

## A Template for a People's Museum

The People's Museum took place at M Shed Museum from 13th-14th November 2021, in partnership with Zion Community Space in Bedminster Down/Bishopsworth. 16 local residents who have collections of their own, everything from Glastonbury Festival memorabilia to vintage games consoles to celery vases, were able to display these collections in M Shed, with interpretative panels and a film of them talking about the personal reasons behind their collections in more detail. Some of the collectors were also available in the exhibition at various points over the weekend to talk with visitors and engage them with the displays.

A People's Museum is a great way to engage with the local community, display its creativity and encourage dialogue between different generations and demographics about the value of social history and cultural venues. By encouraging people that have collections in their homes, either on display or gathering dust somewhere, to take part, you can shed light on areas of interest not normally a part of 'traditional' museums and encourage people to talk about these interests that they have. This will hopefully make others want to do the same. This template is here to help you if you are considering putting on your own 'People's Museum.' It will explain how we went about it at Zion and show some examples, as well as make suggestions of things you could do differently. There is also a timeline at the end showing the stages of our project, though there is nothing to suggest that you have to stick to this yourselves.

### Initial planning

If you're thinking about doing a People's Museum of your own, there are some things you need to decide on first; namely, who will be invited to participate, how you'll get the word out to these people, where it will take place, for how long, and what your budget will be. It is also worth anticipating what basic practical questions people might have, such as how long the collections will be needed for, whether they themselves will be needed for all of that time too, and if their possessions will be insured against theft or damage.

What we did:

- We limited our museum to residents living in BS13. This is partly because Zion Community Space is already closely linked with that area, having become an established part of the local community over the past 10 years. It was also because BS13 includes areas that Bristol City Council call 'Priority Neighbourhoods/Areas of Multiple Deprivation.' They include households from a lower socio-economic background, who don't typically go to museums. Part of our aim was to encourage a new audience into Bristol's cultural venues.
- To advertise for participants, we put an advertisement in Zion's monthly programme of events, and posted on Zion's Facebook page and other social media accounts. We were also able to approach some people individually to ask if they wanted to be involved.
- Bristol Museums agreed to host the exhibition at M Shed over a weekend in November.
- We applied for funding to increase our budget so that we could incorporate a digital exhibition too due to uncertainty over restrictions during pandemic.

- Getting funding obviously increased our budget, and it meant we could hire freelance staff to help; two curators and a filmmaker

What you could do:

- Depending on your circumstances you could open the process up to anyone who wants to join, or focus on a different group of people rather than a postcode - age or gender, for example.
- As well as online and word of mouth advertising, you could always print leaflets to put in other venues in your local area, as not everyone is always on social media
- If you're short on space, talk to other organisations with a similar ethos to you to see if they would be willing to host the exhibition, or partner up and do it together, which would increase your number of applications and your budget
- If you don't have extra budget to spend, a project like this can be run by volunteers - just make sure it's clear they won't be getting paid when they sign up!

## Applications

Before you start to put the word out, you should have your applications ready for people to fill out. The main things to consider are what questions you want to include, who you will make them available to people, how they will return them to you and by what date.

What we did:

- We kept our applications quite simple. They asked for a name, address, contact number, email, the theme of the collection and a description of it in 400 words or less. There was also a tick box to make sure they were happy for us to keep their contact details.
- They were downloadable from the Zion website, but people could also email and ask for a copy. They could then email them back to us or handwrite them and give them in by hand.
- We included a word limit of 400 words. It's good to give people an idea of how much you want them to write, otherwise some people will write two sentences and others two pages.
- In the end, we received 16 applications. This turned out to be perfect with the amount of space we were given in M Shed, so everyone who wanted to got to take part.

What you could do:

- You could ask more detailed questions on the application form. Depending on the amount you get, this information could help you be selective, and will also be helpful with the interpretation at the exhibition. Some questions you could use include: 'What was the first item in your collection' or 'Why do you want to share your collection with others?'. It might be better to be more specific if you are expecting a lot of applications and will have to choose between them

- Depending on your community and who you will be targeting, you could also have some pre-printed applications ready to give out to people if they are unlikely to have access to emails or a computer at home
- We didn't include the deadline date or our contact email on the application, but with hindsight that would have been useful.
- If you have to be selective with who gets to take part, think about how much space each person will have (which might depend on what their collection contains), the resources you have, and what the likely maximum number of participants can be based on the venue that will be displaying the exhibition.

## Development and Documentation

You need to give your participants a bit of guidance, but also make sure they feel included in the process and have a say in what the exhibition (or end product) will end up looking like.

What we did:

- We made a promotional video to help encourage applications, which explained what the project aimed to do and offered suggestions about how to pick which parts of their collections to display. You can watch that video on our website: <https://zionbristol.co.uk/peoplesmuseum/>.
- When the applications had been received and finalised, over the course of two days we invited the participants into Zion so we could help them decide which bits of their collection to display (we limited it to 15), photograph each of them (in case the exhibition had to go online) and film them talking through their personal memories of the collection prompted by questions from our curators. This film was edited together and played on a loop throughout the exhibition.
- Our curators used these informal interviews to create a panel of interpretative text to go on display with each collection. This was limited to 200 words, so having the film meant that we didn't worry about having to miss out key information

What you could do:

- You could do an in-person taster session or workshop for people thinking of applying, where you discuss these ideas and what you hope to get out of the project, and think of examples together. This could be a good way to garner interest if you're short of applications. This could be done on Zoom if necessary.
- You could let your participants write their own interpretative text, and perhaps labels for individual objects. This might be a good idea if you don't have the resources for a film, but make sure to give them a limit on how much they should write. The V+A has a [guide to writing gallery text](#) online that might be helpful. Your participants might not be able to be there for the whole of your exhibition to engage with the visitors, so it's a good idea to have that personal side to the collection come through elsewhere.

## Displaying the Exhibition

When it's time for the actual exhibition to take place, it's a good idea to start setting up as early as you can. However much forward planning you do, there will probably be some practical issues crop up that you just hadn't considered, so you want to give yourself some spare time to sort this out. It's also a good idea to make the participants feel involved in the exhibition itself as much as you can.

What we did:

- We made sure all the collections were present at Zion Community Space two days before our exhibition, so we could drive them to M Shed the day before and set everything up in the space. If you are taking care of people's possessions and/or taking them to another location, make sure they are covered by that location's insurance policy.
- In keeping with M-Shed's curatorial style, we choose to display the collections in creative ways, to create a 'theatrical tableau' for each collection, for example; One collection was for 'bee keeping', we used the wooden hive as the central piece, placed on some astro-turf for context, alongside a lifesize roller banner of the collector in her bee-keeping outfit. The other collection items were placed around the hive, using items such as baskets and logs to enhance the outdoor feel. This told the story of each collector and created a visual display which might not be found in a traditional museum. This made it a lot more memorable and really showed off the individual character of each participant.
- While setting up the collections, we noticed a couple of small issues that needed fixing; there was not enough light in the room, the stands for the interpretation panels were a little too low, and it transpired that one of the objects we had contained asbestos and needed to be displayed in a special secure way! That was a lesson to be more thorough in the application process, but getting in a day early meant that we had time to sort these out.
- M Shed staff were very helpful in letting visitors know that our exhibition was on, both on their website and on the day itself, as well as our own promotion.
- We had a little opening of the exhibition the evening before, with the participants and a few other guests to see everything set up before it opened to the public.
- Some of the participants were also able to be there for the whole, or part, of the exhibition to engage with the audience and talk about what their collections meant to them. For those that weren't, the film helped provide this context to the audience.

What you could do:

- If you can't set up in your space in advance for whatever reason, sketch out or make some notes on how you want each collection to be displayed and where.
- Depending on the amount of space you have, you might not be able to get too creative with your displays but you can still think outside the box. For example, one of our collections contained vintage games on a Sega Megadrive and N64, which the owner set up so the audience could take turns and play. Another contained traditional Thai costumes that we put on mannequins.

- You can ask your participants if they have any special requests or ideas about how they might like their collections to be displayed. This might be a good way to make them feel more involved if they aren't able to be there for the entire time.
- If you can, have a volunteer outside your venue to engage passers by and direct them towards the exhibition. If this isn't possible, you can always put up a sign.

## Evaluation

After your People's Museum is over, it might be a good idea for you to think about what worked well, what didn't and what you would do differently next time. If you applied for funding, this will probably have been an agreed-upon part of your application.

What we did:

- Asked the audience to fill out tick-box questionnaires at the end of their visit, telling us their postcode, age group, ethnicity and gender. This helped us judge if our goal to encourage people who wouldn't normally go to museums had been achieved.
- We also had space where the audience could leave feedback comments about what they liked, all of which were very encouraging. We also received some very positive feedback from the participants.
- We wrote this template to encourage others to put on their own People's Museums! From some of the audience feedback we received, it seemed like there was a real appetite for similar shows coming from different areas of Bristol.
- We also had to complete a report after the exhibition was complete, to send to our funders.

What you could do:

- You could have a whiteboard or notebook for people to add comments to publicly. This might encourage other visitors to participate more than just having a written form.
- You could also make a point of asking participants for feedback comments.
- Make sure your ways of gathering feedback are relevant to what you aimed to achieve with the People's Museum (this is why we took postcodes).

## Basic Timeline of Zion People's Museum 2021:

- 26/02/21 - Jess and Emma (Zion) and Holly and Hatty (curators) met for the first time on Zoom to discuss the idea behind the project, agree who is responsible for what and map out a basic timeline
- 25/03/21 - the People's Museum facebook page was set up
- 28/03/21 - the advert for the People's Museum to go in Zion's April/June programme was finalised
- 08/04/21 - participation of Bristol Museums was confirmed in hosting of the exhibition
- 22/04/21 - the timeline for the project was revised

- 06/05/21 - the first tutorial, in the form of a video, was recorded using Loom, presented by Holly
- 10/05/21 - the advert, application form and video tutorial was posted on Facebook
- 22/05/21 - Jess and Emma met with local organizations/groups to discuss project
- 28/05/21 - the People's Museum flyers were sent out to various organisations to promote the project
- 17/08/21 - Jess, Emma and Holly met to discuss next stages of the project
- 17-18/10/21 - participants met at Zion to have their collections photographed and filmed answering the questions about their collections which Holly and Hatty had devised, to be shown as part of the exhibition
- 31/10/21 Deadline for Hatty and Holly for submission of the panel text to go with each collection on display
- 13-14/11/21 - People's Museum took place at M-Shed



