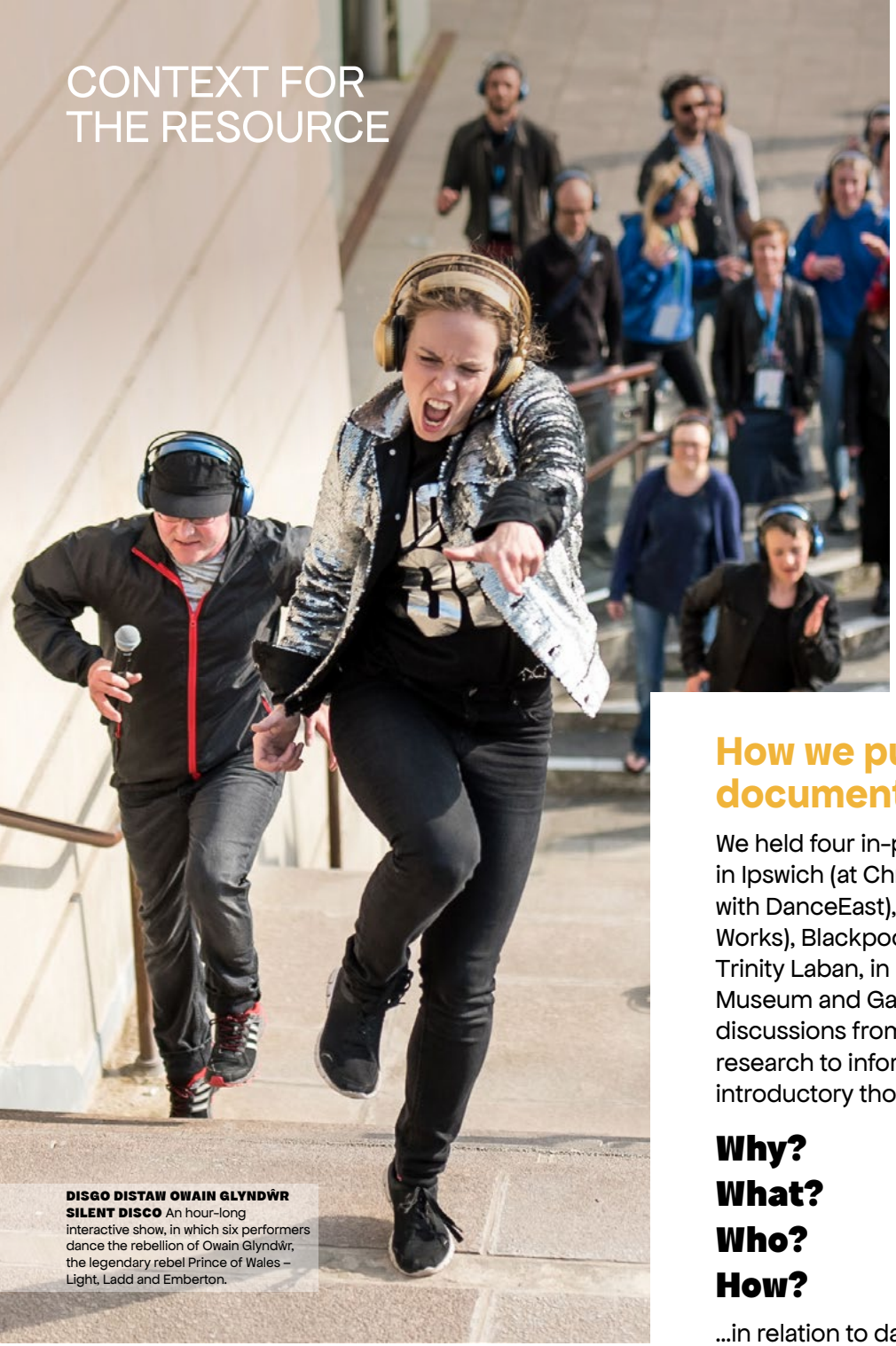
ESSENTIAL READ

the Imagination Museum

First steps for working with dance **in museums and heritage sites**

THE ELSEWHEN SERIES A series of duet scores conceived to be stumbled upon by audiences in unconventional spaces. **Dancers** Theo Clinkard and Leah Marojević. **Photographer** Roswitha Chesher

CONTEXT FOR THE RESOURCE



DISGO DISTAW OWAIN GLYNDŴR SILENT DISCO An hour-long interactive show, in which six performers dance the rebellion of Owain Glyndŵr, the legendary rebel Prince of Wales – Light, Ladd and Emberton.

the Imagination Museum

What is The Imagination Museum (TIM)?

The Imagination Museum is a national network for dance and heritage sector professionals.

Through online and in-person events and resources, we share extensive knowledge and experiences and facilitate opportunities for future collaboration across the country, making the case for the benefits of dancing in museums and heritage sites.

www.imaginationmuseum.co.uk

How we put this document together

We held four in-person Advocacy Events in 2024 in Ipswich (at Christchurch Mansion, in partnership with DanceEast), Cornwall (at Wheal Martyn Clay Works), Blackpool (Showtown) and London (at Trinity Laban, in partnership with The Horniman Museum and Gardens). We have used the notes and discussions from those sessions and from previous research to inform the following resource, providing introductory thoughts on

Why?
What?
Who?
How?

...in relation to dance in museums and heritage sites.

Who is it for?

We hope this Essential Read will be helpful for all partners involved in bringing together dance in museums and heritage sites, or considering doing so.

It is intended to support the early stages of a process of dance/heritage partners working together, particularly for collaborators who are new to this, but may provide a few reminders for people who already have some experience.

We have put together a few prompts, but please note that the information provided below isn't exhaustive, and we've signposted some of the other places you could look for guidance in the links at the end of the document. You can also find more resources here:

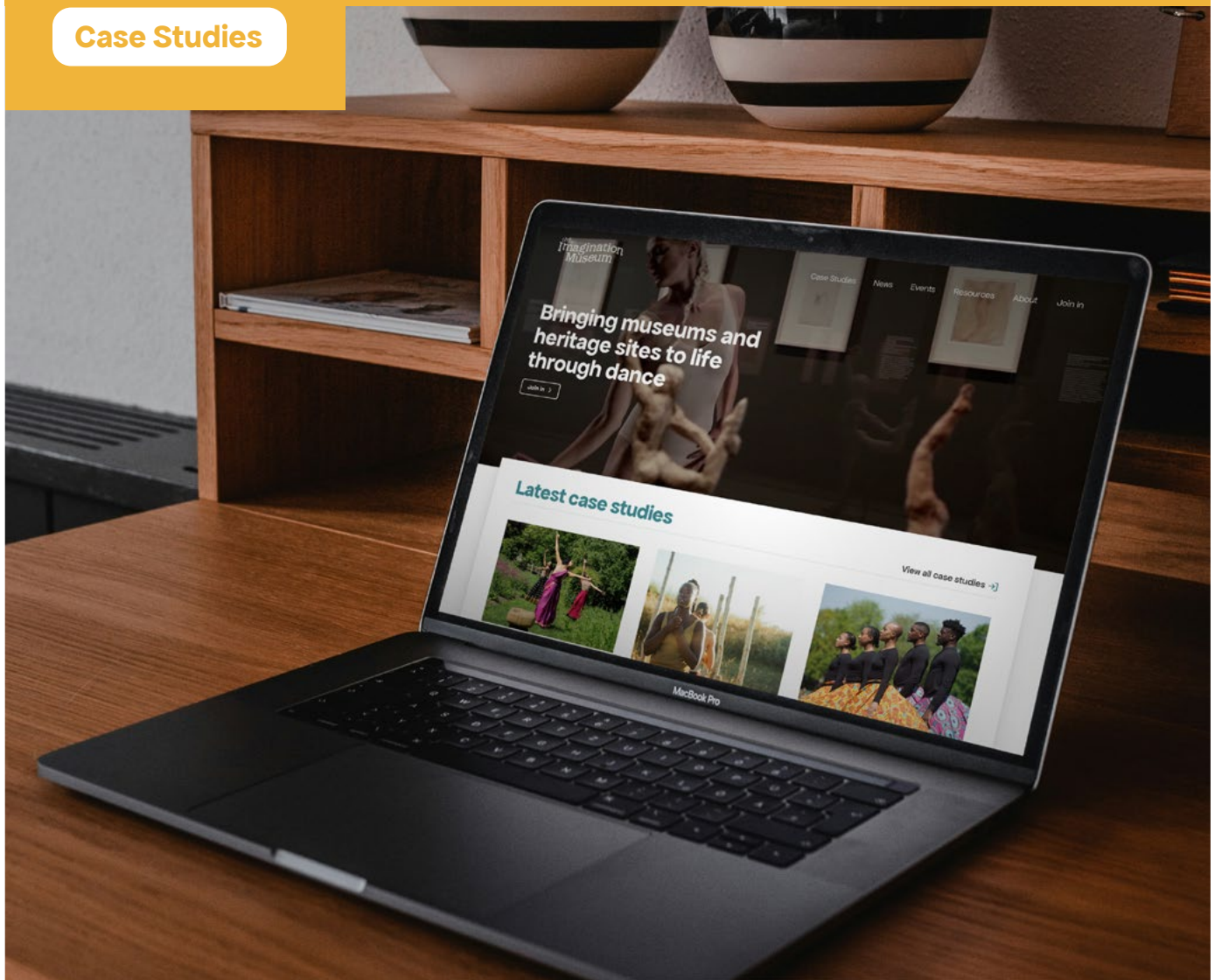
TIM Resource page

WHY dance in museums and heritage sites?

ETUDES A solo responding to The Courtauld Gallery's exhibition 'Rodin and Dance: The Essence of Movement'. **Choreographer** Shobana Jeyasingh Dance. **Photographer** Gary Tanner

On **The Imagination Museum website** we collate a growing range of **Case Studies** that indicate the range of ways in which dance can be used in response to museums and heritage sites, from a **Curious Tea Party at The Horniman Museum and Gardens**, to a **dance under the hull of the Cutty Sark**; **an immersive performance for the coastline of Morecambe Bay at sunset** to a **silent disco bringing the rebellion of Owain Glyndwr**, the legendary rebel Prince of Wales, to castles, fields and the steps of urban buildings to name a few.

Case Studies



These projects can result in a huge range of outcomes, using many different styles of dance – promenade performance, films, workshops, digital trails through a landscape, VR and AR experiences, dancing archives, folk dance, historical dance, from community performances to intimate installations.

They evidence a great variety of **reasons why you should seriously consider working with dance in museums**, as part of a drive to:

- think differently about how people can experience culture and heritage right on their doorstep
- engage different kinds of communities who might not already be engaging with your collection or to reach new audiences for your practice
- foster more inclusive, equitable ways of providing access to collections, sites and stories and the ideas they inspire.

Consider:

How does this apply to you and your practice?

Why do you want to work collaboratively with dance and heritage?

What will a dance/heritage collaboration bring to your site, to your practice, to the people with whom you work and the participants you are seeking to engage?

"There are local stories, stories within the museum, stories that people hold within the community that haven't been explored and to have the opportunity to do that through dance is incredibly exciting."

PREVIOUS TIM MUSEUM PARTNER

BENEATH OUR FEET A promenade performance for caves and underground spaces. **Choreographer** Made By Katie Green. **Photographer** Owen Benson.

"It was great to have something fresh for existing visitors while attracting and making the museum accessible to a new audience."

PREVIOUS TIM MUSEUM PARTNER

The opportunities

Dance in museums and heritage sites can...

1 **Tell stories** in **dynamic ways** that help people consider their history and their heritage differently, often on a more personal level. It can help to uncover stories that might not already have been brought to life and to respond imaginatively to gaps left in written history.

2 **Bring joy, fun and playfulness,** challenging the more traditional ways that things might have been done in the past.

3 Enable visitors, audiences, participants and makers to engage with museums and heritage sites in a **tactile, experiential, multisensory way**. Dance can respond to collections, sites and stories in a way that **moves beyond spoken language**, and therefore contributes to a more **inclusive** offer that can make everyone feel more comfortable. In this way it is also uniquely attractive to communities such as Early Years children, those for whom English is not their first language (EAL), and people with disabilities or conditions that mean they engage with the world around them in a non-verbal way.

4 **Engage new audiences** (as well as appealing to existing audiences) with opportunities to involve those audiences in the process of co-creation.

5 **Support trust-building with local communities and partners** that can lead to people developing a more long-standing relationship with their local heritage, a sense of custodianship of the local environment, and being more likely to attend again.

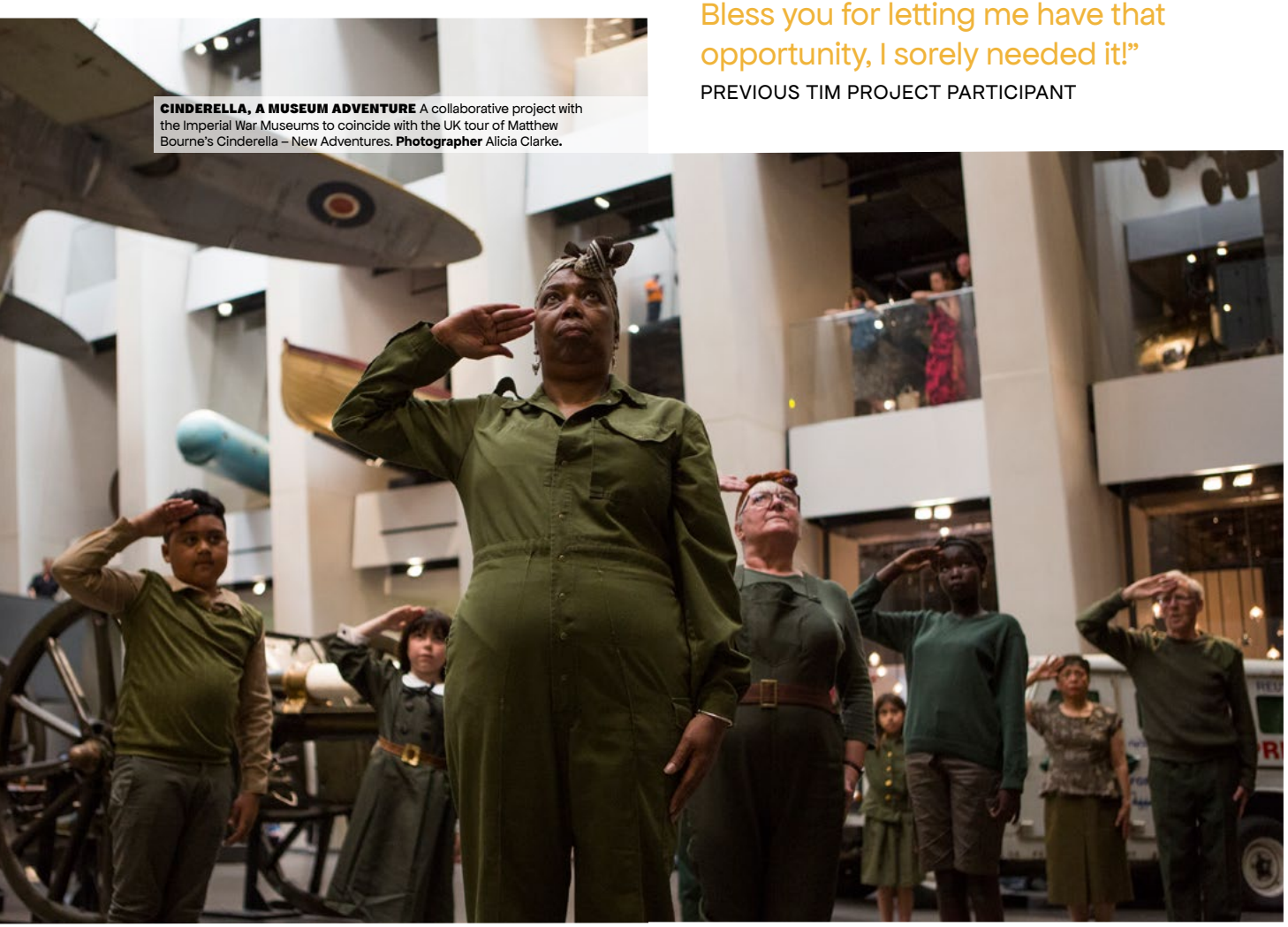
Participants in dance/heritage projects grow in **pride, confidence, develop new skills and understanding** and **enjoy being part of something bigger than themselves**.

6 **Challenge people to reconsider their assumptions of what dance can be** and why it matters to them.

7 **Open up heritage spaces** – breaking down notions of who gets to access these spaces and their perceived boundaries by intervening in vibrant ways that can bring a fresh perspective. Dance can therefore contribute to the creation of safe spaces, where people feel welcome and heard.

"You were prepared to listen to me. Bless you for letting me have that opportunity, I sorely needed it!"

PREVIOUS TIM PROJECT PARTICIPANT



CINDERELLA, A MUSEUM ADVENTURE A collaborative project with the Imperial War Museums to coincide with the UK tour of Matthew Bourne's Cinderella – New Adventures. **Photographer** Alicia Clarke.

8 **Add to a more equitable offer** for audiences and participants, creating access to collections, sites, artefacts and stories from which people have previously felt excluded.

"I always found history a topic that was inaccessible. This project breaks that down, takes down the barriers and makes it accessible."

PREVIOUS TIM PROJECT PARTICIPANT

9 **Strengthen existing and develop new collaborative relationships between different kinds of organisations,** with dance, heritage and community expertise equally valued and celebrated as part of the process. This can lead to innovation of practice, exciting forms of co-creation and more sustainable, productive local partnerships.

"Having a dance project embedded within a wider portfolio of cultural activity is really helping us develop our audiences, raise the profile of our cultural and events programme and look to the future for how we continue these relationships."

PREVIOUS TIM MUSEUM PARTNER

10 **Transform ways of working within organisations,** building confidence in collaborative practice within teams by bringing in new perspectives and approaches to interpretation.

"I think internally the beauty of this project is that it has spanned both our teams [engagement and contemporary art]. It's been a collective ownership of the project at delivery level which has been invaluable"

PREVIOUS TIM MUSEUM PARTNER

WHAT do you need to consider?

BENEATH THE WAVES Exploring the dynamics of energy and movement seen in the full and partial sculptures by G F Watts displayed at Watts Gallery. **Dancer** Chris Pavia. **Photographer** Callum Graham-Robertson.

1 What's the big idea?
What do you want to achieve?

- How will this collaboration link with a specific theme of your practice, focus of your collection, or historical event for example?
- Why work with dance or with heritage in particular? Are you interested in using dance as part of an interpretative process or to engage a particular audience (or both)?
- Is there a particular museum or site, dance organisation or artist with whom you want to collaborate?
- What might you want the final outcome to look like?
- What happens next?

We highly recommend trying things out with partners before settling on a single focus for a project so don't worry if you don't know all the answers straight away.

Your dance/heritage collaboration will be most effective if it is relevant and well-suited to the context within which it sits, so really think about why it needs to happen here, in this site, with these people? Committing to building a relationship with a local partner and community over a sustained period of time rather than parachuting in an idea created within another context is so important in terms of enabling the longer-term impact of a project.

2 Why does it matter?
(to you, to your community, to your partners etc)

How does the collaboration or project respond to the shared ambitions of the individuals and organisations involved?

Does it align with other commemorative events, special activities or local or national festivals coming up?

Is the heritage at risk? Is this a story that needs to be told? Why? Why are you the right collaborators to tell it?

Your answers to these questions will inform key decisions you need to make later, in terms of the right partners to approach, kinds of communities to involve and when, where the final performances might happen etc.

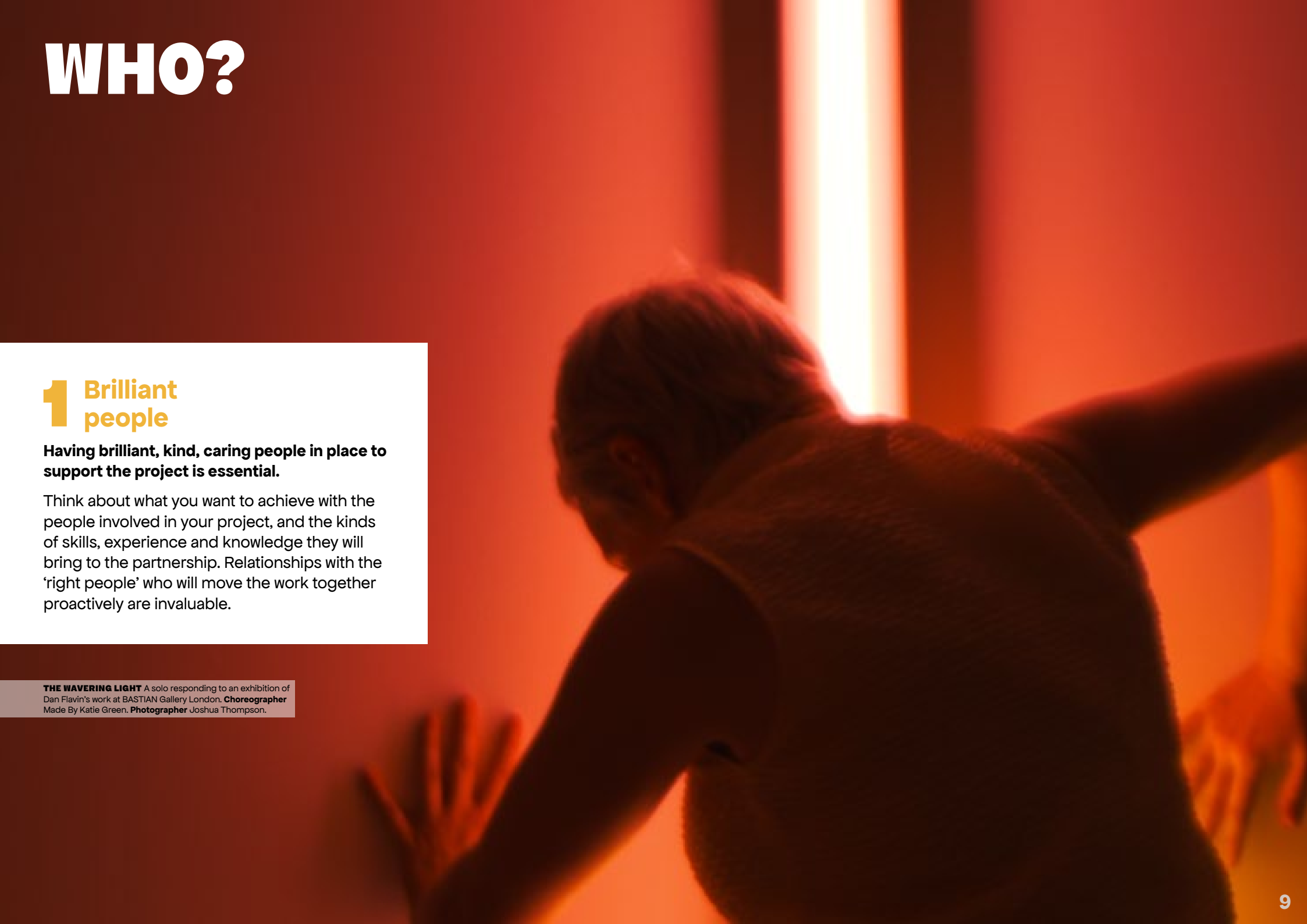
THE GALLERY PROJECT Created for Kettle's Yard in Cambridge during the Antony Gormley SUBJECT Exhibition. **Choreography** Casson & Friends. **Photographer** Alisa Boanta.

WHO?

1 Brilliant people

Having brilliant, kind, caring people in place to support the project is essential.

Think about what you want to achieve with the people involved in your project, and the kinds of skills, experience and knowledge they will bring to the partnership. Relationships with the 'right people' who will move the work together proactively are invaluable.



THE WAVERING LIGHT A solo responding to an exhibition of Dan Flavin's work at BASTIAN Gallery London. **Choreographer** Made By Katie Green. **Photographer** Joshua Thompson.

2 Include communities

This is fundamental to best practice.

It is especially important when working with cultural objects and stories belonging to particular communities to ensure representatives of those communities are involved in the development of any project from the very beginning. However, this early consultation is important as part of any process that may result in co-creation with communities – a clear representation of the fact that the expertise held within communities is valued equally alongside that of the dance and heritage practitioners involved.

Think from the beginning about how you can involve representatives of local communities in:

- **initial 'taster sessions'** to get a sense of local people's interest in a new project and the perspectives they would bring to it e.g. set up informal opportunities to chat with people locally about what you're planning over refreshments; welcome them into the museum space and show them round, or go to other places where they may already be meeting
- **more developed planning discussions** and **helping to select inspiring objects**, or to choose a performance site for example
- **spreading the word about a new project with other members of the local community**
- **artist recruitment panels**
- **development of any work responding to collections or a site** e.g. as performers in a community cast, contributing their voices to a soundscore, collecting contemporary artefacts from local people to share as part of a new response to a collection, documenting a project through photography or film, writing interpretation labels or creating an audio guide for a new exhibition, creating visual arts responses or as participants and audience members for the final product. There are many possibilities for ways that members of local communities could be involved in responding to museums or heritage sites.

Developing relationships with local communities can take time, so ensure you take this into account in your planning and make sure that members of community groups who are contributing to the development and delivery of your project are reimbursed for their time.

You may be drawing on connections you already have with local community groups, but – particularly if you're instigating a new relationship – think about how you can support the growth of that relationship throughout the project and beyond. Once you've built trust with local people, what systems are then going to be in place to sustain that? For example, could you continue to run a regular group for your community participants? Are there volunteering or other opportunities to which these key individuals could be signposted? Look for opportunities to bring others – e.g. young people interested in work experience, volunteers, existing local groups, other artists who may be interested in shadowing the co-creation process – up and along as part of your work and potentially other projects in the future.

COTTON A site responsive dance work illuminating processes of cotton production in Lancashire. **Choreography** About Time Dance Company. **Photographer** Andy Ford.

3 Making contact

You may already know and be in contact with potential collaborators. At The Imagination Museum we have a growing network of museums, heritage sites, dance artists and organisations across the UK who are interested in collaboration, so ask us (email **manager@imaginationmuseum.co.uk**) if you would like some recommendations.

a) If you are a dance artist or organisation interested in working more within the world of museums and heritage, you could start by contacting the **Museum Development Delivery Partner** in your area to ask for suggestions, or do your own research.

Think how to make the best case for what you want to do, and be mindful that the person you're contacting might not understand your practice in the same way you do (and vice versa).

We've discovered through speaking to museums and heritage partners that the idea of working with dance can often lead to misconceptions around what will be involved e.g. that staff may think they will need to dance themselves to take part, or have concerns about the safety of their collections. In this case, the advice we've been given from those heritage partners is for artists to keep things **simple and clear** and to **provide examples** wherever possible. Photos, film, testimonials, first-hand experience, recommendations can all help to bring understanding and reassurance.

b) If you are a museum or heritage practitioner keen to find an artist based locally to you, see if there is a local dance agency or professional dance artist network in your area, or connect with a national networking organisation like **One Dance UK** or **People Dancing** who might be able to point you in the right direction.

THE IMAGINATION MUSEUM: MAYFLOWER 400 A promenade performance for museums in three locations linked to the story of the passengers on board the Mayflower in 1620. **Choreographer** Made By Katie Green. **Photographer** Roswitha Chesher

If this way of working with dance is new to you and you want to bring in some external expertise or identify new collaborators, think carefully about how to outline your idea in a project brief.

Include:

- The vision and aims for the project
- Any thoughts about what the outcome might look like and how you might like to see it develop in the future
- Who is involved already and their different roles
- The project timeframe - what has happened already and how will it progress?
- Any target audiences?
- Resources available e.g. access to space, technical equipment, links to expertise, access to possible participant groups
- Budget/fees and how these have been calculated. You will need to make sure you're taking into account **industry rates** to ensure artists are being paid fairly.
- Any considerations around inclusion, sustainability and how you will evaluate your project if you're that far ahead.

You don't need to know all the answers to these questions. Be honest and open about that and allow time and opportunity within your callout process to find out more about each other's practice and to firm up some of the details together.

Ask us if you're not sure where to start: **manager@imaginationmuseum.co.uk**

4 Equitable working processes

Think about how you can make sure that everyone who wants to can access your project.

Ensure equitable application and recruitment processes e.g. hold opportunities for interested artists/museums to meet and become familiar with each other's practices in advance; make it possible for artists to supply application information in many formats and supply interview questions in advance for everyone involved.

Involve diverse communities in developing your project. Test things out with different people, hear what they have to say, integrate their feedback into your forward-planning.

When planning the delivery of your project, consider measures that you can put in place to ensure everyone feels welcome to take part, breaking down any perceived barriers, which may be physical (e.g. the accessibility of the place where it is happening, how easy it is to get there and whether there is any cost involved) or psychological (is it clear what will be expected of people if they take part and the choices they can make about how they participate?).

(RE)MAKE A dance film by Sara Wookey in collaboration with Camilla Robinson, created for the opening of Windermere Jetty Museum of Boats, Steam and Stories. **Choreographer** Sara Wookey. **Photographer** Roswitha Chesher.

5 Professional development

Are there creative ways that you can support local dance artists and heritage practitioners to come together to share practice either during or at the end of your project? e.g. by 'match-making' artists and heritage organisations, or providing shadowing or buddying opportunities for local artists who may have less experience to work alongside commissioned artists with a longer track record in order to embed that expertise locally.

6 Shared ambitions and clear roles

Once you have identified your partners, it's important to understand what the roles of the different people involved in the project will be, and what you all want to achieve through working together.

Think about the resources needed for the project to take place, and who will be providing these? e.g. access to collections; recruitment workshops to engage local communities; somewhere to rehearse; marketing materials; project management on the day of any performances; volunteer stewards; refreshments?

Put together a **letter of agreement** at the beginning of the project so everyone knows what is expected of them and what they will bring to the relationship.

HOW to plan and deliver your project.

THE IMAGINATION MUSEUM: MAYFLOWER 400 A promenade performance for museums in three locations linked to the story of the passengers on board the Mayflower in 1620. **Choreographer** Made By Katie Green. **Photographer** Roswitha Chesher

1 Allow sufficient time

Although the timeline of a project may not always be in your control, we cannot overstate the importance of allowing enough time for the development process to take place. As dance organisations, museums, heritage sites, galleries, archives can often plan their schedules years in advance, there is great value in allowing something to evolve gradually into what it needs to be over time, rather than trying to pull it together in haste. This will also enable you to build in all of the important things like community consultation, considerations around access and inclusion, how you will evaluate the project and what the legacy might be from the outset.

2 Do your research

Although there will be lots of new discoveries to make along the way, wherever possible, do your research into other similar things that may have happened and try to anticipate what you will need to have in place to make your collaborative project run smoothly. We provide an overview of many things that have happened effectively before through the Case Studies we bring together on our website. We can also provide examples of some of the documents you may need in place when your project gets underway, such as a risk assessment, evaluation framework, marketing pack, social stories for any workshops, events or performances or a front of house 'briefing' sheet.

Case Studies

3 Try things out

Opportunities to prototype ideas, to test and learn and build relationships will help you find out what is needed to support best practice and also begin to build trust and a track record that will help for the future. So take time to get to know a potential collaborator.

"the more information museums can share, the better and more evolved a dance work can be and vice versa"

PREVIOUS TIM NETWORK PARTICIPANT

Commit to meeting for coffee and a chat on a regular basis for a period of time. Visit each other's places of work; find out about the story of a collection from the curator, or visit an open rehearsal or performance from a dance artist. Try some ideas out with members of the public through open workshops; hold an open day for local artists (micro-grants might be available locally e.g. from your local Museum Development organisation to help support this). Think about what you want to know from partners and participants and put together a short survey that will help you show proof of concept.

ROOTS TO RISE Exploring ancestry, agriculture, ecological activism and the inherent wisdom of women. **Choreographer** Nandita Shankardass. **Photographer** Pranita Choudhury.

4 Communicate respectfully and clearly

Clear, friendly, open communication can help to nurture new relationships and ensure things go to plan.

Ensure your communication throughout a project is transparent and timely, providing enough regular detail to ensure everyone is kept up to speed without bombarding each other's inboxes!

Where you're working with larger organisations, our previous experience has shown that communication is most effective where it is shared across the whole organisation, from those operating within the senior management of an organisation to those working 'front of house' (who will be your greatest allies in recommending a project or performance to the general public for example).

"everyone in the venue was well-briefed and equally invested"

PREVIOUS TIM PARTNER

Museums and dance organisations can be well networked – they tell each other if they think you do good work and will vouch for you with other museums/artists.

5 Funding

Our consultation with our members has shown that once the other things outlined above are in place, it can be easier to identify the 'right funders' who are most likely to support a project.

Some options to consider include:

Arts Council England

e.g. through their **National Lottery Project Grants** (for which 'Unlocking Collections' is a time-limited funding priority at the time of writing) for example, or **Developing Your Creative Practice (DYCP)** fund if you're applying to explore a new idea as an individual

Heritage Fund

National Heritage Lottery Funding
NHLF is much more open to grant requests from heritage organisations

Art Fund_

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

Historic England

Everyday Heritage Grants

Museums can often access development grants through Museum Development funding (you can **read about the Museum Development delivery partners here**), or other heritage networks such as:

Museums Association

Association of Independent Museums

Do look into other Trusts and Foundations operating locally to you, to see whether your project idea aligns with their funding objectives. You may also be aware of other local funding that could be available to support your project e.g. local authority arts/community/heritage grants, discretionary funding from local councillors and community foundations.

DANCING TO ART A dance film created in response to the collection at Tate Britain, showing what happens when people have the freedom to enjoy the gallery however they want. **Choreography** Corali Dance Company.

6 Legacy

Over the last 10 years, we have seen a movement away from a more transactional relationship between dance and museums, where dance companies just 'use the museum as a performance space'. Committing to building a relationship with a local community or partner over a sustained period of time is so important in terms of enabling the longer-term impact of a project.

Think about what you might want the legacy of your project to look like, and opportunities to:

- work with/develop groups who could meet regularly at a museum
- hand over power to people within those groups who have resilience and drive to move the activities forward
- sustain elements of your project as a way of continuing to engage new people at a museum (e.g. integrating filmed dance/heritage collaborations as part of a heritage organisation's permanent offer, or continuing to use educational packs created through a project)
- respond to different parts of a museum's collection, including its permanent collection as well as particular exhibitions that are passing through
- share what you have learned with the broader sector e.g. through creating and sharing documentary films and photographs, writing blogs, holding online Advocacy events, speaking at conferences and discussion events, and sending us a Case Study to add to our website.

Especially if you're just getting started, one excellent collaboration will stand you in good stead to do more of this work in the future, so it's worth getting it right!

OTHER RESOURCES

The Imagination Museum website holds a range of Case Studies and Resources that can help you in your planning.

Case Studies | TIM Resource page

These resources include other guidance for artists and museums interested in working collaboratively, which explore some of the prompts we have touched on here in much greater detail. **For example:**

Precarious Movements resource
This freely available, online resource focuses on choreographic work in the context of the museum and addresses how we can better serve and represent the artist in this context. It is intended as a reference for artists working with museums to provide knowledge and to support their agency and autonomy in such situations.

Precarious Movements

Grace Nicol's Dance Pack
A free interactive Public Dance Pack that considers how to support challenging and risk-taking work within the contexts of galleries and museums.

Grace Nicol's Dance Pack

Dancing Museums
Dancing Museums was developed in two phases: Old Masters, New Traces (2015-2017) and The Democracy of Beings (2018-2021). To culminate this research project, a new website has been created to document what was discovered throughout this period as well as give the project an ongoing legacy to urge a change in the position of the audiences and artists alike within the museum context.

Dancing Museums

Arts&Heritage Resource Hub
- Supporting curators and artists, and heritage and museum staff and volunteers to create and commission new artistic projects that explore hidden or untold stories within sites and collections from new perspectives. (Free, but sign-in required.)

Arts&Heritage Resource Hub

The Live List
A set of prompts to consider when bringing a live work into a collection.

The Live List

CONTACT DETAILS

You can find The Imagination Museum at:

Website www.imaginationmuseum.co.uk

www.instagram.com/imaginationmuseum

www.facebook.com/TheImaginationMuseum

www.youtube.com/@imaginationmuseum

Email manager@imaginationmuseum.co.uk

We're committed to continually updating our resources, to adding in new information and evidence, so please get in touch if there's anything you would like to see added to this document.

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The Imagination Museum is supported by the National Lottery through Arts Council England, and is currently being managed by **Made By Katie Green.** Phase 1 in 2024 was delivered in partnership with Colchester and Ipswich Museums, DanceEast, Wheal Martyn, Showtown, the Horniman Museum and Gardens and Trinity Laban, with additional support from an Executive Committee, and Advisory Organisations including the Association for Suffolk Museums and Arts & Heritage. For more information about our Core Team, Committee and partners, please visit **www.imaginationmuseum.co.uk/about/**