We often feel like we’re invited to events about inclusion without seeing real change, or brought in late in projects when budgets are nearly exhausted, reducing our contributions to a ‘box-ticking’ exercise.”

If the partnership has been developed fairly and the work has been truly developed by both parties this type of tokenism should be easy to avoid. However, there are things that should be considered to make sure that the partnership has meaningful impact.

Community partners will have their own views about how they want to continue to work with a museum partners. You should make sure that a range of individuals are involved in communications as this will make it more likely that it can be maintained even if there is a break in funding that prevents formal ways of working. This could be achieved by finding opportunities to maintain contact or value the contribution of partners, such as providing positions on a board of trustees for example.

“Make sure that there’s not only one person on a short-term contract engaged with us, because when they go then we’ve lost our connection. People should be treated and trusted as professionals, having some agency in the museum or the institution build, building trust and agreeing on how to communicate and how to share our ideas, thoughts and information.” says Kate. She also suggests that museums should look for opportunities to employ people they have worked with effectively as part of a partnership:

“It’s important that you don’t feel like you’re thrown away when the project money runs out so employ people to work in museums, offer supported internships or shadowing opportunities. It’s about sharing a bit of that power that people have in institutions.”

You should discuss how you are going to maintain contact following the completion of a piece of work, who will be the lead contacts on this and how will you keep doors open for future opportunities.



Case study: Continuing relationships between Paxton House and Descendants

Descendants is an award-winning children's charity in London dedicated to enriching the lives of children and young people primarily of African and Caribbean descent.

During 2022 they collaborated with Paxton House in the Scottish Borders on the project, "Parallel Lives, World Apart" which explored Paxton's links with slavery in Grenada.

60 children from Descendants aged 4-16 took part in online workshops and creative activities resulting in a permanent exhibition and "Sugar and Slavery" trail at Paxton. Fifty-five members of Descendants travelled from London to Paxton's Caribbean Connections Celebration to launch the exhibition. This short [film](#) showcases this celebration.

The relationship between both organisations dates back to 2007 when Paxton trustees and the Home family, who lived in the house, first contacted the charity. Once Parallel Lives was over, conversations between Descendants and Paxton's Curator, Dr Fiona Salvesen Murrell have continued. In March 2024 Paxton was awarded further funding from Museum Galleries Scotland's Delivering Change programme that will enable the partnership to continue.



Paxton House

Engaging senior stakeholders

Sometimes, especially in larger organisations, equitable partnerships can be created at officer or practitioner level but they lack the senior stakeholders recognition that is needed to make long-term commitments. For example, you may have worked effectively at operational level but unless the governing body and leadership understand what has been done and how it has benefitted all organisations, the continuation of the partnership might not be written into strategic, longer-term organisational plans. Your evaluation should measure progress towards outcomes and articulate the benefit of the partnership, and this should then be a useful tool for senior stakeholder advocacy. It is also important to emphasise in any advocacy that all parties have gained something from the relationship.

To track progress, museums could use the [Power to the People](#) framework. This allows museums to benchmark their participatory practice at the start and end of an evaluation period – ideally in discussion with community partners – to see how their practice has changed and the difference that makes. If senior stakeholder can see the organisational benefit to equitable relationships, they are far more likely to divert time and money to maintaining them.

“It’s not just about short-termism. Value different ways of working and get them into your organisational DNA.”

Tony Heaton, sculptor, chair of Shape Arts,
and Museums Association Board Member

Conclusion

05

Museums and community partners can and do form effective and fair partnerships that can hugely benefit the people they work with. Everyone will bring a different set of skills to the table and this expertise should be valued. The key is to take time to consider how the relationship will work and to build in mechanisms for honest and regular communication throughout. Ask yourself why this partner might want to work with you in the first place and make sure everyone understands each other's motives for working with one another. You will soon see that equitable collaboration will lead to great things.

Acknowledgements

06

Thanks to the following people and organisations for contributing to this toolkit through interviews and sharing resources:

- Aileen Strachan,
Paisley Museum Reimagined
- Alison Paterson,
Blackhall Community Centre
- Chantel Noel, Denise Charles &
Margaret Noel, Descendants
- Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
- Francisco Carrasco, Luma Creations
- Horniman Museum and Gardens
- Kate Allen and PurpleSTARS Rix Inclusive
Researchers, Ajay Choksi, Baljit Kaur,
Gosia Kwiatkowska, Kanchan Kerai,
Kiran Dhillon, Lee Phillips, Ros Weinberg,
Rufaro Asuquo, Samantha Walker
- Ollie Douglas and Phillippa Heath,
Museum of Rural Life
- Tony Heaton, sculptor, chair of
Shape Arts, and Museums Association
Board Member

