

TRANS- INCLUSIVE CULTURE

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

SCENARIO:
Ethical interpretation of trans lives and histories

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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 interpretation of trans lives and histories

We are reviewing interpretation for an exhibition that includes trans lives and histories. While the material is well evidenced, there is some uncertainty amongst the team about how we should approach this and who should author it.

Some colleagues are also concerned about reputational risk and complaints from visitors, while others feel that neglecting to discuss trans experience would contribute to erasure. Trustees have asked for reassurance about risk management and staff want clearer guidance on how to proceed. What advice can you offer?

Decisions about what is included in interpretation – or omitted – actively shape public understanding. Organisations routinely interpret complex, contested or sensitive social histories and represent people with a wide range of identities, beliefs and experiences. The decision to include trans histories in a display should not be viewed as an anomaly within museum or gallery practice.

Framing the work being undertaken for this exhibition as part of the organisation's existing responsibilities and commitments to inclusive practice – 'business as usual' - rather than as something exceptional, can be reassuring for both staff and trustees, helping everyone recognise that they have the necessary transferable professional skills to engage in this important work. Reflections about how organisations should approach an exhibition and who should author interpretation arise in the context of all new exhibitions, and the approach here should be consistent.

Concerns about risk (whether reputational, legal or operational) or complaints are common, and should never be dismissed. Organisations have responsibilities towards those visiting and those who work there. They need to act fairly and lawfully, providing equitable treatment to all they deal with. And so organisations are right to be sensitive towards visitors and staff of differing cultures, religions and beliefs. They need to ensure that their spaces are free from all forms of unlawful discrimination, such as harassment, intimidation or bullying. Everyone must be treated with dignity and respect; diversity, equity and inclusion need to be valued.

Already, organisations are required to have policies and procedures in place to ensure that is the case and that they fulfil their legal obligations, for example under the Equality Act 2010. Those protections apply also to trans people who are visitors or who work at your exhibitions. (They apply more broadly also, of course, to other individuals or groups

whose characteristics and beliefs are protected by law). In short, as already mentioned, it is ‘business as usual’ in the scenario described here; risks and complaints may arise in relation to all of our work, and can be (and should be) handled and managed consistently, in line with how your organisation generally operates, applying those same policies and procedures to ensure there is no unfair or discriminatory treatment.

Interpretation is not neutral. Ethical interpretation grounded in evidence— including collections, archival sources and oral histories— should be consistent with an organisation’s responsibilities and duties. Being clear about this can help shift conversations away from uncertainty and fear.

Trustees and senior leaders often want reassurance about *purpose* and *process*. The *purpose* of museum interpretation is to help all visitors understand what they are seeing or experiencing, including histories that may be unfamiliar or contested. Trans-inclusive interpretation should therefore be understood in that context, not something that is exceptional.

Organisations should collectively decide how interpretation is approached, supported and resourced, and recognise how this work aligns with their values. Questions of authorship, review and governance are central to this *process*. Some organisations have written policies or guidelines in place to support ethical interpretation and, if these exist, they should be adhered to. For other organisations, interpretation guidelines aren’t explicit, but the institution has a recognised approach, shaped by wider museological practices. Whichever is the case for your organisation, ensure a consistency of approach (in line with the Equality Act 2010) so that there is no discriminatory treatment of trans histories. Clarity about how interpretation may change through internal review and a clear sign-off process that has been shared in advance supports consistency, helps manage risk and builds confidence amongst staff and any collaborators.

Where possible, as when representing any marginalised identity, consider if there might be scope for consultation and collaboration rather than relying on a single institutional voice or one person’s perspective. Trans identities are diverse and no single narrative or voice can represent all experiences. Distributed or community-authored approaches— including quotations and first-person perspectives— can reduce the pressure to ‘speak on behalf of’ others while remaining clear and evidence-based. This reflects good practice in shared authority and co-production. There are Trans Pride collectives and Museum of Transology collections right across the UK, offering first hand routes for engagement with trans, non-binary and intersex culture and histories.

Finally, consider how you can build understanding amongst staff around the approach that has been taken and how the interpretation has been shaped. Rather than limiting or curtailing interpretation, to minimise risk of complaints or avoid being challenged, organisations should instead explore ways to better support and prepare staff. Examples might include discussion of a range of questions through briefing notes, and/or providing a FAQs summary, while reminding staff of existing internal processes for dealing with any complaints or challenges that may arise during the exhibition. A pre-prepared communications strategy can reassure frontline teams, managers and trustees that questions or complaints can be handled consistently and fairly.

Ethical interpretation is not about having all the answers, but about creating the conditions for informed, respectful public engagement.