

On Friday 3rd July 2020, South West Museum Development hosted a panel discussion featuring representatives from the museum and heritage sector in the South West of England.

The panel discussion was chaired by Crystal Johnson (CJ) and featured:

- **Sam Astill** - Head of Museums, South West Heritage Trust (SA)
- **Vicky de Wit** - Museums Advisor, Dorset, Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole (VdW)
- **Hannah Jones** - Lead Volunteering & Participation Consultant for the South West, National Trust (HJ)
- **Philip Walker** - Head of Cultural services, Gloucester City Council (PW)

The panel discussed some of the key considerations to re-opening after lockdown, sharing their current thinking on the challenges and opportunities ahead, whilst drawing on their own experience to date. This document is a summary of the key points covered during the discussion.

CJ Opening Remarks: This session is about sharing thoughts and experiences – not about giving advice; the emerging government guidelines are our reference point and are there for museums to interpret for their own organisational settings. This discussion will address common themes many are experiencing across the sector.

Q. As museums we are very much part of local cultural offer and so are facing number of short/long term challenges. Should we rush to reopen and what should we consider?

PW – No we shouldn't rush to re-open even though pressure is mounting. Re-opening needs to be given due consideration and in consultation with visitors and staff. Getting it right from the off is important. Museums are in the business of providing memorable experiences and connecting with people emotionally. Visitor experience may be compromised if we do not take it steadily and safely.

SA - Confidence is our key word at the South West Heritage Trust (SWHT), including confidence that we can ensure staff wellbeing. This involves a methodical approach, not rushing. Consultation with staff and audiences is critical, as well as confidence around the economics of reopening - what income generation can we put in place on each site - these need to be part of the reopening criteria.

VdW – There are four things determining the ability to re-open; size of site (outdoor spaces, space to move); profile of volunteers (% with health or are older); nature of the offer (family focused; harder to bring people back as interactive); cost benefit analysis (is it financially viable to reopen. Some museums will choose to re-open and will make a loss but they see need to raise profile in this instance, whereas for others it's not viable at all).

HJ – At the National Trust (NT) we look after many different places – houses/museums, carparks, gardens. Reopening involves looking at so many moving parts. As an organisation we agree there should be no rush. The NT has reopened in a phased way, with gardens initially. We have developed framework of what we need to do to reopen and are now working through that. Six NT houses, of which 2 are in the SW, will reopen in mid-July. We have found that you have to work through every element of the visit. Give yourself time to work through all the ambiguity, including the guidance changing. As a result of guidance changing, decisions may have to change. Testing and trialling will play a big part moving forward.

Q. How as a sector how do we make decisions and cope with changing guidelines and public confidence?

SA - We have to talk to staff and listen. In terms of decision making – we have tried wherever we can to bring lots of voices into conversation, so decisions are not made in isolation. Our Public survey launched last night has had 600 responses already. We plan to utilise the hard edged guidance as much as possible

HJ - We have been in mitigation phase and still are - recovery is still a few months off. Our executive team came up with priorities: First, to inform reassure and support workforce; then our reputation and assets came second. Essentially, how we are keeping the workforce safe: giving them information so they can keep selves safe, and then how are they getting support from us. A 'travel locally' message didn't come through strongly enough as lockdown was eased, and this put pressure on some of the Trust's countryside car parks. We have had to be guided by revisiting our purpose as an organisation – giving access to beauty. That gave the impetus to open gardens.

Q. PW talked about not opening until you have the right offer, how do you marry that up with looking at the right guidelines and people

PW - It has been difficult with constant changes. Follow government advice is the first thing you have to do but as advice changes there is a risk that we alienate people who, in their minds, have moved away from the rules (2m). We might get challenge from our audiences, so it is a negotiation on how we move forward to find a safe route through – be flexible and able to be resilient as a sector, this is where we need to draw on that.

Q. HJ, you have a range of different sites – outdoors and indoors....?

HJ - At the Trust we are following a working practices guideline that we've developed; all staff being asked to hold to that – it sets social distance at 2m for our working areas. At the start we decided, we wouldn't ask any volunteers in the vulnerable and clinically vulnerable category to come and work on site. That was very hard – didn't go down well with everyone. Now, due to reduced risk level and information coming from government, we now feel confident we can make a safe environment and can invite people in these groups to back to work/volunteer. Our approach has been to share the risk assessment and then ask people to make a decision. So they know what the new circumstances are – it would be hard for them to make a decision based on what they did before...

One saying we have found helpful - "You can travel at the speed of trust" - so we share our thinking and what's behind our thinking to help them make a decision.

Q. VdW, you have a number of small, volunteer museums under your remit; how do we manage those physical spaces? How can we and do we police our visitors in those small spaces, Inc. toilets? What's the feel with your museums?

VdW – Those museums have looked at guidance and undertaken risk assessments and some have chosen not to open yet. Some felt concerned not to reopen and Museum Development are reassuring that it's ok if it is not the right time, to wait for situation to develop. Others with bigger spaces may have facilities that can be used but have chosen not to open these, particularly if they are close to toilet facilities managed by Dorset Council as these have reopened right across the county. It's important to bring together formal risk assessment with volunteer survey to see what appetite is and to see what capacity they have.

Q. PW, you have organisations that span different sizes, how are you managing it with your organisations?

PW – We are treating each site and venue differently. E.g. run live performance venue with cinema, can't have live performance but can open cinema. You have to take call on which parts of business you can open and consider if it is worth it. Mounting pressures financially about how to sustain – for those unable to return any income, what are the options there? Do we open because it's a heritage site or do we open because it is safe, we know what we're doing and we have an offer? It needs to be nuanced across all aspects and sites.

Q. There is a pressure between being safe and how to generate income; so how can we open up and bring money through the door when we have so many challenges. SA, how are you adapting your income streams when we have so many challenges?

SA - Just to add here – we are going to manage numbers through timed ticketing. We operate museums on different business models – Museum of Somerset is free entry; The Rural Life museum is a paid entry ticketed site.

We see that there has never been a better moment to turn visitors' connections with a site into a financial relationship. So, we are putting a lot of thought into that; for example, membership schemes, supporters' schemes, and so on. We will use an online booking scheme even at our free entry sites and there may be opportunities around donation and around that relationship we can build with visitors at that point.

Q. HJ, are you looking at similar things to SA?

HJ – Estimations are that we will lose around £200 million this year. So we are scaling back projects to begin with and cost cutting in other areas, including staff costs. We are so grateful and lucky in terms of membership. Some people have decided not to keep membership due to changes in their life circumstances, we absolutely respect that, but many are choosing to maintain their membership. We are getting some new members and others are maintaining their support which we are so grateful for. We are looking at online engagement around membership, and the opportunities to engage people through their lives at home – activities around nature and about what's going on in people's gardens; also using collections as inspiration –The Ashmolean Museum's online work on taking inspiration from collections was excellent.

We are also looking very carefully at where we are re-opening commercial spaces (retail/café) – what is the benefit? Doing a cost benefit analysis. We are being cautious – in case of local lockdowns we might be left with catering stock. Guidance isn't out in terms of Track and Trace for retail spaces, so that's tricky in terms of decision making.

We did move to online booking – for some that was frustrating, difficult to navigate. So we had to do a lot of messaging, asking people to be understanding, to bear with us and explaining that the system is about creating safe environment. However commercially, it is tricky. But hopefully, through the steps we take, we will still be giving people amazing experiences and access to places they love.

Q. PW – Within the LA context does that have any implications or change the way that you approach income generation?

PW – We have a different position to independent museums, the government has continued to pay staff wages and have announced further support. Like other organisations represented here, we face substantial losses of income which will have a knock on later. Loss will make next year really challenging so we will have to look at all aspects to ensure efficiency with limited resources.

There are new opportunities for income. Its slightly worrying about just going headlong into commercialising everything (as run 3x free site entries) as people will be in financial hardship and commercialising can create barriers that pertain to wealth as to whether you can engage with museums/culture. Also need to be entrepreneurial, smart and clever but careful that we don't push people away. From programming perspective we could have chosen a commercial exhibition to reopen with but we wanted to connect with people's stories and local communities to create 'life in lockdown' exhibition; we hope to connect with lived experiences to draw them back in, but we can't charge them to come and engage with it. Financial pressure will be immense and we will face challenges, we will need to keep communicating and take people with us.

Q. VdW – when we talk about cutting costs, it is hard to see where we can do that. Museums strive to develop proactive and interactive experience. How can small museum do that when cutting costs and ensuring strong offer and great programme?

VdW – Small business grants were real life saver for small museums, which has given degree of comfort so that museums can reassess their decision. Some are looking at not having café or retail operations in normal way (e.g. sell ice creams through hatch, plant sales instead to supplement. In Dorset there have been fundraising campaigns, we will need to see how that develops over the next six months.

Q. Should we be finding new ways to engage people? Technology – should we be using this as a way to engage with new audiences and using new ways to engage. How drastically do we need to respond? Are you changing ways of doing things digitally?

HJ - We had to revise our online and digital from being all about driving people to visit us – to something new! We are definitely doing a bigger engagement process around online and digital. It's partly around how we're looking after our places in lockdown.

SA - Two things. There's a real duty and an opportunity, with a reduction in numbers, in adapting our offer to a digital offer and a new analogue offer too by giving people cultural experiences in their own communities – that's really important. Using museum content, storytelling, working in community settings too.

Q. We can get out there and develop relationships in our communities...

SA - Yes the speed with which partnerships have formed, for example with Contains Art in West Somerset, to create art packs to send out to young people around the county - this happened in days, much more rapidly than it usually would. So there's a new focus on how we can create partnerships, especially with other sectors – a good thing to come out of Covid-19.

Q. PW, you operate a number of different organisations and you have tourism role. How is the market working? What can we do for local audiences and tourism?

PW – Partnerships are crucial and have been formed quickly (e.g. Gloucestershire linked to history festival for recovery, existing good network in the city already). Tourism hat on – very useful as emerging profile which can be promoted to locals as it is about their history, their locality; high profile speakers which speak nationally too. If you can wrap cultural activity in an area that speaks to an area, it is really useful. Keep up communications with tourism organisations in your area. Visit England have some resources - 'Good to Go' certification. Connecting with those things can help amplify and support local ecology of cultural provision.

Q. The people are at the heart of everything – inside or outside organisation. How do we support our workforce? They are key. What should we be doing to support them?

VdW – This is where Museum Development can play strong role through skills sharing, training opportunities and working with networks. Museum Development has been really busy in since the beginning linking people up; sharing information and supporting local networks. We are feeling our way along, but have communication channels open and are providing platforms for people to come together.

Q. How do we support our workforce when they have personal concerns as well as professional concerns?

SA - Remote working has led to really strong communication within our organisation. That's been a positive change in the way the organisation communicates within itself and with each other [as individuals]. There shouldn't be a falling off point with this, when things go back to normal. Also there has been an increased focus on front of house, on ensuring they are at heart of that communication and continue to be involved in that communication going forward.

HJ - Everyone experienced this in a different way, with massive trauma of some kind, for everyone. We are all in same storm, but in different boats. It's therefore hard to anticipate how people are feeling as they come out the other side. It feels as if there is much more connection across teams and to some extent the hierarchy has fallen away. We feel we need to be calm and kind but responsive. Strong relationships have formed and this has been a positive.

PW – By looking after each other, particularly our health and wellbeing, it's been a traumatic period. Culture/heritage is hard already, so let's support, share and recognise that it's not easy but we love it!

CJ – It's good to end on this positive note. Thank you to the panellists and to the team at South West Museum Development.

END.

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