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Making sure your organisation is relevant

Andrew McIntyre, of Morris Hargreaves McIntyre chaired the second keynote presentation, presented by Virginia Tandy and Kate Farmery. Andrew said that this session is not just a good case study, or best practice or interesting, but a vision of the future. Anyone who wants to survive the current funding crisis should take notes, as although the examples come from Manchester, the thinking and ethos come from the heart of why museums and galleries exist. This session is relevant anywhere we need to demonstrate our value and measure our impact.

Kate Farmery was one of the first marketing people to reach senior management level in museums. Kate has been a strategic marketer for fifteen years and has embedded an audience focus in Manchester City Galleries. Virginia Tandy is an inspiration to Andrew: throughout her 20 years in the city, Virginia has been a cultural leader, culminating in her latest post of Director of Culture at Manchester City Council.



Virginia has this image in her office [Marcus Coates, *Sea Mammal 4*] and it seemed appropriate to share it with delegates today.

The artist's work concerns itself with the close relationship between animal and human identity and behaviour. But for the purposes of this session, this image represents the complexity (and confusion) of the artistic, social, political and economic agendas that we have to keep in our heads and somehow bring together. It is Virginia's job – and yours – to have the coloured balloon head of an entertainer on the sober body of a bureaucrat!

Our profession has endlessly debated the *point* of museums and galleries. Is our intrinsic *existence* sufficient? Or must we have some wider social or economic relevance? We often set up the tired old 'art for art's sake' argument in opposition to a more instrumental approach – using museums to improve educational attainment, make an impact on residents' health and wellbeing or encourage economic vibrancy. We ask whether we are underselling or even demeaning ourselves to deliver agendas better delivered by others? Why can't we just be left alone to do what we do best?

But for Virginia, there has never been a conflict between museums *being* and museums *doing*. The intrinsic value of a museum, which lies in the complex process of how individual visitors enjoy, learn from and contribute to the museum – our personal response to that knot of coloured balloons – is our strongest instrumental weapon. This

is the essence of the museum experience, which is hard to measure or describe, but everyone knows what it feels like. This is what makes museums powerful, stimulating and unsettling. Instrumentalism just means harnessing that power for the greater good; driving home the relevance of the museum experience to people's lives and the sustainability and viability of their communities. The most successful, impactful, relevant cultural organisations are those that see the bigger picture and have the generosity of spirit and the culture of partnership to ensure they are part of the society they sit within.

Culture in Manchester is partly shaped by the fact that, despite boom, the city is:

- 4th most deprived city in England
- 1 in 4 residents unemployed
- In half the city 40% of children live in poverty

We would be arrogant and naive if we thought we could be detached and above this while being committed to public value and social equity. At best, we would be marginalised and ignored, particularly if our interest in our social contribution was a cynically-motivated attempt to secure funding. At worst, in the face of reduced public funding, we would face decimating cuts.

Manchester's key social priorities include:

- Raising educational attainment
- Reducing worklessness (i.e. generational unemployment)
- Improving the life experience, health and well-being of residents in deprived areas

The city has tried virtually everything to make headway on these challenging goals. But until recently, it had not tried culture. Much of the work currently piloting in the city's museums and galleries is about culture in Manchester stepping up to the plate:

- First, ensuring that we have an impact on residents' lives (not just giving them something nice to do on a Sunday afternoon)
- Second, proving it, with robust and meaningful research data, to the many funders and stakeholders who view museums and galleries, at best, as a 'nice to have'

Manchester is at a fairly early stage in this area, but this session will share some of that learning to date.

Until recently, the situation was similar with culture's contribution to the economic sustainability of the region. The museums and galleries themselves couldn't fully explain the relevance of a vibrant cultural sector and thriving creative economy to the North West's ability to attract inward investment. So it was no wonder the agencies responsible for regional development overlooked them almost entirely. But the group has convinced themselves – and others – of their potential to impact, to the extent that the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA) has invested £3m over four years in a cultural tourism initiative, spearheaded by the region's museums and galleries.

Kate Farmery

A couple of years ago, museums asked stakeholders across the region - from local authority officers and members to regional development agencies and tourist boards - to give feedback specifically on the importance of the museums sector to their work. They told us:

- You are not as good or as visible as you think you are
- You need to work more effectively and strategically to increase your visibility

So clearly, there was an issue with how 'good' the museums were. 'Good' meaning, in their eyes, on their terms, how successful what we were doing was in helping them do what they needed to do. But also, the good work we were doing, that we believed could/should be of relevance to them, was not having sufficient impact. As individual venues, we were not getting the reach we needed.

The single biggest factor in the North West's museums and galleries' raising their game and ensuring increased relevance in the region is **partnership working**.

The thinking behind this: one museum or gallery is probably one of many separately run visual arts venues in your area. Even if you all worked together and spoke as one (which you probably don't, because you are run by different bodies), you would only represent one element of the cultural sector in your region. And the cultural sector is only a tiny part of the whole. Health, social services, education, industry, commerce – they're all fighting for funding and profile, most with more money and arguably, more 'nous' than us. One museum or gallery working alone can of course become more relevant to its local residents and the sustainability of its region; make people sit up and take notice of them. But probably not well enough. Our stakeholders and funders certainly didn't think so.

Kate and Virginia are therefore speaking as representatives and advocates for museums and galleries across the North West, regardless of how they are managed and funded. The point is that the group is beginning to speak as one, which is having an impact on how they work in partnership across the region.

And the other crucial factor is evidence. Many marketers have become quite adept at using visitor research and information to influence colleagues and the direction of our organisations. But how can we use our research and evaluation skills to convince people outside of our venues and outside of our sector that we are a force to be reckoned with? In early March, Kate met with Drew Stokes, the Chief Executive of Marketing Manchester, the city's marketing bureau and tourist information board. She was sounding him out about the possibility of extending funding for one of their partnership initiatives. He said to her: 'At the moment, you are interesting, but you need to convince me that you are important, too'. If *Sea Mammal 4* is Virginia's inspiration for today, then that phrase is Kate's inspiration.

An early light bulb moment came when museums across Manchester began working in partnership with Children's Services on a three-year programme targeted at improving literacy at KS2. We commissioned evaluation by the University of Warwick which indicated that among participants, literacy skills had risen 30% faster than teachers would expect. This statistic caught fire. It was quoted back to wherever Kate and

Virginia went and made the team realise the power of *proving* what we all suspected anyway – that museums and galleries can be so much more than a nice-to-have (especially when we work together).

Everything discussed in this session is work in progress and there are many other pockets of good practice across the country. We are beginning to ask the right questions, but we definitely haven't got all the answers – yet.

One of the case studies focused on the pilot project North West Hub museums are doing with partners primarily in the health sector, to contribute to the region's health and mental well-being. The other focuses on the cultural tourism initiative, specifically the work the Manchester Museums Consortium (informal grouping of nine venues in city) are doing in partnership with the tourist board.

Case study: Who Cares?

Six venues across the North West are participating in this pilot. For example, Manchester Art Gallery is doing:

- A collaborative ceramic course project with arts group Start Manchester (some of the members of which have mental health issues), resulting in an exhibition
- A project involving Wigan Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, in which young people with mental health issues will use artworks in the gallery as starting points for discussions and creative activities

Manchester Museum is undertaking:

- A collaboration with the Zion Community Health and Resource Centre, in which individuals with mental health issues will volunteer to take part in a training scheme at the museum based on 'mindfulness'

Bolton Art Gallery and Museum are:

- Inviting individuals who feel they may be suffering from mild to moderate depression and/or anxiety to self-refer via an NHS website to participate in an arts project at the museum

Museums working in partnership to contribute to mental health and well-being are not unique. Tate Modern runs collaborative programmes with local and national mental health organisations, as do University College London hospitals and museums. Culture Unlimited has done a comprehensive survey of this kind of work. But while the broad argument for the value of health and the arts has been made many times over, there is little museum-specific information. Many stakeholders also have commented upon the lack of rigour in all the existing evaluations and research about the impact of the arts, particularly in-depth research which explores the actual experience of participants.

What is ground-breaking about this project, then, is not just that the evaluation of it will be museum specific, but that the innovative approach to gathering evidence will deepen understanding of each participant's journey and provide compelling, convincing stories to tell. It will genuinely strengthen our ability to argue the case for the contribution museums can make to health and welfare.

The group is working with the Psychosocial Research Unit in the Faculty of Health at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan). They are going to be exploring the factors which lead to significant experiences, moving beyond the quest to find positive impacts to teach us about the deep experience of participants. For example, other research by the team at UCLan has analysed the experience of a young offender who participated in a creative writing project. The research shows how, with the help of a poet, the offender was able to find a language with which he could develop self-reflective capacity, moral responsibility and hopes for a better future.

Raising the game

A four-year collaboration between Manchester Museums Consortium to reposition the region as a more popular cultural tourist destination and increase cultural tourism.

In order to secure funding for this initiative, the group first had to prove the potential for economic impact. In 2007, the group commissioned Arts About Manchester (now All About Audiences) to undertake an economic evaluation and assess the contribution the consortium was *already* making to the city region and North West economies. This found that together, the consortium venues generated a significant impact on the Greater Manchester economy, in terms of full time employment, on and off-site visitor expenditure, volunteering value and capability and the volume of visitors attracted. Again, before this study, there was a lack of detailed information about the economic contribution of the museums sector in the UK. But this gave the group the opportunity to call the funders' bluff for extra funding and resources, in order to prove what could be achieved. The discussion has taken two years, but they are now convinced of the argument. The project was designed to:

- Strengthen museums and galleries' contribution to the visitor offer
- Build sustainable partnerships between the museum and gallery sector and the tourism sector
- Attract and retain out-of-region visitors
- Grow the visitor economy

The main work is being done through the Director's group, which in itself is one outcome of the initiative (and did not happen on a regular basis before) and via a group of venue marketing staff and Visit Manchester representatives.

The group is delivering:

- A cutting edge programme, installations and commissions across the city. Much of the extra money has gone on programming and has genuinely allowed the city to raise its game, exhibition-wise. The group works together to shape everything that is happening in the city's museums and galleries, which allows the organisations and Visit Manchester to communicate the 'product' in a much more coherent and meaningful way.

- Visitor experiences are joined up and have a 'Manchester' personality (everything from all using the same map to joint front-of-house staff training, to reviewing signage and visitor orientation city-wide)
- Marketing messages that match the city's own destination 'sell'
- Marketing activity that challenges expectations, tests new ideas and does things a little bit differently. The marketing activity is centred around a campaign called **Creative Tourist** (www.creativetourist.com).

Obviously, this is ultimately about the numbers of tourist visits and driven by the economic impact, so the group is being very careful to work with Visit Manchester and the regional development agency to measure the longer-term impact of the programme.

Targets set by NWDA are fairly basic:

- Increasing national tourism visits to partner venues by 10% and international tourism visits by 5%
- Increasing levels of visitor satisfaction to 85% very satisfied
- Other targets relating to media coverage, awards and numbers of evaluation events

The group is working on meaningful ways of doing this and this will be the focus of the final year of funding: gathering the evidence and improving their ability to communicate and advocate.

Re-framing Manchester's Cultural Ambition

Virginia explained that the partnerships created for this set of initiatives have significantly increased the group's understanding of the relevance of what they offer to the city. They have built relationships with statutory services (including health, social services and education) and economic development agencies.

Manchester's new Cultural Ambition document capitalises upon this and outlines a vision for future success. The city is beginning to believe in the vital role of its cultural creative base in defining the future identity of the city, in increasing the aspirations of its citizens and nurturing the cohesion of its many communities. There is a widely shared understanding that an ongoing cultural and creative transformation of the city is essential to its prospects of securing sustainable economic development.

The five key elements of this vision are that Manchester must become:

1. Culturally distinctive
2. Community inspired
3. Creative investor
4. Talent city
5. Culturally connected

The second and fourth themes are of most relevance to this session and these case studies.

Community inspired

We want everyone to be part of the Manchester story.

Richard Leese, Leader of Manchester City Council

Manchester has long been a diverse city, shaped by the powerful influences of the different traditions, ethnic groups and lifestyles that define the city. Its cultural strategy aims to ensure that residents of all ages and traditions participate in cultural activities – both as audience members, and by becoming involved in cultural activities through their neighbourhood or community.

Culture must and can do more to build the self confidence, self esteem and ambitions of people living in the city region and must play its full role in channelling people to greater opportunity through bolstering the skills and economic prospects of all those living in the city.

All too often, debates about culture and community become locked into the important but tired story about how to ‘reach’ more people with the city centre’s cultural offer. This polarity needs to be reversed. Manchester’s cultural offer needs to be inspired by its communities, a DIY cultural city, in which its people have a cultural voice, a cultural point of view and myriad opportunities for cultural expression.

The museums and galleries consortium aims to:

- Make the people of Manchester proud participants and architects of the city’s cultural life
- Provide communities with real opportunities to develop the cultural offer and build an enhance sense of neighbourhood identity and pride
- Ensure that culture makes the fullest possible contribution to the health, wealth and cohesiveness of Manchester’s many communities

Are you trying to do the same in your town or city?

Talent city

To do better, Manchester needs to address both the supply of skilled workers and the demand from employers to use more skilled workers. The only option is to attract more skilled labour to migrate to Manchester from elsewhere.

Manchester Independent Economic Review, 2009

The cultural sector can play a major role in improving skills acquisition. First, it can have powerful impacts on overall attendance, attainment and aspiration levels during early years and secondary education. Second, museums and galleries can help fashion the skills required for a successful knowledge-based economy and contribute to addressing worklessness. Manchester must aim to become the most innovative city in the UK for skills provision, education and training in the creative and cultural sectors.

Manchester is setting out to:

- Become one of the world’s top ten cities for nurturing, attracting and retaining creative economy talent and the UK’s leading centre for cultural and creative

economy skills training – creating the right milieu for people who work in the creative sector

- Develop a world class reputation for innovative partnerships involving the cultural, creative and education sectors
- Open up pathways to employment and channel the skills and creativity of Manchester residents towards education and work opportunities in the cultural and creative sector

Could you do that in your area?

There is one major block to progress: as a sector, we are still a long way from persuading our politicians and funders that museums have a really powerful role to play in addressing wider social and economic issues, so that we can win a place at the funding table. National and local government still see cultural activities as marginal to their main purpose.

There are lots of reasons for this:

- The sector remains invisible to key players. Key people in government may not have experience of culture, professionally, and may not be interested privately.
- In local authorities in particular, sport, leisure and libraries, where museums often sit, are higher up the political pecking order
- More generally, museums and galleries still struggle to demonstrate social and economic outcomes and impacts clearly. Despite our best efforts to date, outcomes are too much bound up with things that are hard to measure and reduce to political sound bites. How do you measure the quality of experience for individuals: pleasure, inspiration, creativity? How do you prove that better museums and galleries increase the number of bed nights purchased by tourists?

Profile raising, advocacy work, research and evaluation – any of this sound familiar to you? This is a challenge for your area of the profession more than any other. Both the Museums Association (via its new *Love Museums* advocacy training programme) and the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) have recognised the importance of us all up-skilling in this area. Make sure you take advantage of the new opportunities available to you that will enable you to be seen differently by others, who might have funding in the future.



After 10 years of boom, the current recession and predicted reduction in public spending makes everything look difficult. There may be a change of government. And the future of Renaissance (an MLA programme to support England's regional museums in raising standards to support education and regeneration).is uncertain after 2011.

Going back to this image – if we're not careful, we'll be standing alone on that beach with the tide going out.

What we must do is use the downturn to sharpen our understanding of our relevance – how museums and galleries can contribute to other's agendas – and communicate this relevance much more effectively, as we compete with other priorities for shrinking funds.

The Chair opened up the floor for comments and questions, asking for delegates to particularly think about how what they had heard would be relevant or what might be a barrier to its relevance for your organisation.

Questions

Do we need to find a mechanism for sharing the bits of research going on out there? Several museums, including the Fitzwilliam, are working on impact research. Would this help the sector with its advocacy? Could we develop a toolkit for meaningful impact research to help those without resources or access to impact research?

The Chair asked for a show of hands for how many organisations:

- Have some existing impact research
- Feel they have a sound knowledge of the area

The response suggested that there would be value in drawing it together (quite a few doing similar research) and that few felt confident about impact research.

Virginia commented that if organisations have any sound impact research, they should let people know about it at the moment. The sector is collecting information for advocacy papers post-election. This issue of proof or the burden of proof is something we can't do too much with, not least because one of the ways funding will go, especially with local government, is that we will be moving into a commissioning environment, so we will commission activity, not fund grants. If you want funding for work in education, you will be given money because you can prove you have an impact. You will be contracted to deliver on certain objectives, so the more information your organisation has to prove that, the more likely you are to get work.

The Chair pointed out that the sports sector commissioned the same type of research from universities about ten years ago, to prove that engagement in sport had transformative effects on people beyond health, but including employability and self-esteem, and helped make the argument for better funding. If we had the equivalent for the arts, we would be in a stronger position.

Kate said that the crucial thing is to bring it all together nationally, and to focus on the immediate, short-term impacts that we can definitely record and prove through our activities. Kate believes we got hung up on long-term outcomes, which are not feasible for us at the moment, and missed the opportunity to track the here and now. As a sector, we haven't been creative enough in the ways of proving ourselves to others.

How do we close the gap between the need for museums and galleries to be socially relevant, when many of the people who choose to work in the sector do so because they perceive it to be intellectually stimulating, cool, interesting and avant-garde?

Virginia felt that this was an interesting question, but surely if someone is running an organisation which is at the cutting edge and offering brilliant art, why wouldn't you want to share that with everyone? To take the things that inspire you and share them with non-traditional visitors, because that work has a power that can be unleashed by anyone who has opportunity to engage. The best curators are those who apply intellectual knowledge to progress their art form and also create some kind of social good. Virginia believes good leaders should be able to do both and it is part of a greater

whole. It was also suggested that this way of thinking (i.e. we don't have to be socially relevant and can just be cool) is on the way out, and it goes against the process of putting so much investment into an exhibition, not to want to share it. Virginia gave some examples of other North West museums and galleries who are working as a consortium. As a result they have been commissioned by the local PCT to provide a range of experiences for people who are in health settings, as a result of work during the City of Culture year 2008.

Andrew commented that there is a resistance to this kind of thinking in some museums and galleries, which Virginia agreed with up to a point. However, on the other hand everyone who puts their life and soul into an exhibition wants people to come and enjoy it and get something from it. Is it really true that the only people they want to come and see it are people like themselves?

Andrew has certainly found that to be the case. Maybe this is something that is interesting for marketers, in that there is a problem with the M-word (marketing). Andrew has found that if you actually talk to somebody who has worked very hard to get the work onto the stage or in the gallery, they are passionate about it, and able to communicate with all kinds of people who are not experts or traditional visitors. However, when the curators are away from these audiences, there is a tendency to have more of a concern about their peer group than anybody else. Andrew's experience is that it is those curators who are really confident in their own vision and programming that are able to engage with audiences. Those who are not very confident in themselves are the ones looking over their shoulders and worrying about what their peers are saying. Maybe this is about the tipping point.

Andrew wanted everyone to think about how we could all make our organisations more like the North West Museums group or accelerate that process. Andrew was hoping for people to be inspired to make change within their own organisation, rather than all wanting to go and work for Virginia. This is about collecting the evidence together and proving the point, but also gathering friends, so that the peer pressure stops being only about great art, but also about engaging. The one thing we have in our favour as marketers is the decommissioning stick that has been mentioned. This is how the world is going, so anyone pushing in this way must win swimming with the tide, rather than against it.

Kate pointed out the other side of the situation: our colleagues know that they are swimming against the tide and so they fear, perhaps rightfully so, that this means more investment in the area of work marketers look after, which because there is no money, means there is less investment in the care of collections etc. There is a lot of fear and marketers have to be aware of that, and help them get over that fear.

Virginia has some sympathy with this situation as well, but argued that it does not have to be seen this way. Manchester recently opened a new gallery on the outskirts of the city, a collection of costumes that is the best in the country after the V&A. The council struggled to find the funding to refurbish what was a slightly decrepit building, but because they have made a commitment to engage that building and its collection with the local community, they were able to lever £1m worth of funding for the fabric of the building. This commitment to the community has not taken anything away from the fact

that it is a prestigious collection but it does add to what it offers. This is not about small local museums being relevant, but big collections demonstrating what they can do locally, and the kudos that comes with giving public access to collections of that quality nationally. The two things are part of the same message and not mutually exclusive.

Do you have any experience of working with the retail sector? Do you have any experience of advocacy among this sector?

Heather mentioned the role of arts organisations in regeneration, specifically how they can revitalise the high street, but our experience is that arts and culture are generally seen as little more than window dressing. The workshops that the questioner provides are little more than mother and toddler groups. The questioner is from Wolverhampton, where the rate of empty shops is running at 20%.

Manchester, along with a lot of other local authorities, has received money from the Empty Shop Fund to enable activities. Virginia believes this is a great opportunity for museums and galleries, particularly in respect of being able to take visual arts and creative activity out to places where people are. The Imperial War Museum recently ran a project like this, taking work into shopping centres to commemorate the 60th anniversary since the end of the Second World War. In Manchester, they have artists working in empty shops. In terms of locating your activities into a retail unit, there are considerations around health and safety and the availability of funding to enable you to do something worthwhile.

It is a question of working with those organisations that have an interest in supporting your local economy. Manchester has all the major retailers working together to make Manchester's success and have a single voice. It could also be about making sure that the local tourist body actually understands the impact that you are having.

Kate and Virginia were astonished at how arts organisations worked with tourism bodies in the city. They couldn't believe the lack of communication. Obviously your local development agency or tourism body will be instrumental in communicating the message of your city as a whole. Manchester museums' and galleries' biggest lesson was learning how irrelevant they were to the local tourism authority: just not on their radar. It was partly because as small individual institutions, it was impossible for them to understand the network, and partly because they just didn't have any reason to engage with the museums and galleries. Even getting together as a museums and galleries sector to talk to the people who could help you could be a successful way to progress this. The Manchester galleries and museums keep the conversation going all the time, by inviting them to the venues and collections, reminding them of their presence, impact and offer. Wolverhampton has a tourist information office, and it might be worth looking to see if there is some city region marketing organisation funded by the regional development agency.

Several things that Manchester learned:

- The scale: an institution that has an impact of £12 million is not as exciting as five organisations have the collective impact of £30 million
- Managing the communication with the tourism institution: they are bombarded with other sectors and they did not have the expertise within their organisation to

make intelligent decisions about the information they are receiving, when they were receiving it from about every individual museum and gallery in the city. By managing the communication, you create a coherent set of messages, rather than a lot of people jockeying for position with an organisation which takes some persuading in the first place.

- Manchester's museums and galleries discovered that the regional development agency was actively campaigning on the region's behalf in London to particular audiences. But no one knew about it, because it was being done in London, and not in the region. Once the group discovered what those audiences were, and their targets in terms of audience segments, then they were able to tailor the offer to those audiences, and thus created a virtuous circle.

The Chair thanked Kate and Virginia for an inspiring session, and the audience for a lively Q&A session.