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Wessex Museums Trust

Summary Evaluation Report

Lost & Found: Redefining the folk arts and traditions of Wessex NM-23-00475

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Executive Summary

The impact *Lost & Found* had on delivering Wessex Museums and The National Lottery Heritage Fund priorities includes:

Social/Audience

- 94 underserved community participants engaged in co-production of ‘new folk’ artwork *“It has helped with confidence, voicing my opinion to a team and working with others”* (M&AS participant)
- Feedback from participants was very positive, building confidence, self-esteem and a sense of belonging *“How communication goes beyond words and images – making with our hands; real contact with real nature, evokes feelings nothing else can and these feelings can unite us in sharing an ‘identity’”* (DM&AG participant)
- Creative and practical skills were developed by participants in projects, as well as by staff *“confidence has also grown in running creative projects to support refugees and asylum seekers, that are both creatively productive and emotionally supportive. Adaptability, empathy, and a student-centred approach are required”* (Salisbury Museum)
- Film, photography, music and artist commissions produced new work that captured intangible folk heritage with local communities
- *Un/Common People* toured four museums across 396 days, reaching 34k people and showcasing the new work *“I particularly enjoyed the quilt and poetry created by ESOL students. A beautiful nod to folklore around the world and how it makes us richer”* (Salisbury visitor)
- Exhibition very well received overall by audiences, with 90% rating their overall experience as excellent or good, and 77% having had their expectations met or exceeded, *“Thoroughly enjoyed this exhibition - it gave me an affirming sense of continuity in folk practice”* (Wiltshire visitor)
- Overall, there are signs (although not evenly spread) that the exhibition did engage a wide audience, and that it was reaching both locals and tourists. Wiltshire Museum, with the youngest and newest of audiences, stands out
- Overall, the exhibition was successful in conveying a better understanding of folk and its contemporary relevance to a majority of survey respondents, *“So good to see such a thoughtful presentation of folklore, recognising it as living/continuing - something that belongs to us all - Thank you!”* (Wiltshire visitor)
- Museum staff gained a new perspective on folk heritage in Wessex, *“collaborative working with external partners has allowed a more holistic view of what folk culture can be”* (M&AS)

Collaboration

- Project delivery supported by nearly 1,500 volunteer hours across community engagement, collections research and documentation, and exhibition stewardship

- An exhibition bigger than the sum of its parts *“Collaborative show meant that visitors will experience a mass of material, with the material on loan, that offers a real wow factor that each museum would not be able to muster by itself”* (M&AS)
- *“Pulling together the collections of the partner museums – the first time we have successfully shown a story of Wessex in a coherent narrative across museums”* (Salisbury Museum)
- However, *“we need to think very carefully about working with external curators, and the impact that this will have on staff time and the planned exhibition. Bear in mind that we have a lot of expertise in the Wessex teams, and to utilise this where possible, perhaps drawing in consultants to advise on content and help shape exhibitions, but perhaps not deliver the whole exhibition?”* (M&AS)
- Mixed responses to relationships with partnership colleagues during the project
- A joint marketing strategy implemented by WMT and museum staff, with support and joint assets creating an economy of scale and consistency
- Unsuccessful joint merchandise strategy and creation of joint retail stock
- Challenges to managing partnership delivery: sustaining momentum; staff changes; capital projects; working with external curators; and collections administration

Reputation/Quality

- Structure, content and interpretation for a digital *Un/Common People* exhibition created, securing its future once launched (summer 2026)
- By headline measures partners are skilled in managing exhibition communications with all outcomes being met apart from exhibition webpages, and some are increasing their confidence in newer areas such as TikTok
- More meaningful measures of communication success that can be read across the partnership as a whole are lacking
- Exceeding the quality metric for audience’s exhibition experience with a combined response to IIT of 75
- Not meeting the quality metric for staff exhibition experience, with a combined response to IIT of 77 on opening and 66 on closing
- Staff responses to how did the exhibition compare to expectations being overall positive (exceeded/met 6/9)
- *Un/Common People* positively peer reviewed for *Museums Journal* (May 2026)

Environment

- Using Julie’s Bicycle CCT Tour Project Footprint to create a baseline to improve on for net zero ambitions (from 3.67 tonnes CO2e)
- 1:1 training on CCT process and methodology should have increased partners’ knowledge about ways of contributing to higher standards

Finance/Governance

- A decent budget for ‘new folk’ community engagement raised its ambitions, improving its quality and outcomes

LOST & FOUND: PROJECT IMPACT IN NUMBERS

SOCIAL/AUDIENCE

COMMUNITY & CO-PRODUCTION

-  **5** community-led programmes create 'new folk' artwork
-  **94** community participants engage in co-production
-  **4** new folk objects collected
-  **6** narrator-participants of new folk traditions films
-  **40** people participate in new folk traditions films
-  **10** new recordings of songs & stories
-  **11** community musicians aged 11–80 years

EXHIBITION & VISITORS

-  **4** museums host Un/Common People exhibition
-  **34,000** people visit Un/Common People exhibition
-  **90%** rate overall exhibition experience as excellent or good
-  **77%** have their exhibition expectations met or exceeded
-  **85%** would attend a similar exhibition in the future
-  **14%** 16–34 age group represent 14% of visitors
-  **54%** of visitors are aged 50+
-  **70%** of postcodes are local
-  **93.5%** agree exhibition improved knowledge & understanding

PROGRAMME ENGAGEMENT

-  **62** associated activities programmed including storytelling
-  **3,724** people engage in the programme
-  **887** people take part in family events

COLLABORATION

-  **7** objects conserved &/or remounted
-  **114** objects photographed for digital exhibition by volunteers
-  **1,500** volunteer hours support delivery

REPUTATION/QUALITY

-  **75** combined audience IIT response
-  **77** combined staff IIT response on opening
-  **66** combined staff IIT response on closing

ENVIRONMENT

 **3.67**
tonnes CO₂e
exhibition footprint

 **6**
private lenders
loaning 25 objects

FINANCE/GOVERNANCE

 **£145,666**
total project spend



Conclusions

The evaluation sought to understand the extent to which the project outline was met, through analysis of specific aims, objectives, outputs and impact. The weight of evidence demonstrates that **The Heritage Fund outcomes and project outputs have been met and delivered, and to a greater or lesser extent so have WMT's specific exhibition aims and impacts:**

Social/Audience It can clearly be demonstrated that this exhibition provided social value, contributed to museum audience development priorities, and delivered positive outcomes for audiences, staff and volunteers. This exhibition responded to contemporary issues and engaged more diverse audiences.

Collaboration There are areas in which this exhibition has encouraged and supported staff collaboration (e.g. sharing collections/marketing strategy/LEX) and achieved some economies of scale (e.g. tour/assets). A culture of greater mutual respect among colleagues has not emerged (except recognition of folk expertise), nor consistently increasing recognition of individual and collective benefits of delivering partnership exhibitions (hindered by challenges to effective project management).

Despite this, there emerges from this evaluation a desire to be *more* involved in planning and delivery of more tailored partnership exhibitions and increasing use of internal expertise.

Reputation/Quality For most audiences this exhibition was a high-quality experience across several measures, contributing to the positive image and reputation of the museums. From a staff perspective they moved from agreement with audiences to less so (although still in agreement). Exhibition communications were managed skilfully and confidently, with the support of the Wessex Marketing role, the lack of which was felt towards the end of the project.

Environment This exhibition contributed to net zero ambitions by implementing a tool and creating a baseline measurement of its CO2e, and increasing partners' knowledge about ways of contributing to higher environmental standards for exhibitions - together or individually.

Finance/Governance Using WMT to fundraise successfully for this exhibition, including a decent budget for community co-creation, contributes positively to the museums' strategic ambitions and their financial sustainability, although this could be more explicit. Planned contributions up to £2,500 each represent less than 2% of final expenditure, suggesting good value for money.

Recommendations

Social/audience

- Fund community co-creation projects well to enable positive outcomes for participants and staff
- Engage external expertise to provide new and diverse perspectives

Collaboration

- Mitigate challenges to effective project management (to increase recognition of individual and collective benefits of delivering partnership exhibitions)
 - Sustaining momentum - have a clear 'contract' communicating the project's ambitions and expectations with each partner from the outset that transcends staff changes and allows each organisation to hold WMT, as project manager, to account to the original vision, and vice versa; have someone 'own' and advocate for the project within each organisation at a senior level
 - Staff changes – a 'contract' would mitigate assumptions about the level of knowledge and understanding within the partnership by new staff
 - Capital projects – although the burden is on the first venue, be aware of team capacity and requirements of a genuinely shared enterprise across the whole length, and how that intersects with other projects
 - Working with external curators – find out the working style of consultants and match them accordingly e.g. a firm PM with a flexible curator, or avoid a mismatch
 - Collections administration - plan an approach from the earliest stage (e.g. a list of accession numbers of shortlisted/final objects from external curators), supported by proactive engagement between partner museum curators as to how the administrative process could best work (and minimum standards). On site collections expertise is beyond scope of WMT team
- Establish what being more involved in planning and delivery of more tailored exhibitions (including use of external expertise) looks like (should lead to a culture of greater mutual respect among colleagues as its clearer to all the role each one is playing)
 - Ask questions and be proactive from the beginning about implications of outputs and outcomes
 - Weigh up production values and personalisation vs time/cost and what minimum standards are
 - Consider implications of bringing more in-house (e.g. editing of *Un/Common* text done by M&AS and Wiltshire Museum out of hours)
 - Allow time for relationship building with external expertise (and other partners)

Reputation/Quality

- A shared Marketing role for exhibitions creates cohesion, economies of scale, and can measure shared impact

- If possible, rotate an exhibition in and out of county to increase audience opportunities

Environment

- Continue reuse success story in footprint
- Continue to draw on and pool partner collections
- Using partnership knowledge and experience, create individual footprint baselines using CCT

Finance/Governance

- Continue to jointly fundraise for financial sustainability and value for money
- Be more explicit about how exhibitions can contribute to actual financial sustainability targets