Listening to Communities

A Toolkit to Develop Community Significance

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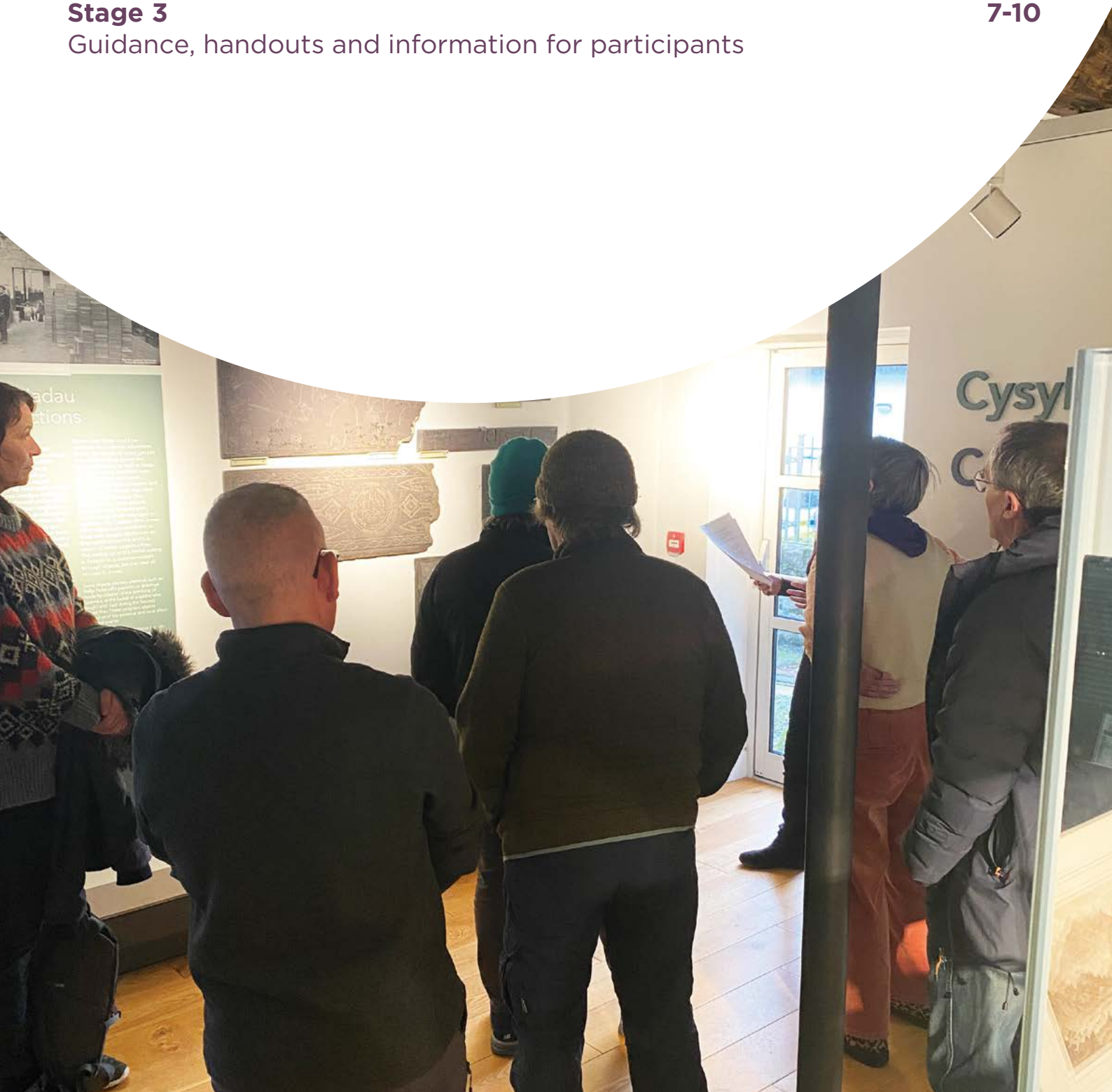

STAGE 1

Background on Significance of Collections

Why museums consider significance, with reference to the Collections Significance Assessment Toolkit

Introduction

This supplementary toolkit has been developed to help museums gain a better understanding of their collections through significance assessment which invites community involvement and voices. This should be read alongside the Collections Significance Assessment Toolkit for Museums in Wales available through the Welsh Government website or Collections Trust. One of the key features of the Collections Significance Assessment Toolkit is that it considered community significance and sets out to include this important aspect from different perspectives, including from under-represented groups.

Research with museums in Wales showed that other significance frameworks do not have a methodology or structure that allows us to understand the collections of Wales as a whole, or to properly consider historic and community value alongside more traditional aspects of significance. We wanted the new toolkit to bring community value and the knowledge and expertise of community members (rather than just academics) to be recognised and articulated.

Feedback from museum staff during our research shows that it can be difficult to get external input from peers, specialists, academics and community members. This toolkit sets out a framework to support this work, especially through community involvement.

This Community Significance Toolkit was piloted at a time when work and research on what a Recognition or Designation scheme might look like for national and internationally important museum collections in Wales was being developed for Welsh Government. Both these studies have led to a set of priorities for understanding significance of collections.

We want museums to:

- Discuss significance from a range of perspectives and voices
- Make use of a set of tools that allow for a range of resources and capacity
- Develop a working practice that helps people to articulate significance for a number of different purposes
- Look at how collections can become more equitable.

Collection Significance Assessments
What is it and why might you undertake one?

A collections significance assessment is a systematic process used to investigate, evaluate, and articulate the historical, scientific, aesthetic, social, and cultural value of museum collections. This could be a single item, part of the collection or the whole collection. The process to undertake an assessment is set out in the Collections Significance Assessment Toolkit and starts with planning and a collections review which will make sure that you have all the required information about the collections and appropriate resources and space for the work. The Significance Assessment should be followed by a review that evaluates what has worked and what could be improved so that the process, if repeated, can become more efficient.

A significance assessment will:

- Help you better understand the value of your collection
- Inform decisions about acquisition and disposal of collections
- Enable you to make strategic decisions about museum collections and update collection management policies
- Advocate for the collections or help make the case for grant funding
- Improve your knowledge about the collections to develop engagement activities and new exhibitions and interpretation
- Articulate the national or international significance of your collections to establish a collection which is formally recognised as significant.

This toolkit provides the background and instructions to undertake community significance workshops which form part of the process to develop a Significance Assessment. The conversations, notes and information gathered can be incorporated into a Significance Statement. Community-related work may be the most appropriate method adopted to confirm a collection's significance, or it could be used to supplement knowledge already recorded in collections data.

STAGE 2

Identifying Collections and Communities, and Guidance for Setting up Workshops

Selecting Collections and Communities

Often the collection selected will be linked to a project or exhibition, or the project might be developed in partnership with a community group who could select the collection. The choice of collection will be a practical one based on available collections data. If you start with the collections, then your task will be to look for communities and groups who have interest or connection with the collection. This connection might be related to their work, hobbies and interests, where they live, or their ethnicity or where they are from, their gender or age. Sometimes such groups will bring knowledge based on their experience or they might bring an emotional connection, or a creative response to the objects.

The table below shows some examples from pilot projects in Wales.

Collections	Community groups
Wood working tools in Ceredigion Museum	Construction college students and Men's Shed group
Samplers from Carmarthenshire Museums	Local sewing and embroidery groups
Llanelly Pottery collection at Parc Howard Museum	Local historians and antique dealers
Carved slate made by slate workers in Storiel	Artists and slate workers

Making first contact and building trust

This section draws on guidance provided by Dr Marian Gwyn.[1] Working with new audiences can be challenging, especially knowing how to make that first approach to people and communities with whom you don't already have a relationship. The key thing is to look beyond the usual institutional networks and be prepared to make informal connections and build trust. It is important to be clear and honest about how people will be involved and how their contribution will be used. Marian provides some tips below for starting to build new relationships. She says it's important not to allow anxiety about 'getting it wrong' to become a reason for not engaging at all. Marian, recipient of the Museums Association's Radical Changemaker Award in 2024, specialises in inclusive practice and representation in the cultural sector in Wales.

[1] Recent publications include: 'Museums in Wales: Identities, Empire and Slavery', in *Globalising Welsh Studies: Decolonising History, Heritage, Society and Culture* (University of Wales Press, 2024). Continues to provide advisory and partnership work with cultural organisations and agencies across Wales.

Practical guidance for engaging new communities

- Talk to your team, trustees and volunteers as many will have connections to communities they previously may not have considered.
- Think sideways and keep asking.
- Don't be afraid to chat to people in local shops or restaurants.
- It's very important to set boundaries and manage expectations – be clear about what you're asking people to do and how this will be used.
- Don't be afraid to ask if people would be interested, sometimes geographic boundaries don't matter and sometimes they do.
- Recognise and value people's experience; this might include an offer to cover costs or expenses, or a contribution towards people's time.

Managing risks

We suggest undertaking a Risk Review before the workshops. This will help to mitigate any risks and ensure that the collections and people participating are properly cared for. The risk register should consider the following areas:

Collections
Are the objects suitable and robust enough to be handled carefully? Do you need mounts or protective covers?
Are there enough tables so people can handle the objects sat at a table? Can gloves be provided and are there enough staff to supervise?

Participants
Do they understand the aim of the session?
Do they have additional needs for access?

Sensitivity
Is the topic or theme of the collections one that should have a trigger warning? Remember that certain communities may consider sensitivity issues in different ways.

There is guidance here on best practice for discussing topics that may be sensitive by Museum Development North and by the University of Reading.

STAGE 3

Guidance and Handouts

Handouts are available as standalone Word documents that can be printed

Community led significance | Aims:

- To explore specific parts of the collection with community members with a connection to, or interest in, the collection
- Engage community members with the collection through active participation
- Add to our knowledge of the collection with input from the community
- Capture and record community knowledge and expertise relevant to our collections
- Encourage community groups to get up close to collections.

You will need to have identified a collection to focus on, checked that you have information about the objects and identified a group of people to take part in the workshop (see Stage 2 of the Toolkit).

Collection

The selection of objects needs to be representative of the collection which you are considering. You could invite participants to help select the objects, but this will probably require a separate session. The objects chosen should be out and ready before the workshop and should represent the collection in terms of dates, materials and styles. You will need enough objects for one between two, or one each allowing everyone to get a really close look at the item. We suggest that each person (or pair of people) work with just one object. There are opportunities later in the session for people to comment on other objects.

If you plan to run more than one workshop for different groups, you could use the same set of objects or a different selection of objects for each group. Consider making comparisons of group reactions to objects to form a consensus.

Practicalities

You could record the session on video or using Co-pilot or a similar tool which would provide summary notes as well – you would need to check that recording equipment can pick up all the participants' voices. Or take notes and use worksheets (with pencil) for participants to record their comments.

Sample Invitation:

"We would like to invite you to take part in a workshop to help us understand more about our collections and their significance. We are focusing on [name of collection here] and have invited people with [experience or interest specified here] to take part. We would like to invite you to join us for a collections workshop to explore the museum's collection of [insert collection type here] and to discuss how this collection connects with your life and experience.

We would like to compensate you for your time, and we are able to cover the costs for you of attending this workshop. If you could let us know we can discuss the best way to do this."

Suggested Format of a Community Discussion | Session Introduction

Invite people to introduce themselves. You could ask beforehand that they bring an object or photograph connected to the collection or their experience.

Explain the purpose of the workshop. It is important that the group understands the aim of the session. Some groups might prefer to work over more than one session with a visit to the museum and introduction first. Facilitating the group will need to include flexibility balanced with an awareness of the time constraints.

Session Discussion

Once everyone understands their role and the impact of their comments, encourage the group to have a close look at the objects and ask questions:

- What is it made of?
- What does it look like?
- How big is it?
- How was it made, what can we tell about the process of making from the item?
- What are the object's key characteristics?
- What makes this item distinctive?

Significance of collections is considered under different headings, look at each in turn and ask why the collection or individual items are significant.

Session Conclusion

Following a wider discussion, try to bring together all the comments into some form of consensus regarding the significance of the collection(s). This will help the group understand that their input has been important in defining the specific areas of significance involved. The notes should be collated and a summary written using the suggested headings and/or types of significance.

Handout to print for participants on the following two pages.

Community significance

Have a look at the item:

- What is it made of?
- What does it look like?
- How big is it?
- How was it made, and what can we tell about the process of making from the item?
- What are the object's key characteristics?
- What makes this item distinctive?

Significance	Notes
Historic Does the collection have a direct connection to a historic event, person or group? Where was it made and what was its function? Why was it collected by the museum? Does the collection represent a particular theme or pattern of life? What does it tell us about the history?	
Artistic/ aesthetic Was the design influential? Is there a connection between the different designs? Is the design / construction high quality?	
Social Do we know who owned or made it? What was their role? Do the objects help us understand life in the past and the role of different members of the family/ community? Do the objects symbolise ideas or culture?	
Scientific / technological Does the collection have relevance to changes in science or technology? Is the production method used to make it similar to that used today?	
Community value and impact Do the items have a particular meaning for a specific group in the community? How do people respond to the collection? What values does it represent?	
Rarity / representativeness Are there any other examples in museums locally, regionally or nationally? How does it relate to these other examples? Is it one of a kind? Are the items of high quality?	
Other Tell us how else this collection is significant from your perspective	