



## Case Study – real practice, real impact

The Lightbox, Woking –  
community engagement  
and co-creation

**The Lightbox, Woking** is a charity and a private company run by a full-time staff of 13 and 11 part-timers. The gallery is supported by 250 volunteers and attracts 89,000 visitors a year.

# The Lightbox, Woking – community engagement and co-creation

**This case study is about how members of the community with mental health issues curated an exhibition called 'Landscapes of the Mind' – and helped The Lightbox to embed a participative way of working and a focus on wellbeing.**

**This case study is relevant to:**

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

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# Highlights

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*“The Happy Museum Project helped us to embed a way of working which gives greater control to community participants and improves their wellbeing.”*

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Rib Davis, special projects manager,  
The Lightbox

- The project allowed the gallery to embed its new approach to community engagement
- Participants said the project was “a life-changing experience”
- The project was accompanied by a well-attended conference on art and wellbeing
- Internal discussions on wellbeing and sustainability were sparked by these initiatives
- A second Happy Museum project followed – on our culture of waste and consumption





# Museum profile

The Lightbox gallery and museum in Woking is home to three significant arts and heritage collections and to an interactive museum of the town's history. The Lightbox is one of nine galleries and museums across the UK taking part in the Our Museum programme, funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, which puts

community engagement at the heart of all the organisations do. The Lightbox is a charity and a limited company overseen by a board of Trustees. The gallery is run by a full-time staff of 13 with 11 part-timers, supported by 250 volunteers. It attracts some 89,000 visitors a year.

*"The project aimed to challenge perceptions about mental health issues and about the role of the museum in the community."*

## Happy Museum funded activities

The Happy Museum funding supported the community engagement work already begun under the Our Museum programme. The additional strand of work enabled the gallery in 2013 to deepen its focus on mental health. The 'Landscapes of the Mind' project involved nine participants with mental health issues. The participants selected inspirational artworks from the Ingram Collection of

Modern British Art and worked with artists to create their own works, a process documented by a video artist. The participants curated an exhibition of both bodies of work. The project finished with a conference on 'the art of wellbeing'. Since the project, the gallery has led collaborative projects working with adults with learning difficulties, older people and the Muslim community.



*“The project gave us the confidence to ask a very fundamental question: what was our purpose? The most important change has been in our organisational culture, it’s contributed to giving a commonality of purpose across the organisation as well as across projects.”*

**Rib Davis, special projects manager, The Lightbox**



## What happened?

“Our involvement in the Happy Museum project built on what we were already doing,” says Rib Davis, special projects manager for The Lightbox. “It helped us to embed a way of working which gives greater control to community participants and improves their wellbeing.”

The purpose of the project was to increase the shared ownership and decision-making between museum staff and participants as a model for the way the museum operates. The project also aimed to challenge perceptions about mental health issues and about the role of the museum in the community.

At the ‘Landscapes of the Mind’ private view, the participants said the project had been a life-changing experience. Evaluation showed that they were coming to the museum as visitors and felt their relationship with staff was developing – although there was still a way to go before they felt they were equal partners.

The project ended with a well-attended conference on the ‘art of wellbeing’ – with many wellbeing academics participating. From The Lightbox’s point of view, the conference had a number of benefits. It raised the profile of the organisation in terms of this sort of work; it consolidated the place of The Lightbox within a network of organisations in the field of arts and mental health; and it provided an excellent opportunity to encourage others to work in a similar way, handing as much control as possible to the participants.

In parallel, the gallery held internal discussions related to wellbeing, starting with the question of how we measure success – as a society, as individuals and as organisations. “It was very refreshing to focus staff meetings on some bigger issues, instead of pensions and the washing up.” One result of asking staff what makes them happy was that one staff member began running a knitting circle







at the museum. Interestingly, project participants were in some cases more prepared to challenge consumerism as a source of wellbeing than staff.

“Overall, the project gave us the confidence to say this is what we should be doing, it allowed us to ask a very fundamental question: what was our purpose? The most important change has been in our organisational culture, it’s contributed to giving a commonality of purpose across the organisation as well as across projects.”

The Lightbox is currently working on three collaborative community projects: Skyscapes involves adults with learning difficulties working with artists and drawing on the Ingram 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. All these projects will culminate in an exhibition or installation at The Lightbox.

Environmental sustainability is the theme of a second Happy Museum project. Called ‘Waste Not ...’ the project asks local people about the objects they have been keeping and repairing rather than replacing. “The idea is to question the continual upgrade culture we live in. We will advertise locally for people to tell us about their objects. We will choose about 20 objects, work with their owners. The plan to take over the gallery for a few days, with an exhibition of the objects and showing of three minute films about the objects and their owners. There will also be an environmental stall with information about sustainability and alternatives to upgrading.”



# What's changed?

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*"Participants said the project had been a life-changing experience."*

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**Community engagement:**

Landscapes of the Mind proved a stepping stone towards a form of active community engagement, where The Lightbox and collaborators jointly devise projects from the outset, rather than the Lightbox inviting participants to take some control of a project that has already been designed. The Landscapes of the Mind project helped to embed a participative, community-focussed way of working.

**Sustainability:** The Lightbox has become more aware of the issue

of environmental sustainability, both as an organisation and as individuals. Since the first commission, The Lightbox has taken part in a Happy Museum sustainability event resulting in an action list to improve environmental sustainability at the gallery. The theme of a second commission is sustainability and alternatives to consumerism.

**Organisational culture:** The gallery staff team benefitted from questioning the organisation's purpose and values.



# 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? <i>Drivers</i>	What? <i>Delivery</i>	Why? <i>Difference we make</i>
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



The Lightbox team 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)

## Online resources

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

Conference report: [Landscapes of the Mind – post project conference](#)

