

TRANS- INCLUSIVE CULTURE

Resources to support trans-inclusive practice for museums, galleries, archives and heritage organisations

SCENARIO:
Ethical partnerships



SCENARIO: Ethical partnerships

1

TRANS-INCLUSIVE CULTURE
Resources to support trans-inclusive
practice for museums, galleries,
archives and heritage organisations

This resource has been developed by the University of Leicester's Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) through a partnership of leading UK museums, galleries and heritage organisations and a team of experts in trans inclusion, equalities, law and ethics. The resources have been created to support a step change in the capacity and confidence of the UK's culture sector to advance trans inclusion as part of their commitments to inclusion for all.

More information about the partnership – supported by Art Fund, the national charity for museums and galleries, and the Economic and Social Research Council – can be found at transinclusiveculture.le.ac.uk

Disclaimer

Please note that this guidance is intended only as a starting point to assist relevant organisations in enhancing trans inclusion. Every effort has been made to ensure that it is correct from a legal standpoint. Readers must, however, be aware that it is pitched at a general level and it does not purport to offer a full account of the law. Readers are advised to, where necessary, take legal advice on the specific facts of their situation.

Note

Where the word “trans” is used in relation to legal duties, it is used synonymously with the term “gender reassignment” in section 7 of the Equality Act 2010.

Scenario: Ethical partnerships

During recent collaborative projects between our museum and local trans community groups, we encountered challenges we were not fully prepared to navigate. Members of one community group held very different views from museum staff about what should be included in the co-curated exhibition. We agreed a way forward, but further difficulties arose after the exhibition opened. Following negative media, the museum decided to make small changes to the introductory panel. Staff believed they were acting to protect the wellbeing of trans partners, yet trust has been eroded and community partners feel the museum prioritised its own interests. How can we navigate such challenges in future and ensure partnerships that are ethical, equitable and beneficial to trans communities?

Partnering ethically with trans groups – like work with all community partners – demands that we seek to build relationships that are equitable, not extractive; that are authentic, not performative; that address community needs and generate benefits for all parties.

But working ethically with trans communities also demands that we develop a deep understanding of the specific and changing context within which trans groups are operating.

The opportunity to partner with a cultural organisation to co-produce an exhibition or event may be appealing to a trans community group, bringing – for example – the possibility for group members to share trans experiences on their own terms and to craft and share stories that help to counter widespread misinformation and disinformation surrounding trans lives. But, as many trans writers and allies have noted, increased visibility in the public realm can also generate challenges. Some have used the term ‘hypervisibility’ to refer to how trans lives have been spectacularised, subject to particular media and public scrutiny, and, in some instances, purposely portrayed in ways that seek to delegitimise and misrepresent trans existence. Understanding this context means that cultural organisations that are partnering with trans communities need to educate themselves around the sometimes fast-changing social and political factors – and wider public discourse – that are impacting trans lives. As cultural practitioners, we need to recognise that our own knowledge and expertise is always partial and that we need to learn from and work with our community partners as we progress our work together. Of course community partners also need to understand the responsibilities and constraints (for example, financial and legal) that organisations are working with. Effective partnership means working to build mutual understanding, mutual respect and mutual goodwill towards one another.

Transparency is fundamental for building trust and equitable working relationships with any community partners. From the outset, take the time to build a shared understanding around

each other's motivations, goals and expectations for the partnership. Where possible, both partners are fully involved in key decision-making at all stages of your collaboration. This will involve taking the time to work through situations where differences of opinion arise. If, for example, there are genuine constraints around what can be displayed in the museum, ensure that partners fully understand what these constraints are and why they are important, so that decisions can, where possible, be taken together. Although shared decision making is the goal, it is also important to recognise and prepare for situations that may arise where either partner might need to take decisions on their own. Museums, for example, have legal obligations to provide a safe and lawful place of work and situations may arise where actions need to be taken to protect staff.

In recent years, with increasing support for trans inclusion across the sector, there has been a noticeable growth in trans-literacy and skills in community engagement that are enabling cultural organisations to develop strong partnerships. Sadly, there have also been instances where cultural organisations working with trans community partners have been ill-prepared to defend their collaboration in the face of criticism. In the event of controversy, museums have sometimes responded too quickly, removing or editing content or cancelling planned public programming, in an attempt to diffuse criticism. In some instances, these actions may result from well-meaning attempts to protect community partners by seeking to close down hateful transphobia as well as legitimate concerns for the safety and wellbeing of their own staff. However, these actions – taken without discussion with community partners – risk leaving them feeling betrayed, hurt and vulnerable to further hateful attacks. Cultural organisations should build organisational readiness and resilience by ensuring their partnerships with community groups are fully supported by senior management who are prepared to defend the work in the face of public, media or stakeholder criticism.

Developing partnerships with these principles in mind can support your museum to build ethical, mutually beneficial and longer-term partnerships that enrich the work of the museum, and generate outcomes that benefit trans communities and improve diversity, equity and inclusivity, to the benefit of all.