

The Wellcome Collection Midsummer Picnic

Evaluation summary

The Midsummer Picnic took place on Saturday 20 June 2009, between 1200 and 1700. The theme was 'collecting and sharing', with stalls and activities devised by [Juneau Projects](#). The event was produced by [General Public Agency](#) for [Wellcome Collection](#), and presented in association with [West Euston Time Bank](#).



[Cumberland Market](#) is a large square surrounded by mixed medium-rise housing in a diverse neighbourhood in north central London. In the centre of the square is an area with play equipment, a fenced area for ball games, a community building known as the H-Pod (the home of West Euston Time Bank), and a section of grass about 70 by 50 metres. With the H-Pod as the base, the grassed area was taken over for stalls and activities on the day. Stalls included watercolour portraiture, a display of jewellery created by local people, make your own cardboard electronic guitar, collections of pickled vegetables, make your own flower pots (with seeds to plant), and Wellcome Collection's own stand. About 300 fairy-cakes were prepared by Time Bank volunteers and provided for participants. The event, food and all activities were free of charge.

The design and style of the event

Free and public - The organisers decided that no money should change hands during the picnic. This was consistent with the role of the Time Bank and was largely welcomed by participants, although a few felt that it should have been possible to buy food. Associated with being free was the open public nature of the event. The venue was ideal for attracting passers-by who had some business within the neighbourhood, without risking an unmanageable influx of freeloaders from across the city. The low railings surrounding the park meant that the activities attracted attention, and if people came to see what was going on, there was no off-putting aspect to discourage them. The style of the event implied no expectations on the participant that they would have to do anything other than behave in a civil manner towards fellow-citizens. While many people clearly knew one another, there was no sense in which unapproachable cliques formed. This non-territorial, welcoming, non-prescriptive 'feel' seems natural but can be very hard to create at neighbourhood level.

Was it a picnic or was it a fete? - A harder trick to pull off was to design the event as a picnic. Few people spread blankets on the ground or brought prepared food. Most people felt it was more like a fair or a fete. Some expected a barbecue. In practice this probably made little difference to the attendance, levels of enjoyment, or degree of interaction that took place; although if the event is repeated it could be useful to ensure there are more chairs, and perhaps some tables. Older people in particular might then have lingered longer: as one said, 'If I'd sat down on the ground I'd never have got up again!' It's true that food is an ideal lens for examining cultural richness as well as community health - topics that reflect the interests of Henry Wellcome - so persisting with the picnic theme could well be justified.

Ownership and association with Wellcome Collection

Playing the role of generous event sponsor without tastelessly claiming credit required subtlety: it was accomplished by Wellcome Collection flawlessly. Participants were aware of the role without feeling indebted or dominated. This is precisely the kind of positioning which many institutions (such as local authorities) would struggle with and it was a significant achievement.

A trustworthy partnership with the community sector was crucial and the relationship with West Euston Time Bank appears to have been well-handled.

All the local residents who I spoke to knew (at least vaguely) of Wellcome Collection, and a couple of those who came from further afield did also (possibly through connections with the organisers). The typical response from local people was 'is that the one on the Euston Road?' Several people said they had noticed it from the bus, but none claimed to have been inside.

'I will make an effort to go and see it, because it seems interesting but because it's so near you can always leave it for another day, you know, if it was a long way away you'd have plans and you'd go.'

(Local resident)

Despite recognising the role of Wellcome Collection in the event, participants did not appear to reflect on the subtle theme of 'collecting' as represented on the stalls. This is hardly surprising: one would have to know more about the institution in order to think of it as the result of a passion for collecting rather than just as a building. Nothing was lost, and if the event were to be repeated annually I suspect the theme would soon become widely appreciated.

Cohesion, diversity and social interaction

The community picnic made a very direct and visible contribution to the community cohesion agenda.

The ethnic diversity represented on the day was remarkable. I spoke to a Filipino; several Italians; a black South African who has been in England since 1954; three white Londoners in their nineties; an east end Jew; two Polish children and one Bengali; an English mother married to a Muslim; another Bengali and her daughter; a Greek woman; and various others. It took a reluctant effort to remember that the casual ordinariness of all the intercultural interactions is not universal.

The picnic was also strikingly successful as an intergenerational event. Lots of people remarked on how most age groups were enjoying themselves and interacting casually without pressure or expectations. What was exceptional was the non-artificial, unforced context in which this range of people came together.

"There are very few activities that bring people together from different backgrounds and you'll find people from similar backgrounds tend to stay within those social groupings. And so this kind of event is fantastic because what it does, it brings people out into a very safe place where they can engage with other people who they wouldn't necessarily normally associate with or have much connection to, and I think today's been really, really successful."

(Local parent)

In truth, as so often with events of this kind, there was one missing age group – older youths. This is not a matter of particular concern: given the choice, young people aged between about 14 and 20 tend to dissociate themselves from gatherings of this kind and probably always have done.

Should it be repeated?

All the participants I spoke to about the event said they would like it to happen again. One saw it in community development terms:

“I think today’s event has been great, and if it were just a stand alone event people would go home feeling quite positive. But I think if anything’s going to grow, if the community’s going to really build and start to create links *within* the community, there needs to be some kind of series of events. It doesn’t necessarily have to be the same type of event every time, and there may need to be different types of focus to encourage more older groups or the teenage group or whatever... but the momentum needs to be maintained, you can’t just do something as a one-off.”

Concluding remarks

This initiative was conceptually bold. Attempting to establish some kind of experiential link between an established and internationally renowned museum on the one hand, and a diverse residential community on the other, is not just awkward but fraught with potential pitfalls.

To have avoided all the pitfalls and accomplished an event that was enjoyable at the individual level, and meaningful and positive at the community level, was far harder than it looked. Through the committed expertise of General Public Agency, the collectors connected successfully: Wellcome Collection has pioneered a new kind of creative relationship between an institution and its locality.



This independent evaluation summary was prepared by Kevin Harris of [Local Level](#).