

Best practice in community consultation by museums

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This research was conducted by **Kalliopi Fouseki** at **The Science Museum**.

Summary

The research explores how community consultation is carried out by museums, and highlights in particular the perceptions of community members involved. It uses the case study of seven institutions and their development of exhibitions based on the 1807 Abolition of Slavery Act. The key research findings are that community members often felt angry and frustrated, rather than involved, as a result of the consultation process. Consultation often meant informing communities rather than engaging in proper dialogue and negotiation with the community.

Why and how to consult the community?

Museums consult communities to meet the criteria of funding bodies, boost visitor numbers, and fulfill social inclusion agendas and personal and institutional democratic and political priorities. The institutions utilised different methods of consultation, with varied success:

- small focus groups formed through personal invitations, sometimes with additional key community member interviews. These were effective at producing a sense of shared ownership, but not very diverse
- large discussion groups of 30-40. These provided a diverse range of voices but failed to produce a sense of shared ownership and had high drop-out rates
- specific sub-projects like oral history projects or art workshops running alongside the exhibitions. These provided skills and opportunities for community members but were sometimes peripheral to the main exhibition

What best practice looks like

The author concluded that best practice for consultation involves shared ownership of all stages of exhibition design, recognition of the power relations involved in community consultation, and recognition by curators of the significance of exhibitions spaces as sites for providing social justice and positive representation. The results of the research show that narrative-driven exhibitions, rather than those that were object-led, more often involved a democratic consultation process. In order to deliver better community consultation in the future, the research recommends diversity and negotiation skills training.

This summary was written by **Ruth Craggs, King's Knowledge Exchange Associate**

Keywords

UK focus group museum community consultation

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