Mark O’Neill,

Associate Professor, College of Arts, University of Glasgow and former head of Glasgow Museums

Hello. I'm delighted to be invited to offer some thoughts on issues of cultural inclusion and exclusion. I'm going to speak mainly about museums because that's my background, but what I say, I hope is relevant to other Publicly supported forms of arts, heritage and culture, whether that support comes in the form of funding or charitable status … what I will call “public service culture”.

Despite years of educational and outreach programmes, co-production and community engagement, participation and public service culture still follows the socio economic gradient. In the past 20 years within museums, the gap between upper and lower socio economic groups has remained unchanged at 24%. The gap in theatre and music is even greater. This may be partly a funding problem but research in Germany - which has the richest arts heritage and culture sector in the world - has shown that decades of audience development activities have not changed the composition of cultural audiences. If our current audience development and engagement activities have not reduced the attendance gap up to now, it seems unlikely that they will do so in the future. We need to ask what can we do differently?

I'd like to offer a suggestion based on research in the newly fashionable area of culture, arts and health and wellbeing which we can perhaps treat as a proxy for the broadly enriching impacts of public service culture. Most wellbeing projects follow the pattern of current audience development approaches, intensive working with small groups over three or six months, with a huge effort being made to find evidence of impacts on participants. The results of these studies are usually unsatisfactory, because it's virtually impossible to have control groups to do long term follow up and to avoid confirmation bias … When was the last time you read a study which provided evidence that the project had failed or hadn't had an impact?

These studies however, ignore a large body of research by epidemiologists who study statistically the links between long term health and well being with cultural and in particular museum attendance. These studies involve very large numbers of people over decades, and they are controlled for income, education, gender, chronic illness and age. They use sophisticated statistical methods which support with a high degree of confidence the direction of causation. In other words, it's not that healthier people visit museums more often. But visiting museums regularly - makes you healthier. And regularly in this context means more than three times a year. If the evidence that simply visiting museums or going to concerts has a health impact, and this evidence is at least as robust as all that from the small projects, it suggests a radical shift in strategy, if our aim is to reduce the attendance gap. It implies that the most significant contribution cultural activities of all kinds could make, would be to build the lifelong capability among people who are poorly educated or socially excluded for other reasons to become regular museum visitors or cultural attenders. Rather than picking up groups and dropping them when the project ends or the money runs out. We would enable people to develop a sustainable relationship with “Public Service Cultural Organisations”.

This shift in practice would mean that all engagement and learning activities, whatever its specific focus, would have a meta objective of building the museum or visiting our cultural attendance capability of not only the participants in any given project, but their wider networks of family, friends and community. It might be clear if I take a very familiar example that of school visits. There are some evidence that children benefit educationally from school visits but very little let's go visit sneaking museum visiting in later life. Museum visiting like other forms of cultural attendance is learnt in the family setting. So why teachers will still want curriculum relevant subjects the museum's meta objective of getting the children to bring their families and friends back in their own time can drive the format. For example … the children can learn about the Romans or the Victorians by constructing a tour that they would give to a person of their choice when they visit on their own. Students from schools in deprived areas can be incentivised to visit in their own time with vouchers for free entry for the cafe, or for activities or for transport. This principle would need to be systematically applied to every kind of activity and engagement building - humane network to pathways into your venue. A well being project for 10 or 20 people over three or six months will have much less impact than a project which inspires 100 or 200 people to become regular museum visitors or cultural attenders. This approach would require a lot of trial and error to learn what works and also some radical changes in more traditional institutions to make these novice visitors welcome. But it may also require a radical change among outreach and learning staff, to focus on attendance of large numbers might mean doing far fewer small projects with small numbers from non attending groups. This intensive interpersonal work is part of the professional identity of many cultural workers. How much of this are we prepared to give up to benefit much larger numbers of people?

So to summarise …if we want to reduce the attendance gap between upper and lower socio economic groups, to public service cultural organisations, we need a new strategy. I suggest that focusing the majority of our activities on building long term cultural attendance capabilities amongst non visiting lower socio-economic groups looks like a much more promising approach than continuing with strategies that seem to have reached their limit.

Thank you very much.