



Radical culture and unapologetically 'Rotherham' - Connecting the community with an ambitious culture strategy in Yorkshire

About the talk - Case Study: Wentworth Woodhouse Culture Strategy Why should the Rotherham community care about a heritage culture strategy when faced with pressing economic or social priorities? Hear how Wentworth Woodhouse identified their role as a hub for radical creative culture that would be truly meaningful and valuable for the people who live near them.

About the speakers - Sarah McLeod, CEO Wentworth Woodhouse In 2017 Sarah was engaged as the first CEO of Wentworth Woodhouse following the establishment of the Wentworth Woodhouse Preservation Trust.. She has since launched the Wentworth Woodhouse Masterplan – a £130m regeneration programme for the site - as well as setting an ambitious cultural vision that has international scale with local relevance.

About the speakers - Kate Rolfe, Director of The Revels Office After working in-house at The National Gallery, NHM and RADA, Kate founded The Revels Office in 2018 as a strategic commercial and audience development consultancy. The Revels Office work to make culture more relevant and resilient, transforming visitor attractions into highly magnetic and truly responsible cultural destinations.

Summary of the talk –

KR Question - Why did Wentworth Woodhouse need a culture strategy?

KR context – Sent out a brief, one of the most colourful and inspiring I've seen. Clear from the get-go that this had to be for, with and about the community. What we offered in return was to facilitate action-focused strategy development, using our knowledge and listening to yours, and working with you to get everyone to objectively look in the same direction for what WWH is (its purpose) and is doing (its impact on the world). Our team was made up of various specialisms, designed to meet that same ambition and vibrancy of Sarah's brief (Sarah Marfleet- marketing and membership; Jeani Tamakloe – creative programming and audience analysis; Szandra German – practical operations and evidence; Madeline Wilson – artist and community engagement; and myself leading on strategy and project management). Our methodology used a mix of market research, design thinking workshops, stakeholder interviews, online events and surveys, and lots of reflection and debate, to shape the process around the people involved and make sure the strategy fit you and fit the community.

SM detail – Yes, community was absolutely key. Going back a bit – We had completed the Masterplan for the site but purposely left the cultural strategy until later so we could get a better understanding of our communities. We had been experimenting for 5 years - having fun - trying things out but needed to become more focussed and give ourselves some values / pillars to work to, to ensure we were all making the right decisions for us as an organisation (our identity) and for our audiences. We needed to be clear as to what we stand for and understand what people wanted. WW is big and the ideas for it were too plentiful - we needed to be more refined in our thinking - not trying to do EVERYTHING.

KR Question - As consultants working with you, one of the early things we all agreed on as a challenge was this desire to be a dynamic, international cultural hub but in a way that really meant something to the local community and could be of value and of service to them. Can you help us get to know the community - can you tell us about the people in Rotherham and Wentworth and what they think of WWH?

SM – Rotherham is a deprived area with a lack of cultural investment over many years. There is poor health with over 20% recognised as having severe life limiting health problems. Educational attainment is low. Its history (and ours) is bound up in the industrial revolution, wealthy landowners and hard-grafting workers, rural deprivation, and the rich multiculturalism of the people who live and work in the area now.



The people are proud of their history and proud of the house. As WWH, we want people to be proud to be from Rotherham and have a role to play in that.

There were difficulties in bringing in our vision and values to the community – when we presented them to the world (which we'll tell you more about later) we had mini- riot on our hands from locals and history-lovers who couldn't see why a historic house should be a place for big, creative, sometimes challenging experiences and ambitions. We also, frankly, don't mean much to some people who have low interest in - or previously no opportunity to -experience our history, arts, and culture.

But we welcomed the voices of those who disliked what we were doing – and sought the voices of those who didn't yet care - and realised that we were doing what we set out to do, by exposing people to new things.

We also realised we had lots else to offer people, to start building a relationship with them, via our gardens and grounds first and then into the house and to our artistic programming from there.

What's also really important is the wider benefits of our cultural ambitions - job creation, training, apprenticeships, a Young Producer programme. We can prove economic, social and artistic value, and this is vital as it offers a foundation to build relationships from.

KR Question - There's a preconception that economically deprived means culturally deprived. What's your take on this?

SM - Not true - economically deprived throws up some incredible talent.

But it is not right that economically deprived people and places miss out on basic cultural education - dance lessons, music lessons, exposure to art, theatre etc.

The raw talent is there but people need to be exposed to great things - hence our role in bringing that to Rotherham.

Culture = well being, educational advancement, making the best of your life – and it should a be a level playing field

KR – We were able to talk to a number of stakeholders in the wider Yorkshire area in this project, to see where WWH could play in a role in regeneration, opportunity creation and attracting audiences to Yorkshire as a whole. Whenever we do projects like this its important to acknowledge that there's usually a great number of very important and very inspiring strategies in play, but which can complicate the picture of exactly who needs what and where, and who exactly is going to address that.

For example, Rotherham had identified a local interest in leisure and green spaces ('Get Active, Get Creative, Get Outdoors'); the Chamberlain Walker Report and NP11 corridor had identified needs for collaborations to connect and amplify the cultural sector; Levelling Up and Let's Create were all about creating new opportunities for people and sharing the value of culture widely; and finally We Great Place and Flux were specific projects that brought new work and new voices to cultural projects in the heart of Rotherham and nearby Elsecar. No one can deny with all these plans in place that Rotherham and its neighbours are culturally rich and on a journey to economic improvement through culture, but it makes the job of creating a clear identity for WWH that people understand and can respond to even more important – to show exactly why you exist and how you plan to serve the community.

The other takeaway here is that with projects like this, if you want to truly do something that is going to help people you cannot do it in isolation -like bringing any other product or service to market, you need to know the external environment you operate within and how what you do will compliment or disrupt the existing provision, as well as how you will scale it in a sustainable way.



KR Question - We worked together to create these values (show on screen) that would shape the strategy and define your identity. For you, why were these so important? How are you and the team making them a reality?

SM - We now use the values in all decision-making, not just cultural programming. Right through the organisation - in all decisions e.g, even menu planning.

KR – This is so important -too few places do not align everything they do behind one purpose and identity. That's great to hear. Can you give us some other examples?

SM – Handbags made via a design competition which use the 'values' banners we had on the front of the building; laser machine and making recycled goods; tea to celebrate our Camelia House.

KR - Do you think the community have connected with these values?

SM – Within reason, mostly via the opportunities we put out there for them to respond to. What was incredible was that when we put these values outside the building – and I mentioned early how a lot of people hated them – there were so many people who came to our rescue and said why they loved them, and even offered evidence to help us out (e.g. that ancient buildings typically would have been painted every colour under the sun, and not be left as stone like ours). I guess the point is that people in the community don't need to know our values, they need to connect with what we do, and that's why these values are so important for us as a business and a community hub.

KR Question - What's changed for WWH and your community since we wrote this

SM – Starting with the challenges - South Yorkshire Sundays - Challenges with rising costs vs. inability to pass on to visitors from poor areas.

However, ticket sales are up, inclusion has improved, there is fantastic community work going on through our dedicated activity plan and other programmes. We see community ownership through our Make your Mark campaign – WWH belongs to us all.

One of our main USPs is working with young people and this is brilliant for so many reasons – we're creating opportunity and inspiration early on, we're learning from people with different ideas and experiences to our own, we're building relationships that could last a time-time, and we're demonstrating our value to the decision-makers of the future. If there's one thing we'll carry on focusing on since writing this strategy its young people in our community.

KR – There was a sense from some of our consultation of consultation-fatigue, and also a danger of the concept of co-curation being exhausting for communities who don't have time or capacity to bring the ideas and activities to cultural intuitions. We spoke a lot about creating a hub or a platform – a stage for people to fill with their own ideas and activities – alongside WWH's own programme and offer. How do you think people feel now – are they energised by what you are offering them? Do they know what to bring to your stage? Do they know how? Are they doing it?

KR – On a practical note, I was delighted that you agreed with us that we needed the Cultural Strategy to have a 'reality check' that explained the risks of not doing anything, as well as ongoing challenges around areas such as funding, resource, operations, marketing that could potentially hold you back. What was great was that we were all honest about this, and upfront with the community – this is what we want to do but it may not be easy or quick, but here's where we are doing to start, and this is what we will do next and later. It was transparent and very human. I loved that your published this for all to see and didn't keep it hidden internally.



KR Question - Having said all this, For a while things are probably going to stay pretty hard in regards to that reality – funding especially, and competition for people’s time and money - how will WWH ensure that both the local community and visitors from further afield care enough about WWH to visit and return?

SM - Our YouTube channel is really key, it keeps everybody updated and is free. Only 17 countries in the world are NOT subscribed to us. We plan to also keep programming fresh and varied to keep people coming back.

We want to keep this dynamic going of old vs new – its so important to us, even if it causes a stir.

We’ll carry on pressing the message that WW belongs to us all and it is for everybody to make the most of the opportunities it brings.

Everything that we do is about creating opportunities for people to live their best lives.

(Questions, End)