

Toolkit: Using your collection to create a peer support network

How to use this toolkit

Museum collections are a unique and exciting tool to engage with people and to use stories that you hold to encourage groups to share and explore ideas and discuss difficult ones. Exploration of collections can be used as creative inspiration, a starting point for difficult conversations and a point of fun and respite.

Use this toolkit to explore:

- How you might use your own collections and stories to support people's wellbeing, particularly in a peer support context.
- The importance of community need and making your collections useful to that need.
- Working in partnership

To find out more about the work Royal Museums Greenwich does with dementia services see our [All Aboard project](#) which uses the museum's Travel Journals Collection as inspiration.

This resource was created as part of the All Board project focussing on the National Maritime Museum's Travel Journal collection. To find out more about this project visit:

[Memories of Travel: the All Aboard project | Royal Museums Greenwich \(rmg.co.uk\)](#)

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Step by step guide in setting up a peer support network

- **Identify local need.** Working in partnership with local community groups, explore how you can make your collections useful, in line with their desired outcomes and yours. This is the most crucial step and often missed. Coming up with an idea and then finding a partner organisation is most usually less meaningful and useful. Building a programme with your partner organisation right from the inception and planning stage is key. A partner organisation that is set up for supporting young carers for example is going to do a better job of that than you are, and you know your collections and how to use them creatively better than anyone – working together and utilising both these strengths creates a more fulfilling and robust project. When sharing advice on sensitive matters in a peer support network you can rely on your partner for accurate information, support and signposting.
- **Thinking differently about your collection.** Consider what themes, ideas, objects would lend themselves to be an interesting project for the group you are working with, think about how the collection can have an active role in discussions. Some sort of tangible outcome or something to work towards is always a good idea; an end product the group can be proud of and perhaps share their experiences to support others or advocate for something that's important to them, think about what this might be.
- **Recruiting for your project.** Have a think about recruitment methods and how long the project is running for. In order to recruit for a new project you will need a long lead in time and resources to promote. Think about the group you are working with, if it's a vulnerable group, do you have the right support in place? For a shorter project, and in making sure the group has the support they need, working with an existing group, through your partnership may be the best way to go. When the project comes to an end there will still be support for the group if they are already established.
- **Consider a taster session.** This can be part of your planning, meet with the group and discuss how best to run the project, which will help them get the best out of it. If it's a peer support group, having the participants steer the group with you is essential.
- **Running the programme.** Now it's time to actually run your group! Regular sessions to build up rapport is useful. Set out a plan with clear intentions for each session, but with room for flexibility to let the needs of the group steer it. If you are creating something together make sure that there won't be a detrimental impact for a participant missing a session, this may be a common occurrence for young carers.
- **Celebrate!** It's important when the project comes to an end to acknowledge that and reflect. If you've been working towards something, perhaps it's showcasing that, if you have been having peer support sessions, this is a chance to gather together and have a bit of fun!
- **Evaluate and signpost.** Evaluate in a way that is meaningful; how have the participants found it, has the project met the aims of both you and your partner organisations? In a project such as a peer support network it's important to not simply end that support, find ways to signpost to other support available or help to create a framework in which the peer support structure can continue without you, perhaps suggesting ways the group could meet at your museum and use the space on their own.

How to use your collections for a peer support network

A starting point for discussions. You could take an object/group of objects and use them as a point of discussion. This is often a good focus in discussing more difficult subject matters, to channel these discussions using your collections.

Example: When discussing a difficult topic this is a great way to focus discussions. For example choose an object from your collection that is about protection, perhaps an amulet, or tortoise shell, or piece of armour (could be so many things!) and get people talking about the object specifically. From there open up discussions about how we protect ourselves. Ask questions like: Does anyone wear a lucky charm? Do they feel it protects them? How in general do we protect and look after ourselves and mental health? How do we protect others? This less direct way in to discussions can really help people open up and feel less on the spot, and also help them to think about things differently.

Inspiration for an activity. For example creating some artwork while sharing peer support ideas can be a great way to hold a discussion and help people relax and share their thoughts in a less formal way. On the other hand this part of the session could simply be about respite; using the collections to do an activity to have some fun, this will also help the group in getting to know each other in a light-hearted and unique way, helping greatly with the peer support aspect of the session.

Example: Look at a map or chart from, or related to, your collection, discuss key elements of the map, how it is a visual representation of a certain space, how has this been created? If you were to create a map or route of your life, what would be the key markers? Get people to draw this out, being as creative (or silly!) as possible, then discuss amongst the group. This is a great way to get to know people, what is important to them, what similar things pop up within the group to get discussions going. You could then create a route on a map together to decide on how you want the group to go, acknowledging obstacles and important points along the way.

Note: The above ideas are examples for a structured peer support group that is run by a facilitator. You could also create activities for a group to use independently around your museum. For example, a route that takes the group to different points around the museum with questions and activities as you go. Perhaps as an output of your peer support group young carers could help co-produce this route with you. This would be a great focus for the group and to support their wellbeing in using their experiences to help others and have a piece of work to be proud of.

Notes and tips from our community partners

Admiral Nurses

Engaging with a museum gives people access to a range of incredible resources, and to the expert knowledge of the staff. It can bring the story of objects to life in a creative and fun way that allows peers to come together in a supportive environment.

Developing this peer support project with a museum takes time – often more time than you would think. Be prepared to review and change the development of the project so that it can evolve to meet the needs of your own unique peer support network.

Peer support groups can be a great help if you care for someone with dementia, but sometimes, you might need the expert advice and support of a specialist dementia nurse. If you would like to talk to a Dementia UK Admiral Nurse, please call the free Helpline on 0800 888 6678 (Monday-Friday 9am-9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am-5pm, every day except 25th December) or email helpline@dementiauk.org.



This is Dementia

This is Dementia (TID) is a social enterprise / lifestyle brand which raises awareness of young onset dementia through the sale of our products - predominately t-shirts. We also raise money for Dementia UK by donating 100% of our net proceeds to the charity. We pride ourselves on sustainability, which is why all of our t-shirts are made from repurposed fabrics donated by brands such as Burberry and fabrics mills across Portugal. I'm Lizzie, 28 years old and the founder of TID. I am also a young carer for my dad who has young onset dementia.

From my perspective, it is vital for the museum to partner from the beginning with a person who has real life experience of the topic of dementia and relatability to the target audience. This is not only to ensure your work is always aligned / brought back to your core mission but also to provide perspective that may not be found in generically available information. From tapping into real life experiences, you can create a more tailored project where participants will feel very comfortable and at ease, and holds longevity as it retains its relevancy.

When signposting to other support networks it would be equally valuable for the museum to have made meaningful relationships with these networks. This would ensure your recommendations are both valuable and meaningful. I would also recommend running feedback sessions during the project, to ensure you're aligned to your main goals and hitting the right points with participants. This could lead to shifting goals to ensure participants gain the most from these sessions, or reassure you that you're on the right track. Finally, this could help lead to ideas for future projects or sessions if not able to action during the current project.