Collection Histories and Organisational Change



UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Birmingham Museums

Introduction

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We welcome this research as a valuable contribution to understanding how collections can act as catalysts for meaningful organisational and social change. The findings reinforce what we and many museums are increasingly recognising — collections are not simply assets to preserve and display, but powerful resources and tools for building relationships, sharing authority and creating more representative cultural narratives.

This report highlights a much-needed shift from a short-term project delivery mode, towards embedding inclusive practices, sustainable community partnerships, and participatory approaches across entire organisations. It also demonstrates the growing importance of people-centred storytelling in helping museums connect collections with contemporary audiences and diverse lived experiences. For museums, galleries and archives, these findings provide both evidence and encouragement to invest in long-term transformation. They underline the value of committing core resources, revisiting policies, and involving communities in decision-making around collections, interpretation, and collecting practice. The research offers practical insight into how museums can become more relevant, responsive, transparent and accountable to the communities they serve, while ensuring that collections remain central to organisational purpose and public value.

Our Research

Our research looks at how museums, galleries and archives are conducting work around collections and their histories, from research to (re)interpretation, (re)display, archiving and programming. We ask how collection histories have been shared through physical and/or digital initiatives since 2021, in what ways these correspond with institutional strategies and how local communities have been involved. Co-designed by researchers at the University of Birmingham, Birmingham Museums Trust, and the Exhibition Research Lab (ERL) at Liverpool John Moores University, this research focuses on regional, civic and charitable collections of fine and applied art, social history, material cultures and world cultures across the UK and Ireland.

The roles played by public collections are being reimagined through a necessary interrogation of their relationship with communities. There are new approaches to recognising and addressing the power imbalances between museums and their publics, and a pronounced shift towards co-production as a mechanism for democratising access and overturning exclusionary practices. [1] These changes have been occurring within the wider contexts of financial crises, global conflict, the pandemic, changing government policy and the impact of social justice movements, all of which have required cultural organisations to change how they operate, ensuring they are increasingly inclusive, representative, relevant and purposeful. Our aim is to examine how these changes affect the way regional and local public collections operate, including medium-sized and smaller civic and charitable organisations, across the UK and Ireland.

Findings

We have found that, ideally, working with and around collections:

- **Drives organisational transformation**, resulting in changes to access, inclusion and representation, new collection development and consultation policies, integration of co-production and participatory practices, and embedding sustainable relationships with communities.

- Puts **objects and stories back into the centre** of what museums, galleries and archives do, using tangible assets such as spaces, collections and new commissions differently, and creating new intangible assets through storytelling and new research in partnership with communities.

Recommendations: Share knowledge. Co-produce. Collaborate. Embed change.

Museums:
- Ensure that projects lead to meaningful long-term change. Where possible, commit core budget.
- Work equitably with communities to tell new and diverse stories.
- Be open, share power, avoid extractive behaviours.

Sector bodies and funders:
- Support new acquisitions and collection development.
- Support community-focused staffing.

Communities:
- Get involved - where relationships are designed to be long-term and well supported!
- Use your spaces, shape your collections!

Data

We collected data through twenty-two structured interviews with colleagues working with civic and charitable public collections across the UK and Ireland, and through eighteen site visits to regional public museums, galleries and archives across the UK and Ireland.[2] Large Language Model analysis and manual comparative analysis were used to identify similarities and differences in practices, outcomes and contexts across the dataset.[3] Our research questions were co-designed, and the geographical scope was determined collaboratively by researchers at the University of Birmingham, Birmingham Museums Trust and the Exhibition Research Lab.

References

[1] Museums Association's *Empowering Collections* (2026), https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/collections/empowering-collections-2026/ ; Manchester Museums' 'Rethinking the Collection' project (2023-), https://manchesterartgallery.org/rethinking-the-collection/; The Hunterian Museum's 'Curating Discomfort' project (2021-), https://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian/about/changing-museum/curating-discomfort/; National Museums Liverpool's *Co-Production Framework* (2023), https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/national-museums-liverpool; Tríona White Hamilton, *Curating Inclusive Global Histories*, National Museums NI, 2025.
[2] Ethical review was conducted by the University of Birmingham, and ethical approval granted, ERN_5182-Oct2025.
[3] LLM: NVivo12

Organisational transformation

Our data shows that public collections are moving from experimenting with new practices within stand-alone projects, towards **embedding long-term change** within their organisations. They are thinking carefully about how to balance the imperative to deliver projects with immediate impact, versus the benefits of transforming structures and practices for long-term impact. Overall, there is a **trend towards an organisation-wide commitment to inclusive values and sustainable partnerships**, rather than delivering change on a project-by-project basis.

Collections work is often happening around **capital development projects**. As the physical spaces of the museum, gallery and archive are transformed, so the way in which collections are stored, exhibited and used is changing. This is providing an opportunity to revise institutional and collections' stories. The multi-purpose and easy-to-change design of new museum spaces enables the collection itself and the **physical space of the museum** or archive to become **engines of change.**

Committing Resource

Museums, galleries and archives are increasingly **committing core budget and core staffing** to new collection-focused initiatives. Funding for this work comes from many sources, but the most reported were Heritage Lottery funds (in the UK) and core operational budgets (in the UK and Ireland). Staff resourcing happens in two ways: first, **hiring dedicated staff** to undertake new and often community-centred work; second, **embedding responsibility** for transformative work **across all roles** within an organisation, from curators and collection managers, to sales and commercial teams, community, learning and engagement teams, to customer service and front-of-house teams.

Changing policy

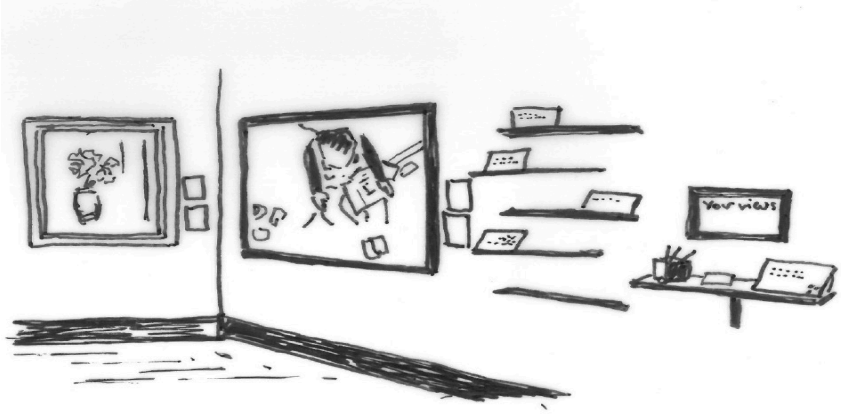
Revised **collection development policies (CDPs)** and **commissioning policies** are concrete manifestations of **embedded change**. Communities are increasingly offered opportunities to shape new CDPs, and in some cases EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) and anti-racism statements are written into CDPs as a way to diversify collections and improve representation. Commissioning policies are also changing, as organisations seek to rebalance collections and address historic gaps and exclusions.

Museums, galleries and archives are changing their **community consultation strategies** and policies. Moving away from one-off community participation projects, museums, galleries and archives are increasingly embedding community consultation in **more sustainable** ways. They are forming long-term relationships with focus groups, advisory panels, community co-curating groups, and friends' groups who advise and provide feedback on, and, in some cases, take ownership of programming and practices. Communities are increasingly involved in decision-making around interpretation. Where this work is not yet happening in a sustained and long-term way, respondents specifically commented that they wanted to do more of this but needed the staff and resources to enable it.

Transformed policies and practices enable museums, galleries and archives to renew the social contract with their communities. Long-term commitment of core resources, including staff and budgets, is key to instituting these changes.

Case studies

For their centenary in 2025, **Kirkcaldy Galleries** developed an exhibition and public programme that explored not just the history of the collection, but what the future of the collection should be. A feedback station in the galleries collected community feedback that now influences new acquisitions and future collecting.



At **Hackney Museum**, community engagement is a formal part of everyone's job. In 2023, the Museum established a Community Advisory Panel to select temporary displays for the gallery. They commit core budget to supporting community projects.

Using a social care approach, **Wolverhampton Art Gallery** worked with community groups to co-curate a re-hang and reinterpretation of the permanent collection in their Georgian Gallery. As part of the process, community groups received prints of works from the collection to hang in their own spaces.



Storytelling

Structural change and the adoption of new practices in the museum are inextricably linked with the stories that collections can tell. Staff resource, funding, community partnership strategies and collection development policies all influence storytelling.

Our data shows an overwhelming trend towards telling people-centred stories within collections.

Museums, galleries and archives want to tell more rounded and multifaceted stories, because they see traditional institutional narratives as incomplete and at times dismissive of hidden and difficult stories. They also want to embed community voices in this storytelling. There are many interrelated motivations for telling new or different stories: wanting to better serve their local communities; coming to terms with and addressing exclusionary histories within the institution; encouragement from funders; responding to or enacting ideas championed by social justice movements. Overall, storytelling is one way to share power and attempt to dismantle the monolithic institutional voice.

Museums, galleries and archives are developing people-centred stories through community consultation, by commissioning new research, and by embedding participatory practices in curation and engagement work.

Objects and spaces can act as instigators of or testing-grounds for new stories. Popular themes include local (social) histories, industrial heritage, world cultures and communities' lives today. These are seen as ways to humanise the stories of collections.

Viewing narratives surrounding collections as 'stories' and the processes of (re)interpretation as 'storytelling' is significant. Unlike 'histories' or 'research', stories are commonly understood to be creative and created: stories can be multiple, variable, told from different perspectives, and can change over time.

Case studies

Community consultation at **Cyfarthfa Castle Museum and Art Gallery** revealed that little attention has been given to the history of the women who worked and lived in the area. New museum interpretation, new acquisitions and ongoing collection of feedback are re-centring local women's histories in the museum.

At **Highlanes Gallery**, exhibitions co-curated by community groups bring together objects from the permanent collection with pieces by contemporary artists working in the region today. These exhibitions and accompanying programming explore the history of the collection while also championing and supporting the local arts ecology.

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