

# Making Connections Through Collections: Briefing Document

Summary of the *Making Connections Through Collections* pilot project, November 2022 - January 2023

The  
Fitzwilliam  
Museum  
CAMBRIDGE



## Project Summary

Making Connections Through Collections explored the potential to bring participant voices into the Museum's collections and acquisitions processes. The project began by asking the question: why does the Museum say yes to some objects and no to others?

As the project developed, this initial question was extended by the rich and diverse experiences and perspectives of our community collaborators. Participants challenged existing Institutional understandings and hierarchies, and led us to explore much broader themes including interpretation and display design, museum layout, organisational decision making, alongside acquisition processes.

This briefing acts as a small window into the project, highlighting some key outcomes. In addition to sharing some of the key questions raised by our project participants, we also highlight the impacts of working as a collaborative project team within the Museum.

Making Connections Through Collections ran from September – December 2022. We hope that the project will lay the groundwork for the development of more participatory projects across the wider Museum.

# Key Findings

## A Museum With a 'Responsibility to the Residents of Cambridge'

Each of the group members was recruited through their relationship with the museums either as participants, volunteers or community consultants. This did not, however, mean a universal love of the Museum, with one participant openly remarking "I hate museums". The group represented a range of Cambridge identities – those connected to the University, and those who feel excluded by it. Some members are born and raised in the area, others have moved here at different stages in their lives.

Conversations often converged on the role of the Fitzwilliam within Cambridge and the region. We found a collective sense that the Museum "could be an amazing part of the community", although this was often paired with a sense that it does not necessarily fulfil that role yet. This input was given as a positive challenge, a reminder that "people need to know that the Fitz exists", and an area of opportunity for the Museum in the spirit of constructive criticism.

### Key Question:

In our acquisitions, how do we foreground points of relevance to our locality? How do we reflect what it means to be a museum in Cambridge?

## Being Accessible 'not just on a physical level'

Ease of access to our collections emerged as a frequent theme. At times, this related to issues of physical access. For example, it was noted that some labels are in positions that prevent either children or wheelchair users from accessing information. It was noted, too, that the placement of some cases in corners that were less easily accessible created the perception of a hierarchy of importance for items in our collections. Through developing an increased knowledge of behind-the-scenes decision-making processes within the Museum, our participants gained an increased understanding of the challenges faced in producing our displays.

Access is, however, about more than the physical aspects of the space. There is also the aspect of intellectual accessibility – the invisible barrier of feeling welcome in a museum space. It was made clear that these were not barriers created by Museum staff, but rather a broader "cultural barrier". However, we also heard how involvement in things like our learning or engagement programmes can break down those barriers: "I felt quite intimidated the first time I came [to the Museum]. I don't anymore".

### Key Question:

How might engaging people in our collections development processes help open up access to the Museum?



## “I would like to do something useful”

Breaking down the intellectual barriers of access allowed us to create an environment of knowledge sharing and development. At the outset of the project we heard that our participants wanted to be involved as it was an opportunity to “contribute to something” at the Museum. Opening what would “usually be a closed conversation” and creating a sense that participants “opinion matters” was at the heart of the enthusiastic engagement with the project.

The presence of curatorial staff in our workshops was extremely positively received. This reaffirmed our sense that participatory work is a method of championing existing expertise, as

well as seeking out new knowledge. The opportunity to hear from, and to critically engage with the expertise we hold in our Institution was valued.

We also received positive feedback on the sharing of collections acquisitions policies and processes, including acquisitions forms. Providing this foundation of institutional knowledge, creating an “outside group that has insider knowledge”, has allowed participants to bring their own expertise and knowledge to the project with confidence.

**Key question:**  
How can we effectively reflect the significant expertise and enthusiasm brought to the project work by this group? How can we deliver on their desire to ‘make a difference’ in the Museum?







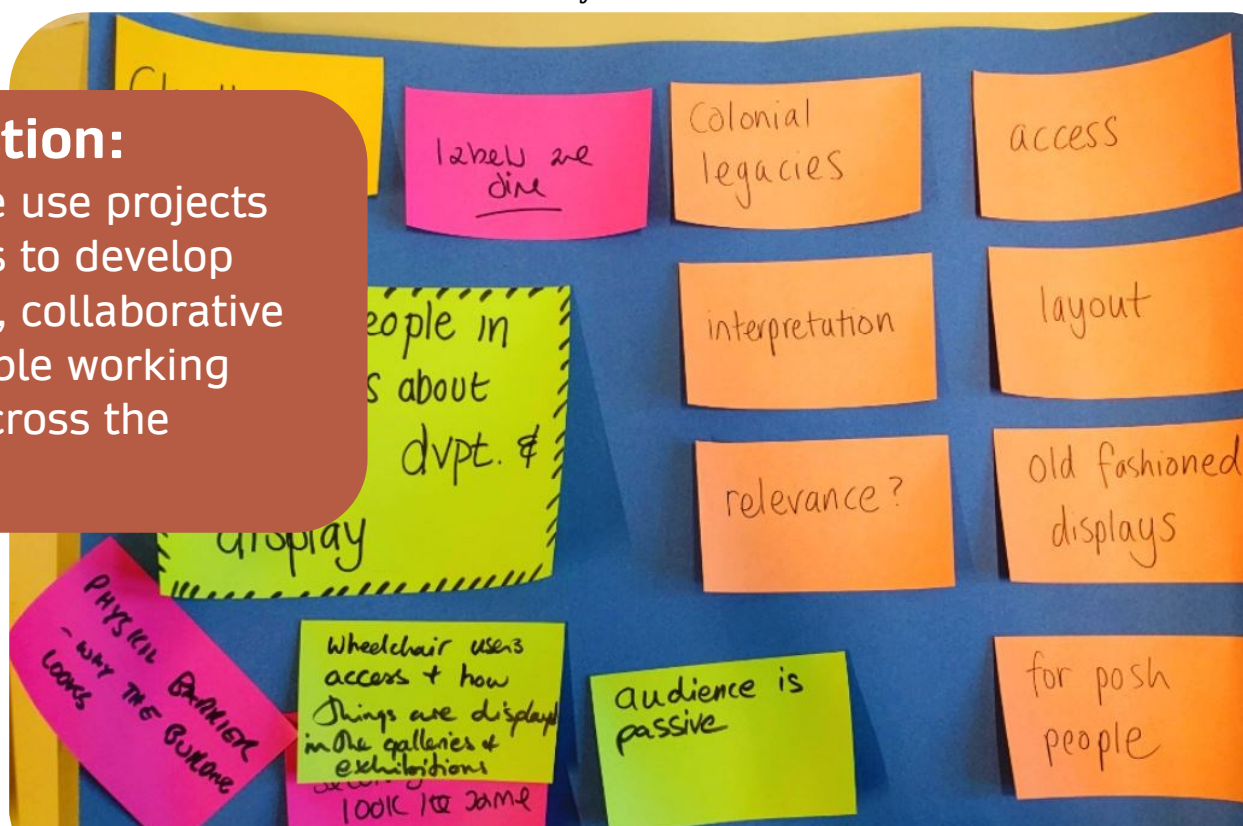
## Working collaboratively and honestly

Work that seeks to explore participatory methodologies comes with challenges for a project team. For most of us, the experience of working across curatorial, learning, engagement and research departments so closely was a new experience. We each brought slightly different approaches to our work on this project which, at times, resulted in some tensions or anxieties within the team.

We have sought to develop a project space where we can communicate openly and honestly. We took this approach when sharing feedback from the project work to staff throughout the Museum, openly discussing the individual challenges we faced as a project team in a public forum. It is our intention that this openness will provide support for staff across the museum who are seeking to work in similar ways.

### Key question:

How can we use projects such as this to develop sustainable, collaborative and replicable working practices across the Museum?







# Next Steps

From February 2023, the project is continuing under the title *Connections Through Collections*. Through continuing to work with the same group of participants, it is our intention that opportunities are found for more deeply collaborative and impactful work.

The continued project will explore the possibility to bring new participants in to the project team, as well as developing specific project proposals and outputs with the team.

The continuation of the work will also allow for us to bring other members of staff into these sessions, expanding on the knowledge sharing that has been at the heart of the project so far.

## Project team

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with thanks to Miranda Stearn

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