

the happy
museum

Happy Museum thematic case study

Empowering staff, building
external partnerships

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This case study is relevant to:

- Senior management teams
- All internal stakeholders
- Key staff in partner organisations

This case study is about how encouraging a culture of 'active citizenship' – in staff, volunteers and others – and seeking mutually beneficial relationships can lead to change, increased wellbeing and build resilience in individuals and 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 14](#) 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"> • Measure what matters • Be an active citizen • Pursue mutual relationships • Create the conditions for wellbeing • Learn for resilience • Value the environment and be a steward of the future as well as the past 	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

The Happy Museum Project seeks to bring about change in cultural organisations at every level – from change in individuals, to change in teams and groups, to change in the community or even the society.

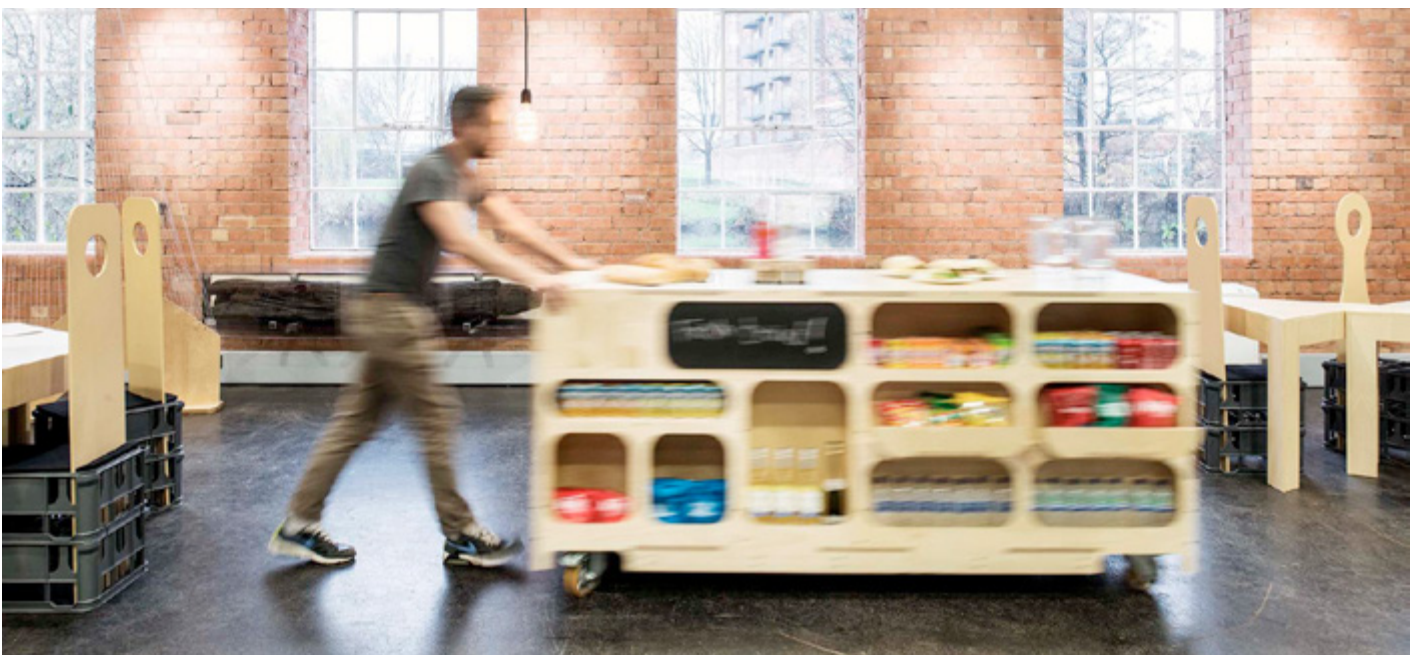
Two key Happy Museum principles are that organisations should seek to encourage active citizenship and work to develop mutual relationships. Active citizens are empowered and being an active citizen inevitably leads to making connections with others. If those relationships develop based on mutual benefit, in which everyone has ownership, those connections will tend to develop and grow strong, and create resilience within an organisation – or between an organisation and individuals or groups on the outside.

Museums and galleries can develop this idea and become hubs for connections between a range of organisations that might not be connected, but which

could mutually benefit from being brought together. The hub model is particularly effective as it spreads responsibility for making connections within a group of organisations and it also contributes to the development of greater resilience through mutual support between organisations.

This case study looks at projects fostering active citizenship and mutual relations – for individuals, groups within an organisation, in external partnerships with groups or individuals, and where a hub model has been adopted.

The case study also includes examples where the focus has been on vulnerable local communities. Happy Museums take a deliberate strategic decision to develop active citizens – this not only creates a greater sense of ownership in the community but also many other benefits.



1. Focus at an individual level

The following examples of Happy Museum funded projects show different ways that a focus on the quality of individuals' experience can lead to benefits – for the individual and for others too. Greater confidence, a strong sense of ownership, and higher engagement are among the changes that Happy Museums have found.

“Setting out to empower people and share ownership with them, as well as valuing wellbeing alongside learning, played an important role in the success of these projects.”

Several of the Happy Museums worked with vulnerable people – with mental health issues, homelessness or young carer responsibilities. Setting out to empower people and share ownership with them, as well as valuing wellbeing alongside learning, played an important role in the success of these projects.

One aspect driving **Gwynedd Museum's** interest in developing a software app (which allowed visitors to record and leave their

own reactions to pieces in the collection) was to give confidence to shy or introverted visitors – to show that their voices counted. The app was a mechanism for quieter voices to be heard, and for challenging the norm of respectful hush in museums.

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

Torquay Museum's project was about re-thinking the museum, to develop its scope through a focus on environmental sustainability and young people. The workshop series the museum ran allowed the voices of young people to be heard. The team benefitted from the energy and positive thinking that the young people brought to the most challenging of problems.

London Transport Museum worked with homeless people through a partnership with a charity, resulting in growing confidence for individual participants. The project focused on wellbeing and mutual relationships between new and existing volunteers, as well as on offering the chance to learning new skills. The experience resulted



“Staff, volunteers and veterans were involved in testing different ways to allow visitors to handle or interact with objects in the collection.”

in increased confidence for one homeless volunteer, who went on to find employment.

The **Imperial War Museum North** carried out a piece of empirical research as part of a wider piece of work on wellbeing and the museum’s core purpose. Staff, volunteers and veterans were involved in testing different ways to allow visitors to handle or interact with objects in the collection. Using veterans to support object handling was the

most successful approach – and highlighted the importance of first-hand, eye-witness testimony and one-to-one conversations to the museum experience. There are now more veterans in the galleries sharing their stories. Object handling trollies manned by veterans and volunteers is now a strong part of what the museum offers.

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



2. Focus on a group or at an organisational level

“Active stewardship of people and places are needed for a changing world.”

Several Happy Museums chose to focus their projects at an organisational level or on specific groups – such as staff teams or vulnerable visitors. This can enhance visitor engagement and improve how an organisation works across hierarchies and departments. A focus on groups is about seeking to make the most of everyone’s potential.

Audiences

Gwynedd Museum and Art Gallery’s project aimed to enrich the experience of their audience. Called ‘What’s your story?’ the project was about developing and testing a software app that allowed visitors to record their views on particular objects in the collection. The aim of the app was 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. **Godalming Museum** is hoping to make use of the app with its audience.

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

Participants

As part of **Ceredigion Museum**’s Happy Museum project, young people were involved in developing crafts inspired by the collection for sale in the museum shop. For Stuart Evans, the museum’s designer and technician, working with the young interns to explore the museum’s objects “refreshed our view of the collection.” The focus on the young craftspeople and on developing an enduring partnership with woodland charity Tircoed has brought many benefits to the museum. As Ceredigion shows it is no longer good enough to just be a passive steward of heritage. Active stewardship of people and places are needed for a changing world.

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



Front of house/ visitor team

Manchester Museum's first project for Happy Museum was focused on developing the role of the visitor team (front of house staff) and embedding playfulness within the organisation.

Around 25 members of the visitor team were trained by visiting play work specialists in child-led play and in the use of different techniques for observation and evaluation. The key aim was to widen their engagement with visitors and to broaden the scope of the role so they were more empowered. In the second project, the visitor team worked with an external consultant to develop a handbook – Rules for a Playful Museum – which built on and embedded the work of the first project. “A playful museum is an attitude of people and the environment,” says Anna Bunney. “Our museum is a living organism and our gallery staff have coined the term ‘relaxy staffitude’ as one of the key ingredients in creating the right conditions for play.”

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

“Breaking down internal barriers was part of reinventing the museum after the refurbishment. There is now more internal collaboration.”

Staff teams

At **The Lightbox** in Woking, in parallel with a Happy Museum project working with local people with mental health issues, 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. According to special projects director Rib Davies: “Overall, the project gave us the confidence [...] 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.” One result of asking staff what makes them happy was that one staff member began running a knitting circle at the museum.

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

At **The Beany House of Art and Knowledge** in Canterbury a Happy Museum project brought different staff teams together and broke down barriers. The Beany commissioned the creation of ‘cultural apothecary’s shop’ made out of recycled materials. Cultural ‘prescriptions’ inspired by the house and its collection were developed by children from local schools. “The project required a lot of staff involvement. We used to be organised in three departments, and staff in those groups didn’t get many opportunities to work together. Breaking down internal barriers was part of reinventing the museum after the refurbishment. There is now more internal collaboration.” In deciding on a



wellbeing prescription, one child chose a meeting with a particular member of the front of house staff as the prescription – which was very empowering for the staff member selected. By co-creating the apothecary project, The Beaney developed more partnerships, and boosted participation and community engagement.

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

Derby Museums' Re:Make refurbishment project at the Silk Mill meant a huge investment of staff time, but has also led to a significant increase in staff engagement. "The staff were given the opportunity to really get involved, and it enabled them to experience what the participants felt as makers," says Andrea Mercer senior manager of audiences and communities at Derby Museums. "A lot of personal staff time has been devoted to this project through a desire to make this project a

success. This has allowed us to develop deeper, more meaningful and responsive relationships with community volunteers and has also led to further thinking about resilience and well-being by both individual staff members and the organisation as a whole."

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

The **Story Museum** in Oxford is using playfulness and creativity in an effort to have wellbeing written into the fabric of the organisation. The museum has ten full time employees, as well as up to five interns and three or four volunteers at any one time. The museum uses a 'happy count' at weekly staff meetings, with each person sharing a personal score on a happiness and wellbeing scale from 0 to 10. The scores are noted down and tracked by individual and by team. Crucially, the scores are not commented on or discussed in the meeting. "The happy count has been a very good tool for us", says co-director Kim Pickin. "The fact we do the count and write it down is a way of saying wellbeing matters in this organisation. Little things come out of it – if someone is low, someone else will do something nice for that person during the day. We find it brings out the kindness in people." Using the Happy Tracker, which strategically invites personal emotion into the workplace, has made the staff team more resilient.

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

"This has allowed us to develop deeper, more meaningful and responsive relationships with community volunteers."

Andrea Mercer, Derby Museums



“Participants said the project was ‘a life-changing experience’.”

Vulnerable people

The focus of **The Lightbox** project was a group of vulnerable local people. Called Landscapes of the Mind, the project engaged a group of participants with a history of mental health issues in co-curating a new exhibition. The project was accompanied by a well-attended conference on art and wellbeing. The project allowed the gallery to embed its new approach to

community engagement – and participants said the project was ‘a life-changing experience’. The **London Transport Museum’s** project focused on homeless people, while for Abergavenny it was young carers. In all these cases, the focus on the participation and wellbeing of a particular vulnerable group led to benefits for both the group and for the organisation.



3. Focus at a community level

“Once the museum became a hub connecting a number of partner organisations the responsibility for vulnerable people was shared and the load was lighter.”

Developing community relationships has a knock on effect on partnerships, communities and even society. It also has positive impact on Happy Museums, creating a virtuous circle, attracting new and different audiences, and new and different resources to invest.

Developing mutual relationships is about mutual benefit, but also co-creating and even sharing ownership so that mutual relationships happen earlier and earlier in the supply chain. Another way of thinking about this is of moving our communities higher up the hierarchy of responsibility so the museum shares the load with other local service providers.

organised a conference on the ‘art of wellbeing’ – consolidating the gallery’s place within a network of organisations in the field of arts and mental health.

The **Cinema Museum** has developed a number of powerful partnerships with local organisations and individuals following a decision to focus on wellbeing and community outreach. An initial Happy Museum project informed the museum’s strategy and led to the creation of 12 different wellbeing offers for local residents, service providers, schools, universities, GPs and other local charities and organisations. This was a significant development from the project’s starting point. Initially they invited individuals to be involved with their Happy Museum commission, but many of them were quite vulnerable, and the museum didn’t have the resources to support them properly. Once the museum became a hub connecting a number of partner organisations the responsibility for vulnerable people was shared and the load was lighter.

External partnerships and being a hub

Many of the Happy Museums developed new external partnerships as a result of their projects. **Bilston Craftplay** in Wolverhampton developed their outdoor space and a new play offering for schools in partnership with local primary schools and other organisations. **Ceredigion Museum’s** ‘Harvest the Knowledge’ project worked with local young people to develop a range of craft items (inspired by the collection) for sale in the museum shop – in the process developing a close and enduring relationship with Tircoed, a woodland and rural communities charity. As part of the ‘Landscapes of the Mind’ project, **The Lightbox**

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



Co-creating with community and external groups

“Slough Museum developed a lasting partnership local charity Aik Saath, which works with people of all ages, faiths and backgrounds.”

Ceredigion Museum in Aberystwyth is a small institution that has been facing cuts to staff and budgets over the few years. A second Happy Museum project, ‘The Gospel Ship’, uplifted both team and participants through a series community workshops. It used the principle of active citizenship to bring in new volunteers, to crowdsource funding and to promote the project through social media.

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

The **Chilterns Open Air Museum** project was called ‘Green Ways from Yesterday’ and was conceived to help the museum shift from a focus on buildings and agriculture to skills – and at the same time to develop stronger community links. As a result, the museum established links with a new group of organisations and a wider audience than before.

Godalming Museum piloted a new way of working and in the process relinquished the old way of developing and launching new exhibits. The museum worked with local people and community groups to create a new interactive exhibit linking local history and geography with the theme of environmental sustainability. As the scope of the project grew from an exhibit to a new gallery, the museum realised it didn’t need to launch the gallery with a private view as the project was already alive through community involvement.

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

Kirkstall Abbey near Leeds experimented with community-focused projects and on building stronger local partnerships. It targeted its marketing on specific local groups – families and children principally – rather than do a broad marketing campaign aimed at ‘the usual suspects’. As a result, new groups were brought into the museum and a new ‘market sector’ was opened up which hadn’t existed before. Many people involved in the project were contacted through a local children’s centre.

Slough Museum developed a lasting partnership local charity Aik Saath, which works with people of all ages, faiths and backgrounds. The project facilitated dialogue between different generations and forged a connection between the museum and a section of its community that it had not previously directly engaged with.



“Thinking this profoundly is a revolution rather than evolution for museums.”

Reading Museum used a community history project to pilot a new approach to working closely and engaging with communities. The museum worked closely with neighbourhood action groups in several deprived areas of the city – building enduring relationships with many community organisations and service providers. The project changed perceptions about these areas and had a positive impact on the participants. The museum also increased its sphere of influence and, as a direct result of the project, it was invited to contribute to ‘Reading 2050’, part of the central government’s Foresight Future of Cities programme. The museum’s second Happy Museum project – ‘Where’s Reading Heading?’ – focused on working with communities to engage them in the city’s strategic planning process.

Thinking this profoundly is a revolution rather than evolution for museums. It has prompted some staff to leave the sector and work in learning and environmental roles elsewhere. From engaging toddlers with their core strength in Bilston, to hearing from veterans talk about the ravages of war at IWM North, from trustees stepping up on the environment in Godalming to engaging citizens in the future of their neighbourhoods, developing active citizens and mutual relationships are necessary for a healthy, happy society that is ready to meet the challenges of the future.

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



4. 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.

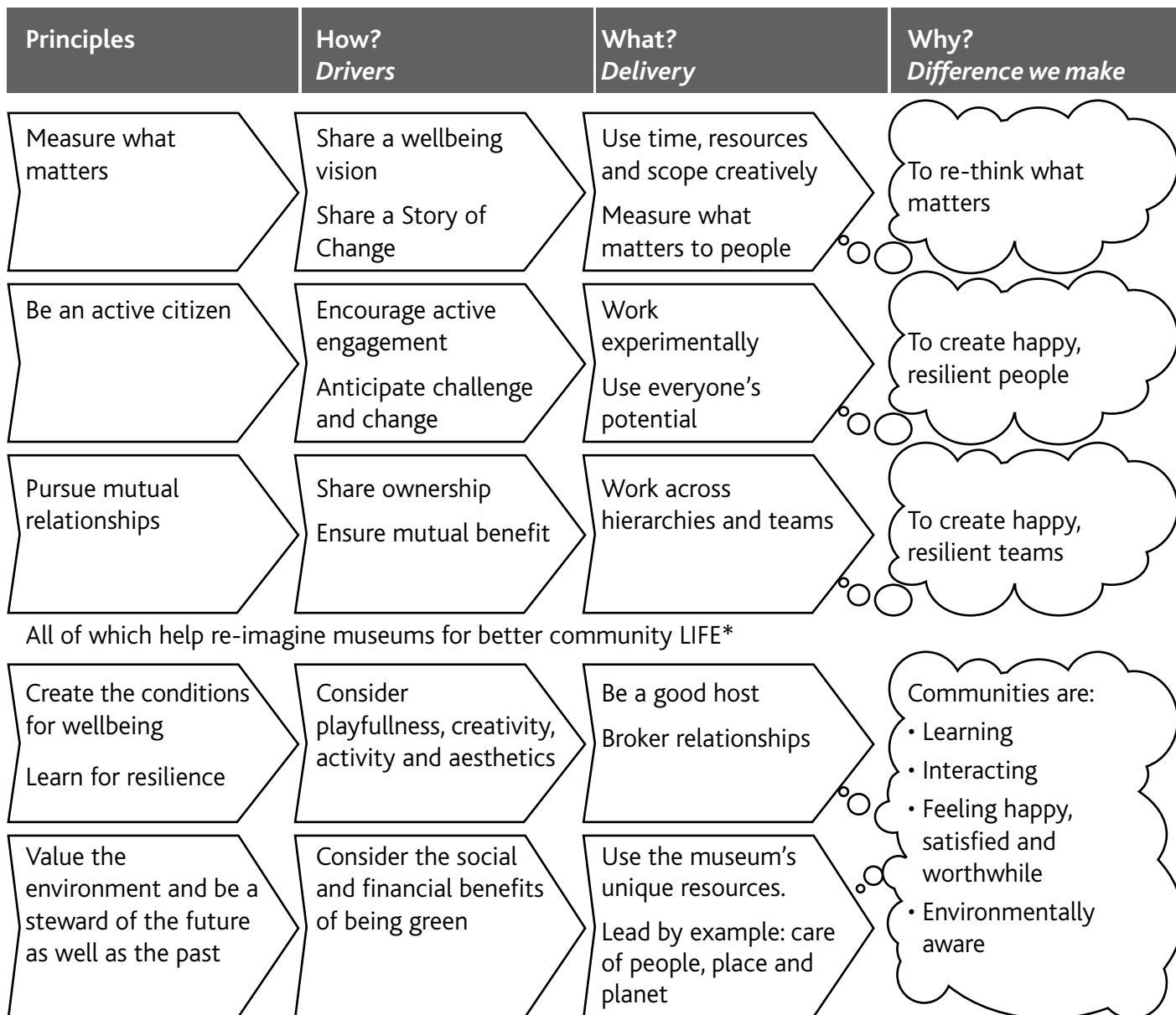
The purpose of this tool (which is similar to theory of change, or logic modelling) is to make sure we start by focusing on the difference we want to make rather than on the activities we may use to achieve those ends. Using a Story of Change challenges 'business as usual' thinking by starting with the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