

## Wicked Problems, Happy Approaches



Hilary Jennings, Director

Hello. I'm Hilary Jennings, Director of The Happy Museum Project. Since 2011 we have developed and supported museum people and practice putting societal wellbeing in an environmental and future facing frame and encouraging museums to rethink their role. Our vision is for museums to be active stewards of people, place and planet.



2018 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of this image - Earthrise - taken during Apollo 8, the first manned voyage to orbit the moon. It sent a clear message to humanity of the finite and fragile nature of our home planet.

50 years later we continue to treat the planet like there is no tomorrow. Driven in part by an endless quest for economic growth we have entered a new

geological era – the Anthropocene –defined by the impact of humanity on our ecosystems. Faced with challenges such as climate change we need to recognise the limits of our planet, address our levels of consumption and focus on a fair distribution of resources to meet both current and future needs.

I was introduced the concept of climate change as a ‘wicked’ problem in a report from the Australian Public Service Commission. The term ‘wicked’ is used, not in the sense of evil, but rather as an issue highly resistant to resolution. Wicked problems, like Climate Change, have common characteristics:

They are difficult to clearly define with many interdependencies and are multi-causal, unstable with usually no clear solution. They are socially complex and solutions involve changing behaviour - with all the challenges that entails.

They hardly ever sit conveniently within the responsibility of any one organisation and are often characterised by chronic policy failure.

### **Proposed approaches to Wicked problems**

The need for holistic, not partial or linear thinking

Innovative and flexible approaches built on action, experimentation and evaluation

Work collaboratively across boundaries

Engage stakeholders (which may include citizens) in understanding the problem and identifying responses

Develop core skills and competencies

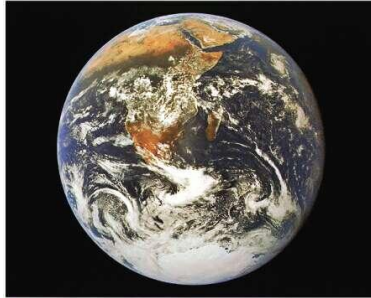
Understand behavioural change

Envision and explore the future / adopt a long-term focus

So far - so challenging. What really set me thinking though was the observation that ‘wicked’ policy problems are difficult to tackle effectively using traditional public sector approaches.

New responses are needed that are collaborative, innovative and flexible. I wondered how Happy Museums work might map against these types of responses.

## The need for holistic, not partial or linear thinking



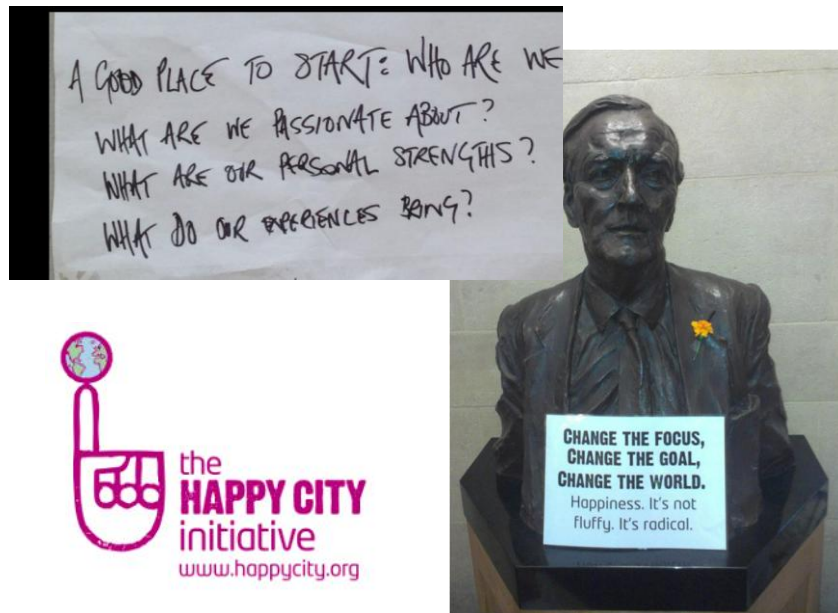
Happy Museum brings an holistic perspective to the challenge of climate change - drawing on thinking from economics, ecology and psychology as well as social movements like the Transition Network a global grassroots movement working to create low carbon, high wellbeing, communities engaged in making changes in how we live, where we live.,

The project was founded by Tony Butler, then Director of the Museum of East Anglian Life. Seeing firsthand the benefits to his community of engaging with a wide range of practical projects at the museum he proposed that a focus on societal wellbeing, on what *truly* makes communities thrive both now and for the future, might provide a challenge to dominant societal paradigms around economic growth, individualism and over-consumption - and that in this frame, museums might have much to offer.

‘Our own happiness is short-lived if we achieve wellbeing for our generation at the environmental expense of future generations.’

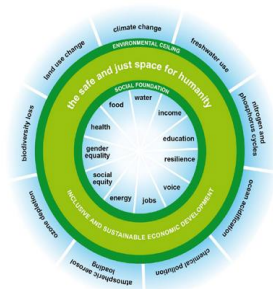
Happy Museum Project

From the outset holding such a broad frame was challenging. Happy Museum, whilst a catchy and memorable title encouraged some to dismiss us as 'happy clappy' promoting individual happiness in a growing wellbeing 'industry'. Wellbeing focused work was a relatively new field in museums - though one that was generating momentum - but even close collaborators found the broader framing a challenge.



Beyond the cultural sector, others were working in the same frame. Founded in Bristol in 2010, Happy City puts the wellbeing of current and future generations at the centre of city life and this year launched a UK thriving places index. In one of our early commissions The Royal Western Academy worked with Happy City to help put wellbeing and sustainability at the heart of a review and redevelopment of the museum.

‘we have economies that need to *grow*, whether or not they make us *thrive*, we need economies that make us *thrive*, whether or not they *grow*’..



Meanwhile a revolution was underway in Economic thinking and teaching. A worldwide movement of students challenged the dominance of narrow free-market theories taught in top universities as a threat to the world's ability to confront challenges like climate change. Many challenge the mantra of growth and explore new economic paradigms - including the wonderful Doughnut Economics of Kate Raworth who spoke to a sell out audience at the LSE recently stating that 'we have economies *that* need to grow, whether or not they make us thrive, we need *economies* that "make us thrive, whether or not they grow"..'.

**"What Wales is doing today, we hope the world will do tomorrow - action more than words is the hope for our future generations"**

United Nations



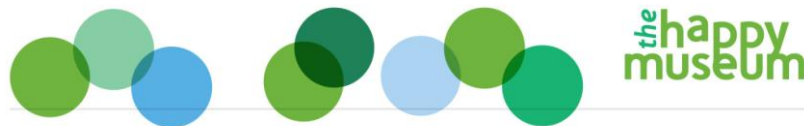
Meanwhile in 2015 the Welsh Government introduced the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act to give 'ambition, permission and legal obligation to improve our social, cultural and environmental wellbeing'. With funding from the Wales Federation, we are working with six museums to map and demonstrate how museums work to fulfil the breadth of the Goals of the Wellbeing Act.

**Innovative and flexible approaches  
built on action, experimentation  
and evaluation**



Happy Museum combines practical action with evaluation and research. Starting with a paper the Happy Museum, a Tale of How it Could Turn Out Alright, we offered a provocation to museums to undertake action research, experimenting and innovating with Happy Museum thinking to develop our six Principles

- Create the conditions for wellbeing
- Value the environment and be a steward of the future as well as the past
- Pursue mutual relationships
- Be an active citizen
- Learn for resilience
- Measure what matters



An evaluation underpinned by the Story of Change model lies at the heart of our Principle ***Measure What Matters***. It's a logical approach which works backwards from the difference we are hoping to make to what we do and how we do it, whilst leaving space for the imaginative and unanticipated. As Albert Einstein once said, "Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere."



In our first four years supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Arts Council, we funded 22 projects experimenting with ideas as diverse as a comedian in residence in a mining museum, a co-created gallery putting making at the centre of a museum, and a programme experimenting with play in a university museum.

Over time we have seen an evolution in the work of our Community of Practice. Initial responses were overwhelmingly focused on wellbeing with only a nod to environmental issues often unconnected to the core proposal.

Over time, however environmental themes became more prevalent with commissions such as The Waste Not exhibition at the Lightbox which celebrated everyday objects - from an old sewing machine to a toilet brush - challenging our attitudes to waste. Torquay museum engaged young sustainability champions in carbon reduction and advocacy. Meanwhile Ceredigion museum partnered with a local woodland trust to train young people in craft and enterprise skills to make a range of sustainable wooden objects for sale in the museum shop.

Chiltern Open Air Museum Imperial War Museum North The Garden Museum  
Shakespeare's Birthplace The Cinema Museum London Transport Museum The  
Story Museum Godalming Museum Slough Museum Storiell  
Torquay Museum Bilston Craft Gallery Royal West of England Academy  
Manchester Museum The Lightbox Derby Museums Ceredigion Museum  
Woodhorn The Beaney House of Art and Knowledge  
Oxford University Museums Design Museum People's History Museum Heritage  
Team at Toynbee Hall Seven Stories Reading Museum The Atkinson  
Monmouthshire Museum Service Mental Health Museum Chester Zoo Museum  
of Homelessness Culture24 National Trust Midlands Encounters Arts -Museum  
of Now Reading Museum Leeds Museums and Galleries  
Oriell Mon Wrexham Storiell Cardiff Story Museum

In 2015 we launched a 5-Year Study Group of six museums seeking to embed this practice over time, and in 2017 expanded our reach to work with 15 Affiliates - working beyond museums to include a zoo, an arts organisation and a heritage team embedded in a social enterprise tackling poverty. By this time organisations were expressing broader visions such as a desire to 'frame well-being in the context of environmental and social change' to engage with 'ethical grand challenges' and explore how museums 'help tackle the big issues that affect society within a turbulent and unpredictable world'.

## Work collaboratively across boundaries



Happy Museum focuses on sharing ownership and encourages people in museums to work from the basis of mutual benefit with their communities, audiences, participants, volunteers and staff.

Through our Principle, ***Create Mutual Relationships***, we explore how staff and public can work together, with different expertise but equal status, to achieve common outcomes such as making a sustainable and flourishing locality in which to live and work. Museums have tested new ways of collaborative working such as Human-Centered Design at Derby Silk Mill, while Reading Museum began to use its 'soft' power to connect with the community around plans for the city's redevelopment and the need to balance economic development with a liveable environment,.

We have collaborated with cultural organisations with different but overlapping remits such as People United, Julie's Bicycle and Culture24. We also engage beyond the cultural sector with think tanks, NGOs and academia including New Economics Foundation and Centre for Alternative Technology. These connections have sparked interesting thinking. A mining museum was inspired to begin a collection around renewable energy whilst a town museum launched an artist's commission on air quality as a focus for connection with local environmental groups. Individuals left museum work to write an environmental focused play, to become a cycle campaigner and to work for a zoo.

## Engage stakeholders (including citizens) in understanding the problem and identifying responses

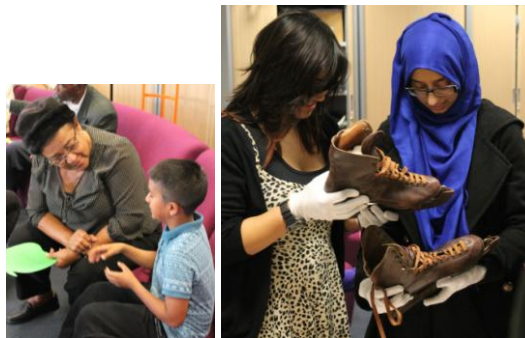


Research shows that when we think of ourselves as **consumers** we are less likely to engage with societal problems such as climate change, while when we think of ourselves as **citizens** we are more likely to participate, volunteer and come together to make society stronger and more resilient.

The Happy Museum set out with big ambitions for museums to change the world. We anticipated organisational even hierarchical change, however it soon became clear that much change was individual, indeed personal. We shifted focus - building on our principle **Be an Active Citizen** our museums encourage active involvement and engagement from visitors, volunteers and staff alike.

Wherever possible we work with teams from across and beyond the museum, breaking down traditional silos and barriers of 'expertise'. Shared and inclusive leadership is at the heart of this. As Nat Edwards of the Robert Burns Birthplace described "When we started using the Happy Museum principles as the meeting agenda items, suddenly the catering manager started talking about her advocacy work in mental health and whether the learning team could help her, soon they were talking together – and now we have a regular event around that interest. Across the board, there's a real sense of autonomy and can-do excitement."

## Develop core skills and competencies



Develop core skills and competencies – communication, big picture thinking and influencing skills, and the ability to work cooperatively. Communities who learn together become more resilient. As Barbara Heinzen identifies in *How Societies Learn* resilience and adaptation come from learning gained in small diverse groups, project by project over time.

Museums enable individuals and communities to learn together. Museum learning is already all the things much orthodox learning is not: curiosity driven; non-judgmental; non-compulsory; informal and fun. The people needed in the future will be resilient, creative and empathetic systems-thinkers, exactly the kind of capacities museum learning can support. Our Principle ***Learn for Resilience*** encourages learning across and between communities using the collections as a catalyst and the museum as a host.

Through a process of action learning and experimentation across a wide range of museum practice the **project itself** has learnt much about the potential of museums:

- They offer invitation to shared public space at a time when the public realm is being diminished and challenged both in real and virtual terms.
- Museums are largely trusted institutions in a time of fake news and exploitative big data.
- They are places for encounter where we can meet and connect beyond our immediate social bubble - where we can understand our differences and share our commonalities.
- Museums are places to experience awe and wonder - feelings that

research shows us help us to understand ourselves as communal and pro-social beings.

- They are places where we can reflect upon our past and apply this to imagining different futures.
- Museums are places full of humanity and human stories; they place that contribute to our wellbeing both individually and communally.

## Envision and explore the future / adopt a long-term focus



Museums are ideally placed to show us our potential for change. Museum collections evidence the adaptability of the human race and show the enormous societal shifts we are capable of, shifts in energy, production, consumption, transport, arts and culture as well as in ethics and mora

**"The future is not some  
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one we are creating "**

John Scharr

As the futurist John Scharr said: **"The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be**

**found, but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destinations."**

.Our principle ***Value the environment and be a steward of the future as well as the past*** encourages museums to recognise their unique position to engage us in longer-term thinking as an antidote to today's accelerating culture, using their buildings and collections to provide space and context for reflection and encouragement to take agency in possible futures.

## Understand behavioural change



Happy Museum has worked with experts in psychology and human behaviour to better understand the power of relationships and connections. .

Collaborators have included neuropsychologist **Kris De Meyer** who works with climate change scientists on how an understanding of belief might inform their communication; and playwright and activist **Sarah Woods** whose performance The Empathy Roadshow introduced us to mirror neurons, which, scientists argue, suggest humans are hard-wired for empathy.

Meanwhile **Tom Crompton**, of Common Cause whose focus is an understanding of the centrality of compassionate values for most people, has worked with Manchester Museum to bring these values into programmes and conversations.

## Complex problems - happy solutions?

Viewing Climate Change as a wicked problem throws valuable light on the particular role and approaches that museums might take to connect with it in a way that is meaningful and effective.

In tackling climate change, with its vast global and temporal scale, there are no silver bullets. As individuals we make changes in our thinking and behaviour through accumulated understanding and experience. Organisations can only change when the individuals within them change. The pace of change may feel slow and imperceptible, then shift occur as if from nowhere, like recent awareness of the dangers of plastic..

We might take encouragement from the fact although our challenge may be wicked, our world is complex, and in that very complexity solutions may arise. When Kevin Anderson, Professor of Energy and Climate Change at the University of Manchester was asked, post COP 21 what gave him optimism he thought carefully, and replied....

*"We live in a complex world. Not just a complicated world, a complex world. Climate change is a very complex problem. The great thing about complexity is that it has emergent properties. Things come out that you would never anticipate, in fact you cannot anticipate them. The good thing about that is that it makes every single person, all 7 billion of us, agents for change. Most of us will fail. Most of our ideas will wither and die on the vine, but a few seeds will flower and come forth, and the role of society is to nurture those..... if you see the world as a complex problem, you're no longer relying on the Prime Ministers and the leaders, you're relying on all of us.... It's quite a hopeful message, that we could see change emerge from different places, to give ourselves all some scope for thinking differently about the future.'*

We believe it there is a key and urgent role for society, for culture, for museums, to nurture our citizens as agents of change and to give us space and scope to 'think differently about the future'?

Happy Museum plan to launch an international Affiliate scheme later this year, we are seeking input and interest so do come and speak to me (or Bridget, Anna, others in the room....) follow us on twitter or sign up on our website for our regular newsletter.

Hilary Jennings, Manchester University, April 2018