Exploring how the World Conservation and Exhibition Centre Activity Plan 2015-18 has:
• opened up the British Museum
• supported capacity building in collections skills and co-creation work for the wider UK museums sector
• developed thinking around participatory practice
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Introduction to the World Conservation and Exhibition Centre

The World Conservation and Exhibition Centre (WCEC) is a Heritage Lottery Fund-supported development which has enabled the British Museum to provide first-class facilities for visitors and researchers; taking conservation, scientific research and collections management to a new level of excellence. The WCEC is home to state-of-the-art facilities such as the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery (SEG), Conservation Studios and Science Laboratories, storage facilities, and the Collections Hub.

Yet the WCEC’s world-class facilities are only part of the story. From 2015 to 2018, Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) funding has enabled the British Museum to deliver a rich programme of activity to broaden and deepen participation for visitors, volunteers, communities, and the UK museums sector. The WCEC Activity Plan has produced:

- A wide range of training courses, face to face and films-based, for museum professionals across the UK through the Collections Skills Training programmes.
- Digital content across a range of platforms through World History Lab to showcase conservation and science work internationally and increase virtual access.
- Volunteer and staff-led Behind-the-scenes WCEC tours of the conservation labs for visitors.
- Object handling opportunities for temporary exhibitions through Hands-on Desks, facilitated by volunteers.

- A multifaceted volunteering programme, giving the public more and new ways to get involved through volunteering, including the opportunities above, as well as the Object Moves programme to transfer the Africa, Oceania and Americas (AOA) collection into the WCEC.
- Object Journeys, which has seen the Museum work collaboratively with community partners to research and explore the AOA collection to co-create displays, public programmes, digital content and additional information. It involved piloting new engagement methodologies and community-led display development.

These activities and interpretation have been guided by internal and external steering groups and continuous evaluation throughout the project.

Now that the WCEC Activity Plan is complete, this report has been produced to celebrate the achievements and reflect on opportunities for growth in the future.

Cover: Visitor handling a coin at the volunteer-facilitated Hands On desk in the WCEC
Opening up the British Museum

The extensive programme of activities around the creation of the WCEC has generated unprecedented public access to and engagement with once-behind-the-scenes spaces and activities at the British Museum. Through dynamic high-quality digital content, behind-the-scenes tours, and partnering with communities to create new content, the project has opened up previously inaccessible areas, content and activities.
Showcasing the Museum’s sector-leading Conservation and Scientific Research work to a huge digital audience

- 2.5 million visits
- Average of 60,244 views per video post
- 1 million views of the Vulture Peak Embroidery series of films

The Museum has showcased its conservation and science work to huge numbers of digital audiences around the world through the World History Lab’s online content. High-quality standalone videos and themed series on a range of intriguing yet accessible topics, have proved to be extremely popular, attracting around 2.5 million visits in total. The content explores specific conservation projects, profiles the fascinating range of conservation roles and shares tools and processes. All of the content, and the series formats in particular, have cultivated loyal audiences from around the world, who are eager to watch weekly installments, and actively like, comment, and share via online platforms.
The Museum’s content is also responsive to audience reactions and interests, such as the ‘Why aren’t you wearing gloves?’ film, which was inspired by viewer comments and questions from previous videos. It went on to become the most popular standalone video on the World History Lab channels.

Gloves and handling museum objects film https://youtu.be/VA2Lunt6Lr0

The World History Lab videos will leave a legacy beyond the WCEC project, with a new training guide to support staff in creating future content.
Behind the scenes access to the conservation studios and expert staff

- 99% of visitors rated the tours good or very good
- 98% of visitors’ understanding of the Museum’s work improved

Behind the scenes tour

Monthly WCEC behind the scenes tours have provided the public with unparalleled regular access to the Museum’s conservation work and expertise for the first time. The tours were led by specially-recruited and trained Museum volunteers and allowed participants to meet real conservators and see their work in action. Visitor feedback has been extremely positive throughout the tour offer.

‘Never had a chance to talk to people from the Conservation Department before. It was great to be able to ask them questions and learn what they do.’

Tour participant

‘I really enjoyed visiting an area which is not open to the public and having explanations about the hard work behind the exhibitions.’

Tour participant

‘Absolutely wonderful. If I’d had the chance to do this when I was young, I’d have a completely different career. Thank you.’

Tour participant
The people giving the talks appeared willing and interested. They were fascinating, it was wonderful. Truly memorable. Thank you so much. The tour guide was also inspiring and very helpful.

Tour participant

The tours not only opened up new areas of the Museum to visitors, but also to volunteers, by creating a new role and training programme.

I've really enjoyed seeing the studios and the science department and hearing the conservators/scientists discuss their work and also the interaction with the public who seem to enjoy the tours immensely and engage with the conservators/scientists.

Volunteer

I have personally learned so much from visiting all the various “Behind the Scenes” locations in the WCEC; the conservation staff are top of their field, so very knowledgeable; always willing to share, and pleasant in approach to visitors!

Volunteer

Staff also reflected that that the tours enabled them to share the behind the scenes conservation work with new audiences.

‘I see the tours as an opportunity to talk about my work and spread the word about conservation.’

Staff member

‘This is an excellent platform to talk to the public about the work of conservation and its benefits to collection care and the museum. It is also enjoyable to discuss the work of conservation to an audience that would not normally be privy to this behind the scenes work.’

Staff member

‘It is always important to engage with the public to show them what we are working on. I think public engagement should be more prominent within our department.’

Staff member
Involving community partners and generating an exchange of knowledge

Somali Object Journeys community partner examining a Masarafad or Food Mat for display

Kiribati Object Journeys community partners during a workshop with staff

Kiribati Community partners giving a talk at their display launch event

Family Object Journeys community partners during a workshop with staff in the WCEC
The WCEC project has invited more community partners into working collaboratively with the Museum through the Object Journeys activity strand. The Museum worked closely with Somali and Kiribati community partners, as well as a multi-cultural group of community partners exploring the theme of family. Working closely with staff from across disciplines, community partners have explored the AOA collection and shared their own experiences to generate a two-way exchange of learning. Through the new knowledge created, the resulting displays and public programmes, the Museum and community partners opened up the Museum to the wider community.

‘Recognising that behind the scenes that there are people who are trying to do things a bit more creatively, a bit more differently. So, for me it’s like knowing that behind the scenes all these other things are happening.’

Community partner

‘I found it really enlightening, just because we didn’t realise how many objects there were within the British Museum, so like going through everything that they had and like just identifying which ones were actually Kiribati and which were other items from other Pacific Islands.’

Community partner

‘It’s nice because you get to see things in terms of heritage and culture that you wouldn’t necessarily be able to see... When I started I never knew the BM had like 800 Somali objects.’

Community partner

‘Listening to us, like actually listening to our ideas. We shaped it, we chose the objects, we chose the theme.’

Community partner

‘Just to, kind of, have a space where you’re having a tactile relationship with your culture.’

Community partner
The project has enabled the British Museum to explore how knowledge from community partners is valued. Some staff have recognised that it has opened up conversations and provided new information that the Museum had lacked.

‘Communities are engaging and having a voice.’
Staff member

‘Ordinary people are creating a display.’
Staff member

Object Journeys initiated a greater insight into how to support communities to develop equal partnerships and sense of ownership of the Museum. This poem by professional artist Theresa Lola is a written interpretation of the evaluation feedback from Somali community partners. It explores key themes such as access, ownership and partnership.

Object Journeys

To reclaim objects your ancestors once used is like pulling a mirror closer to your face to give a clearer reflection of home. Home is an alien until you create a space for both of you to co-exist together. The British Museum was that space for the Somali partners to share the stories of Barkin, Masafared, even the Dacas, goat-leather sandal pinched intricately together by a mother’s soft hands.

Out of the objects, the Somali partners got to touch a few, but there is no set figure of how much of your heritage you can swallow to feel it bloating your body with joy.

The British Museum has the world condensed into a building, so you too would want to touch everything you can, but for large organisations access is a challenging process.

Partnership is a malleable term that can be bent in many directions. The Somali partners and the British Museum, tried to define their position without treading on egg shells. A structure is important but the Somali partners wished they could make more decisions on the structure of the project.

No one wants to feel like a ticked box, The British Museum reached out and welcomed the community into its arms. With all the sweat and dedication, who benefitted more from the project?

Sharing their heritage with the wider community made their faces glow like newly refined diamonds showing the world the side of them that sparkles in hopes it will blind out the narrative of the Somali culture that is displayed to the world.

Sustenance is the magic word that will keep lemonade dripping from lemons, what happens from now is the important question.

By Theresa Lola
New opportunities and growth: for volunteers, visitors and communities

The WCEC project has not only opened up more of the British Museum for a wider range of people to experience, but also generated new opportunities for participation. This includes new volunteer roles in public engagement and collections management, which in turn have facilitated and increased visitor participation. Evaluation has shown high levels of satisfaction among volunteers in all new roles, and positive impacts on their lives and careers. In addition, Object Journeys has created unique opportunities for communities to actively participate, which has supported a rich range of benefits.

Expanding volunteering and visitor opportunities

- 1,995 days of volunteer time has been created
- 100% of people participating in the volunteer facilitated Hands on desks rated volunteers’ knowledge good or very good

The WCEC project has produced many firsts for the British Museum, including new opportunities to volunteer behind-the-scenes with the Africa, Oceania, and Americas (AOA) collection. The Museum’s Storage Moves Team recruited Object Moves volunteers to support them in managing and caring for the collections. This was the first time the Museum has offered a volunteer role so directly involved in collections care and management. These new opportunities had an extremely positive impact on volunteers, especially in the areas of professional development, skill building, and personal enjoyment. The experience has been a gateway to paid roles in this area for a number of volunteers.
Volunteers were specially recruited to help staff members to lead public tours of behind-the-scenes areas of the WCEC. Tours were volunteer-led from the Information Desk in the Great Court. On arrival in the conservation studios the group were split into smaller groups who rotated between different conservators who talked about their current work. This allows visitors to interact with conservators working on a range of objects. Visitor satisfaction has been extremely high and volunteers are very positive about their experience. The WCEC tours have provided new opportunities for volunteers and staff to support each other in delivering important public engagement work.

‘My time with the WCEC Storage Moves team has been really enjoyable! Choosing to volunteer here has turned out to be one of the best decisions for my personal development and understanding which direction to take my career.’

Object Moves volunteer

‘I have truly had a wonderful experience volunteering with the WCEC and will be forever grateful for all the valuable things I have learned. I am delighted and honoured to have been part of the project.’

Object Moves volunteer

The volunteer-facilitated Hands on desks have allowed visitors to the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery to touch authentic objects and artefacts reflecting the themes explored in major SEG exhibitions. These object handling stations have enhanced visits to many British Museum exhibitions, from Vikings: life and legend to Scythians: warriors of ancient Siberia. The project massively exceeded original targets by delivering a desk for every exhibition. The specially-trained volunteers facilitate visitor engagement with the handling objects at the desk, with content support from curators and the interpretation team. Volunteers are empowered to choose which objects they will use at the desk from within a pre-selected set. The desks offer visitors tactile experiences and spark interesting conversations between volunteers and visitors about themes explored in the related special exhibition.

Both volunteers and visitors have found the experience to be enjoyable, meaningful and enjoyable.

‘Object based learning through the handling of authentic artefacts (or copies) holds a very strong interest for me. Therefore, the opportunity to engage with visitors through object handling and to witness their enthusiasm prior to entering an exhibition is particularly satisfying.’

Hands on desk Volunteer
‘According to the visitors I speak to they are amazed and very pleased that the British Museum gives them the opportunity to handle original objects and find out about them rather than just look at objects in a case. Visitors say it is a more personal approach to history and gives them a chance to connect to the past and the people of that time.’

Hands on desk Volunteer
Growth and development for community partners

Object Journeys has provided a unique opportunity for community partners to participate in the process of display curation and interpretation at the British Museum and beyond. Partners found this experience to be enormously valuable in terms of personal growth, cultural knowledge, and greater insight into the curatorial process. Opportunities to celebrate and showcase their culture, connect to others within their communities and skills development were highly valued.

‘I learned more about my own heritage. I was doing the research about Somali culture, Somali people, and it’s very diverse and a multifaceted community. Through that project I learned about it.’

Community partner

‘The islands are changing shape, literally. So, for me, it was very interesting to put all of that into perspective. The historical journey, this is a part of Kiribati culture that hopefully won’t disappear.’

Community partner
The things we’ve learnt, seeing the objects and being able to touch them and it was just so exciting. When I talk about it to friends and family I sort of say it’s probably one of the most exciting things that’s happened in my life. I really can’t believe it.’

Community partner

Poet Hamdi Khalif performing as part of the Somali Object Journeys events
‘On a personal level, fostering strong friendships within the community, because I wouldn’t typically see all of us this often, so that’s been really nice.’

Community partner

‘I enjoyed especially the interaction and listening to this team because we learnt from each other a hell of a lot. For me that’s been the major bit because it opens up your mind and how they communicate and what they want to say, I think for me that’s been the greatest gift.’

Community partner
Family Object Journeys community partners and staff during a workshop.

Kiribati Object Journeys launch event; large crowds of visitors watch the dance performance in the Great Court.

Storyteller and educator Zainab Dahir leading a storytelling event as part of the Somali Object Journeys events programme.
Kiribati dancers at Object Journeys launch event

Handling session as part of the Somali Object Journeys events programme
Supporting the museums sector nationwide

The WCEC project has created new opportunities for the British Museum to support the wider sector, through skills development, capacity building and partner opportunities.

Supporting museums to become loan ready and develop collections skills

- 61 face to face collections skills training sessions have been delivered
  - 450 course participants
  - 98% rated the training very good or good
- 10 short collections skills training films produced and published

A series of training films and face-to-face sessions utilised the collections, staff and WCEC facilities to provide more than 60 training and skills sharing courses for museum professionals. Courses provided a balance of delivery styles, including presentations, demonstrations, and hands-on workshop activities. 10 training films that complement the face-to-face training were produced and published.
The films support UK museums to become more ‘British Museum loan ready’ by offering guidance on many aspects of the loans process; from researching collections before an initial request, through to how objects will be moved and stored after being on loan. These films provide the added benefits of ensuring institutional knowledge and legacy is maintained beyond the scope of the project, and that regional partners beyond those who attended the courses will be able to access the training through the Collections Trust.

As the testimonials below demonstrate, the training courses have made a positive contribution to participants’ professional development, as well as collections knowledge and expertise in the sector overall.

'I have found this training invaluable. It has been so exciting to find out how the British Museum operates and it was a real treat to have a tour round the [WCEC] – the lady that took us was amazing.'

'Ready to Borrow’ course participant

'I wanted to learn a bit more about conserving and storing textiles as I work and have volunteered at numerous organisations where textile care is crucial. I also want to progress in the industry so the more knowledge I have, the better. I highly enjoyed the delivery and knowledge shared by [the trainers]. They seemed to have endless knowledge and hearing about their work made me excited to use the techniques in my own work. I thought learning how to roll the flat textiles was really practical and useful.'

'Textile Care and Storage’ course participant
Facilitating partner museums to develop co-created displays with British Museum loans and their local communities

The Object Journeys activity strand was delivered at three partner museums across the country. New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester, Manchester Museum, and Brighton Museum and Art Gallery were supported with resources such as expertise, staff time and British Museum loans to create their own displays with community partners. These collaborations resulted in the following displays: South Asia Object Journeys at Manchester Museum, Global Artists: The Whole World Paints at New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, and Fashioning Africa at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery. The regional Object Journeys model provided valuable opportunities for partner museums to explore engagement methodologies around collections and displays.

‘It was eye-opening in terms of people; knowledge, different forms of knowledge, how we can work with different people, feeling we don’t have to know everything. I gained a lot of interesting cultural knowledge and historical knowledge, such as knowledge about Africa, and learned about what surrounds cultures, such as race relations. It helped broaden my understanding – I’d not gain (this) working with other curators or books. Power of relationships and importance of us having different bodies; it confirmed this is the right way/model of working.’

Partner museum staff member

‘Other staff, some more initially dubious, were impressed with the output – so may be persuaded to take this approach. My boss was impressed and said ‘this is not dumbing down, it’s more. It’s better, it’s quality.’”

Partner museum staff member

‘It strengthened relationships between the museum and their stakeholders, artists, and communities, to allow the organisation to be more porous and let different perspectives and people in. They are publicly funded so need to be seen to be doing this to be more democratic. It allows for expertise sharing and levelling the ground; it makes the relationships equal and its beneficial to both partners.’

Partner museum staff member
Developing new thinking around participatory practice

Object Journeys has provided new learning, skills, and perspectives which have generated new thinking around what participatory practice could and should look like at the British Museum. This activity strand has successfully delivered three projects at the British Museum (along with the three regional projects) which have experimented with a range of engagement methodologies, worked with different community partners and been supported by a strong practice of internal and external reflection. These factors have all resulted in a developing new learning and robust research that the Museum can build on in the future.

Exploring new engagement methodologies and approaches to co-creation around collections

Object Journeys workshop with community partners and staff
Object Journeys has deepened staff understanding about how to work collaboratively with collections and community partners, as well as developing confidence. The project has established insight into what ‘community-led’ practice at a national museum can look like, opened up questions about what this means across disciplines, and initiated a dialogue about the extent to which different kinds of expertise is described and valued.

“You have to step away and recognise it is their voice and represented as it is and not edited.”

Staff member
Different iterations of Object Journeys enabled the Museum to trial exploring co-creation of displays through both culturally specific and thematic approaches. In addition, testing the extent to which the community partners and participatory process is visible in the interpretation is enabling the Museum to learn more about how its visitors respond to co-produced content. Visitors have felt that the collaborative nature of the displays has added value and importance, due to a sense of authenticity and culturally relevant content being chosen.

There are a vast range of opportunities for the Museum to further explore, including supporting staff to work more regularly and effectively with community partners as experts, exploring how communities can be supported to access collections and how different kinds of expertise can be valued.

Many British Museum staff members are strong advocates for participatory practice around collections, but there is still room for more support and advocacy at a senior level to ensure the learning from Object Journeys is nurtured. This is increasingly important as museums are asked to demonstrate their relevance to society.
Playing a more active role in sector conversations about participatory practice

Object Journeys Under 5s event

Object Journeys community partners exploring archives

Young visitor enjoying Kiribati Object Journeys activities
Participatory practice is often assumed to be the domain of smaller or regional museums, rather than large (inter)nationals who often attract a higher proportion of overseas visitors. Object Journeys has started a conversation around the role of this practice in museums that may experience challenges specific to being a large institution with local, national and international audiences. Both community partners, Museum staff and External Steering Group members reported that they felt this project has successfully challenged the assumption that a large, national museum is incapable of or uninterested in delivering meaningful participatory practice.

‘I’m amazed, I’m very pleased, yes, to see the direction that the British Museum is taking. I felt before it was very hierarchical. Here is something, I don’t know how new it could be, but the approach is very good and I love it.’

Community partner
‘I was pleasantly surprised that community groups curated displays in a permanent gallery at the British Museum.’

External Steering Group member

‘This project stretches the British Museum. I want us to learn from each project and build on these. I want a legacy; to focus on embedding this work in more day to day non-externally funded work.’

British Museum staff member

‘Sometimes you feel a little distant from the British Museum, but this project is helping, by working together, to change the view of how the British Museum is working.’

Community partner

Going forward

The World Conservation and Exhibition (WCEC) Activity Plan has provided unprecedented learning opportunities for all involved.

It has challenged the British Museum to try new ways of working and engaging with audiences and stories; it has invited a greater number and variety of people to experience and help shape the inner workings of the Museum; and it has begun to shift perceptions about what a national museum with a largely international audience can do in terms of community engagement and participatory practice. There is still a lot of progress to be made – this project has created new opportunities for the British Museum and wider sector to continue building upon. Object Journeys is best seen as the start of a journey rather than the end.

There is also an opportunity to continue broadening the definition of ‘public-facing’ staff within a museum. The popularity of World History Lab Videos and behind-the-scenes tours of WCEC have demonstrated a strong public interest in traditionally ‘back-of-house’ conservation work. Most behind-the-scenes staff see the wider benefit of these forms of public interaction. This reveals an opportunity to further demonstrate the value of public engagement for all staff, including those in curatorial and collections care roles. The British Museum and wider sector can advocate for participatory practice to be integrated into the work of the entire Museum, rather than being largely limited to education, engagement and visitor services departments.
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