

Feeling the squeeze and doing it anyway: How museums are changing lives during the age of austerity

Laura Crossley, School of Museum Studies

Email: lfc10@le.ac.uk; Supervisors: Dr. Sheila Watson and Dr. Suzanne MacLeod

A. Have the financial cuts had an impact on the work museum staff undertake with vulnerable groups?

Since the 1990s, museum staff have increasingly carried out work that aims to have positive impacts on vulnerable people's lives. For example, National Museums Liverpool's 'House of Memories' project trains carers and care staff how to use museum objects to deliver dementia-friendly reminiscence sessions, and staff of Norwich Castle Museum run sessions for people with learning disabilities to improve their basic skills.

The press often report that recent national and local financial cuts have had a negative impact on museums in England. The research project described here aims to take a look behind such negative newspaper reports to find out whether the financial cuts have had an impact on the work museum staff undertake with vulnerable groups.



Image above: Session for people with learning disabilities at Norwich Castle Museum

Image below: Shopping reminiscence kit

B. The method

I carried out interviews with 19 museum staff at nine museums across England to find out:

- whether the way in which the cuts have been reported in the press is masking what is really happening in museums;
- what, if anything, museum staff are doing to deal with the cuts, and;
- interviewees' thoughts about the importance of working with vulnerable groups

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C. What does the research show?

Museums' work with vulnerable groups is thriving! This is because museum staff believe that this type of work is very important and are therefore trying new things to ensure they can work with vulnerable groups even with reduced funding. Museum staff are:



Making partnerships with local community organisations who work with vulnerable groups to share knowledge and resources.



Securing funding for projects that promote health and wellbeing, rather than solely applying to funders - such as the Heritage Lottery Fund - who traditionally give money to museums. The House of Memories project, for example, has gained funding from the Department of Health because of its positive impact on people's health and wellbeing.



More robustly evaluating projects they undertake with vulnerable groups in order to better demonstrate the impact of this work. By proving that the work they are doing is making a positive difference to people's lives, museum staff are more likely to secure new forms of funding and persuade more community organisations to make partnerships with them.

D. What is the impact of the research?

The research increases our understanding of how museum staff are dealing with the financial cuts.

The results show that museum staff care deeply about working with vulnerable groups and have changed their practice in order to protect this work from the financial cuts.

The results give some ideas of how museums and other cultural organisations can continue to work with vulnerable groups work if their budgets are further cut.