



# Happy Museum thematic case study

Engaging emotions to  
promote wellbeing and  
build resilience

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**This case study is relevant to:**

- Senior management teams
- Learning and community engagement teams
- Curators

**This case study looks at how deliberately seeking to engage emotions can help to promote wellbeing in audiences and staff, and also build resilience in organisations.**

# About our Story of Change

Since 2008, the Happy Museum project has been testing a set of working principles related to wellbeing through small commissioned projects. The funded projects used a 'Story of Change' tool to define their sustainable wellbeing vision for the project and to plan the route to achieve that vision. Story of Change is also known as Theory of Change; Logic Modelling is a similar approach. Using a story of change challenges 'business as usual' thinking by starting with the

'why?' – the overall purpose of a project – and working backwards. Moving to a focus on wellbeing and sustainability is not something that can be planned and executed in the way a construction project can be. Thinking about a convincing narrative that will take us in that direction and sharing it helps everyone to align around the new direction.

More about our Story of Change can be found on [page 13](#) and [online here](#)

Principles	How? The 'drivers' of success	What? The activity you deliver	Why? The difference we want to make
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Measure what matters</li><li>• Be an active citizen</li><li>• Pursue mutual relationships</li><li>• Create the conditions for wellbeing</li><li>• Learn for resilience</li><li>• Value the environment and be a steward of the future as well as the past</li></ul>	How you go about setting up a Happy Museum approach: the drivers for change, commitments, set up and investments that underpin the approach.	The activity you deliver, working internally and/or externally, in partnership with staff, volunteers, participants and audience.	This is the reason we're here, the outcomes a Happy Museum can achieve. The difference we make to everyone, staff, volunteers, participants and audience.

# About this case study

This case study analyses Happy Museum funded projects on the theme of engaging emotions (including difficult emotions) – not only strategies aimed at audiences and visitors but also internal efforts aimed at staff and organisational culture. Our theory is that deliberately engaging emotions (as distinct from the more common museum approach of engaging the intellect) can help to promote wellbeing

in audiences and staff, and also build resilience in organisations. Focusing on different learning styles, as museums are very used to doing, also leads to an emphasis on physical activity, on making and on aesthetics. Putting the two together makes a kind of 'active stewardship', which is about caring for people and planet as well as collections and buildings, but which is also proactive rather than passive.





# 1. Sharing a sustainable wellbeing vision

**The Happy Museums investigated how a vision about sustainable wellbeing can be applied to what is unique about museums – their collections.**

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*"This highlighted to us the importance of first-hand or eye-witness testimony."*

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**Zoe Dunbar, Imperial War Museum North**

For instance, the **Museum of East Anglian Life** in Suffolk made the wellbeing link between objects and people explicit with a series of exhibitions comparing children's wellbeing in Victorian times with today. One of the exhibitions – Happy Days – involved 7 and 8 year olds from a local primary school designing a special happy day for themselves and for a Victorian child based around objects – the ones they had as well as the museum's own collection of Victorian's children's possessions. The children chose objects for their day and wrote about how they felt

about them. For their own happy day, the children overwhelmingly chose objects that represented relationships – with family and friends – and time spent playing outdoors. The ones they chose for Victorian children centred on food and festivities.

[\*\*Read our case study on the Museum of East Anglian Life here\*\*](#)

For their Happy Museum Project, the **Imperial War Museum North** in Stretford, Manchester, decided to test different approaches to object handling by visitors. This piece of action research was linked to a wider effort to re-imagine the museum's core purpose and function. The museum used – and continues to use – the story of change tool to develop a wellbeing vision, plan and chart progress. The project was a piece of action research testing six approaches to object handling (handling being a more direct route to the senses than interpretation) to explore their impact on wellbeing and civic engagement. "Using veterans to support object handling ... was the most successful approach we tested," says Head of Exhibitions Zoe Dunbar. "This highlighted to us the importance of first-hand or eye-witness testimony to the



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*“Conversations about sustainability were not new – they had a long heritage.”*

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experience on site and we have built upon this since the project completed. Object handling still forms a strong part of what we do and we now have object handling trollies manned by our veterans and volunteers.”

[Read our case study on the Imperial War Museum North here](#)

At the **Beaney House** they used the museum building and it's collections to engage its communities with their own wellbeing. 250 'Happiness Investigators' and 'Cultural Doctors', including 120 school children, were invited to investigate the museum's collections, library and heritage. These were then made into 'happiness prescriptions' which were issued to visitors in a full-sized model Apothecary made entirely from paper. The project explored how contact with cultural experiences can kick start healthier and happier communities.

[Read our case study on the Beaney here](#)

A new community developed gallery at **Godalming Museum** was used to show that conversations about sustainability were not new – they had a long heritage and were part of the town's ongoing story. A quote from the *Daily Telegraph* in 1881 was featured: “We shall not want the stoker and collier so much if only the example set by the good people of Godalming be followed. The waterfalls, millheads and rivers will quietly be making all our electricity by day and we shall be consuming it as easily at night, or the winds and tides will be made to labour for us. Nature in all her varied moods will be called in to help us fight against the dark, and we shall be eventually to turn night into day by the bright lamps which Nature herself kindles for us.”

[Read our case study on Godalming Museum here](#)





## 2. Plan time, resources and scope

**For some of the museums and galleries, the question of how to improve wellbeing by engaging emotions led to a re-evaluation of the resources available to them. Several museums focused their Happy Museum projects on underused outdoor space – in the process creating a wellbeing link with the environment.**

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*"Indoors, the children tend to sit down; outdoors they don't stop moving."*

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**Jack Shuttleworth, Bilston Craftplay**



The **Bilston Craft Gallery** in Wolverhampton added outdoor play to its existing play and craft offer, in the process opening up new possibilities for outreach. Craft experts were recruited to train Bilston staff to make outdoor play objects and the space was improved and developed – the space was developed and tested in partnership was developed with a local school. "We discovered that outdoor work is a very different thing from indoor craft play," says Jack Shuttleworth of Bilston Craftplay. "Indoors, the children tend to sit down; outdoors they don't stop moving. The school group made three visits and we put less material out each time, as we found it wasn't needed." Bilston is now offering term-time packages of five sessions of outdoor play and crafts to local schools. The gallery is developing a pop up craft space to bring craftplay to parks and open spaces in and around Wolverhampton.

[Read our case study on Bilston Craftplay here](#)

In another approach to engaging emotions, the **Shakespeare Birthplace Trust** in Stratford on Avon wanted to build relationships with the local community and make the gardens a place for repeat local visits. The Trust decided to 'reinvent' the garden, orchard and woodland of Anne Hathaway's cottage for local residents, through two installations and a community planting session. The project involved a touch sensitive 'Singing Tree', the commission of a piece of music for visitors to play, and a planting by volunteers of thousands of bluebells and snow-drops. It culminated in a community party. A visitor said: "This is a beautiful piece of work and that's coming from someone that doesn't like Shakespeare. But the whispered prose combined with the magic of Peter's violin is something very special. It puts you in a better place for a while." The project team reports that things are changing at the Trust and now "wellbeing is a legitimate aim for staff and visitors alike."

### 3. Use playfulness, creativity and aesthetics to engage the senses

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*"Playfulness is part of what staff do now."*

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Charlotte Derry, project consultant

**Other museums and galleries were more focused on expanding the scope of their offer, beyond a focus on learning to include focusing on the senses, physical and fun – a shift in mode of appeal from head to heart.**

**Manchester Museum** has a tradition of playfulness, and through two Happy Museum projects, the museum has tried to develop, spread and embed playfulness. The first project trained the museum's visitor team to develop their understanding of play and reflection techniques – and to support child-led play sessions. In the second project, the museum developed Rules for a Playful Museum, a playful and accessible handbook to capture the learning and experience of their experiments in playfulness. The museum now offers playful days and playfulness features

in museum strategy documents and in induction materials. Evaluation evidence following the rulebook project showed that playful behaviour from staff and visitors has increased. For project consultant Charlotte Derry, developing the rulebook has "really helped the museum have even more confidence. It is helping to embed play, which is a quite ephemeral, fleeting thing. Having this handbook underpins great practice making it something concrete – playfulness is part of what staff do now."

**[Read all about the Playful Museum here](#)**



**Torquay Museum** is a natural history museum and wanted to reach a new 14-18 year age range with a project focusing on the environment. The project was linked to a wider goal to make the museum a sustainability centre. The museum team ran assemblies in two secondary schools followed by seven young people's workshops. One key to the success of the project was the focus on



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*"Visitors respond to this with many saying their visit was 'an emotionally satisfying' experience."*

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enjoyment of the process – for the staff leading the workshops as well as for the young people taking part. The young people were very engaged and devised witty and resourceful materials on facing the challenges of climate change.

From the outset, the **Story Museum** in Oxford has put engaging emotions at the heart of everything it does. The Happy Museum project played a role in defining the museum's ethos and core vision. The museum has sought to engage the emotions of visitors through the use of space, the use of objects, and the use of aesthetics. Some exhibits allow visitors to tie labels with their own thoughts and comments on and leave them. "This is something we have incorporated throughout the building, allowing for living conversations with our visitors." Wellbeing has explicitly informed the design of exhibitions and the appointment of a theatre designer helped to create the

'deep human interconnections' and emotionally intelligent spaces the Story Museum were aiming for. Evaluation shows that visitors respond to this with many saying their visit was 'an emotionally satisfying' experience. The museum's first exhibition – 'Other Worlds' – had a remarkable level of engagement, with 6,000 written contributions in 18 days.

[Read our case study on the Story Museum here](#)

The Happy Museum project at **Woodhorn Museum** led to the appointment of a comedian in residence with a focus on wellbeing. As well as sessions aimed at visitors, there were several 'meet the comedian' training sessions offered to staff. The sessions helped break down staff silos. The comedian project was widely publicised and helped attract new audiences to the museum.



## 4. Be a good host, broker relationships

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*"As good hosts, they can pay attention to particular needs and they can also broker relationships between their 'guests'."*

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### **Engaging the emotions of audiences and local communities can be achieved by opening up the typical museum-to-visitor relationship.**

Museums and galleries should act as good hosts to their audiences and communities, offering things like welcoming space, food and drink. As good hosts, they can pay attention to particular needs and they can also broker relationships between their 'guests'.

sustainability project called 'Waste Not ...' asked local people to exhibit objects they have been keeping and repairing rather than replacing.

[Read our case study on The Lightbox here](#)



At **The Lightbox** in Woking, art was used to engage the emotions of group of people with mental health issues. During the gallery's 'Landscapes of the Mind' project, the nine participants selected inspirational artworks from the collection and worked with artists to create their own works. The participants curated an exhibition of both bodies of work and the project finished with a conference on 'the art of wellbeing'. The Lightbox has since developed its role as a host and broker with a number of collaborative community projects: Skyscapes involves adults with learning difficulties working with artists and drawing on the collection for inspiration. Older people at two care centres are taking part in 'Stitching your memories'. An intergenerational project involving Woking's Muslim community and the Shah Jehan Mosque will lead to the creation of a Sufi poetry soundscape. An environmental

**Gwynedd Museum and Art Gallery** in Bangor wanted to host a new kind of museum experience by encouraging people to talk and listen in the galleries. Through a partnership with Oxford Internet Institute (OII) and the Wales Centre for Behaviour Change, Gwynedd developed a software app that allowed visitors to record their reactions to works of art and to playback the reactions of others. Called 'What's your story?' the project aimed to boost engagement and participation, encouraging more extrovert behaviour in the exhibition space. Nudge techniques were used to draw people to recording points and to be bold in sharing their responses and an art therapist tested the app to use with her clients.

[Read our case study on Gwynedd Museum here](#)



## 5. Making an impact

*"I'm so chilled here. It's the atmosphere here, the concentrating on doing something."*

Young carer

Efforts to engage emotions, to speak to the heart rather than the head, can lead to people interacting more, feeling happy, satisfied and more worthwhile. In some museums, this enabled them to make more of a difference in their work with people with particular needs. In other museums, it led to a greater environmental awareness, as much through noticing surroundings as through awareness of the importance of environmental sustainability.

At **Abergavenny Museum**, Happy Museum funding was used to test a new approach to co-curation with local vulnerable young people. Two craftspeople led workshops in weaving with eight young carers and bee-keeping with 20 primary children with special needs.

The workshops took place both inside the museum and outdoors. Both groups, school children and young carers, made reference to the immersive experience of the activities. One participant referred to the "busy with your hands thing" – which is a way of describing 'flow', which researcher Mihály Csíkszentmihályi described as a mental state in which a person is fully immersed in 'energised focus'. As one young carer put it: "Every time I went home [after weaving] I was chilled out. I went home and had a shower and I was happy." Another said: "I'm so chilled here. It's the atmosphere here, the concentrating on doing something, more than the people." Staff noticed the same experience with the younger children who built stoops for bee-keeping, describing them as "gripped" by the activity.

[Read our case study on Abergavenny Museum here](#)





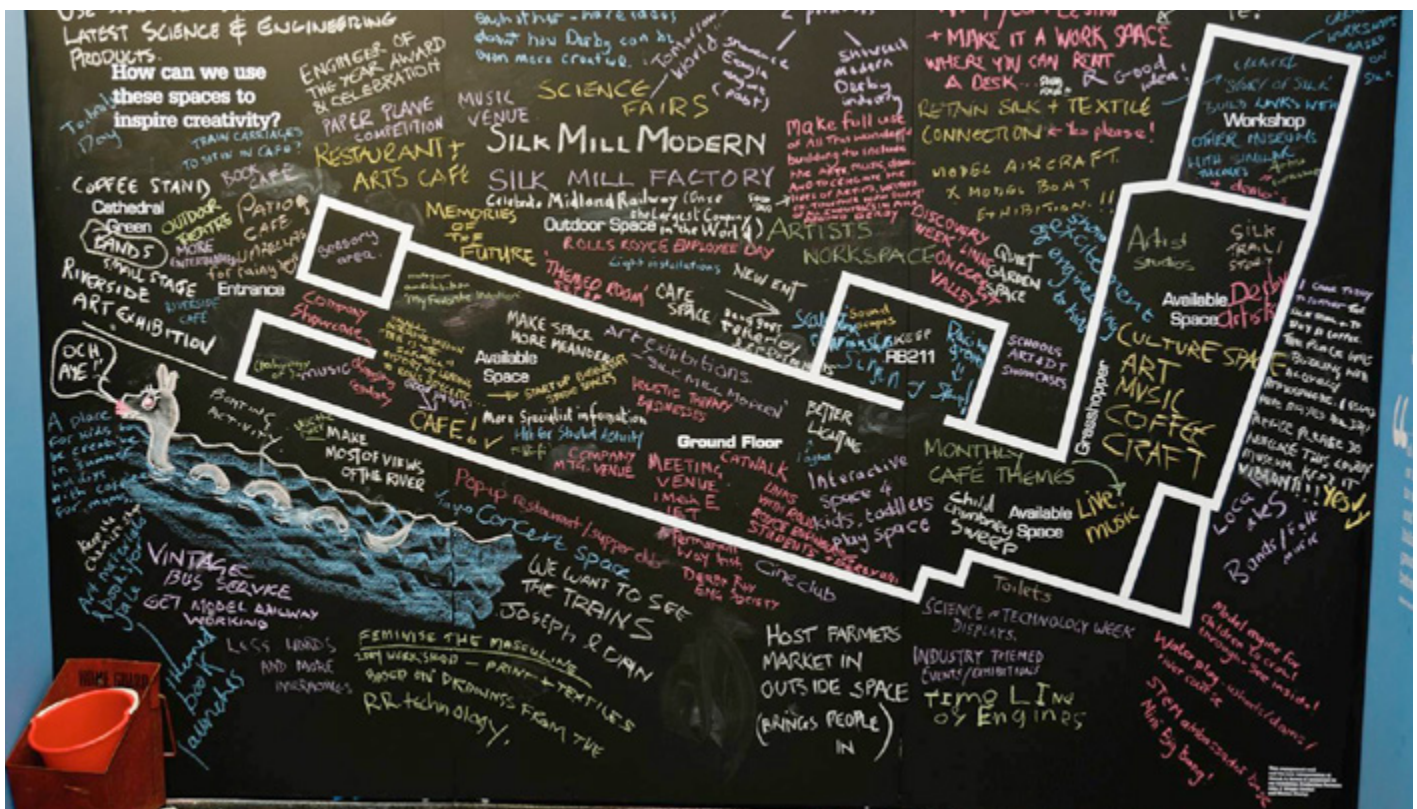
*"The activities emphasised the spiritual, environmental, edible and physical."*

**Derby Museums' Re:Make** project found that the act of making things improved peoples wellbeing. The project at the Silk Mill Museum invited audiences to become producers and makers, designing and building the refurbished museum's fixtures and fittings, with help from 'makers-in-residence'. Since 2012, more than 200 local people have been involved in designing and making furniture, display stands and fittings. Making is now at the heart of the museum, which has three workshop spaces offering creative and practical activities for visitors. The museum runs short sessions and weekend courses – and also hosts larger 'maker fairs'. Through a partnership with the University of Derby, the physiological impact of the activity of making was measured – revealing a small but significant drop in the level of stress hormone cortisol in those taking part in making activities. The learning from the project has

informed the restructuring of the Derby Museums staff team and the project's approach to co-production has been rolled out to the other museums. A Re:Make 2 project has led to a nature gallery being co-created by local people and the museum team.

**Read our case study on [Derby Museums here](#)**

At **Kirkstall Abbey Museum**, Happy Museum funding was used to develop active stewardship through a range of community projects. The activities emphasised the spiritual, environmental, edible and physical. Some were held in a local children's centre. Word of mouth brought large numbers to an Easter seed planting session. An adult with learning difficulties was among those that took part. As a result she took on planting one of the flower bed at her care home.



## 6. More about the Happy Museum's 'Story of Change' tool

**The projects funded by the Happy Museum project used a 'Story of Change' tool to define their vision for the project and to plan the route to achieve that vision.**

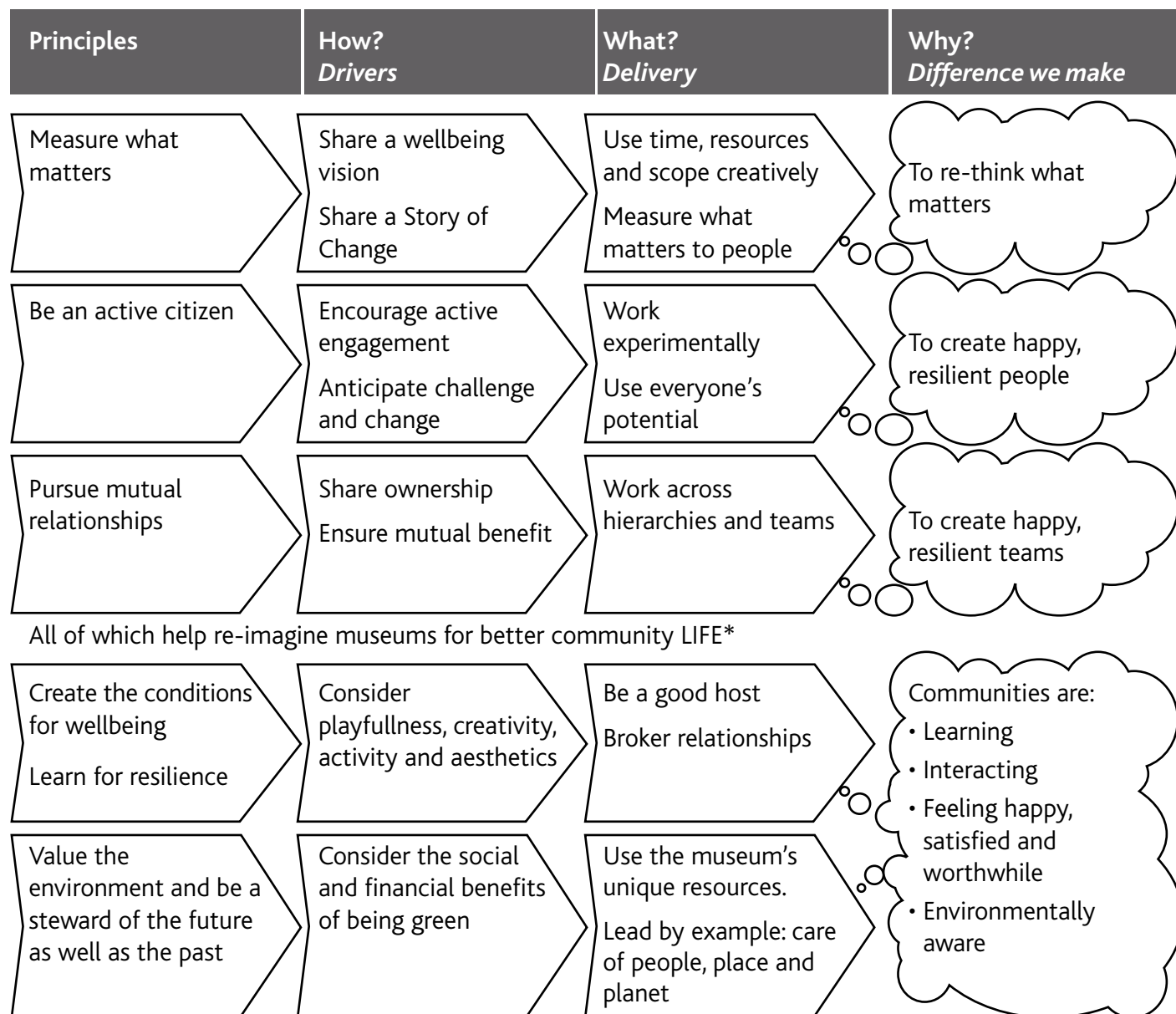
The purpose of this tool (which is similar to theory of change, or logic modelling) is to make sure we start by focusing on the difference we want to make rather than on the activities we may use to achieve those ends. Using a Story of Change challenges 'business as usual' thinking by starting with the 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.

[Read more about the Story of Change tool](#)



See below for our own Story of Change which shows success factors for Happy Museums. An [online version](#) contains links to further case studies and resources.



\* 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)