



BOLD FUTURES

The Liminal Space

How can we work together to build a shared, strategic vision for museums, galleries and science centres?

The Liminal Space convened 25 senior leaders and innovators from across the museum and science centre sectors to take part in a new project: Bold Futures.

Bold Futures has been developed to explore some of the complex cross-sector challenges that have arisen since the pandemic and enable organisations to make changes through follow-on, capacity building grants.

Consisting of two online workshops, supported by some offline 'Fieldwork' where participants were encouraged to speak to members of their team, as well as take time to reflect on their space, the project built on some of the insights uncovered in our [Mindsets for Museums of the Future](#) and Science and [Discovery Centre Futures](#) research.

Through the workshop series, we wanted to consider what our organisations need most to support values-led practice with communities, audiences and partners.

We asked:

- How can we build capacity to deliver meaningful and responsive work that engages old and new audiences, funders and partners?
- How can we consolidate our individual learnings and opportunities to become more resilient in the face of our most pressing challenges?

Explored
through 4
lenses

Listening and Sharing –

Inclusive communication and resource sharing, both internally and cross-sector

Explore and Experiment –

Better mechanisms reflection and critique. And the ability to test and look outside of sectors to learn about innovative engagement, content and practice.

Power Dynamics and Inclusion –

Sustainable and implementable methods for decolonising, non-extractive community building and equitable practice at every level; internally and externally.

Evaluation Innovation –

A sector wide shared language, development and enhancement of impact measuring for audiences.



What did we hear?

Shared challenges and reflections

- The participants shared a need for increased authenticity, accountability, honesty and transparency within the organisations and the methodologies. With the focus to get communities to understand where organisations' failure and struggles are, so that a space to build trust, true co-creation, and ongoing relationships can be established over time.

“People need to feel comfortable in the space to be able to share and listen”

“We need to build emotional investment so we can be sources of joy”

- Existing funding and power structures within organisations are failing to keep up with emerging and great practice on the ground.
- There was a general acknowledgement that macro and structural politics still heavily impacts on bringing institutions and communities together.

- There was also a general acknowledgement that funding is still structured around rigid frameworks that don't allow for free exploration. There was a call for funding to have a degree of flexibility, so that it could be diverted when necessary; but also to embrace failure, so as to free up the experimenting process, therefore driving creativity, changing the learning's results, and possibly even generating new dialogues with communities and audiences.
- There is still an evident discrepancy between the decolonizing policies in effect and the realities of what each centre is still able to do; also between the top level management and boards' engagement with the subject and the one of the staff on the ground.

“People at the top haven't changed. How long do we wait?”

“We have to do more and challenge our assumptions around diversity and accessibility”

“People's understanding of the barriers that people face, in terms of being part of these conversations, needs to be much more improved”

“Accountability is interesting - when you invite people who have been disempowered”

Evaluation Innovation

- There were differences on how people perceived the role of digitalisations in evaluation and also their organisations in general. On one side it was seen as hard to implement and impeding time for human conversations and reflection on the practice – almost directing all efforts to quantitative, rather than qualitative evaluation. On the other side, it was seen as a tool to make everything easily searchable, especially when archiving and needing to retain information to pass it to other people

“We need to find ways to simplify and minimise the data collection, so you can focus on the more important human connections”

- The general perception was that a successful evaluation was hard to measure, especially when evaluating emotional perspectives or when needing to evaluate long term changes. Also, while funders push for co-creation and co-design, the evaluation methods required by the funders to measure this have not caught up.

“So much of the tick box evaluation is not actually meaningful”

- It was felt that to move away from box-ticking, good evaluation should be a whole organisation activity to create a culture of continuous learning, with everyone engaged in thinking about and sharing ideas on how to improve - from front of house teams to leadership.

We learn so much from failures and mistakes. We need to be able to share these failures and learnings within teams, with each other as organisations and with our funders in order to innovate and improve.

“The project wasn't successful, but the learning was!”

“How can we be honest about failure to drive real learning?”

- Funders push for co-creation, but the evaluation methods required by the funders to measure this have not caught up.

Ideas and suggestions

- ❑ There is not a lot of value in one-off interactions. We need to focus on sustained interaction and sustained engagement.
- ❑ Let's create evaluation strategies designed to enable all staff to feed into and have ownership of. The creation of this tool, or strategy, could in itself be a whole team co-creation activity – to collectively define what good looks like for us and how we are going to assess that.
- ❑ One idea on how to pass on and share the layered value of knowledge in an organisation was to use a fun and immediate tool: “Record it on camera, all the KILN (Keep, Improve, Loose, New)”
- ❑ A giant sector-wide failures report! Could we come together to be truly honest about the things that did not work and shout about that learning?
- ❑ Could we share and combine evaluation between sectors?

Listening and Sharing

- A common theme was raised that organisations need to think about and invest differently in the front of house staff – the floor assistants, the baristas, the cleaners – as they are the first point of contact with the audience. They often are the people who notice some of the most interesting and valuable audience interactions, and yet however, they can lack a sense of pride for and ownership of the place where they work, and there is often a fundamental disconnect between them and the directors.

“Trust in the little things means trust in the big things – everyone needs to be contributing to impact”

- There was a need for more authenticity in communication, both with the audience and communities (the people buying the tickets), but also internally, among the staff.

“Sharing community voices is difficult, and nuanced. Organisations need to remember communities are not homogenous!”

- One of the top things people focused on was that there are a lot of work crossovers and repetitions in the sectors, and yet everyone is in silos and in competition with each other and it is hard to connect to other organisations outside the local area or each nation. Participants expressed the desire to have more collaboration all round – to be able to talk about failures openly together, so it would link to finding easy ways to solve problems, helpful hacks, but also methodologies, and research learnings.

“It should be less about centralised discussion and more about group exchange”

Ideas and suggestions

- ❑ Cross organisations away days – getting people together with expert training.
- ❑ A Team Takeover – so organisations are able to see other teams in action and there is a true knowledge transfer.
- ❑ A Learning Journey – rolling programme of cross sector sabbaticals / shadowing so people can go on other experiences, while other professionals come to be in residents in each organisations, to stimulate the movement and exchange of knowledge.
- ❑ A site for national collaboration – with mini community hubs across the regions to share services and an online platform that served both as collective archive for shared resources and forum.
- ❑ Investing in storytelling to recruit, introduce and brief staff. Train staff to think about visitor experience.
- ❑ Introduce meaningful staff retention and value schemes, where basic needs are met – pay, appraisals, workload, flexible hours. But also one that encourages field trips and getaways together.
- ❑ Introduce anonymous input on what should be done, from all perspectives, not just the management.

Explore and Experiment

- There was an overarching sense that Science Centre Sector players are not perceived as Cultural players or that they are not engagingly creative or relevant enough to be on the cultural map. This also highlighted the need for centres to be bolder and braver in experimenting.

“We need to be prepared to fail – we won't get it right.

We know we have a long way to go but we must start somewhere”

- A point was raised that embracing micro experimentation would allow organisations to research smaller topics, iterate and develop new things before looking for funding for bigger experimentation. A micro experimentation would also motivate staff, allowing them to learn and try new things, and giving them ownership of the work.

Ideas and suggestions

- ❑ Look at other business models, organisations and ways of working to 'take-off the blinkers' and learn new things.
- ❑ Take inspiration from theme parks. "People think of science centres in similar way. Slides, roller coasters..."
- ❑ Bringing to life a Travelling Science Circus, playing to the strengths of different venues – a catalyst for long term change. An intentionally provocative activation, a place to experiment with new perspectives.

Power Dynamics and Inclusion

- All participants agreed that decolonisation is currently a big priority in the museum sector, but that it was a long way to go to creating true representation.
- A need was identified to shift the power balance between organisations and communities, with the focus on considering a journey of growth in community engagement, which developed in smaller steps that were cementing trust and building ongoing dialogue between audiences and the centres instead of creating a bigger, shorter lived, impact.

“Collaborating, where do we do this? We don't have a space to collaborate.”

- The point was raised about how the sectors' boards of directors, which too often do not mirror the audience that their organisations are trying to reach. For example, a lot of museums nowadays are interested in reaching youth and youth groups, but the demographic in those museums' boards don't tend to never reflect this need to authentically influence decisions.

Ideas and suggestions

- ❑ All publicly funded organisations and charities made to have diverse boards so we can truly change the status quo – Building awareness of what diversity really means at top level and working towards making the boards a safe place, e.g. offering internal board mentorships.
- ❑ Stop creating permanent exhibitions. More outreach, more change, more flexibility. Museums need more permeable collections. Open storage. Open to communities.
- ❑ “Give funds directly to communities to change the power structure. This would help to develop different models for community engagement”
- ❑ “We need to develop payment models so resources are properly planned and paid for when engaging community partners and researchers. If we value lived experiences they need to be rewarded”
- ❑ Flexible engagement so it fits different types of participation. Thinking laterally on how people access knowledge and giving agency and space for organisations and people to make programmes their own.

A few interesting ideas, shared desires and takeaways emerged clearly from our discussion

- The desire to be able to offer free entry to all public, as the first, primary leveller for inclusivity.
- "Pay every school to come to a science centre"
- That funding streams should reflect the needs of the sector and that funding should also be more flexible in order to adapt to each individual organisations' needs – whether it be for training at mid level jobs, or spending resources in researching actually sustainable income models.
- “There should be a Funders Accountability Scheme with committees from all across sector – top to bottom, with equitable practice”
- There was a common theme of needing internal space to focus on big ideas and strategies rather than the practical every day jobs.
- And finally there is a strong desire to activate a sector change that promotes cross-pollination, sharing, exchanges, and collaboration on all levels of work.

A Bold Future is...

"BEING INNOVATIVE &
CHALLENGING THE
STATUS QUO."

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A Bold Future is...

"WHERE SMALL THINGS
ADD UP TO BIG THINGS...
BUT WE MUST CAPTURE
AND COMMUNICATE
THEM"

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A Bold Future is...

"SCIENCE CENTRES BECOME
CITIZEN CENTRES"

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A Bold Future is...

"WHERE WE ARE DARING
TO TEST NEW IDEAS,
NOT JUST TALKING
AND THEORISING"

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If you'd like to see more detail on some of the ideas we discussed, you can see [the Miro board](#) where we captured some of our thinking.



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