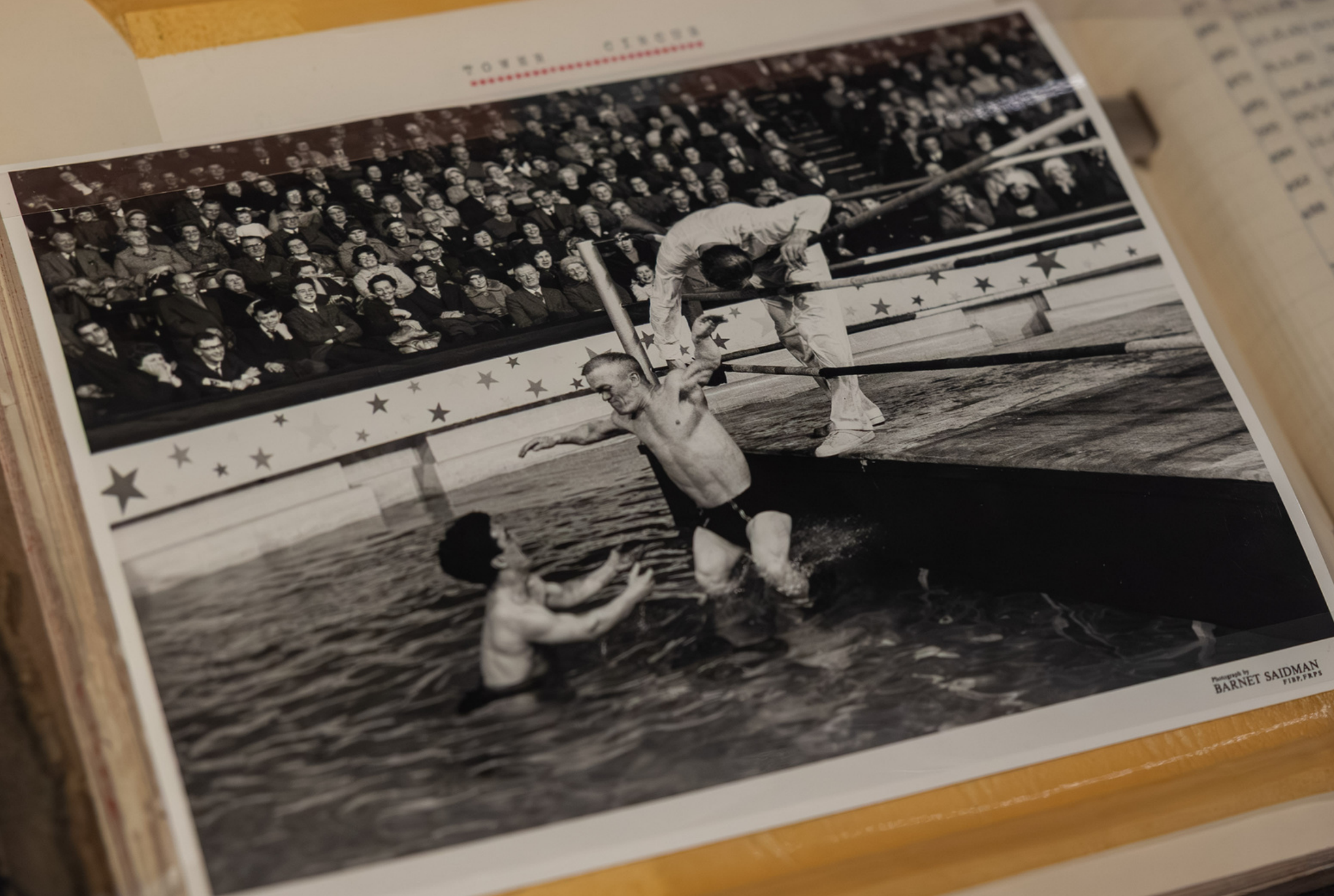


Through Our Eyes: interpreting collections featuring little people



476 1.5.63 The Gattenburgs
+ 5.8.63 Kimi Yokoi



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Introduction

Summary

Showtown has developed a comprehensive toolkit to support museums, galleries and archives to engage with collections featuring little people. The toolkit features a decision tree to support reframing historic collections, helping curators interpret objects for public access. The decision tree allows stakeholders to consider how they can balance access with potential harm and humanise the individuals in these collections. The toolkit highlights the importance of community-led approaches to reframing sensitive collections, Showtown's lessons learnt, and the impact that this work can have on audiences.

Please note that some of the historical material in this toolkit contains language that is outdated and degrading. Please remain sensitive and take a break from reading if needed.

Marvels and Mayhem

Marvels and Mayhem has been a decade-long project, funded by Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund and the Museums Association. The project supported Showtown to catalogue and conserve its circus collection, and co-produce its Roll Up! Roll Up! gallery in the museum, which opened in March 2024. Through Our Eyes is one strand of this wider project. While working through the circus collection it became clear that



Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs costumes,
Martin Bostock Photography for Showtown.

Introduction

Blackpool has vast amounts of material relating to little people's historic roles in the entertainment industry.

Showtown wanted to work with little people to interpret these stories ethically. Showtown worked with the charity Little People UK and a community group of little people and their families from across the country to explore the historic material in our archives and co-create a variety of outcomes.



Ivan Nickoli postcard, Blackpool Council.

Doodles postcard, Blackpool Council.

Outcomes

The group met online for ten sessions exploring research around little people in the UK's public collections, discussing their lived experience, identifying outcomes, and shaping the content of the resulting exhibition and this toolkit. The group gathered in person in Blackpool to visit Showtown, see collections, and spend time in historic venues visible in material from Blackpool's collections.

It was essential to the project that it was entirely co-produced, meaning the community group had the opportunity to input at all levels of the project. This deep engagement included ensuring that the outcomes were entirely of the group's choosing. Showtown planned to facilitate a variety of potential outcomes, such as by holding a slot in the temporary exhibition programme for the option of if the group wanted to create an exhibition, as well as the option of working with our Learning and Engagement team for educational resources. This meant that the group could decide what they wanted to achieve and have ownership of the methods for achieving it, with full support from Showtown.

Introduction

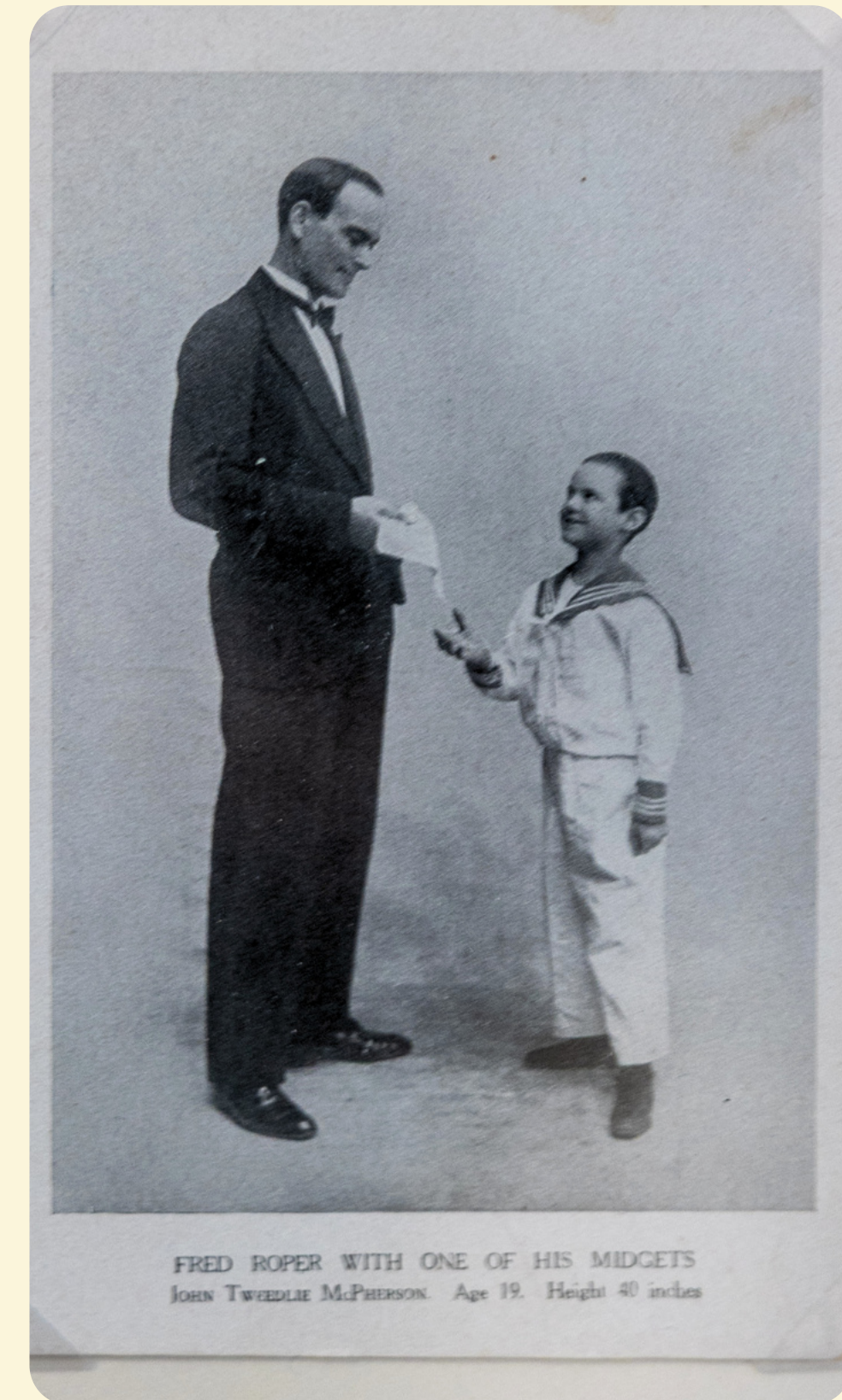
The two key outcomes decided by the group were an exhibition and the creation of a toolkit supporting other museums to undertake this work. 'Through our Eyes: little people beyond the Circus' ran at Showtown from 12 February to 31 May 2026. The exhibition was accompanied by a public programme exploring the themes from the exhibition in more detail. This toolkit aims to give other museums practical tips and the confidence to interpret collections featuring little people. It is important to note that this toolkit can be adapted for different people with different needs: despite focusing on our work with historic material related to little people, this method of reframing marginalised histories that were historically overlooked and recorded in ways we would now find offensive or discriminatory can be applied to collections featuring many marginalised communities.

I felt that this project delivered the message that we were trying to put across on a difficult subject with empathy.

Project participant



Sonia Franks postcard, Blackpool Council.



John Tweedlie McPherson and Fred Roper postcard, Martin Bostock Photography for Showtown.

Key findings

Community group

One of the main things we learnt during this project is that the history of little people in entertainment isn't discussed often. Within the community group there was a range of familiarity with these stories, often because some of these participants or their families were in the entertainment industry.

This project was rooted in research and in collections. The community group chose themes and objects for display based on an in-depth report produced exploring the representation of little people in entertainment in the UK's public collections. The group found much of the research harrowing due to encountering many difficult topics, namely the historic exploitation and mistreatment of little people, and the extensive use of offensive language in historic material.

For the group, the project gave a chance to challenge stereotypes, to present historic material respectfully, centring little people's skills and achievements, and to ultimately reframe society's perspectives. The groups' success measure for the exhibition was for one person to leave it having learnt the correct language to use when referring to little people.

**I've loved being
part of this project
and have learned
so much.**

Project participant



Members of the community group and Showtown staff at the exhibition opening, Martin Bostock Photography for Showtown.

Key findings



Visitors in the exhibition space at the opening,
Martin Bostock Photography for Showtown.

Exhibition visitors

For many of the exhibitions' visitors, the exhibition served as their introductory point to the histories of little people. A concern held by the community group was that allowing visitors to freely write feedback would result in inappropriate responses or the regular use of offensive language. We found that this occurred in less than 1% of responses.

The vast majority of the responses were overwhelmingly positive. The exhibition received a positive article in the national press and an extension, which led to an increasing percentage of visitors coming specifically to see the exhibition throughout its run. Of our five-star scale, 94% of visitors rated the exhibition 4 stars or more. And against the group's main success measure, 88% of visitors said they had learnt the right language to use to refer to little people.

The qualitative question we asked visitors was 'what have you learnt about little people from this exhibition?' The most frequent responses were that all people are the same and shouldn't be judged or treated differently. We also had responses that the exhibition had prompted visitors to update EDI practices around language, little people saying, 'we little people are amazing!', and the lesson that 'curiosity is okay

Key findings

when it leads to educating yourself.'

'Through Our Eyes' is evidence that working with communities, providing them the opportunity and trust to present their voices and reframing our collections through their perspectives is enormously valuable. It resonates with our audiences, it empowers the communities, and it sparks empathy at times when marginalised communities are facing widening inequality and harassment.

Lessons learnt

At the time of writing and during the project, Showtown's permanent team consists of entirely average-height people. Our team have learnt about the historic mistreatment of little people, the ways museums can feel alienating – such as through lighting often creating eye-level glare, and how difficult navigating an average-height world can be.

Early in the project we found that it was difficult to begin conversations around a topic that can be quite sensitive. There were trepidations on both sides, with Showtown staff wanting to ensure that we addressed topics ethically and created a safe space, and with participants meeting new people and in some cases being hesitant to share their own

experiences in a group setting. We found that creating a welcoming environment where people were encouraged to ask questions, make mistakes, and learn, was foundational for building trust and made having conversations in online sessions easier and more enjoyable.

By working collaboratively and deeply during this process, we have also learnt the value and joy that comes from being vulnerable and truly open to learning. We have learnt that museums have the power to change lives.

Unexpected outcomes

While we expected some of the outcomes – like learning that museums are often unintentionally inaccessible – the project also had unexpected outcomes. One of them was how it brought people together. For example, the community group was the first time one participant had ever met other little people. The in-person visit to Blackpool was also a key point in cementing the groups' relationships and building connections.

We also learnt the value of discomfort. One of the most unexpected outcomes

**I've learnt
so much about the
town I was born
in, and enjoyed it.**

Visitor

Key findings

was the response to the physical adjustments to Showtown's temporary exhibition gallery. The exhibition was designed to be accessible for little people, meaning: a reduced hang height with a mid-point of 1200mm; lowering tabletop display cases where possible to 900mm; and providing steps for access.

The initial scepticism of some of the average-height family of the community group that this would be uncomfortable for average-height visitors reinforced the power imbalance in museum spaces. Centring little people's needs was essential to this exhibition. We found that this received very positive responses from our visitors, who it helped understand how the world is built with them, and not little people, in mind.

Legacies

Reinterpretation projects like this one need embedding into organisations to secure their long term impact.

To ensure that this project has a legacy for our organisation, Showtown are:

- Creating a permanent webpage dedicated to this project
- Reusing the lowered display cases created
- Embedding updated language and the exhibition interpretation in our collections cataloguing
- Including the stories of little people performers on our visitor app
- Adding the exhibition to our online platform
- Attending conferences
- Joining communities of practice to share our learning
- Creating this toolkit to support the sector in reinterpreting their collections

I have enjoyed learning more about the history of people with dwarfism, and being part of a community who were passionate about this project.

Project participant



'On With the Show' programme featuring the Brashos
Martin Bostock Photography for Showtown.

Interpreting collections

Engaging with collections

For Showtown, much of the material featuring little people in our collection was found through written or visual means – through the presence of inappropriate language or little people in photographs. These are the easiest signs to notice in a collection. When working with catalogue entries, it is also beneficial to explore material labelled as featuring children as these materials may have been misidentified, and may in fact feature little people. This had occurred in Blackpool’s material.

The most important element of engaging with collections is taking the time to explore. As the glossary on the following pages suggests, ‘decoding’ act names may not always be simple – the overlap between act names used for little people and children can require additional research to further identify the individuals.

There may be a hesitation to explore these collections or a feeling that special training is required to engage with complex histories. Whilst working with specialists should be prioritised where possible, we have learnt during this process that success comes from centring curiosity and empathy while engaging with collections.



Blackpool Tower Circus poster (1927), Blackpool Council..

Photographs and programme featuring Malcolm Dixon, Martin Bostock Photography for Showtown..



Blackpool Tower Circus poster (1964), Blackpool Council..

Interpreting collections

Working with communities

Due to the nature of working with complex historic material and the purpose of museums to work with and for people rather than to create content about them, we would always recommend working with communities. Bringing the lived experience and family histories of our community group to our engagement with collections enriched their context and shaped the outcomes of the project.

However, it is important to note that bringing in communities can be difficult. It requires funding, staffing, and time that not all organisations – or individuals – are able to commit to. Community groups also require investment and upskilling: many people may not be familiar with museums, collections, or the historic context of these particular materials, and co-creation projects require committed support to ensure everyone is speaking the same language. Time must also be built into a project for collections research and to address challenges that arise when working co-productively.

This toolkit will benefit organisations by sharing the learning of community voices to facilitate engaging with collections, particularly if they are unable to begin a co-produced project. The following pages include a glossary of terms that may be

I have enjoyed collaborating with the group. It was interesting to hear other people's personal experiences.

Project participant



Project participants exploring the Blackpool Tower Circus, Showtown.



Interpreting collections

found in historic material or useful in a reinterpretation project, and a decision tree supporting the interpretation of collections.

Ultimately, the reinterpretation of collections at Showtown showed the importance of balancing access and harm. The historic material was often offensive or difficult for some of the community group to engage with, and the outcome of our learning during this process was to prioritise context. By humanising the people in the collections and centring their narratives we helped to restructure an historic power imbalance, and contextualising displays with sensitivity notes allowed communities the independence to make their own decisions about how they wanted to engage with collections.

Glossary

Many of the words used historically to refer to little people are now considered offensive and material using them should be treated sensitively. What follows is a list of common historical language you might come across and their meanings.

Average-height – used to refer to people who are not of short stature

Dwarf – historically used negatively to refer to people with disproportionate dwarfism, still used by some people of short stature to refer to themselves

Lilliputian – historically used to refer to little people, based in the mythology of ‘Lilipute’, the island from the novel ‘Gulliver’s Travels’

Little person – the current terminology used for people of short stature

Midget – historically used to refer to people with proportionate dwarfism, this is now considered one of the most offensive terms for the community

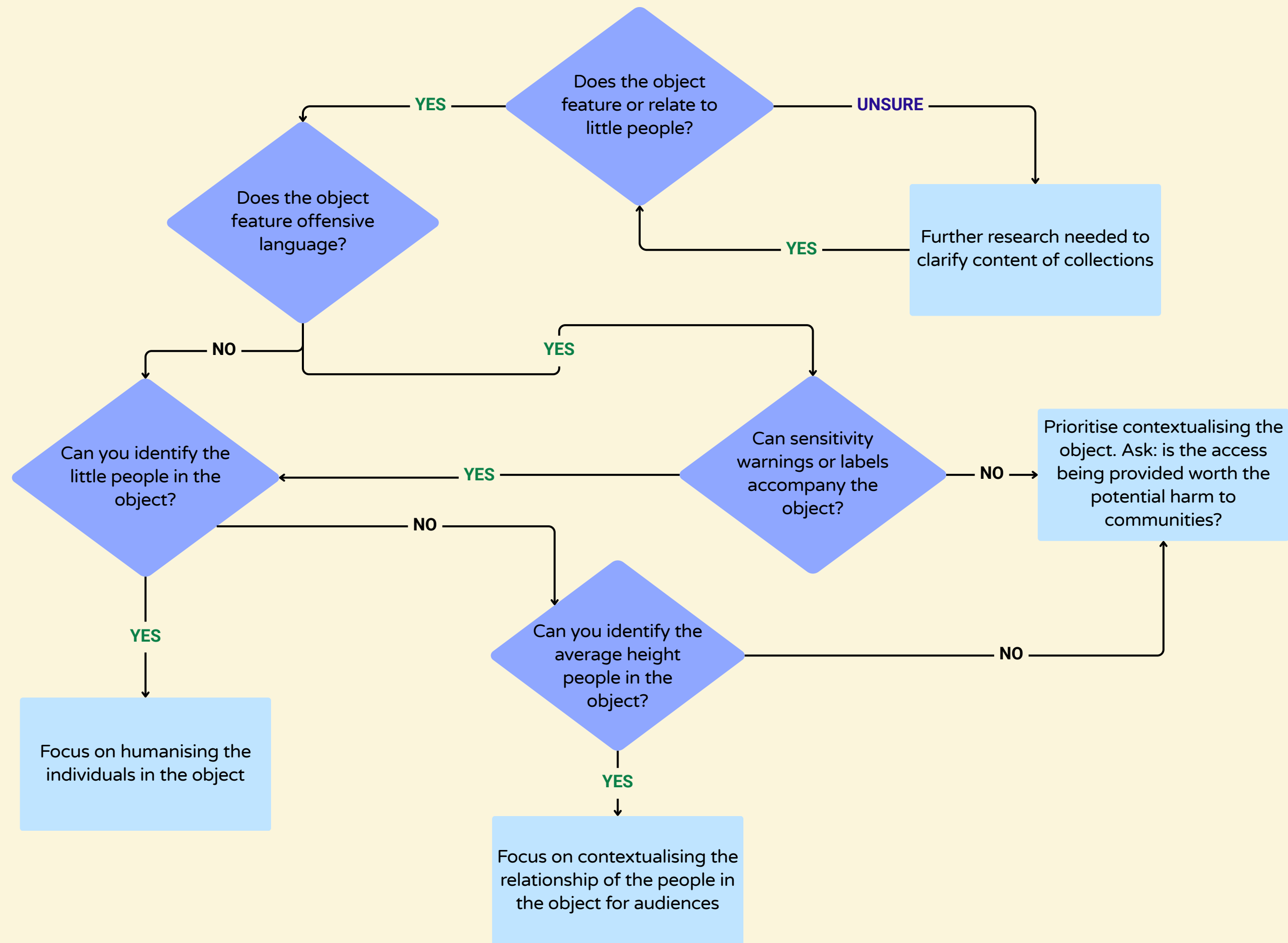
Mite – often historically used in the act names of little people

PORG – acronym for person of restricted growth, a term no longer utilised by people of short stature

Prince / Princess – often historically used in the act names of little people, also a common way of styling acts featuring children

I was unsure at first about how the public would interpret this exhibition. However, after hearing the feedback, I am really glad this has made a positive impact not just for little people but on how society views us. Project participant

Decision tree for interpreting collections featuring little people



All interpretation, cataloguing and display of collections featuring little people should employ best practice in current terminology and perspectives, with a willingness to listen to communities with lived experience to learn and improve.

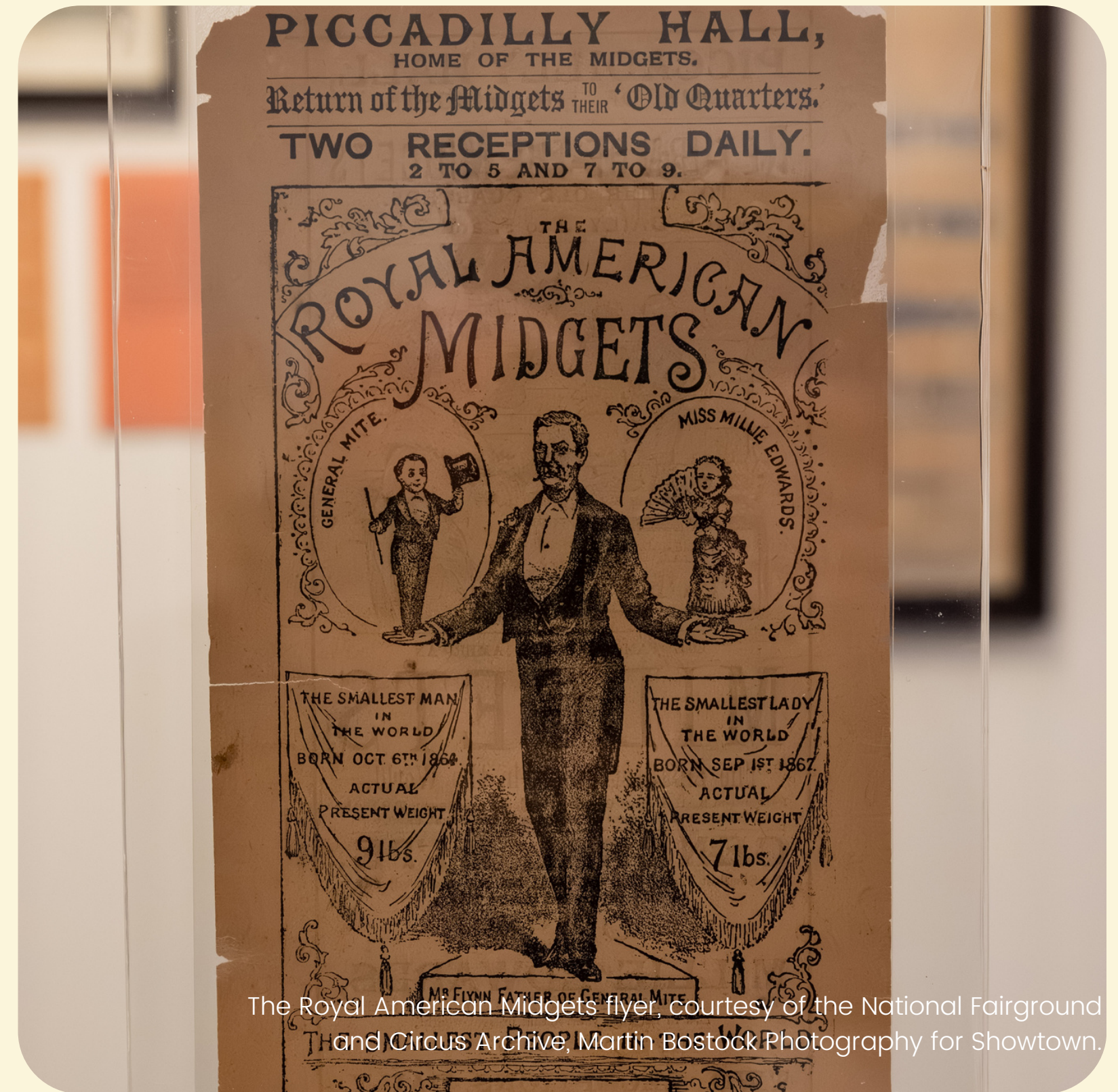
Measuring impact

Why is impact important?

Showtown used a variety of methods to measure the impact of this project, through gauging audience responses to the exhibition with feedback forms to project evaluation with the community group and gathering responses from Showtown staff. This toolkit has also discussed wider impact in terms of outcomes and legacies which demonstrate how this project has changed Showtown's working practices and is making us a more accessible and inclusive museum.

The written visitor responses from our feedback forms covered a range of reactions. Many emphasised their level of learning, particularly around the historic discrimination of little people, and the social stigma they still face today. The connective impact of the project is very positive; multiple little people visited the exhibition and said they learnt a lot, and the majority of project participants felt more connected to the history of little people by the end of the project.

We found that the project exceeded the expectations of all participants. They enjoyed the community collaboration that led to hearing other people's experiences and being surrounded by others who were also passionate about this projects' success. One significant aspect of the lasting impact



The Royal American Midgets flyer, courtesy of the National Fairground and Circus Archive, Martin Bostock Photography for Showtown.

Measuring impact

is the pride, positivity and confidence participants developed through being involved. This clearly demonstrated to Showtown's staff the social impact of co-production work, as well as creating ambassadors for the museum in communities Showtown usually does not reach on its own.

Showtown also measures impact through conversations with visitors. We found this was a significant measure of impact for the exhibition, as visitors expressed being grateful for a space addressing sensitive topics boldly, and for the opportunity to have potentially difficult conversations with our staff, which in turn increased staff confidence in exploring these histories. The exhibition was also a value-add for visitors: visitors had a lot of interest in the fact that the museum was working with communities, and wanted to understand how they could get involved in future projects.

Although much of our evaluation so far focuses on the community group and exhibition visitors, the impact on staff who were involved in this work signals the importance of doing this reinterpreted work even if the results may not be immediately available to the public. The ability to shift perspectives, build confidence, and address topics that have often not been discussed in museums in depth benefits all

staff – in turn benefitting our collections, our programming, and our audiences. Through our qualitative evaluation, it is clear that engaging with these histories is incredibly important and impactful to many different people.



Measuring impact

Moving forward at Showtown

It is key for Showtown and for the community group that this projects' impact does not end here. We intend to continue promoting this project in a variety of ways and ensuring that it has a legacy. The dedicated webpage will continue to stand, allow us to measure visits. We will also be able to measure views for the project videos on YouTube.

In addition, the toolkit will be launched in September 2026, meaning we will be able to measure impact through downloads, enquiries, and engagement with the resource. Showtown is committed to continuing to share the learning from this project by attending workshops to demonstrate the toolkit, by contributing to community and sector forums, and by submitting ourselves for sector conferences and awards to spread awareness of the project.

Your audiences

Impact is different depending on context. The methods used at Showtown may not be relevant depending on the work that you are undertaking. For example, if amending catalogue entries, you may measure impact based on how many words were amended, whether acts or individuals were identified, or increased searchability in your records. Adjustments to interpretation could have their impact measured through feedback forms or through noting key conversations between staff and visitors. If putting on a display, you may consider measuring changes to accessibility at your venue.

A key measure of impact is to evaluate staff knowledge during this process. It is worthwhile considering what staff knew about the community and historical contexts before doing this work, and how their knowledge and perspectives have adjusted during the reinterpretation process. Impact can be measured in infinite ways. It is important to ensure you find a way that works for you and your project.

Conclusion

Final thoughts

At the time of creating this toolkit, our society is at a point of increasing polarisation. The collections cared for by museums and archives provide an opportunity to reshape these narratives, centring stories of joy and building communities of care. Showtown's 'Through Our Eyes' project has shown that deeply engaging with collections, not in spite of but because of their sensitive histories, can support connection across society and help change people's attitudes towards marginalised communities.

Working with our collections and with our communities reframes historical perspectives, empowering communities. It also empowers those who work with collections to create more inclusive spaces for all.

Contact details

This toolkit was created by Showtown and the Marvels and Mayhem community group.

For further information, see:

showtownblackpool.co.uk/through-our-eyes

To provide feedback, please contact Showtown's Exhibitions team on: info@showtownblackpool.co.uk

Resources

If you've been impacted by anything in this toolkit or would like to explore further, here are some resources to explore:

Dwarf Sports Association – www.dsauk.org

DSAuk is a leading national disability sports organisation working to make sports accessible to all people with dwarfism

Little People UK – www.littlepeopleuk.org

LPUK is a national charity work to raise awareness of dwarfism and support members of the community

If your organisation would like to explore a community project, LPUK may be able to support you

Mind – www.mind.org.uk

Mind is a national charity providing mental health support and care to ensure no one feels alone

Restricted Growth Association – <https://rgauk.org/>

RGA are a charity working to build a better society for people with dwarfism

Image credits: Blackpool Council, Martin Bostock Photography for Showtown, Showtown, and We Film Blackpool.

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