



**the happy  
museum**

**Case Study – real  
practice, real impact**  
Reading Museum –  
engaging with vulnerable  
communities

**Reading Museum** is funded by the city’s borough council. The museum has 14 FTE staff and attracts some 115,500 visitors a year.

# Reading Museum – engaging with vulnerable communities

**This case study is about how Reading Museum used a community history project to pilot a new approach to working closely and engaging with communities. The project changed perceptions about several deprived areas of the city and had a positive impact on the participants. The museum is now working on a second Happy Museum project designed to provide community input into Reading’s strategic planning process.**

**This case study is relevant to:**

- Senior management team
- Learning and community engagement teams

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# Highlights

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*“We wanted to reveal the hidden history of these areas and to plant the idea that positive change was possible in the future.”*

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**Brendan Carr, Community Engagement Curator, Reading Museum**

- Some 60 members of some of Reading’s most deprived areas took part in the project
- Temporary pop up museums were set up in the community
- Evaluation showed participant and visitor wellbeing was boosted
- The museum was invited to take part in the ‘Reading 2050’ strategic planning process
- The project’s success has changed the museum’s approach to community engagement
- The museum has developed links with many community organisations and service providers.



# Museum profile

Reading Museum has been providing opportunities for learning, inspiration and enjoyment since 1883 and aims to provide innovative, hands-on learning services. In recent years, the museum has worked to align its work with the strategic priorities

of Reading Borough Council, which provides the bulk of its funding. The museum has identified a need to engage with Reading's vulnerable groups and to promote community cohesion. The museum employs 14 FTE staff and attracts some 115,500 visitors a year.

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*"During the Reading's Hidden Histories project, temporary 'pop up' exhibitions were set up in the neighbourhoods and colourful 'pocket history' pamphlets were created – more than 15,000 were distributed through schools, libraries, doctors' surgeries, local retailers and public spaces."*

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## Happy Museum funded activities

Reading Museum used its first commission funding to develop a community history project focusing on parts of the town that scored poorly on national indices of deprivation, and have a reputation for crime and anti-social behaviour. The aim was to challenge the negative perceptions of the Oxford Road, Norcot and Newtown areas of Reading, to explore their hidden heritage, to instil a more positive sense of place. Temporary exhibitions were

created and colourful pamphlets distributed in schools, community centres, libraries, and other places. Reading Museum worked closely with very active Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs) in those areas, building enduring relationships. In a second Happy Museum commission, Reading Museum was funded to develop their learning into a strategic input into the town's Local Development Plan.



# What happened?

*“Throughout the project we used a participatory evaluation approach to see if the attitudes of the 60 participants had changed towards the areas they live in. The data showed a slight increase in the number of positive words they used to describe their neighbourhood.”*

**Brendan Carr, Community Engagement Curator, Reading Museum**



“Whenever these three areas of the town feature in the local news it always seems to be about something negative,” says Brendan Carr, Community Engagement Curator at Reading Museum. “We wanted to present an alternative narrative, reveal the hidden history of these areas and have some impact on the wellbeing of the people in those communities. We wanted to show how the areas had changed over time and to plant the idea that the present situation was just a moment in that journey and that positive change was possible in the future.”

During the Reading’s Hidden Histories project, 60 different participants worked with the local NAGs, museum staff, local historians and others to research past lives of the different areas. Temporary ‘pop up’ exhibitions were set up in the neighbourhoods and colourful ‘pocket history’ pamphlets were created – more than 15,000 were distributed through schools, libraries, doctors’ surgeries, local retailers and public spaces. The project was positively reported by local newspapers, radio and TV.

“Throughout the project we used a participatory evaluation approach to see if the attitudes of the 60 participants had changed towards the areas they live in. The data showed a slight increase in the number of positive words they used to describe their

neighbourhood. We also have anecdotal evidence that their wellbeing increased, through new friendships, fun and being involved in a group activity.”

The success of this project has encouraged Reading Museum to take a more creative approach to community engagement. The community of practice established around the Happy Museum has influenced the museum to make more use of creative practitioners in funded project work. For instance MoD Community Covenant Funding was used to repeat a Happy Museum methodology, this time working with Reading’s armed forces community, during the “Reading at War” project. The museum commissioned a poet in residence who generated some powerful results from therapeutic sessions with serving personnel. Hearing contemporary voices was important in helping the museum contextualise the First World War’s emotional impact.

The museum now has an internal workgroup looking at how the Happy Museum approach can influence simple change. One current idea is about making sure school children are encouraged to recycle their waste from their lunch box. The group is also looking at how the museum can continue to lower its energy consumption.

# What's changed?

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*“Being part of the Happy Museum community of practice has given us the confidence to push a little harder when it comes to engaging audiences.”*

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**Brendan Carr, Community Engagement Curator, Reading Museum**

**New ways of working:** The success of this project has encouraged Reading Museum to take a more creative approach to community engagement. The museum has set up an internal workgroup on change drawing on Happy Museum principles.

**Influence:** The museum has acquired increased sphere of influence within an area of public policy it might not have previously been considered relevant to. As a direct result of the project the museum was invited to contribute to 'Reading 2050', a multi-agency initiative that is part of the central government's Foresight Future of Cities programme. By being a key

partners in the local development plan, the museum has the potential to bring communal memory to plans for the future – a role that could inspire other local authority museums.

**Confidence:** Being part of the Happy Museum community of practice “has given us the confidence to push a little harder when it comes to engaging audiences with vital contemporary issues.”

**Enduring partnerships:** The museum has built enduring relationships with many community organisations and service providers.



# Happy Museum success factors

Since 2008, The Happy Museum project has been testing a set of working principles through commissioned projects. These 'action research' projects have helped us identify critical success factors of how, what and why museums might re-imagine

themselves in the light of these principles. The table below is a summary of our 'Story of Change' tool (More information here: [www.happymuseumproject.org](http://www.happymuseumproject.org)). This case study best demonstrates the aspects of practice highlighted in red.

Principles	How? Drivers	What? Delivery	Why? Difference we make
Measure what matters	Share a wellbeing vision Share a Story of Change	Use time, resources and scope creatively Measure what matters to people	To re-think what matters
Be an active citizen	Encourage active engagement Anticipate challenge and change	Work experimentally Use everyone's potential	To create happy, resilient people
Pursue mutual relationships	Share ownership Ensure mutual benefit	Work across hierarchies and teams	To create happy, resilient teams
All of which help re-imagine museums for better community LIFE*			
Create the conditions for wellbeing Learn for resilience	Consider playfulness, creativity, activity and aesthetics	Be a good host Broker relationships	Communities are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning</li> <li>• Interacting</li> <li>• Feeling happy, satisfied and worthwhile</li> <li>• Environmentally aware</li> </ul>
Value the environment and be a steward of the future as well as the past	Consider the social and financial benefits of being green	Use the museum's unique resources. Lead by example: care of people, place and planet	

\* The Happy Museum Project is conducting a national LIFE survey, where LIFE = Learning, Interactions with others, Feelings and emotions, and Environmental awareness. More: [www.happymuseumproject.org](http://www.happymuseumproject.org)

# Tools used



## Story of change

Reading Museum used the 'story of change' to define their vision for the project and to plan the route to achieve that vision. The purpose of this tool (which is similar to theory of change, or logic modelling) is to make sure we start by focusing on the difference we want to make rather than on the activities we may use to achieve those ends.

Using a story of change challenges 'business as usual' thinking by starting with the overall purpose and working backwards. The process of 'measuring what matters' can then start at the planning stage – by defining the success factors for a project, a strategy or a change of direction. The tool is also valuable for helping to communicate a vision to staff, volunteers and all stakeholders, as well as the thinking that underpins it.

More on using a Story of Change can be found here:  
[www.happymuseumproject.org](http://www.happymuseumproject.org)

## Time capsule evaluation

Reading Museum developed a 'time capsule' tool to help it evaluate the impact of its Happy Museum funded project. The 'time capsule' evaluation asked participants at the start of the project to pick words that they felt described their area from a

pack of word cards. Their selection was recorded and the process was repeated at the end of the project. The selections were compared and analysed. The data showed a slight increase in the number of positive words participants used to describe their neighbourhoods.

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*"We have anecdotal evidence that their wellbeing increased, through new friendships, fun and being involved in a group activity."*

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**Brendan Carr, Community Engagement Curator, Reading Museum**

More on using a Time Capsule tool can be found here:  
[www.happymuseumproject.org](http://www.happymuseumproject.org)

# Online resources

Museum website: [www.readingmuseum.org.uk](http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk)

Project consultation: [www.readingmuseum.org.uk/get-involved/projects-consultation/happy-museum-project/](http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/get-involved/projects-consultation/happy-museum-project/)

Follow-up project: [www.readingmuseum.org.uk/get-involved/projects-consultation/where-s-reading-heading](http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/get-involved/projects-consultation/where-s-reading-heading)