



VISITOR STUDIES GROUP CONFERENCE 2014
6th and 7th March 2014, St Martin-in-the-Fields, Trafalgar Square, London

The VGS Conference this year was held in St Martin-in-the Fields and focused on the theme Visitor Studies: It's all about Relationships. This theme was selected to explore the internal and external relationships created and sustained by those working in visitor studies.

In this paper Committee Member Sabine Doolin and Co-Chair Sheena Muncie provide feedback on the two day event with highlights from all the speakers. This is just a synopsis of what we heard across the two days – the PowerPoint presentations given by our speakers can be accessed via the VSG website.

The Conference was a packed two day event with inspiring presentations and lively discussions. Approximately 70 conference delegates came from a wide range of cultural organisations including museums, zoos, botanical gardens, libraries, galleries, universities and visitor attractions as well as research agencies and consultancies. Our delegates came from across the UK and further afield, ie the US, Australia, Netherlands and Switzerland.

Day 1

On the first day our conference speakers explored the relationship between visitor studies and internal stakeholders and the opportunities as well as challenges around visitor studies having real impact on the work of colleagues, leaders, funders and other decision makers. Key themes that emerged were the importance of clear objectives and effective communication of visitor research as well as the conviction by its advocates - the VSG community.

Mark O'Neill, Director of Policy & Research at Glasgow Life, got the conference started with a **keynote** interrogating how "Museums change lives". Glasgow Museums have an international reputation for building relationships with a wide range of audiences through accessible long term displays and innovative outreach. In his keynote, Mark outlined the next stage in museum impact through Glasgow Museums plans for the next few years and proposed visitor studies approaches museums can take to avoid increasing inequality - including logic models, the RE AIM framework and learning from other sectors (especially health) - to move beyond small projects and make a difference at a population level. He concluded by linking these to the fundamental mandate of the museum and its role in creating a more just and democratic society.

In a joint session, three organisations shared their approaches to their internal relationships and their journeys on having impact on their organisations.

- Rhian Tritton and Jude Holland from **ss Great Britain Trust** talked about "**Converting the organisation to the audience research cause**" and how new research transformed the Trust's understanding of its visitors and made the organisation re-evaluate how it identifies visitors' needs and shapes its offer. They emphasised the importance of a shared language about visitors to bring the various departments within their organisation together.
- **Chester Zoo's** Andrew Moss shared his insights on "**The long but worthwhile road to developing internal support for Visitor Studies**" at the Zoo. Andrew shared with us five lessons he has learned along the way: external credibility often comes before internal acceptance, don't expect

people to care, everyone is an expert when it comes to education/learning/social science, the delicate balance between expertise and evidence – evidence can be threatening to some and finally nobody likes change ... whether it is good for them or not!

- Susie Ironside and Laura Gutierrez from **Glasgow Museums** presented “**More than just friends?: Change and Community Capacity Building in Glasgow Museums**”, which linked back to some of the thoughts from the keynote and the organisational change they are going through at Glasgow Museums. Their talk included examples of how they changed the way they worked together with stakeholders. Through their post-it exercise they gave us a sense of where we all are on the spectrum of engagement in our organisations. They concluded that in order to develop meaningful relationships and foster a sense of empowerment with community partners, museums need to learn to step away from the controls.

Pre-lunch the delegates enjoyed speed networking to encourage relationship building. We know that our members welcome the opportunity to meet and share best practice and we provided this as a forum to encourage that.

As part of its commitment to visitor studies, the VSG offered a platform to discuss the value and impact of summative evaluation that **Maurice Davies** challenged in his report “Evaluating Evaluation”. After a short presentation of his report, Kayte McSweeney (VSG and Science Museum) and Ben Stewart (Wellcome) offered approaches to strengthening the impact of visitor studies and Kayte moderated a lively and productive discussion.

In an interactive workshop, Cheryl Kessler from **Blue Scarf Consulting (USA)** introduced the benefits of using logic models as a tool for generating, organising, utilising and sharing information with internal and external stakeholders in project development and evaluation.

Senior Audience Advocate, Amelia Robinson from the **Science Museum** underlined the importance of advocacy in audience research roles. In “Advocacy: It’s not just research, it’s what you do with it!” she suggested the key ingredients for having impact to be engaging ways of disseminating results as well as clear recommendations from the research (as well as a little bit of flattery).

Sarah Thomas and Cassandra Murray presented how evaluative practice has changed organisational culture at the **Zoological Society of London**. Cassandra joined ZSL in 2012 as its first Evaluation Co-Ordinator. Within this session, she and Sarah talked about the groundwork and strategic development needed to secure Cassandra’s role, her relationship with other departments within the organisation and how visitor studies has informed the development of exhibits, live interpretation and understanding of audiences over the last two years. In conclusion, the session focussed on how building internal stakeholder relationships has been fundamental in changing ZSL’s organisational culture towards evaluative practice and evidence based research.

In “University challenged: The benefits and challenges of collaboration between museums and academic institutions” a panel of Emily Dawson, **King’s College London** and Christopher Whitby and Richard Pering from the **Science Museum** suggested that universities and museums are a ‘match made in data heaven’ and showed how partnerships between museums and universities can help increase the robustness of visitor research.

The first day ended with a poster session with delegates sharing and discussing case studies over a glass of wine.

Day 2

On day 2 we explored the relationship between cultural organisations and their visitors, looking at how is this relationship is created, developed and nurtured over time and how is it changing.

Martin Smith from **Firefish** opened our second day of the Conference with a talk entitled “Unlocking the Nature of Visitor Relationships through Innovative Technology”. Martin shared with us how first person camera technology gave the Tate insight into how their visitors engage with content and gallery spaces. Through using this approach Martin was able to unpick audience interaction with art.

Theano Moussouri and Eleni Vomvyla from **University College London** along with Effie Phillips-Staley in the Listening to Families session introduced us to three unique studies investigating how you can help families form closer relationships with heritage and cultural institutions.

ThinkTank's parallel session was an interactive workshop hosted by Lynsey Fairweather from ThinkTank and 18 year old Carrie Soderman a member of its Young People's Forum. Within this session delegates played Participation Station and looked at different ways of engaging with different audience segments from elderly people in care homes to teenagers. Thinktank shared with delegates how they had successfully engaged with each of these audiences and the challenges they faced in doing so.

Our second joint session of the Conference featured three organisations who shared with us how they had building relationships within their communities.

- Cressida Finch and Jane Findlay from **English Heritage** talked about how at Kenwood they achieved their aim of increasing public involvement and visitor numbers through consultation and engagement with families with children under 5, BME communities, people with disabilities and residents of Camden and Islington.
- From the **Science Museum**, Deanne Naula and Dan Green shared with us their challenge in acting as a conduit between exhibition designers and the blind and partially sighted community when building a new gallery.
- Finally within this session, Matt Sheard from the **Museum of the University of St Andrews (MUSA)** shared his top tips when engaging with young people. His experience from establish MUSA Youth Curators indicated that the following were key: constant contact, be yourself, build trust, set objectives for each session, set guidelines, plan but don't plan too much for teenagers, remain hands-off and take lots of notes.

After lunch, we heard from Tom Goodwin from **X Marks the Spot** with a talk entitled “How research can help unlock the power of your organisation's purpose” drawing upon his experience of working with organisations such as the National Trust. Key elements in unlocking this power include identifying your why, using research to explore how that purpose connects with people, using the findings to emotionally super charge the existing communications, services and products and finally measure the impact on the organisation.

In 2013, the **Alison James Bursary** was awarded to David Francis from the **British Museum**. The VSG Committee invited David to attend the Conference and share with delegates how he had used the £500 bursary. In 2013 David attended the Discursive Space Conference in Toronto with the Bursary paying for his Conference fees, accommodation and access to heritage institutions not covered by an ICOM card. The main benefits to David in attending the Conference were that it was his first ever international conference, it provided possible publication opportunities, it gave him a chance to meet some high profile people in the American museum studies/visitor research community, and to visit heritage attractions in Canada. David spoke very positively about the Bursary and the short and longer term impacts it had had on his work – he hoped that delegates would take the opportunity to apply for the Bursary this year and access similar opportunities.

Our second keynote speaker who closed our 2014 Conference was **Lynda Kelly, Head of Learning at the Australian National Maritime Museum**. Her session entitled “From #myspace to #sharedspace: has tech changed our relationships with visitors?” talked about the three ways in which we engage with our audiences – physical, online and via mobile. She described social media sites as our

“embassies” and explained how even though people are access museum content on mobile devices they still want that social experience. Her talk shared with us some great case studies – check out her notes on our website.

And so ended the second day of our Conference – we were delighted with the response to our call for papers, with our speakers on the day and with number of delegates from a wide range of sectors. We look forward to seeing you at our next event.