

the happy
museum

**Case Study - real
practice, real impact**
Prescribing Happiness –
The Beaney, Canterbury

The Beane, Canterbury

Local authority funded,
42 full time staff.

The Beane House of Art and Knowledge, Canterbury – prescribing happiness

This case study is about how a participative temporary exhibition/activity was co-created with local people – in the process helping the Beane House in Canterbury to successfully re-launch itself and to pilot an effective approach to engaging and working with audiences.

This case study is relevant to:

- Senior management team
- Learning and community engagement teams
- Curators

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Mitch Robertson, Head of Programming & Collections for Canterbury Museums & Galleries

Highlights

- More than 6,700 people visited the Paper Apothecary during its two-week run
- Some 65% said it made them feel ‘happy’, ‘very happy’, or ‘inspired’
- Visitor numbers and engagement afterwards were significantly boosted
- The project strengthened existing external partnerships and led to new ones
- Co-creation and community engagement is now an embedded way of working
- The city’s museum service strategy was changed to include a focus on promoting wellbeing



Museum profile

The Beaney House of Art and Knowledge is an art museum and library situated in the heart of Canterbury. Following a £14 million restoration project (with half provided by the Heritage Lottery Fund) the revitalised

Beaney re-opened its doors to the public in September 2012 – and in the first two years since then has attracted some 950,000. The museum employs 42 full time staff and is managed by Canterbury City Council.

Happy Museum funded activities

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The Beaney commissioned Animate Arts Company to work with children, local people and museum staff to co-create a cultural apothecary – a full-size antiquated apothecary’s shop made out of card and other recycled materials, staffed by performers who dispensed cultural ‘happiness prescriptions’ to some 6,700 visitors over a two week period. The 200 different prescriptions were created by a group of 109 children aged 5 to 10 from four local schools and by over 100 members of the public. These external ‘happiness

investigators’ took part in a series of workshops alongside museum staff and professionals to make use of the museum’s collections, library and heritage. Visitors to the Paper Apothecary described how they were feeling to the apothecary’s resident chemists and were given an appropriate prescription – a cultural activity suited to their needs. Prescriptions ranged from the playful (roar at the statue of the lion) to the poetic (imagine rose petals blowing in the wind). Some of the prescriptions linked to activities that were available, others to parts of the collection.



What happened?



“We’d never worked in this direct way with communities before, we had quite a traditional approach to outreach. But its success has led to a very big attitude change within the organisation. After the Paper Apothecary, the feeling is that anything goes – we can try things and take measured risks.”

Mitch Robertson, Head of Programming & Collections for Canterbury Museums & Galleries

“The city council undertook an extensive consultation with the local community (before the refurbishment) which revealed that most people felt it was not very inviting. In its previous incarnation, the museum didn’t really actively engage with communities or hard to reach groups,” says Mitch Robertson, Head of Programming & Collections for Canterbury Museums & Galleries. “Our Happy Museum project gave us a chance to change that and to engage with those communities in a novel and interesting way. Through this project the new ‘therapeutic’ Beaney is becoming a powerful agent of social change.”

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“The project required a lot of staff involvement. We used to be organised in three departments, and staff in those groups didn’t get many opportunities to work together. Breaking down internal barriers was part of reinventing the museum after the refurbishment. There is now more internal collaboration.”

“The Beaney has a Front Room gallery which we are now using in a different way following the Paper Apothecary experience. The projects in that space now offer a much higher level of visitor participation and the space has become very democratic. We encourage community groups and local artists to use the space and tell us what they want to do with it.”

“The biggest impact for the organisation was the realisation that programmes aimed at improving wellbeing were really needed – visitors want to participate, talk and connect.” This conclusion has led the Canterbury Museums and Galleries to include wellbeing in its strategy. A stated aim of the city’s cultural institutions is now to: “Act as

a catalyst for social change, contributing to the quality of people's lives and the wellbeing of local communities." The 2013 strategy document states:

"We know that museums have the power to help promote good and active citizenship, and that we can play a significant role in supporting our users' health and mental wellbeing as well as enhancing creative ability and academic performance."

"We see social investment as a key part of our activity, and we will use our collections and programmes to stimulate and facilitate debate on pertinent issues for our communities. We aim to make a positive difference to the lives of our users through influencing public knowledge, attitudes and behaviour and empowering our citizens."

What's changed?

"Working on your own is quite scary, and we benefited from being part of the Happy Museum community of practice and from input from the team. It gave us confidence, we felt part of a bigger family on the same journey."

Mitch Robertson, Head of Programming & Collections for Canterbury Museums & Galleries

Visitor engagement: The project created a near 100% take up of further visits for the participant schools and most of the children involved also visited with their families, some many times.

Partnerships: The project strengthened existing partnerships and led to new ones. An example is the connection with Professor Paul Camic, Professor of Psychology and Public Health at Canterbury Christchurch University and Research Director in the Department of Applied Psychology. Through this connection, The Beaney and the local NHS Trust ran a series of cultural workshops over eight months for patients with early onset dementia.

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practice and from input from the team. It gave us confidence, we felt part of a bigger family on the same journey."

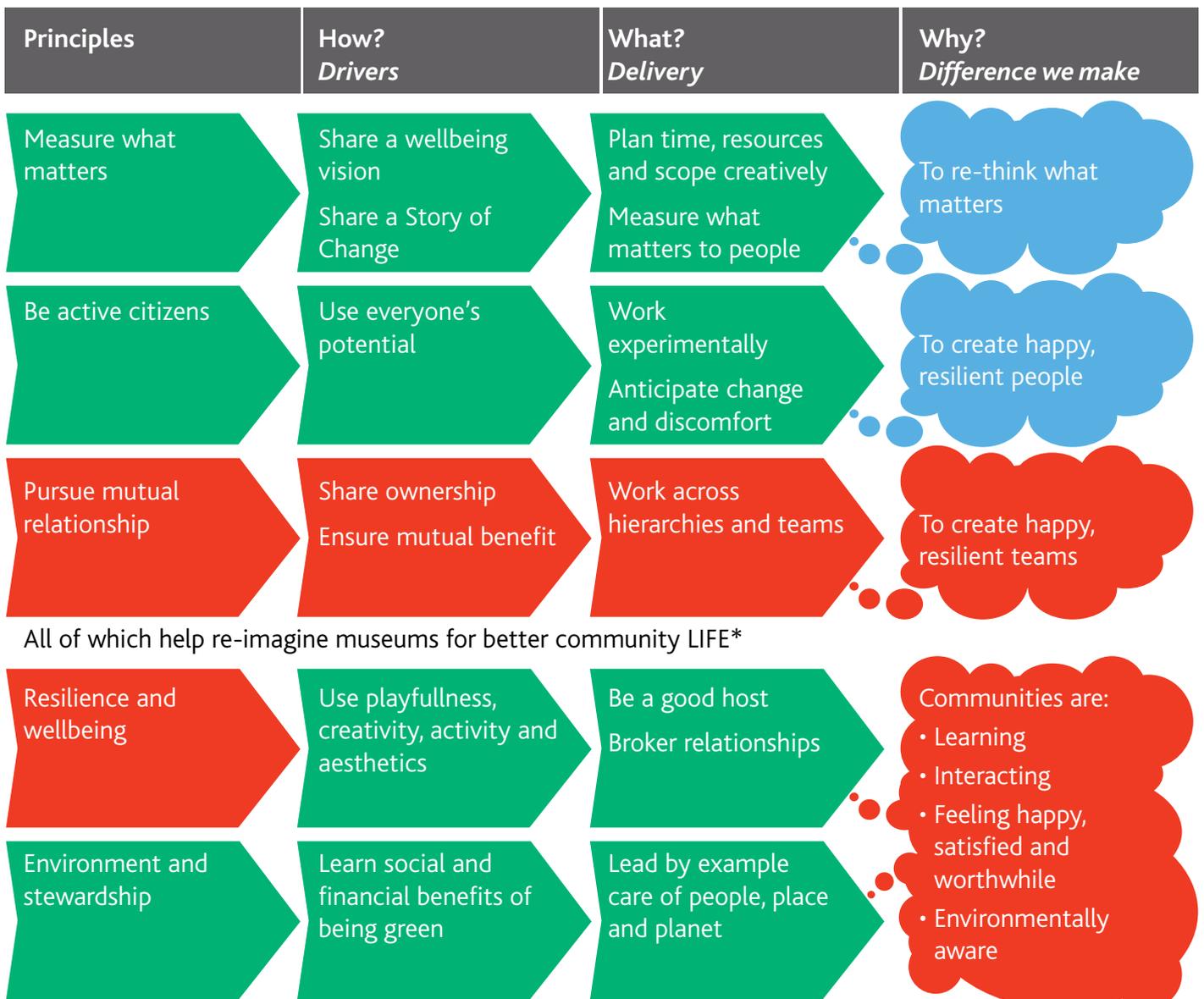
Organisational change: The project was an excellent way of breaking down barriers between departments. By working more closely together, they learnt about each other, and the whole organisation is now more open to new ways of doing things.

Project impact: In an evaluation of the Paper Apothecary project carried out by People United, Beaney staff, participating children and community groups all reported higher levels of wellbeing after involvement in the project. Of the 6,729 visitors, some 37% said they felt 'happy' after their cultural treatment, while 15 % felt 'very happy' and 12% felt 'inspired'.

Happy Museum success factors

Since 2008, The Happy Museum project has been testing a set of working principles through commissioned projects. These 'action research' projects have helped us identify critical success factors of how, what and why museums might re-imagine

themselves in the light of these principles. The table below is a summary of our 'Story of Change' tool. (More information here: www.happymuseumproject.org) This case study best demonstrates the aspects of practice highlighted in red.



* The Happy Museum Project is conducting a national LIFE survey, where LIFE = Learning, Interactions with others, Feelings and emotions, and Environmental awareness. More: www.happymuseumproject.org

Tools used

The Paper Apothecary project team used an embedded evaluation, among other techniques, so that participant feedback was built into (rather than being separate from) the activity. The cultural 'prescriptions' given out at the apothecary featured a tear-

off section where people were invited to record any side-effects, reactions and comments to the cultural treatment they had taken. In total, there were some 297 written comments responding to the simple question 'How did the cultural treatment make you feel?'

More examples of embedded evaluation techniques can be found here: www.happymuseumproject.org

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Joanna Jones
Director, Canterbury Museums & Galleries



Online resources

Museum website: www.canterbury.co.uk/Beaney

Project film: *The Paper Apothecary in the Front Room*

Project evaluation: <http://mediafiles.thedms.co.uk>