



PSYCHOSOCIAL RESEARCH UNIT

# Research Summary

## Who Cares? Museums, Health and Wellbeing Renaissance North West Programme

The *Who Cares?* programme was a collaboration between six museums in the North West developing health and wellbeing projects. The Psychosocial Research Unit at the University of Central Lancashire was invited to research the programme. The research undertaken clarifies the potential of museum collections to affect the wellbeing of people with specific health conditions, and people who are disadvantaged in ways which might impair their ability to make use of museums and art galleries. It highlights different approaches, achievements and difficulties in providing participatory group activities tailored to specific needs. It also conceptualises the psychosocial significance of interacting with museum objects, and the ways in which they provide common cultural forms for the expression of personal experience. The museums enabled participants to access collections and take part in creative activities which included visual arts, poetry and performance, object handling and movement and music. Projects were completed with both children and adults and with people who had mental health problems, physical disabilities, serious illnesses, homelessness and frailty and dementia associated with old age. The research concluded that museums have a specific contribution to make to health and wellbeing that rests on their role as custodians of collections that are part of a common cultural heritage.

## Key Research Findings

### **Socially engaged practice for health and wellbeing**

Museums can engage vulnerable people and contribute to wellbeing through targeted projects aimed at cultural inclusion. Museum collections offer opportunities for interaction with objects and staff and opportunities to find new cultural forms for personal experience.

### **Relationships and skills**

Staff can develop the skills to work effectively with vulnerable groups. This is relational work which involves emotional labour. Support structures should enable self-reflection and clarification of difficult issues that arise. There is scope to develop specialist training for museum staff and collaborating artists.

### **Models of work**

Three dominant 'models' emerged for this kind of work

based on: education and learning, a therapeutic environment and creative workshops. Often approaches to project work are not articulated. Clarification of aims, roles and relationships based on implicit models is vital in work with partner agencies.

### **Accessibility**

Some groups initially need encouragement to use the building. There are a number of ways of facilitating access. The key is in providing people with the opportunity to form relationships with staff and engage in conversations about the collections. This helps people to begin to make independent use of the museum and its contents.

### **Sustainability**

Specially targeted projects for vulnerable groups are resource intensive and will continue to involve partnerships with health

and social care agencies and collaborating artists. Enabling care staff to use museum collections and run projects will be a cost-effective strategy.

### **The importance of partnerships**

Stable partnerships with health and social care agencies are vital to this work. They have a key role in reducing risk, in ensuring that the right mix of knowledge and skills are present in the project team, and in ensuring that information is shared, and individual needs are catered for.

### **Evaluation**

Sensitive, tailored evaluation strategies can help to maximise learning from projects and ensure practice development. A cost effective way of using external evaluators is as consultants who work with museum staff to embed self-evaluation skills in the museum.

# Highlights of the Research

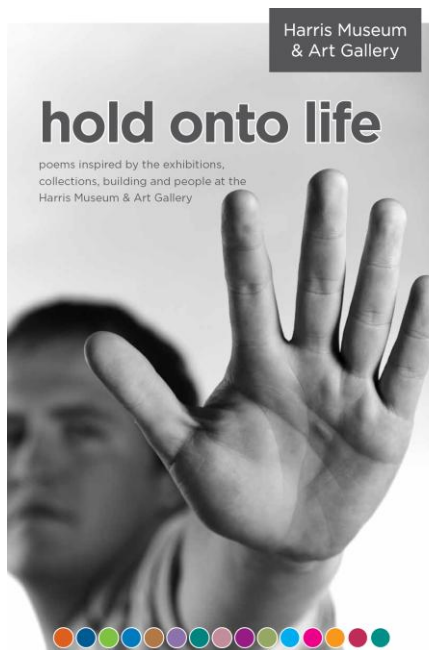
## Background and Rationale

Recent developments in government policy have called for the museum sector to combat social exclusion and act as a positive vehicle for social change. In particular, there is an increasing focus on the contribution museums can make to mental health and emotional wellbeing. There is relatively little in-depth research in this area which takes into account the voices of participants. In order to develop this evidence base, the Psychosocial Research Unit (PRU) collaborated with the *Who Cares?* projects in a study of their socially engaged health and wellbeing practice. Key staff from the six museums held network meetings regularly throughout the research process. Distinctive areas of practice were identified in each of the museums. Below is a selection of key projects.

## Distinctive Areas of Practice

### The Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston Practice at the sharp end with hard to reach groups

The Harris attempted to reach several new participant groups including an Asian women's group with mental health issues and a disabled group. The most difficult project involved working with a group of formerly homeless men who were recruited through a supported housing scheme, Foundations. The project highlighted the adaptability required for this work, especially when participants were reluctant to return to the museum site. Nevertheless perseverance from all sides resulted in the production of a booklet of poetry from the project entitled 'Hold Onto Life'. It contained reflective works which were inspired by making connections between personal experience and exhibited art works.



centre and residents at a psychiatric unit in the local hospital. The children took part in a variety of creative activities with artists and an artist in residence at the psychiatric unit worked on installations on the ward and photo-realistic portraits of the children (pictured) for an exhibition in the art gallery. The foundation of the project's success was the relationship between the Gallery and MSHS which enabled the project manager to gain access to secure NHS sites and helped the Gallery and the health service to work effectively together.

### The Whitworth Art Gallery Working with young people with illness

Project work was run in partnership with Manchester Schools Hospital Service (MSHS). The participants were children with long term and serious illness and mental health problems. The children were pupils at a local



## **Bolton Museum and Library Service** **Therapeutic practice**



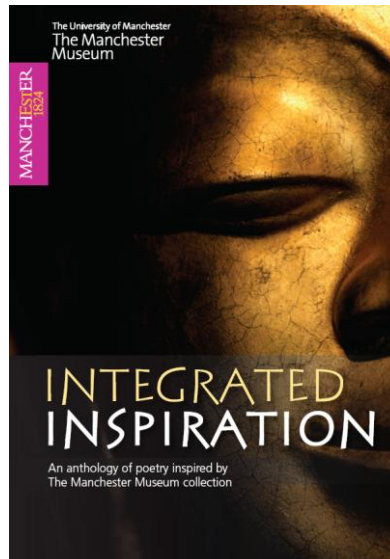
The Museum opted for one long-running therapeutic project with participants with mild-to-moderate mental health problems. The lead artist was also a psychotherapist. Sessions began with a 'mindfulness' exercise (a meditative activity) and closed with a 'sharing session' where participants were encouraged to share personal reflections with the group. Participants worked on a variety of art forms linked to the collections, and in a variety of locations, including outdoors (pictured). The emphasis was on process rather than arts outputs. This enabled participants who were anxious about their abilities to explore new and unfamiliar art forms, and to succeed or 'fail' at art in a risk-free context.

## **Tullie House, Carlisle** **Working in partnership with carers and care homes**

The participants were elderly people - including some with dementia. Projects focused on arts and crafts, music and

movement and poetry. In poetry sessions, historical objects were used to elicit stories of personal experience resulting in group poems of a richness and quality that impressed the care staff and families of the participants. The Museum has acknowledged that creative writing poses the biggest challenge for staff and has run training sessions for care staff to make the work sustainable. A network that includes care homes and the museum has been set up to meet this aim.

## **The Manchester Museum** **Museum objects and intimate attachments**



Projects recruited people with mental health problems from Start in Manchester, a local arts and mental health organisation, and through the Museum's own volunteering scheme. The creative sessions were different from those in other museums in that participants were able to form intimate attachments

with naturally occurring objects that were not crafted by artists. Imaginative engagement was enabled even though there was no reference to a particular artist's intentions or idiom. The project produced high quality arts outputs: a book of poetry entitled 'Integrated Inspiration', Museum displays of visual art and creative writing and in the local hospital; and public performances of poetry by participants in the Museum.

## **Manchester Art Gallery** **Working with mental health partnerships**

Three projects targeted three different groups: adults with severe and enduring mental health problems (recruited through Start in Manchester), young people with mental health problems using a CAHMS service and young people on an oncology ward. Participants took part in a range of activities from visual art and creative writing, to object handling and imaginative discussion. For the first two projects arts outputs were displayed at the Gallery. This project consolidated a partnership with Start which has been built over several years and merged participants with another community-based arts group, Out In The City. The aim was to give people with mental health problems wider opportunities to socialise with people from the local community in preparation for their lives post-healthcare.

## Psychosocial Aspects of Museum Engagement

The full *Who Cares?* report contains a focused literature review which together with the empirical study forms the basis of a conceptual chapter on psychosocial processes of museum engagement. The key finding here is that museum collections, when used in the right conditions, have the potential to provide a wide range of cultural forms which individuals can use to find expression for personal experience that is not easily represented or communicated to others. This in itself promotes wellbeing. However there is a further benefit: since the collections belong to the public and are part of a collective heritage, finding a personal connection to them enhances a sense of social inclusion. For marginalised people, finding a form for personal experience in the cultural domain can be the key which opens the door to participation in a common culture. When objects are used in distinctive ways by individuals in a setting that connects them to a group they gain access to that common culture in a way which recognises their particular qualities, capacities and needs. This can be a profoundly affirming process.

## Psychosocial Methodology

PRU adopted a psychosocial approach in order to study psychological and social dimensions of museum engagement. Methods were arts-sensitive and tailored to the specific object or field of study. They included ethnographic observation, narrative, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and reflective discussions and analysis of arts outputs. An important feature of the research design involved working with each museum to develop self-evaluation procedures congruent with the research design. Evaluation data was analysed by the museums and independently by the research team.

---

### Research Team:

**Project Manager:** Prof. Lynn Froggett, Psychosocial Research Unit, University of Central Lancashire

**Chief Investigator:** Dr. Alan Farrier

**Researchers:** Dr. Konstantina Poursanidou, Dr. Sue Hacking, Dr. Olivia Sagan

**CONTACT:** [lfroggett@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:lfroggett@uclan.ac.uk) | [www.uclan.ac.uk/pru](http://www.uclan.ac.uk/pru)

---

### *Who Cares?* Key museum and collaborating agency staff and artists

**Renaissance North West Research Manager:** Myna Trustram.

**Tullie House – Project Managers:** Susan Child, Angie Ball. **Artists:** John Killick, Margaret Middleton, Karen McDougall, Andy Murray. **Network Organisation:** Gil Fewlings. **Partner Organisations:** Burnside Court Day Centre, Alzheimer's Day Care Beverley House, Petteiril Bank Day Care Centre, Lanercost House Residential Home, Elizabeth Walsh Care Home.

**Harris Museum - Project Manager:** Kyra Milnes. **Artists:** Chris Davies, Chanje Kunda, Gabby Tyrell. **Partner Organisations:** NHS Mental Health Race Equality Team; Progress Housing Preston; Strategic Housing Service – Preston City Council; Disability North West; Bluestreak Arts; The Bridge (NHS).

**Bolton Museum - Project Manager:** Louise Bienkowska. **Project Lead:** Lory Povah. **Artist:** Gwen Robinson. **Partner Organisation:** Active Health.

**Manchester Museum - Project Manager:** Gurdeep Thiara. **Project Conservator:** Irit Narkiss. **Artist:** Chanje Kunda. **Partner Organisation:** Start in Manchester.

**Whitworth Art Gallery - Project Manager:** Wendy Gallagher. **Artists:** Lucy Burscough, Chanje Kunda, Kevin Dalton-Johnson, Alan Birch, Vicki Wheeler. **Partner Organisation:** Manchester Schools Hospital Service.

**Manchester Art Gallery - Project Manager:** Leisa Gray. **Artists:** Annie Tortora-Cailey Jim Medway, Amanda McCrann. **Partner Organisations:** Start in Manchester, Wigan CAHMS, Christie Hospital.