

Keynote: creating the right culture for public engagement

Dame Fiona Reynolds, Director General, The National Trust

Introduction

Fiona has been Director-General of the National Trust for England, Wales and Northern Ireland since January 2001. On her arrival, Fiona led the Trust successfully through a period of significant change, including a major staff restructuring, relocation of the Trust's central staff to a new, 'green' office in Swindon, a strategic financial review, and a major overhaul of the charity's governance, described by the Charity Commission as exemplary. She developed a new strategy focusing on engaging the Trust's millions of supporters more deeply through exemplary conservation and environmental performance and is now leading a further change programme designed to localise the organisation, bringing properties to life and delegating more decisions to property managers. Before the Trust, Fiona spent 18 years in the voluntary conservation movement as chief executive of the Council for National Parks and CPRE and a short spell in the Cabinet Office as Director of the Women's Unit from 1998-2000. Fiona became a CBE in 1998 for services to the countryside and environment, and a DBE in 2008 for services to Heritage.

In this final keynote of the conference Dame Fiona Reynolds shared her thoughts from the experience of opening up the National Trust to enable people to engage, connect and participate on many different levels.

The journey to an engaged organisation

When I heard about the title of your conference, *Connect, engage, inspire*, it was irresistible to come and be with you. I'm sorry I'm coming right at the end of your conference because I'd love to have been with you for the last few days.

The theme is close to my heart and sums up everything I've tried to do as Director General at the National Trust. What I'd like to do is take you on a journey, tell you a story about the things I've been doing; how we've taken the National Trust down the road from being what I call an '*arms closed*' organisation to an '*arms open*' organisation. I hope that by the end of it, you'll be inspired to take your organisation or your part of it on that journey too, if you're not already miles ahead of us (and I guess some of you will be). My story isn't just about the National Trust; it's about how an organisation goes through cultural change, how it becomes an organisation that loves people as much as place (in our case) or whatever your organisation's core purpose is.

Where was the Trust twelve years ago? I came to the Trust as Director General in 2001 but I'd been involved as a volunteer for almost twenty years before that. It was clear to me that there were some things we were extremely good at; looking after

special places and conservation. But we had begun to lose touch with people, had begun to take their support for granted and that mattered because our core purpose, what's in our legislation, is looking after special places for ever *for everyone*. The challenge was how to maintain our reputation as a world class conservation organisation while at the same time becoming more people focused, without '*dumbing down*' or compromising our conservation standards.

On a visit to the United States early in my time as DG, I met some American national park officials who talked about the difference between 'arms closed' and 'arms open' organisations and I was moved by this. An 'arms closed' organisation is one in which you are looking after something, keeping it safe. Visitors are allowed to come in but must do so carefully, not touch things, and only come in on the organisation's terms. An 'arms open' organisation wants people to be part of its future, is interested in what people think, wants them to get involved. It is still passionate about conservation but in a way that truly engages people. So the story of the last decade for me is about how the National Trust has become an 'arms open' organisation while not having lost its passion for conservation in the process. During that period, we have more than doubled our volunteers, doubled our turnover and increased membership from 2.7 million to 4 million.

How did we do it? Well, I had to be very clear that the National Trust is about connecting people with places. We needed to be less egocentric as an organisation and we wanted people to see the Trust not as the end but as the means, the facilitator, enabling people to enjoy and love and share in special places. To do this, we had to have two important pieces of knowledge. Firstly, we needed to know what it was that made our places special in order to do the conservation work. Secondly, we needed a really good understanding of people and a much deeper and warmer relationship with them. The whole process started with people and with looking at ourselves with their eyes.

Early in my time as DG, we took on an extraordinary Victorian gothic mansion, Tyntesfield, near Bristol. This was the most extraordinary campaign. Everyone said we were mad to even try to acquire this place. It ended up costing us more than £100 million in total. It was on the market and was filled with the very latest objects that you would expect from a Victorian country house collection. Plus, all the contents right down to the tea spoons in the kitchen. Nobody had seen it because the owner Lord Wraxall would come out with a shotgun if anyone asked to look around. Christies had put 'for sale' labels on everything and it felt like an undiscovered treasure. People flocked to give us money. It was one of our most successful fundraising appeals ever. We had to raise about £8 million against a very tight deadline of about three months just to secure the initial purchase. What was very clear to me was that you could not ask people to rescue a country house like this and then close it for up to four years while repairs and restorations were carried out. I took the decision to open it on day one, from the moment we took possession. There

were no facilities that you'd usually expect – loos, car park, shop, café. We bussed people in from a Tesco car park in Nailsea. It was chaos but people absolutely loved it and the word engagement was born within the Trust. There were bare floor boards, fraying fabrics, unopened cupboards. Our own curators were discovering things in front of people and doing the conservation work.

The next step was that we needed to find out more about our visitors. It may seem surprising now but even as recently as 2003-04 we just saw our audience as one amorphous mass. We had never segmented our visitors. When we did, it was an absolute revelation. We quickly identified seven visitor segments which made up the core of our visitors and supporters. Three segments absolutely dominated:

Curious Minds. These are classic Trust visitors. They are empty nesters, very interested in history, nature and conservation. They are knowledgeable and curious to learn more.

Explorer Families. These are families with quite young children whose primary aim is that the children would have a great time.

Out and Abouts. These are people who really enjoy the long walk, the physical exercise. They would visit the house as well as the garden and are primarily trying to experience as much as they can in a day.

We discovered very quickly that not only was their relationship with us based on their motivations around visiting but they were fundamentally different from each other. This was a revelatory moment for our property managers in the Trust and we set them all the challenge of looking at their property through the eyes of people in these segments and doing things for those people, tailoring it to what people in those segments would want. Nothing short of a revolution.

The third thing we did was to commission some research generally from members and supporters, not visitors per se, to tell us what people felt about the Trust. This was almost *the* moment of revelation because what it told us was quite hard to hear. It told us very clearly that people admired us, viewed us as a very responsible, establishment organisation which people felt a great deal of respect for. But when asked how they felt about the Trust, about whether the Trust felt warm towards them or whether they felt warm towards the Trust, the answer was a resounding 'no'.

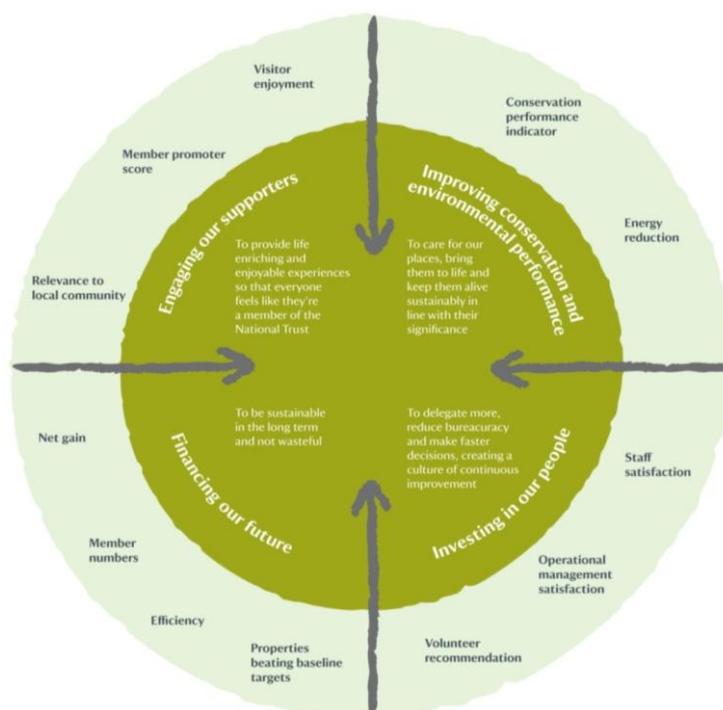
This was hard to hear for an organisation that was doing very well, with lots of things going right and membership growing. There was one phrase that came out of this research that really resonated with me: 'The National Trust is a good thing, but it's not my thing'. That phrase galvanised the organisation. It was the first indication that we couldn't take people's support for granted, that we had to work at that relationship. It was hugely helpful to have this as an independent, honest view. It showed us above all that people's expectations are changing. Visitors in the 1950s were very respectful of the Trust, happy for areas to be out of bounds to them, and

felt privileged to have gained access. But today’s audiences want to be able to go on the grass, touch things and engage in a much more tactile way. In particular, they really want something for children. Not just to our Out and About and Explorer Family segments but people in our Curious Minds segment who usually have grandchildren.

Our next big challenge was called Bringing Places to Life. This goes back to our conservation purpose; drawing out the spirit of each place. Through inspiring interpretation, we wanted to bring the stories to life, not just tell them in dry and dusty ways. We wanted people to experience the country house in new ways: for example, playing billiards and being more tactile with objects in the house. We wanted to take away the ropes and the ‘Do Not Touch’ signs wherever possible. People can’t touch everything but it’s amazing – especially in places like Victorian kitchens – how much people can touch.

Starting off with some of what we call ‘atmospheres projects’ has really transformed the way we way we present our properties. We have been redesigning the visitor experience from scratch at many of our properties. The most important thing we did was to measure what people said. We had a new survey carried out to inform our Visitor Enjoyment Key Performance Indicator. We also took a radical look at our opening hours, our outdoors offer and of course what’s online and what’s available digitally. This is a major, major cultural change in an organisation that was very ‘arms closed’. What’s remarkable is that this now has become core purpose for the Trust, as core as our conservation purpose, and people are noticing. I call this ‘how we’ve learned to love people as much as places’.

This change is partly about leadership; the fact that I was and remain passionate about it was a material factor. Importantly, we put the following in place:



This strategy, a classic balanced scorecard, drove the Trust's transformation. All of our engagement KPIs (visitor enjoyment, member promoter score and relevance to local community) are not measured by how well we think we are doing but by other people's views of us.

I then spent years going round the country, talking to staff and volunteers, trying to win people round to this radical new way of thinking and helping them to engage in the debate.

Measuring new things has been vital because it has really told us what we needed to know. Over time, the visitor enjoyment measurement has become even more sophisticated so now property managers receive new KPIs every month and new data, which reveals not only how Visitor enjoyment is going (it's been particularly challenging this year because of the wet weather) but also lets you know whether the problem is your car park, your shop, your queues for the loos, the quality of the experience or your interpretation. We have a very demanding score. We don't just ask people whether they had an enjoyable time but whether they have had a *very* enjoyable time and our target is 75 per cent.

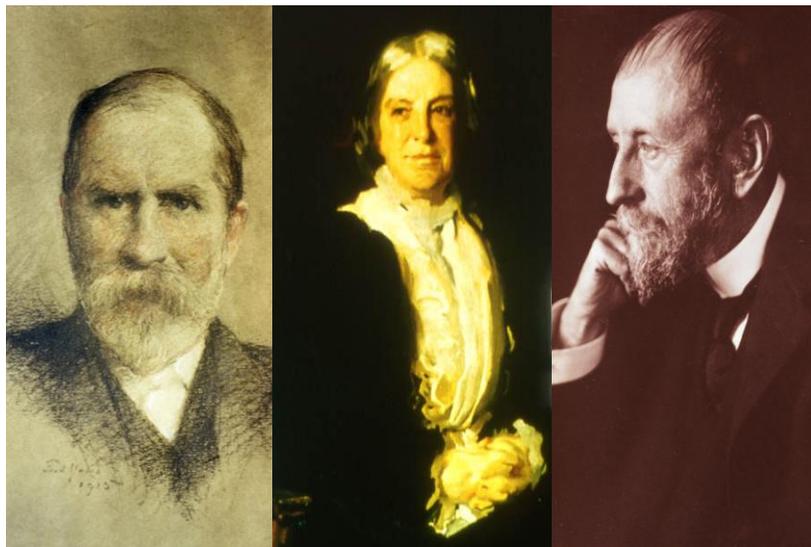
Another big change we initiated was a delegation challenge; delegation to our property managers for deciding their own property's strategy, direction and focus. We encourage them to make decisions, not to wait for instructions from someone else. We also fostered innovation throughout the organisation through mentor groups, forums in which people who have had good ideas can share them and these good ideas then get transmitted through the organisation.

We followed that with a big cultural and structural change. We re-profiled the whole organisation. All our processes were re-engineered around the offer we make to our supporters and our structures all became focused around the service we provide to property managers. All our experts, having originally reported to their own Head of Profession, are now in an internal consultancy. They have become a service to the property managers, designed around conservation and visitor experience. This has been a very radical change within the organisation.

The whole process has been exhilarating but it hasn't been easy. It hasn't been a breeze. Many staff and volunteers struggled with (and some still do) this idea of engagement. Many of them feel that the Trust's core purpose is to look after special places and special collections and all this people stuff is nice but not core. And we have had some external challenges too. There have been accusations of 'Disney-fication' in the press. I'm happy to accept that challenge. We have learned a lot from Disney who are brilliant at customer service. But Disney has to make up its stories; we have the real thing. Authenticity is our middle name. It's important to emphasise, too, that this is not a process of 'National Trust by focus group'. We are clear about our mission and purpose. We are engaging our audiences around that

mission and those purposes, focusing on their needs but not distorting our core purpose.

What it's really been about for me is linking us back to our core, to our nineteenth century founders who set up an organisation unashamedly *'to look after beautiful places for ever for everyone'*. So for me engagement has been there from the outset and during the twentieth century, when we took on so much property and so many obligations, we became an 'arms closed' organisation. Octavia Hill, Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley (a friend of Beatrix Potter) and Robert Hunter M.P. were not 'arms closed' people.



Octavia Hill said 'the need of beauty, the need of air, the need of exercise, the sight of sky and of things growing, are human needs, common to all'. She was a visionary about getting the urban poor out into the countryside to experience the joy of open spaces.

In many ways, what we have been doing is reuniting that nineteenth century purpose with a twenty-first century sense of mission and rearticulating the values of the organisation in those terms. But it has raised capability challenges. For example, some of our wonderful gardeners are not very confident about talking to people; some of our properties have to cope with really different demands from these different audiences who want quite different experiences; and from the organisation's point of view, as we get bigger, four million members is an incredibly broad church, we have somehow got to manage that complex set of stakeholder relationships.

So where are we now? Well, we are not there yet. We never will be, actually, because organisations are always going through change. But the Trust today does feel very different from the one I walked into twelve years ago. Even four or five years ago, engagement was a word we still had to explain to people and now we don't. We felt crusty and dusty yet now we are launching exciting campaigns like our recent allotments campaign and a new campaign, 50 Things To Do Before You're 11³/₄:



Climb a tree, roll down a muddy bank, fish for tadpoles, get muddy – these are all elements of this joyous campaign which has been directly tackling the fact that, with the lost innocence of childhood, many children these days spend so much time indoors, stuck in front of computer screens. People would never have imagined us doing this just a few years ago. Also, they'd never have imagined us with our virtual farm, a group of Internet farmers making decisions about what to plant, which bull to buy, which flock of sheep to buy. And it's only a few years ago that my daughters complained that the National Trust blocked Facebook but now we're Twittering, we're on Facebook, the whole internet and social media world has come alive for us. And we are absolutely passionate about our outdoors offer, encouraging people to get outside and be closer to nature, just as our founders believed it was so important.

And, not necessarily of our choosing, we have also been involving the public in some very important national debates. Some of you will remember at the beginning of 2011 that plan to sell off the forests which was slightly provocative. The National Trust played a key part in getting the government to withdraw those proposals and then I've spent the last year as a member of the Independent Forestry Panel producing a report, which we published last week, about the future of forestry.

Last summer, the government launched a very provocative, radical change to the planning system which basically said that in this time of recession, anything should go, development should be able to happen anywhere so long as it is sustainable but with a very poor definition of sustainability. The Trust said, *'No, this is core purpose to us. We can't have this'* and some of you will have seen a huge media campaign which made us very unpopular with the government, although not unpopular with the people. We gathered a quarter of a million signatures. People had never seen the National Trust quite in that role before and actually they loved it.



We are not going to campaign like that all the time, I think we have to reserve our fire power for the very big issues. When I think of some of the things our predecessors had to fight for – such as Octavia Hill's nineteenth century campaign to stop Parliament Hill Fields being built over – it reminds me we still need to retain the ability to fight for what we believe in.

This is a continuing challenge; there is no beginning, middle and end to this campaign of engagement. It will constantly change and the reason is that people constantly change. Some things seem timeless but people's aspirations, their expectations, their motivations and desires, change over time. Also, it takes a very long time to change perceptions of an organisation; it's a very slow burn. I would love to say that our research shows people view the Trust as a good thing and as their thing, but the truth is that we are still seen largely as a country houses and cream teas organisation, we are still seen as a bit crusty, and I suspect that we will never satisfy everybody so we have to keep the level of energy and commitment up. Every now and then we get a bit of good news. A Demos poll last year showed that we are seen as the second most patriotic organisation after Shakespeare. Where did that come from?

There is not just one answer. It's important always to be creative and innovative and above all, to give our property managers the freedom to experiment and to engage, not to have one organisational top-down view.

I am moving on from the Trust, which feels weird. It's been the job of my dreams, I've loved every minute and I absolutely adore the organisation but I've probably done the big thing that I could do, that is to address the culture change of the organisation – open arms, loving people as much as place and someone far cleverer than I will take it on to its next stage. But I do feel that the Trust now has engagement in its blood and a twenty/twenty vision for everyone in the country to feel the National Trust is a good thing and hopefully 'my thing' as well.

I hope you will feel that some of what I have covered is relevant to you, as experts in arts marketing. And I hope that some of you who feel that your organisations are not

as 'arms open' as you would like feel inspired to go back to your organisations and start the process of bringing about change.

Questions

Anne Torreggiani (Joint Chief Executive, The Audience Agency): I was inspired by your speech. You are clearly a wonderful leader and you've been talking to us about leadership but you don't mind mixing that in with talk about missions and the strategy, and you don't mind talking about audience feedback as being the source of your inspiration and that is my dream talk so I wanted to say thank you so much. My question is whether you have ever received feedback from an audience which you have wilfully, in a leadership, legitimate, way decided to ignore and what was it?

Dame Fiona Reynolds: Yes, of course. One of the things that has been amazing about this job is that I really have got to know every corner of England, Wales and Northern Ireland and some people have said to me 'we don't like this, Fiona.' One of the things about leadership is people telling the truth to you. I'm not someone who likes to hear that everything in the garden is rosy. It's important that people who don't like things feel they can say so and that they get taken seriously. For most of the early years, I wasn't popular.

I've got a press clippings file of my first year and there is some horrible press coverage about this woman coming to dumb down the National Trust, disaster, disaster. It was horrible. I've had lots of negative feedback in my time. But two things sustained me throughout that. First of all, the process of debate and discussion – people had good reason for not liking what I was saying. It wasn't just grumpiness. And that actually enriched the dialogue. Second, when people began to be won round, their conversion was all the more significant. Watching people going from nervous, constrained and very 'arms closed' – I'm here to be a gardener or a collections manager and I really don't want people to be involved in that – to finding ways of really opening out what they're doing, thinking about what people can touch, what they can involve people in, has been quite remarkable. So I've learned a lot from the experience but some of it was quite bruising, honestly, in my early days.