

Reframing Disability At Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums

Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums (TWAM) is a major regional museum, art gallery and archives service. We manage a collection of nine museums and galleries across Tyneside, and the Archives for Tyne and Wear.

TWAM wanted to use this bursary to reframe our collections with regards to disability, reviewing what we collect, the ways we collect and how we should present our collections. We wanted to rethink our approaches by working with external agents and reviewing examples of practice in other museums. We set out to work with external partners drawn from arts and disability backgrounds, who would support and challenge us through this programme, and provide recommendations for improved curatorial practice and future work.



The Activity

Groups of people from disabled arts organisations ARCADEA and Lawnmowers Independent Theatre Company worked with us to discuss whether the TWAM collection does represent disability and how, why we are working in this way and how we can do it better. These groups were full of creative, enthusiastic, interested people who care about disability representation and what TWAM is doing to improve its practice.

Creative Case NORTH

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Through visits and discussions with The Royal College of Physicians; St Fagan's National History Museum; Glasgow Museum of Transport; The People's History Museum, Manchester and The Mental Health Museum, Wakefield we learned about new methods of community engagement, imaginative collaborations and creative interpretation of disability from other museum professionals.

Learning and Insight

Diversity

We wanted to look at our collections and practice through fresh eyes. What we have found is that our collection does represent disability but only some aspects of it, and through a 'narrow lens'. There are gaps, e.g. mental health representation, and we need to look at diversity within disability.

Interpretation

In terms of curatorial practice, this research and consultation shows that TWAM can be more creative in the ways we interpret existing material, e.g. working with disabled partners to look at our collection in different ways and offer new perspectives. Developing our collection is not just about collecting new material but using objects and presenting them using new and creative techniques. Disabled groups' engagement with our collection has illustrated how different objects mean different things to different people, and the stories and meanings of objects can change from person to person. It's our job to capture and present those multiple perspectives – positive and negative stories and personal, emotional responses.

Collaboration

Several museums we consulted have collections associated with disability with no provenance. We have been inspired by new methods which have been used in other museums to interpret disability objects, e.g. by capturing contemporary stories from disabled people and their responses to existing collections. Working with communities, academics, organisations and artists to research and interpret this material has enabled meaningful connections between the objects and audiences.



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Impact

As a result of the Reframing Disability consultation, TWAM's collections policy will be revised. The current Acquisitions and Disposal Policy states simply that disability should be represented in the TWAM collection. The revised policy will be much more explicit about how we wish to do so. We plan to make these changes in consultation with the disability groups we consulted. They have agreed to continue their advisory role to help us to find new, creative ways to represent disability.

This work acts as a philosophy for revising the collections policy to ensure it reflects other protected characteristics – ensuring excellence in the diversity of materials we hold, and creative diversity in the way they are meaningfully interpreted.

We have identified that there are gaps in the types of disability that are represented at TWAM. Representing mental health and people with learning disabilities are gaps that were highlighted by other museums and our disabled consultants.

In TWAM's MPM planning document we have committed to carry out work to further represent disability in our collections over the next 2 years.

Projects will include work to represent the effects of poverty and social deprivation on mental health in Tyneside. This will draw on our existing collection of archive material, including case records from St Nicholas Hospital following World War I, and we will work with groups of people from mental health organisations and agencies working

with homeless people and people living in poverty. The work that comes out of these projects will be included in an exhibition about Inequality in 2017 at Discovery Museum and will feed into an associated events programme.

We have connected up some of the work that we are already doing at TWAM and are looking at new ways to collect and interpret issues connected to mental health and wellbeing. Curatorial and outreach staff have started working with the forensic mental health ward at St Nicholas Hospital on a project to collect and reinterpret museum objects, and we would like to do more collecting and interpretation with this group and the Recovery College linked to St Nick's.

We plan to develop our relationships with the Lawnmowers Kulture Krew group. We will work together to develop work by people with learning disabilities which is inspired by the TWAM collection.

The process of involving disability artists, practitioners and communities in the curatorial process itself has had real value to TWAM. Sally from Lawnmowers said,

"organisations in the 'mainstream' stop at physical disabilities and think their diversity work is done, leaving People With Learning Disabilities out. So I am ecstatic that we're involved in this!"

Find Out More

[Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums](#)

[https://twmuseums.org.uk/files/5029-acquisitions-and-disposal-policy.pdf](https://tw museums.org.uk/files/5029-acquisitions-and-disposal-policy.pdf)

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