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# Children & Young People Engaging with Museums



*“Museums were the weapons my mother had to counter disadvantage... my love of history and learning was ignited by childhood visits to museums – they are engines for learning and storytelling.”*

*David Olusoga*

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# Introduction

*Museums provide unique life changing experiences for children and young people to explore, learn and develop their skills and interests. Children and their families highly value museums, as evidenced by the following survey results and case studies. Museums contribute to their wellbeing, boost their confidence, enhance their communication skills, instil a sense of agency, and enrich their learning experiences.*

Engagement with children and young people has long been a core feature of museums' activity. The purpose of these in-depth case studies, commissioned by Arts Council England, is to explore the entire life cycle of informal engagement of children and young people (aged 0-18) with museums, from initial exposure to sustained participation.

This research was conducted between January and March 2025 and is based on survey responses from 126 museums, as well as insights from Museum Development and a roundtable discussion with 42 heads of learning from museums across England.

The case studies focus on understanding:

- Entry points and barriers to engagement
- Motivations and triggers for sustained involvement
- The evolution of preferences and needs at different developmental stages
- The impact of museum experiences on learning, creativity, and personal development.

We also include data drawn from an accompanying survey of museum learning practitioners to provide a rich context to the case studies.

## Entry Points

A common thread that runs through all the case studies is the importance of the ecosystem in which museums operate. Museums have a range of relationships with partners from across local authority children's and youth services, schools and charities that enable and enrich their work. Partners advise on and shape work, act as entry points for children via referrals and share information about opportunities with audiences. A key feature of the entry points for children and young people into museums is that they are largely facilitated by others.

At Manchester Art Gallery co-locating with Sure Start in 2017 has resulted in the development of their early years practice and audiences, led to development of their Lion's Den space for families and to Manchester hosting a range of art, health and other public services in the museum. At the Young V&A, partners help refer 11 to 14 year olds onto their programmes. At Compton Verney, early years partners have helped to develop their work and practice. The local Cultural Education Partnership DCEP disseminates Derby Museums' offer for schools and families to a wider audience than the museum could harness.

These relationships go both ways.

At Compton Verney their partner nursery found working with them raised the nursery's awareness of the creativity and agency their children have and led to changes in their working practice.

## Motivations and triggers for sustained involvement

While entry points to museums are mostly facilitated by partners, schools and families, once children are in contact with museums there is a golden thread of progressive engagement running through activity. Museums scaffold activity from early years through to careers based opportunities as children grow in skills and confidence.

Building relationships and community is



© Ancient House Museum of Thetford Life

a key trigger for sustained involvement in museums by young people. This is frequently the key element for driving engagement over and above collection content. At Ancient House Museum of Thetford Life, 50% of the young people in their Teenage History Club have been members of their Junior History Club. They engage with the museum from their early years, through family activities before choosing to join the Clubs. Young people attend museum activities because they value the relationships with staff and other young people and the sense of belonging and ownership they feel.

Creating purposeful activities and giving young people agency in making decisions about their involvement with museums is important. For example, at Young V&A 11-14 year olds create products to sell in the shop. At Preston Park Museum young people work towards the Arts Award. At the Museum of English Rural Life the youth panel makes choices about what is exhibited. Acknowledging the agency of children is important across all age ranges, not just as they become more independent as teenagers. As they get older, young people value experiences that provide opportunities to support job seeking and careers.

## The evolution of preferences and needs at different developmental stages



Museums are skilled at responding flexibly to young people and families' needs. At Manchester when working with Sanctuary Seeking families, they made sure food and activities were culturally appropriate which increased attendance and the enjoyment of families.

At Dorset Museum and Art Gallery, they supported care experienced young people to take part by changing from set meeting times to task based activities young people could complete in their own time.

At Preston Park Museum and the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre they tailored the museum environment and activities to the identified needs of their visitors with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The Roald Dahl Museum has developed their offer for children with SEND through focusing on different audiences

*Museums are trusted civic spaces that take care to build relationships and understand the communities they work in so their programme adds value and responds appropriately to their local context.*

for specific days and times with Relaxed, Quiet and Loud days.

As well as the focus on acknowledging and enabling appropriate agency at all ages, the case studies demonstrate the ways museums support children through different developmental stages. At early years and primary level families bring children to museums and support them to take part in activities. Museums consult widely with these groups to design attractive activities that engage and support personal



© University of Cambridge Museums

development. Museums focus on how to communicate their offers via families and schools at these ages, for examples see PK Porthcurno, the Roald Dahl Museum and Derby Museums.

As children grow into tweens and teenagers, museums shift to scaffolding direct links with young people and respond to the increasing independence of this age, as seen in the Young V&A case study. From 14 years onwards, museums work with young people to help them play an active role in the museum's work, such as including them in creating exhibitions. Alongside all of this, museums continue to work closely with schools to provide lighter touch opportunities, trips and visits to enrich school based learning.

The range of needs across children, young people and their families is vast. Museums are trusted civic spaces that take care to build relationships and understand the communities they work in so their programme adds value and responds appropriately to their local context.

## Barriers to engagement

All the case studies emphasise the importance of building relationships with partners in order to engage and provide opportunities for children and young people in museums. Given this, the capacity and funding of museum teams and other services that operate within their ecosystems can be a barrier to engagement. If partners cut back their activities, they have less capacity to signpost and refer to museums. At the same time, museum staffing capacity is being squeezed due to ongoing reductions to local authority funding and the cost of living crisis.

Project based work is an ongoing issue for museum learning. Museum fundraising teams can find it easier to fundraise for learning work. When the project funding finishes the learning activity can be cut or curtailed, something which might not happen to activities receiving core funding. Given the importance of building and maintaining relationships to support children and young people's participation in museums and the consistent investment this requires, there is a clear challenge when trying to align best practice with the funding landscape.

Groups with additional needs, such as children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) or families experiencing disadvantage, face additional barriers. Practicalities of when they can visit, cost of visits, who can be accommodated in activities and sessions, how you provide for siblings and multi-age groups all affect their ability to engage with museums' offers. Museums are seeking to mitigate these barriers, creating in consultation with families different types of experiences at the Roald Dahl Museum for example, or offering reduced price tickets.

Systemic barriers to engagement outside of the museums' control also create challenges. The cost of living crisis affects families' ability to take part in museum activities even if they are free - associated costs such as food and travel present barriers. The increase in transport costs over the past two years, particularly for school groups is a major problem. For museums like PK



© Leeds Museums and Galleries

Porthcurno and Compton Verney their rural locations mean transport creates significant barriers for their visitors unable to travel by car.

## The impact of museum experiences on learning, creativity and personal development

The case studies demonstrate the value placed by children, young people and their families on museum experiences, and how they enrich their lives and create opportunity. They all include examples of how activity supports personal development – increasing children and caregivers' wellbeing, confidence in their own skills and resilience. Children are supported in their learning journeys, young people gain valuable work experiences and learn about careers. Visits and projects enrich learning and develop creativity. Museums continue to be vital civic spaces where children and their families have agency and value, where they are not consumers but active empowered citizens.

**Sam Cairns**  
Director, Cairns Crump  
March 2025



# Research Insights

In January 2025, GEM was commissioned by Arts Council England to conduct research on children and young people's engagement in museums.

All museums that participated in this research reported having an engagement programme for children and young people in place, with these audiences embedded in their strategic plans and supported through core funding. Museum learning expert John H. Falk's extensive research highlights that future museum visitors are more likely to be children who experience museums with their families rather than through school visits, reinforcing the importance of informal learning programmes.

Findings highlight the scale and impact of museum engagement with 0-18-year olds across England:

**100%**

of surveyed museums actively engage children and young people

**96%**

include children and young people in their museum strategy

**50%**

increase of engagement with children and young people since 2023

**63%**

museums offer co-created exhibitions, collections and youth advisory groups

**66%**

provide work experience or volunteering opportunities

**69%**

provide early years programmes

**34%**

offer a youth advisory group

**56%**

recognise Sector Support Organisations as key to supporting engagement with children & young people

**100%**

of museums who responded to the survey actively engage children and young people

© English Heritage





Museums strive to provide inclusive and quality engagement for 0-18-year olds, balancing school and early years programmes with after-school, weekend and holiday activities, thereby serving as an invaluable community resource all year round. Recognising the importance of relevance, museums aim to tell diverse stories and create inclusive spaces where children and young people of all backgrounds see themselves represented.

*“If Art Pioneers was not available, you would be taking away my hope for my child’s future. It’s a life line that I really need.”*  
*(Parent feedback on Art Pioneers SEND programme, Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge)*

Museum learning and engagement staff build connections between programmes for different ages and audiences, ensuring children and young people can engage in ways that are meaningful to their lives. Many museums facilitate transitions from youth workshops to work experience and entry-level employment. For example, the programme Careers for All at Leeds Museums and Galleries creates a range of career aspiring opportunities for young people with SEND (special educational need and disabilities).

A significant 93% of those who responded to the survey actively evaluate and evidence the impact of their learning and engagement work, with 91% able to demonstrate impact on learning, 68% on creativity and 65% on personal development. Increased resources, skills and support would enable museums to provide more robust evidence of their impact on children and young people.

Museums have significant opportunities to enhance their engagement with children

and young people. One key area for improvement is the digital offer, as digital and hybrid engagement post COVID remains significantly lower than in-person activities and museums need to do more to develop products that appeal to children and young people.

*95% of museums said increased capacity would improve engagement with 0 – 18 year olds.*

For families, cost, travel and time are major barriers to participation. Strengthening partnerships and securing sustained investment will be essential in overcoming these challenges and ensuring more children and young people can access the benefits of cultural enrichment.

Continued sector support funding is essential for learning programmes to develop capacity. Providing free learning opportunities in museums across England in a broad range of diverse communities, creates a more inclusive and accessible environment for children and young people, instilling pride of place and value for their local community.

Museums play a crucial role in enriching children and young people’s lives, providing opportunities for learning, creativity and personal growth. As this research demonstrates, museums are essential spaces for engagement and inclusion, helping young people to develop skills, confidence and a sense of belonging. Museums support the development of children and young people and contribute to nurturing a thriving, inclusive and resilient society. Investment from Arts Council England (ACE) is vital to the continuity and expansion of museums’ engagement with 0-18-year-olds, with 50% of surveyed museums receiving ACE support – ensuring that, wherever they live, every child and young person can benefit from the opportunity and transformative power of museum learning.







# Exploring Creativity through Play: Compton Verney's Early Years Partnership and Programme

Compton Verney

Midlands | Independent | Early Years

Compton Verney (CV) is an independent charity and accredited museum set within a park, located in Warwickshire within the West Midlands. The museum & art gallery's mission is to connect people with art, nature, and creativity. Serving these communities in the heart of England since 2004, CV welcomes over 130,000 visitors annually to its historic eighteenth-century site, including 4,500 schoolchildren and students. These visitors engage with world-class exhibitions, experience art and nature in the 120-acre sculpture park, and explore eclectic permanent collections of visual and decorative arts. CV is collaborative and ambitious, working alongside a diverse range of local and regional partners, schools, community groups, artists, and national institutions.

Many visitors are local families who return time and again to explore the ever-changing programme. Whether inviting little ones into the forest school, staging art-historical exhibitions, creating innovative contemporary installations in the grounds or offering adult courses, their values guide everything they do – CV is collaborative, sustainable, bold, inclusive and fun.

"Compton Verney is the most child friendly museum we have ever visited. We are members and over the last three years there have been constant child friendly events and activities. From sand pits to piles of wooden blocks, den building areas to interactive art to trails and playrooms. It feels like Compton Verney wants you to visit with kids rather than make them feel like an add on" (Parent feedback)

Activities for young people and children have expanded, particularly during holiday periods. The Learning team collaborates with artists, creative practitioners and organisations that champion children's agency and prioritise the child's voice wherever possible. Together, they design playful, creative activities that encourage a range of responses and interactions, including structured skills-based workshops, playworker-led giant inflatable sculpture sessions and exploration of materials through Artist Play Days. Collection and exhibition workshops are a vital resource for schools, with many travelling up to 90 minutes to enrich their art, history, science and Personal, Social and Emotional Development curriculum.



CV considers its children and families' programme, along with access to inspiring spaces both indoors and outdoors, to be a valuable resource which provides children with the conditions in which creativity can thrive. Their work with Early Years practitioners and artists is providing evidence of increased confidence, improved language skills, enhanced motor skills, and creative thinking and problem-solving.

Increased engagement and opportunities for young people, children and families lie at the heart of CV's strategic plan. With clear goals to enrich their offer, they aim to provide creative learning

strand of their work.

All engagement activities are underpinned by Compton Verney's Play Strategy, which acknowledges that play is not only a tool for learning but also helps break down the formalities often associated with visiting museums. This approach invites families into spaces that may be unfamiliar to them while engaging them with art in a welcoming and accessible way. The Learning Team's approach emphasises self-directed play, with both open-ended and structured outcomes, opportunities for discovery and risk-taking and art as a catalyst for imagination and creativity.

*"It feels like Compton Verney wants you to visit with kids rather than make them feel like an add on"*

Parent feedback

opportunities for primary and secondary schools, colleges, and further education students, as well as to expand free play opportunities across their site, both in-gallery and outdoors.

Over the past three years, CV has made a significant investment in expanding its learning and engagement programmes through collaborations with specialist artists and educators. This has helped them refine their approach and make the most of their outdoor spaces and unique collections. One key focus has been Early Years collaboration with Whitnash Nursery and the Youth Music Energiser Fund.

Recognising that supporting children's inquiry and exploration during this critical developmental phase has lasting, positive impacts, CV has prioritised this

**Entry Points, Barriers and Motivations for Sustained Involvement**

Early Years children, including pre-school, nursery and reception age groups, rarely visited CV through the formal learning programme. When they did, the offer was typically based on primary school sessions, which did not account for the needs of younger children and their caregivers. Children under 5 generally visit with family groups during the week to attend Tiny Tuesdays, which are facilitated play sessions. These sessions feature comfortable, floor-based spaces that help break down the perception of 'proper' ways to visit an art gallery. Additionally, the Get Mucky, Get Making sessions, part of the Early Years Forest School programme, have developed over several years. In these sessions, the team encourages caregivers to step back, allowing children the space to find their own

flow and explore their interests. The children are provided with creative invitations and opportunities to stretch their imaginations, take risks and connect with nature through creative arts. The nature-based approach aligns strongly with the PLAY and Early Years strategies being explored more deeply through the project.

The Learning Team sought to deepen their understanding of Early Years teaching and strengthen relationships with Early Years head teachers and facilitators. As part of this effort, they engaged with a local playgroup, bringing 2,000-year-old objects for investigation and inspiration. In addition, they welcomed the group to engage in playful gallery sessions, co-developed with the playgroup leaders. These sessions served as test cases for a more open-ended, exploratory approach to early years engagement.





This work has now grown into a sustainable community partnership, with CV working closely with Whitnash Nursery School over three years. Led by Learning Manager and Early Years specialist Emma Butchart, alongside EY specialist Headteacher Rachel Gillet and artist Matt Shaw, the partnership explores how very young children express creativity and how this supports their learning and development. It builds on previous work with local playgroups, where children engaged with museum objects and creative activities designed to encourage curiosity and confidence.

A key part of this work is helping children see themselves as artists. After a class visit to Compton Verney, Shaw reflected:

*“The impact has been profound and has resulted in an explosion of energy and creativity throughout the nursery... After the trip, there was the realisation that artists could be anyone and that they could make almost anything, but most importantly, there was the recognition that the children themselves could be artists. An amazing change of attitude and thinking.”*

By making creativity part of early learning, this partnership is opening up new ways for young children to explore, play and express themselves.

The current formal learning programme for Early Years and Key Stage 1 is evolving to reflect CV’s temporary exhibitions, with workshops such as Landscape and Imagination and Sculpture in the Park. Informed by best practice in Early Years learning, these workshops incorporate movement, mark-making, large- and small-scale making and storytelling, ensuring a dynamic and engaging experience. Feedback from initial sessions has been overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the value of creative exploration in early education.

CV’s Early Years programme was developed to address the key barriers preventing young children from engaging with cultural and creative experiences. At home, there is often a lack of space, time and resources for open-ended play and artistic expression.

A core aim of this work is to collaborate with parents and carers, helping them understand how simple materials and carefully designed provocations can inspire multiple creative responses. By equipping families with these insights, the programme supports deeper engagement with creativity in everyday life and fosters a sense of ownership over artistic exploration.

CV is committed to growing and deepening the impact of its programme, expanding access to art, nature, and creativity across the site and playing a leading role in creative learning across the region. A key focus is increasing opportunities for families and schools to engage in creative learning and play while ensuring these efforts are embedded in long-term practice. Central to this work is addressing specific challenges, such as low participation from certain groups and limited access for rural communities, while continuously refining approaches to make cultural experiences more inclusive and accessible. By tackling these barriers, CV continues to shape a learning environment where creativity is nurtured from the very start of a child’s journey.

As part of CV’s commitment to audience development and widening access to its collections, a £2 admission ticket was introduced in March 2024 for adults receiving Universal or Pension Credit. In its first year, 849 people took up this offer – a strong uptake for a new initiative. Alongside free admission for children aged 18 and under, the scheme represents a significant step towards making the site more accessible to low-income families. Additionally, the museum currently has 10 Community Access Scheme memberships, which have generated around 200 adult visits over the last 12 months, further supporting its goal of widening access. Participation in this project will help embed this admission model further, ensuring a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all.

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## Impact and Key Learnings

The Early Years initiatives at CV have had a meaningful impact on both Compton Verney’s team and the way early years learning is integrated into the site’s programmes. Team members from more formal teaching backgrounds have begun to adopt a more open-ended approach, reconsidering how activities are structured to allow for greater exploration and creativity. This shift is shaping how CV communicates its approach to new nursery and school groups, encouraging them to embrace less outcome-driven workshops where children have the space to explore materials and lead their own investigations. The programme has also reinforced the value of play-based and nature-led learning, particularly through its Forest School sessions. These sessions have provided opportunities for children to take creative risks, build confidence and engage with nature in a meaningful way, while also deepening CV’s understanding of how to facilitate self-directed learning experiences. The knowledge gained from this work will inform future programming, ensuring that young children and their caregivers continue to feel supported in their creative exploration.

The Early Years programme at CV has taught the team the value of continual reflection and adaptation. By running test sessions with nurseries, they have been able to gather real-time feedback and make adjustments to improve the overall experience. This process has highlighted the importance of open-ended activities, which allow children to take the lead in their own creative exploration. Simple tools like pre-printed invitations for children to colour and stick have provided gentle prompts while still leaving space for individual expression.

One of the most powerful insights has been the need to stop, reflect, and adapt as the sessions unfold, which allows the team to confidently embrace a flexible, child-centred approach. This adaptability has fostered both growth and deeper engagement

*A £2 admission ticket was introduced in 2024 for adults receiving Universal or Pension Credit. In its first year, 849 people took up this offer – a strong uptake for a new initiative.*

for the children involved. Collaboration with other sectors, particularly Early Years practitioners and social play specialists, has been key in reinforcing the idea that children are their own creative agents. By giving children the freedom to explore, the team has seen how their creativity can flourish when guided by thoughtful, responsive support in the unique environment of the museum.

*The museum currently has 10 Community Access Scheme memberships, which have generated around 200 adult visits over the last 12 months, further supporting its goal of widening access.*

### Find Out More

[About the learning programme](#)  
[Playful Places Network](#)  
[Youth Music Energiser Fund](#)





# Building Inclusive Futures: Social Justice and Civic Engagement through Early Years at Manchester Art Gallery

## Manchester Art Gallery

North West | Local Authority Museum | Families & Early Years

Manchester City Galleries, of which Manchester Gallery (MAG) is the largest venue, is proudly part of Manchester City Council and belongs to the people of Manchester. MAG believes that creativity can be a powerful force in making a healthy society and achieving positive social change. Meeting the needs of Manchester's varied communities, connecting art and people through exhibitions, engagement and education.

In recent years, MAG has accelerated its efforts to support the city's early years and family agenda, particularly the **Start Well Strategy**, which focuses on a child's first 1,000 days. This work increasingly takes a multi-agency approach within the unique environment of the gallery. The gallery's Early Years and Family programme is rooted in socially engaged practice and is an integral part of a wider engagement strategy that connects with residents at every stage of life. The latest visitor survey shows that 42% of general visitors come as families, with total visitor numbers reaching 640,000 in 2024-25. Each year, the gallery engages with 15,000 school pupils and 12,000 adults through their learning programme, and families form the largest group of

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*The latest visitor survey shows that 42% of general visitors come as families, with total visitor numbers reaching 640,000 in 2024-25. Each year, the Gallery engages with 15,000 school pupils and 12,000 adults, but families form the largest group of active participants at 25,000.*

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active participants at 25,000. Data also indicates that this is the gallery's most diverse audience.

The development of the gallery's targeted family work has been gradual but stems from a key moment in 2017 when the Children's Centre Sure Start needed a new home and contacted the gallery to see if any suitable space was available. Initially, a health visitor-led clinic was delivered in the gallery's learning studio.





This led to an interdisciplinary team—including Sure Start workers, health visitors, early years academics, artists and gallery staff – working together to co-design the gallery’s family space, The Lion’s Den. This space, a naturally lit ground-floor gallery, has become the physical manifestation of the gallery’s approach to working with young families. Its design supports access to art, health and a range of public services in a playful civic space.

The Lion’s Den uses art from the gallery’s collection to inspire everyday creativity and spark debate. Its public programme includes regular artist-led Creative Families sessions, during which The Lion’s Den functions as a creative facility, providing space and resources for people to make together. The space is also used by a range of local authority providers to deliver public health and education services and can be easily adapted to accommodate diverse needs. These include a regular Healthy Child Drop-In clinic, CAPs Baby Incredible Years courses – offering vulnerable parents support and advice from a specialist infant mental health visitor – creative sessions for autistic children and their families, weekly play sessions for migrant families, and Continued Professional Development (CPD) for early years practitioners and artists.

The programme is built on strong partnerships and a flexible approach that responds to the needs of the communities it serves. Collaboration with Sure Start, Manchester Metropolitan University (Education and Research Institute), Public Health and the Manchester Health Visiting Team has ensured the programme delivers impact, making it more fundable and sustainable.



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Lion’s Den is a naturally lit ground-floor gallery. It has become the physical manifestation of the gallery’s approach to working with young families. Its design supports access to art, health and a range of public services in a playful civic space.

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## Entry Points, Barriers and Motivations for Sustained Involvement

Manchester Art Gallery’s early years and families programme is equipped to respond to citywide challenges as they arise. For example, in 2021, a large cohort of families arrived in Manchester city centre as part of the Afghan Evacuee Programme. With no early years provision in the city centre, the MAG team extended its existing partnership with Sure Start and Public Health to create a family hub at the Gallery. This proved to be a vital and successful initiative, building on MAG’s strengths in creating inviting, accessible environments and delivering culturally sensitive early years expertise.

During this work, it became apparent that there was a gap in provision for families with young children seeking sanctuary from countries in conflict. In response, the Families of the World programme was developed with support from the Oglesby Charitable Trust.

Families of the World provides a welcoming space at Manchester Art Gallery for families with children under five who are seeking sanctuary in Manchester. The project is rooted in the spirit of welcome, focusing on refugee children and families, improving access to cultural and civic spaces, integrating trauma-informed approaches, and fostering cross-cultural learning and sharing – including through culturally appropriate food.

In partnership with Sure Start, Read Manchester/National Literacy Trust, Manchester Public Health, and the [City of Sanctuary](#), the project hosts weekly [Stay and Play sessions](#) for displaced families living in Home Office hotels and other temporary accommodation across Manchester. In November 2024, Families of the World won the prestigious Museums Association Best Museums Change Lives award. While the project places families at its heart, it also contributes to a broader vision of

Manchester as a city of welcome and equity. This work has led to MAG becoming an accredited Gallery of Sanctuary, feeding into Manchester City Council’s City of Sanctuary and UNICEF Child Friendly City bids, both key priorities for the city.

Thanks to MAG’s interdisciplinary approach, each partner is able to bring their own skills and expertise, combining arts, health and education to shape a new early years pedagogy through collective action. Additionally, partners use their networks and brokerage to connect with audiences, helping the gallery overcome any perception of remoteness or being ‘not for the likes of you.’

MAG’s experience demonstrates that working in partnership with other agencies, with a shared aim of improving outcomes for families and children, enhances access and participation.

Pathways to gallery sessions include referrals from health visitors and Sure Start outreach workers to the Healthy Child Clinic, developmental reviews, and parenting courses through the Children and Parents Service. Additionally, a number of key agencies in Manchester, including local refugee charities and funders, refer participants to the Families of the World programme.

The Gallery uses its digital platforms to advertise the public programme, which includes artist-led Creative Families sessions during school holidays and Baby Social, a

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weekly drop-in for babies and their adults. The welcoming comfortable space includes cushions, and drawing resources supported by volunteers. Families can sign out Explorer toolbelts from the MAG Visitor Team, take a free sketchbook and, at certain times, enjoy an ‘Art Trolley’ facilitated by the visitor team. The aim is to build relationships with families in the partnership programmes and encourage them to engage with the public programme and the wider cultural offer. By working with a core team of artists and freelancers and developing sustainable, long-term programmes rather than short-term projects, the Gallery has successfully created a crossover between targeted and public programmes. Volunteers, many with lived experience of displacement, work across both programmes, ensuring that a friendly, recognisable person is always available to connect with families. The Gallery also hosts the annual MCC Baby Week launch, a large event promoting the council’s Start Well strategy, which sees over 600 babies attend and connects families to the city-wide offer for under-5s.

The lens of child development can often exclude or marginalise many communities, particularly multilingual and diverse families. Developmental theories were originally created with white, middle-class, Western children in mind, leading to working-class and racialised families, as well as those with disabled or neurodivergent children, being viewed as inadequate or in need of fixing. Collaboration with the Manchester Metropolitan University Education and Research Institute, Children and Childhood Group has enabled MAG to deliver an experimental programme that is grounded in an ongoing process of research and practice. This partnership has allowed the MAG team and its partners to develop a broader understanding of the barriers to inclusion, ultimately leading to the creation of more accessible programmes. Practical barriers are also addressed by securing funding for food and transport for families with no access to public resources.





## Impact and Key Learnings

The Lion’s Den family space has engaged 25,000 family members who actively participate in its programme, a figure expected to grow annually. Another key achievement is the creation of a multi-lingual app, **HOME FOTW Places in Manchester**, which introduces newly arrived families to other museums and helps them explore the wider cultural offer in the city.

Through practice-based research, the Gallery is continually refining its approach to families, developing a more cohesive and responsive programme that addresses their diverse needs and interests. As a result, health partners have reported improved outcomes, noting better results and diagnoses in early years development assessments. Feedback from families seeking asylum has been particularly encouraging, with many stating that the Families of the World sessions are the highlight of their week. One participant shared:

*“Coming to the sessions makes me so happy and relaxed. It’s so good to get out of the hotel. There is nothing to do there for me and my baby. We just sit in a room doing nothing. It makes me sad, but when I come to Families of the World, I feel happy.”*

This response highlights the significant emotional and social impact of the programme, offering a much-needed space for families to connect, feel supported and engage in meaningful activities.

Retaining time for reflection is crucial, even though the pressure for constant delivery can sometimes feel relentless. On the other hand, working directly with such a wide variety of people – children, adults, and partners – proves both invigorating and rewarding. A real sense of community, care, and respect for each other’s work challenges has developed.

The gallery has also had to consider the level of supervision for staff, freelancers, and volunteers, ensuring that appropriate support is available when dealing with weighty life experiences and issues.

In 2023, Man Met (partnered with the Gallery and Sure Start) successfully secured an AHRC Exhibition Fund grant for a project Things of the Least: Lively Exhibition Making Through the Material Encounters of Under 3s. This innovative project explores new ways to design exhibitions for very young children, addressing the gap in experimental exhibition-making and curation for under 3s. It also aims to engage audiences who typically do not interact with galleries, libraries, archives and museums. The project is delivered in collaboration with Sure Start, Man Met’s early years researchers, filmmakers and artists, with families of under 3s attending the Platt Hall\* stay-and-play sessions and those living in temporary home office hotels serving as co-researchers.

An exhibition showcasing the project’s findings will open in October 2025 at The Lion’s Den, with legacy outcomes being developed for both the hotel and Platt Hall’s outdoor space. In parallel to the exhibition, a network of city council employees has been established to ensure families with under 3s, as well as those with diverse lived experiences, are included in the strategic planning and policymaking processes aimed at shaping Manchester into a more child-friendly city.

A key principle of the Gallery’s work is recognising that children are not just adults in waiting, nor are the youngest visitors simply being prepared to become future gallery visitors. Their value is in who they are now, as individuals in their own right, and in what we can learn from them.

*“Coming to the sessions makes me so happy and relaxed. It’s so good to get out of the hotel. There is nothing to do there for me and my baby. We just sit in a room doing nothing. It makes me sad, but when I come to Families of the World, I feel happy.”*  
(Parent feedback)

- Find Out More
- [MCC film about Families and Early Years work at MAG](#)
  - [Families of the World - Manchester Art Gallery](#)
  - [Things of the Least - Manchester Art Gallery](#)
  - [Family stay and play - Platt Hall Inbetween](#)

\*Platt Hall is another venue within the Manchester City Galleries portfolio. Whereas MAG provides a universal offer accessed by over 650,000 visitors a year, Platt Hall operates a hyper-local, invitation-only model with a focus on the needs of the diverse communities in Moss side, Longsight, Rusholme and Fallowfield.







# Connecting Remote Communities Through Climate Action: PK Porthcurno's Planet PK Champions and Forest Friends

PK Porthcurno – Museum of Global Communications  
South West | Rural Museum | 7-12 year olds

PK Porthcurno is a rural museum dedicated to exploring the story of how the world connects. From the first undersea telegraph cable landing in 1870, to the rise of fibre optics that are used for almost all global communications, the museum celebrates the pioneering achievements that have shaped the modern world. Situated in a once-remote Cornish valley, PK Porthcurno reveals how this seemingly quiet place became the centre of worldwide communication and remains integral to global connectivity today. Through its exhibitions, collections and learning programmes, the museum invites visitors to consider not just the past and present of communications but also possibilities for the future.

At the heart of PK Porthcurno's mission is the commitment to enabling people to explore the connected world. The museum provides opportunities for individuals to understand the history, science, and technology behind global communications and reflect on what this means in their own lives. By increasing public access to its collections and the rich history they represent, PK

Porthcurno aims to engage diverse audiences in meaningful ways.

Learning and Engagement is a key focus of the museum's work, ensuring that people of all ages and backgrounds can connect with the stories it tells. From families and lifelong learners to schools, colleges and community groups, PK Porthcurno welcomes a broad range of visitors. Special interest groups and stakeholders also find value in the museum's collections, exhibitions, and learning programmes, which provide insight into the evolution of communication technologies.

PK Porthcurno has strong informal and formal learning programmes. The formal learning programme supports students and educators across all levels, from Key Stage 1 through to postgraduate research, spanning multiple disciplines. Home education groups also benefit from tailored resources and workshops designed to enhance their learning experience. The informal learning programme offers opportunities for families, social visitors, and local community groups to engage with the



*museum's themes in interactive and accessible ways. From intellectual exploration to hands-on activities, these programmes stimulate curiosity and deepen understanding of global communications.*

*Planet PK Champions is PK Porthcurno's environmental club, designed to inspire children aged 7-12 to understand and engage with climate change while empowering them to become advocates for positive action. By developing connections with local families – many of whom live in a recognised area of rural deprivation – the club*

*Planet PK Champions is PK Porthcurno's environmental club, designed to inspire children aged 7-12 to understand and engage with climate change while empowering them to become advocates for positive action.*

*strengthens community ties and encourages ongoing engagement with the museum. As part of the wider Planet PK initiative, the club plays a crucial role in embedding environmental values into the museum's future programming, reinforcing its commitment to sustainability and education.*

*Building on the success of Planet PK Champions, PK Porthcurno introduced Forest Friends in September 2024. This forest school-inspired sensory workshop programme is designed for children under*

*5 and their grown-ups where stories come to life in a magical outdoor setting. These all-weather, outdoor sessions are inspired by favourite children's stories and seasonal themes exploring the creative and practical use of tools and natural materials. Forest Friends has become very popular with local families, with all sessions fully booked.*

**Entry Points, Barriers and Motivations for Sustained Involvement**

Young participants often discover the programme through school visits, outreach projects with local schools and local events and festivals. Others encounter it during family visits or by taking part in the museum's holiday and weekend workshops. By providing multiple entry points, Planet PK Champions ensures accessibility for a diverse audience, fostering curiosity and a deeper understanding of sustainability and global connections from an early age.

PK Porthcurno's remote rural location



presents challenges for access, with limited public transport and local road infrastructure making travel difficult. The cost of transport for schools and community groups can also be prohibitive. To address this, the museum actively applies for funding to support outreach initiatives, including the Mobile Telegraph Unit 'Poppy' – a vintage red bus that brings PK Porthcurno's learning experiences to schools, colleges, and events, making engagement more accessible. The museum also considers the needs of local audiences when planning activities. Porthcurno beach attracts high visitor numbers during peak holiday seasons, which can deter local families. Planet PK Champions sessions are scheduled in the mornings at the beginning of the school holidays to avoid the traffic congestion during the high tourist season.

To create a welcoming atmosphere, participants are greeted by session leaders into the museum and its sub-tropical

gardens, helping them feel comfortable in these spaces. Engagement is further encouraged through the Planet PK Champions membership pack, which includes a passport where children collect animal footprint stamps for each session attended. This incentive fosters a sense of achievement and motivates ongoing participation.

Session details are available on the museum's website, school newsletters, posters, and social media, as well as through school and community websites, repeat visits, and word of mouth at local events.

At the club, young people can connect with others who share similar interests. It's a safe, friendly place where they can build relationships with session leaders and fellow participants.

Each session covers a new topic, offering fresh and exciting content. Attendees can take part in hands-on activities that help them learn new skills.





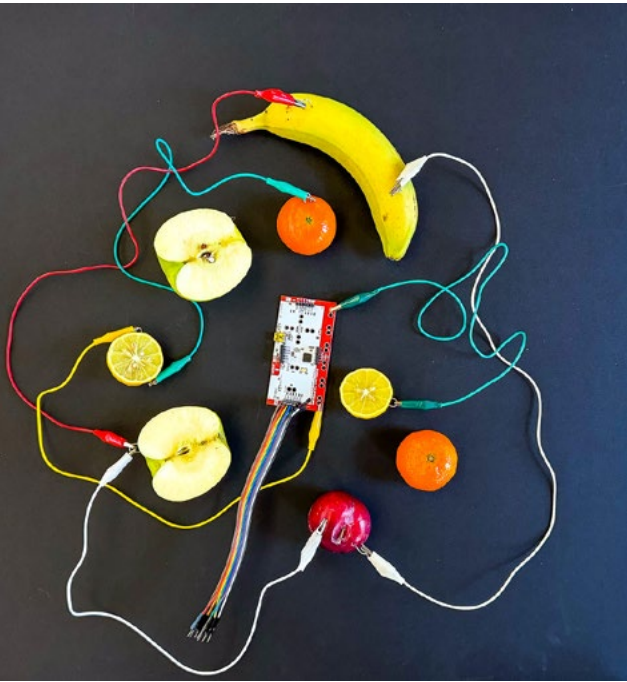
## Impact and Key Learnings

One notable behavioural change observed is that children have become more confident when interacting with adults during the sessions. Additionally, parents have started to engage more in the activities alongside their children, fostering a greater sense of involvement and community.

In terms of personal development, motor skills have improved significantly through the hands-on nature of the sessions, as children actively participate in activities that challenge their coordination and dexterity.

When it comes to learning and creativity, participants particularly enjoy the opportunity to get messy and engage in creative tasks. For example, during a session on seed bombs, one child expressed that this was something completely new to them, highlighting the programme’s ability to introduce fresh and exciting concepts.

The programme has also produced tangible outputs. Home resources, including takeaway paper-based materials, are available for free download on the museum’s website, offering families the chance to continue their learning at home. Furthermore, the programme has had a positive environmental impact through co-created projects. Last spring, plants and vegetables were planted in the museum’s gardens as part of a gardening session, and



the group followed their growth over time. A bug hotel, created during a session, has now become a permanent feature of the gardens, further enhancing the environmental engagement of the programme.

The programme saw high levels of engagement from all attendees, which was a positive outcome. A new approach was also introduced, with the engagement team working together to co-lead sessions. Both a Science and an Arts specialist planned and delivered the activities collaboratively, which proved to be an effective way of combining different expertise. The members’ packs, which were provided to participants, were especially well received and added value to the sessions.

There were some challenges around attendance, however, there has been continuous positive feedback and regular attendance from some young people.

Another challenge was the differences in in planning styles between the Science and Arts facilitators, which created some difficulties in session planning. To address this, the sessions have been made open to a wider age range, aiming to make the offer more inclusive.

Looking ahead, the plan is to incorporate content from the Planet PK programme into the museum’s main offer. This will help staff make the most of the time spent preparing the sessions and allow for the reuse of resources created. Additionally, more themed sessions are being planned to encourage regular attendance, such as a spring session on planting potatoes, which will provide an opportunity for the group to observe their growth over time.

Find Out More

[About the PK Champions programme](#)  
[PK Porthcurno Forest Friends programme](#)





# Creating Inclusive Learning with Young People

## Young V&A

London | National Museum | 11-14 year olds

**Y**oung V&A is a dynamic museum designed to spark creativity, offering a space where children and young people aged 0-14 can imagine, play and design. With a collection of over 2,000 toys, characters, objects and artworks from around the world and throughout history, the museum encourages young visitors to explore and express their creativity. Rooted in its local community with 150-year heritage as East London's first museum, Young V&A works to energise young creators everywhere, as well as empower everyone to promote creativity for the next generation and support the teaching of art and design education for all.

The museum is situated in Tower Hamlets – the most densely populated part of the UK – with one of the youngest populations in the country and with the highest level of child poverty in the UK.

This free museum has welcomed over a million visitors since opening as Young V&A in July 2023. In 2024, it was named the Art Fund Museum of the Year and Kids in Museums' most Family Friendly Museum of the Year.

Young V&A was developed collaboratively with and for children and young people aged 0 – 14. Since 2020, collaboration with 11-14 year olds has helped the museum understand the

needs and perspectives of children and young people, and to build collaboratively on their ideas.

This provision was initially shaped and delivered in collaboration with local youth providers Spotlight and Leaders in Community, and through a partner project with University College London (UCL). Young V&A has also worked with grass roots community organisations such as Mile End Community Project, and with local secondary schools, to engage young people after school and during school holidays.

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*Since 2020, collaboration with 11-14 year olds has helped the museum understand the needs and perspectives of the young, and to build collaboratively on their ideas.*

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Knowledge has been pooled with peers working in the youth sector who face similar challenges recruiting, engaging and retaining 11-14 year olds, and with creative professionals who can share skills, support in nurturing a spaces of playful and professional creativity and lead the production of a sophisticated and tangible outcome (such as a film).





*Most informal learning visits to Young V&A are with children aged 0-5 or 5-11 years. In Young V&A's opening year (2023-4), 90% of visits were from family groups. Visits with children over 6 are concentrated during school holidays and at weekends, whilst family visitors bring more children under 5 during the school term. Around 40% of visitors are 'regulars' who have visited more than once in the last year and a third of visitors are from local boroughs in East London.*

*The wider learning programme at Young V&A engages 80,000 learners per year. The programme includes free and ticketed activity for schools, intergenerational family groups and specialist provision for children under 5. Provision for special education needs and disabilities has expanded in 2024 through collaboration with targeted audiences and stakeholders. Young V&A also offers a regular creative play programme for children and families after school and at weekends, building a local following of regular participants.*

**Entry Points, Barriers and Motivations for Sustained Involvement**

Typical entry points for young people engaging with Young V&A include visiting as part of intergenerational family groups, participating in targeted youth programmes, and engaging through collaborations with community-based youth organisations. Among these, targeted youth programmes have proven to be the most impactful in fostering deeper engagement. Participation monitoring indicates that 7-11-year-olds and 16-24-year-olds are more likely to take part in learning activities as part of a family group, whereas 11-14-year-olds are less represented in this

form of engagement. This highlights the need for tailored approaches to effectively reach and involve different age groups. 11-14s have been identified as an underserved age range in museum provision generally. Typically, museums offer family programmes for children under 11, and youth programmes for young people over 14 or 16 years. The 11-14 age range was referred to as 'the wasted years' in a Department for Education report in 2015, and there is compelling evidence about lack of access to creative education in secondary schools. By targeting 11-14 year olds, Young V&A aims to sustain the positive engagements that take place with younger children, and support the growth of skills and positive mindsets for better lifelong engagement in museums and creative learning. In 2023, Young V&A's opening year, 11-14 year olds made up just 2% of the total visitor numbers. In the same period, this age range represented just 3% of overall learners participating in activity during the museum's opening year. This has risen to more than 6% of overall learners in the current year 2024-5.

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Access for young people aged 11-14 has been facilitated through partnerships with local youth organisations that recruit participants and co-lead activities alongside Young V&A, ensuring the programmes are relevant and engaging. Collaborations with local schools have also played a key role, with schools helping to recruit young people for museum-led activities and providing initial support to encourage independent participation over time. Additionally, working with networks that support underserved young people who do not typically engage in creative activities has helped to broaden access and create new opportunities for creative expression. Engagement is shaped through consultation and collaboration with youth partners and young people. Projects are facilitated to enable co-creation with professional designers and artists. "The kids really

*enjoyed making objects, using the knowledge and help provided by the designers."* (National Play Day feedback). Barriers to participation have been identified through participant surveys, observations and reflective conversations with parents, carers, youth workers, and young people themselves. One challenge is the varying levels of independence amongst this age group. While some young people are confident travelling alone, others rely on carers who may still be looking for structured, wrap-around support. Access to information is another key issue, as creative opportunities ideally need to reach both young people and their carers. However, there are few shared spaces where both actively look for opportunities, and young people in this age range are typically too young to be directly targeted through social media.





## Impact and Key Learnings

11 – 14 years old participants are typically more diverse than the museum’s general visitors, with over a third stating that they had never met or worked with a creative professional before.

Collaborative projects have led to tangible outcomes, from new products for the Young V&A Shop to films, activity resources and event activities designed for other teens.

These contributions have made young people more visible in the museum space, both as creators and active participants.

Surveys and evaluations highlight that the main motivation for 11-14-year-olds to take part in these programmes is to have fun, while generating new ideas is the most highly rated creative skill they develop.

Time-limited projects with clear goals have been more effective than ongoing programmes, both in outreach within community youth settings and in activities delivered at the museum. Formats that have worked particularly well include term-long after-school projects and intensive holiday programmes running over several days or a week.

As the programme develops, young people will continue to shape its direction. Co-creation with this age group has proven to be deeply rewarding, not only for participants but also for the museum, influencing its approach and enhancing the experience for general visitors. Future work will focus on expanding progression and leadership opportunities to ensure continued engagement and meaningful participation.

### Find Out More

[Young Ambassadors: Blog: RE-Invent Digital Pilot: Co-Creating with Young People | UCL East - UCL - University College London](#)

[Young V&A Collective: Becoming the Young V&A Collective Design Club](#)

[V&A Evaluation Methodology](#)



*“The kids really enjoyed making objects, using the knowledge and help provided by the designers.”*  
*(NationalPlay Day feedback)*







## The THC Youth Group: Fostering Skills, Creativity and Community for Young People

### Ancient House Museum of Thetford Life

East of England | Local Authority Museum | Young People (11 – 25 year olds)

**A**ncient House is a small community museum in the heart of Thetford, Norfolk. Housed in a Tudor merchant's home dating back to the 1490s, the museum tells the story of Thetford and the surrounding Brecks. Founded by Prince Frederick Duleep Singh, son of the last Sikh Maharajah of Punjab, Ancient House is part of Norfolk Museums Service.

The THC Youth Group (formally Teenage History Club) welcomes young people aged 11 to 25, meeting every Friday afternoon during term time. While most participants are from the local area, some travel up to an hour to attend. THC Youth Group was created in 2010 in response to four teenagers who had been part of the museum's Junior History Club and wanted to continue their involvement. Recognising the importance of sustained engagement, the museum committed to providing opportunities for older participants. The group received support as part of the five year Kick the Dust programme (NLHF) in 2016, which helped shape and expand its activities.

Since then, the group has evolved into a connected community of young people who actively engage with the museum. The THC often seeks to explore challenging or contested histories.

Past projects have included creating a First World War Murder Mystery and developing an exhibition exploring LGBTQ+ history.

As a community museum, Ancient House is committed to nurturing the enthusiasm and interests of local people. The success of the THC Youth Group highlights the value of dedicated youth engagement, reinforcing the museum's role as a welcoming and inspiring space for young people to connect with history, grow confidence and skills and explore their creativity.

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**THC Youth Group was created in 2010 in response to four teenagers who had been part of the museum's Junior History Club and wanted a space to continue their involvement.**

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## Entry Points, Barriers and Motivations for Sustained Involvement

About 50% of the group’s members come from the Junior History Club (6 – 11 year olds), providing a core of young people who have been engaged with the museum over several years. This long-term involvement has allowed them to develop a strong understanding of museology, enabling them to offer peer-to-peer support for new members. Recruitment is deliberately not through schools, as the young people value the club as a separate opportunity for learning outside formal education. The majority of new members hear about the group through museum events and social media.

The THC Youth Group frequently contributes to, and helps, plan elements of the museum’s schools and informal learning programmes. Additionally, members of the Junior History Club often progress to join the THC Youth Group as they grow older, creating a natural progression for continued engagement.

*“I know that the staff trust me to do difficult things well. This gives me confidence that I can do difficult things. Then it turns out I can.” (Participant feedback)*

The THC Youth Group has attracted a high number of neurodiverse young people, many of whom face challenges in traditional school settings. As a result, the museum has adapted its approach to ensure that sessions are inclusive, responsive and engaging for a wide range of needs. However, delivering high-quality sessions requires significant

preparation time and securing funding for staff support, which remains a challenge. Additionally, as a small museum, Ancient House faces capacity constraints. With only one youth group running, spaces are limited, and there is a growing waiting list of young people eager to participate.

The programme is built on the principles of honesty and collaboration. The museum’s learning officer creates a mutually supportive environment where young people are encouraged to openly share their needs. They are given the opportunity to guide the group’s activities within set parameters, with transparent communication about funding and practical constraints. As a result, both staff and young people collaborate as a team to explore new ideas, topics and activities: *“I know that the staff trust me to do difficult things well. This gives me confidence that I can do difficult things. Then it turns out I can.” (participant feedback)*

Overcoming barriers to participation has been a key focus for the THC Youth Group. Ancient House charges an admission fee, which can be a barrier, but the THC Youth Group offers free provision, ensuring members have a free access to the museum. Many of the young people involved experience anxiety, making it crucial that the Group provides a different kind of learning experience to school. This environment allows them to engage in a way that feels more comfortable and inclusive: *“I have anxiety and often prefer to stay in my comfort zone. In THC it seems like my comfort zone grows and I find I have pushed myself to do new things without even realising it.” (participant feedback)*

Members are also motivated by a shared interest in history and the opportunity to engage with peers who have similar passions. The combination of free access and a welcoming informal space helps to overcome both financial and social barriers, while fostering a sense of belonging and personal development: *“I don’t want to work in history but THC isn’t about that. It is about new friends, new experiences, and new skills. The group is supportive so I can feel safe to try something new.” (participant feedback)*

*“I have anxiety and often prefer to stay in my comfort zone. In THC it seems like my comfort zone grows and I find I have pushed myself to do new things without even realising it.” (Participant feedback)*





Impact and Key Learnings

Since the THC Youth Group was founded in 2010, it has welcomed 33 young people, with 16 currently engaged in the programme. On average, participants remain involved with the Group for five years, demonstrating the long-term appeal of the club . The programme has maintained a high level of satisfaction, with a 96% retention rate, as only two participants have chosen not to continue after joining.

The THC Youth Group has made a significant impact on both the personal development and creative growth of its members. Young people involved in the programme have arranged a diverse range of public events, including escape rooms, tours, murder mysteries, knapping workshops, stand-up comedy, films, animations, soundscapes, and curated exhibitions. These activities have provided valuable opportunities for skill development and creative expression.

*“I’ve gained so much from being a member at THC: I’ve learnt so much about various aspects and periods of history, worked on how to effectively share this knowledge with the public through curation, event organisation and public speaking, learnt how to work as part of a tight-knit team and developed so much as a person in general. I can’t begin to imagine how different I’d be if I hadn’t made that initial decision to join history club... I’m so grateful for the second home that Ancient House has become for me.” (participant feedback)*

Members have gained confidence, built resilience, and embraced the chance to try new things: *“I never thought I’d be able to do it [working in character] but we planned it together. I was nervous and then then next thing I knew it was nearly over and it was brilliant.” (participant feedback)*

Young people have developed a wide array of skills, including project management, public speaking, filmmaking, character work, curating, text writing, research, craft skills, health and safety risk assessment writing, and critical thinking. Some have also spoken at national and international conferences, showcasing their experience and expertise gained as a result of the programme.

The group has also built connections beyond the local community, including a partnership with the Hoshikuso Obsidian Museum in Nagawa, Japan. This collaboration provided two cohorts of young people with the opportunity to take part in a cultural exchange, expanding their knowledge and understanding of the wider world.

As a result of the programme’s success, several young people have progressed to further opportunities. Three members have gained employment in museums, eight have moved on to university, two have started their own businesses, and one has secured a museum traineeship.

One of the key lessons learned from the THC Youth Group is the importance of providing opportunities for sustained engagement – many members have been engaging with the museum since they were six years old. One participant began attending as a baby through the Mini Museum Club

*On average, participants remain involved with the Group for five years.*

and has progressed through the Junior History Club to the THC Youth Group. This long-term engagement has fostered a deep connection with the museum. A key factor in the programme’s success is the flexibility and adaptability of both staff and young people. By allowing young people to lead the way, the museum embraces co-learning and collaboration, which has proven to be a powerful approach. However, the museum also faced challenges, particularly around capacity and ensuring sufficient staff time for preparation. Despite these challenges, the programme will continue to evolve, with upcoming projects focused on themes of Empire and campaigning. Moving forward, Ancient House is committed to sustaining its youth engagement initiatives and exploring new ways for young people to take a lead and collaborate.

*I can’t begin to imagine how different I’d be if I hadn’t made that initial decision to join history club... I’m so grateful for the second home that Ancient House has become for me.” (Participant feedback)*

Find Out More

- [Queering the Vikings \(Produced as part of the Kick the Dust Programme\)](#)
- [How to Queer Your Collection](#)
- [THC’s Z List Dead List Stand Up Comedy](#)
- [THC’s I Heart Toys and Games Animation](#)







# Inspiring Futures: How Derby Museums Supports Young People through STEAM and Creative Learning

## Derby Museums

Midlands | Independent | Young People (13 – 16 year olds)

**D**erby Museums comprises three sites, all of which are free entry – Museum of Making, Derby Museum and Art Gallery and Pickford's House. The museum service plays a vital role in the cultural and community life of the East Midlands, attracting over 205,000 visitors annually (2023/2024). The Museum of Making, widely regarded as the site of the world's first factory, is the southernmost part of the Derwent Valley Mills UNESCO World Heritage Site, linking the heritage of the city and county. Derby Museum and Art Gallery holds the finest collection of works by Joseph Wright of Derby, the renowned 18th-century Enlightenment artist. This collection is 'Designated' by Arts Council England, recognising its national significance. The museums also house internationally significant collections spanning natural history, archaeology, and industrial history.

As a city, Derby faces significant socio-economic challenges, with 24.6% of children living in poverty and ranking among the six most challenged cities in England for social mobility. In this context, Derby Museums plays a crucial role in widening access to culture, fostering creativity and

providing opportunities for learning and participation. Through its sites, collections and programmes, the museum encourages appreciation of the world, city and homes, contextualising global issues through local stories. Collaboration and co-production are embedded in all

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**In 2022–2023, 3,501 children and young people took part in these activities, highlighting the programme's reach and impact.**

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activities, ensuring the museum remains a vital resource for its communities.

Derby Museums' informal learning programme provides diverse engagement opportunities for audiences of all ages. From Early Years activities and targeted holiday programmes to Craft & Making sessions for young people aged 13–16, the programme offers a wide range of free activities inspired by the museum's collections. Family-friendly sessions and skills-based learning for children



*aged 8 and above make the museum more accessible and welcoming to participants. In 2022–2023, 3,501 children and young people took part in these activities, highlighting the programme’s reach and impact.*

*Derby Museums champions STEAM learning which integrates Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics to foster creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving skills through hands-on, project-based activities and is sponsored by Rolls-Royce.*

*Club members of the Museum of Making Craft & Making Saturday Club are inspired by the makers of the past, connect with the makers of today to become makers of the future. With a focus on ceramics, textiles or wood, the 15-week project introduces traditional and innovative applications of these materials to make objects that matter*



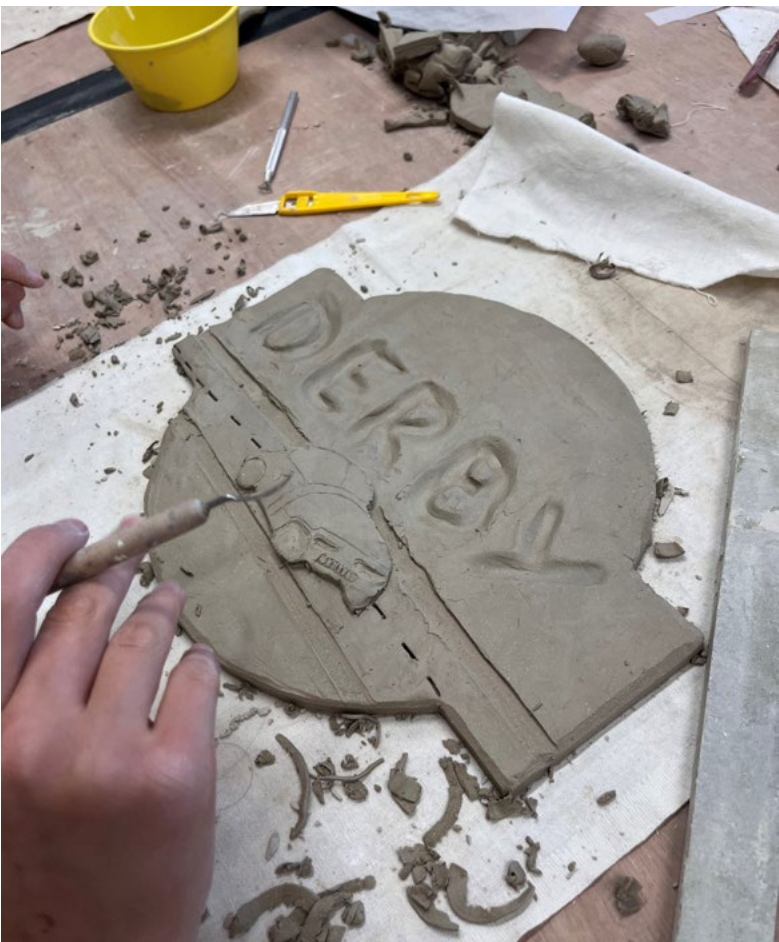
*to young people and to society. It also equips participants with hands-on craft and making skills while connecting them to industry professionals, exhibition opportunities and creative career pathways. Club members have access to the Museum of Making Studios and Workshop facilities and learn from talented local makers and staff at Derby Museums.*

*Collaboration with universities and community partners ensures a pipeline of talent and access for underrepresented groups. The Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme, targeted at families eligible for free school meals, integrates Derby Museums’ collections and STEAM learning to foster creativity and problem-solving skills. Additionally, volunteering opportunities for college aged students improve building on their employability, creativity and social skills.*

## Entry Points, Barriers and Motivations for Sustained Involvement

**D**ue to ongoing cuts to core funding, Derby Museums faces an over-reliance on project-based funding to deliver everyday learning activities. Coupled with a decrease in secondary school visits, the museum recognised the need to consider new ways of engaging young people aged 11+ with its collections and making. The goal was to create opportunities that would attract young people independently and inspire curiosity about culture, heritage and making. To engage with young people, their parents, carers and schools, Derby Museums has used different platforms, including school mailing lists to share information about career and extracurricular opportunities, as well as offering short assemblies and talks to targeted groups within schools. Additionally, opportunities are shared across Derby Museums’ social media channels to reach a broader audience. The museum also engages with local organisations and statutory services that work with young people, providing them with information about available activities. Furthermore, information about the programme is shared through networks dedicated to children and young people, ensuring a wider reach. To extend its impact, Derby Museums collaborates with Derby Cultural Education Partners (DCEP), who help disseminate the programme to local families.

An external business review highlighted that, while Derby Museums has been successful, there is a need to drive more sustainable income generation. The review recommended that the museum develops its sponsored and partnership programmes, with a focus on attracting the student population. The informal learning projects align with these recommendations, suggesting the inclusion of showcases for young people and industry as part of an annual calendar, along with the development of after-school programmes.



Evidence from Derby Museums’ Social Return On Investment report confirms that an inclusive and participatory approach positively impacts social capital, reduces inequalities in cultural capital and promotes skills development. Additionally, the museum has taken into consideration how its activities can contribute to creative, practical and social skills for the young people involved.

The cost of these activities is covered through project funding and sponsorship, enabling the museum to offer free programmes for children and young people, whether they attend independently or as part of school holiday programmes. In the summer of 2024, Derby Museums faced reduced attendance at holiday activities, a trend also observed at other cultural venues in the city. However, community hubs, youth clubs and schools maintained consistent attendance. Moving forward, the museum plans to partner with coordinators of the



Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme to collaborate with organisations catering to larger cohorts in local communities. This partnership will help position the museum as a destination for visits, adding value to existing programmes or providing outreach activities in those communities. The museum is also reviewing its outreach offer, including consolidating a collection of handling objects to enhance its outreach activities.

The museum works to address the financial, social, geographic and accessibility barriers by offering free activities, utilising local networks to promote participation and ensuring that activities are accessible to all. The museum is also mindful of the motivations that drive young people to join and continue participating. For older young people, having more agency in choosing their interests is key. Derby Museums encourages social engagement during sessions, promotes access, and involves peer role models alongside core staff and visiting artists/makers to help maintain interest and support participation.

In 2017, Derby Museums commissioned a report by Bluegrass that focused on the attitudes of non-users in areas of the city with low participation. The findings of the report revealed barriers such as perceptions that “going to museums is not something people like us do,” concerns that museum



*“I want to express my appreciation for the care and attention your team showed in taking care of the children. It was evident that their safety and wellbeing were a top priority, and as a parent, that means the world to me.”*  
(Parent feedback)

visits would be “too much like school,” and that “children would be bored” or “don’t have the time.” These findings have influenced the museum’s programming, such as the World Culture project, recruitment of staff to the Museum of Making (MoM) and a focus on addressing areas of need within the learning programme. While there have been some improvements, the barriers remain largely societal and systemic, posing challenges for any single organisation to address in isolation.

### Impact and Key Learnings

Derby Museums has seen a significant increase in engagement among young people aged 12–16 in informal activities, growing from 241 in 2021/22 to 476 in 2024/25, highlighting increasing participation and interest in the museum’s programmes.

In 2023/24, 100% of the Saturday Club participants (20 young people) reported gaining a better understanding of job roles and career possibilities. During a masterclass with fashion manufacturer John Smedley, the Sustainability Director shared their vision for becoming a Carbon Neutral textile manufacturer, 81% of participants learned something new.

*Additionally, 88% gained a better understanding of how their newly acquired skills could be*

*transferred into the future world of work.* Consistent engagement was also evident, with 85% of participants attending all sessions over the 16-week programme. *“I really enjoyed these sessions. The course was unique and gave me opportunities I wouldn’t get anywhere else.”*(Club member)

Participants were able to exhibit their work at an exhibition in London and their work has been displayed on gallery at the Museum of Making. *“It was really interesting to learn how the company tries to be sustainable and to be able to make something from scraps”* Club member, on Masterclass with John Smedley.

The Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme has had a positive impact on families, providing creative and cultural experiences for children who may otherwise face barriers to participation. Parents have expressed their appreciation for the programme: *“I want to express my appreciation for the care and attention your team showed in taking care of the children. It was evident that their safety and wellbeing were a top priority, and as a parent, that means the world to me.”*

With a well-established Cultural Education Partnership (DCEP), Derby Museums collaborates to reach a broader audience, planning city-wide programmes that complement each other. This creates a diverse range of options for young people, with organisations working together to promote, refer, and celebrate their collective efforts.

In its projects, Derby Museums actively listens to the young people and their parents or carers, encouraging regular feedback to enhance the programmes.

The appointment of a Director of Culture Derby is expected to drive further coordination of activities across cultural venues, benefiting families and young people.

Derby Museums Learning programme remains central to the organisation’s activities. It has built a strong reputation for its STEAM learning approach, addressing the needs of both young people and local employers. Industry partners such as Rolls Royce, IMI, and Vaillant provide crucial

financial support for the programme. However, the external environment has been particularly challenging for civic museums. Years of budget cuts, the effects of COVID-19, the high cost of living, and a disastrous flood – during which the Museum of Making was closed for four months – have placed considerable pressure on the organisation.

Despite these obstacles, Derby Museums plans to strengthen its evaluation framework, ensuring consistency across

*“I really enjoyed these sessions. The course was unique and gave me opportunities I wouldn’t get anywhere else.”*

all learning programmes, and aligning with its core values and principles for STEAM learning. The museum has a solid baseline of relevant data, and through its non-user research and Social Return on Investment (SROI) studies, it understands the challenges faced and knows which approaches work.

### Find Out More

[Derby Museums’ Social Return on Investment Report](#)  
[Museum of Making Saturday Art Club](#)  
[Institute of STEAM](#)





## Expanding Access: Literacy Loans for Home-Educated Families at Preston Park Museum

### Preston Park Museum

North East | Museum Partnership | Home-Ed Children

Situated near the River Tees, Preston Hall, a former Georgian residence, once home to local industrial magnate Robert Ropner, houses a vast collection of artefacts that tell the story of Stockton-On-Tees. Preston Park Museum is part of Tees Valley Museums (TVM), a group of seven museums across five local authorities.

Preston Park identified working with home-educated families as a key objective, as there has not been a regular offer to date. This group is a priority due to the high number of young people being educated outside of formal school settings.

One such initiative, Literacy Loans, has already been making an impact in schools by offering students the unique opportunity to explore real museum objects while working alongside a published writer. This innovative programme brings museum objects into learning spaces, inspiring students to engage with history through creative writing. Participants borrow a real museum object and explore its story in an online session with an Education Officer, before taking part in three interactive workshops led by a professional writer.

With additional online resources packed with classroom activity ideas, Literacy Loans provides a flexible and engaging way for students to connect with heritage, enhance their literacy skills and develop creativity under the guidance of an experienced writer.

Recognising the potential to extend this enriching experience beyond the classroom, Tees Valley Museums sought to adapt the Literacy Loans model to better serve home-educated families. These families, which include a high number of neurodiverse learners, often face barriers to traditional education opportunities.

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*Literacy Loans provides a flexible and engaging way for students to connect with heritage, enhance their literacy skills and develop creativity under the guidance of an experienced writer.*

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*By developing a more flexible and sustainable museum learning experience, TVM aimed to provide meaningful engagement that combines in-person museum visits with virtual interactions, allowing home-educated children to explore, discover and create in ways that suit their individual learning styles.*

*This adaptation not only broadens access to museum resources but also fosters a deeper connection between home-educated families and their local heritage. Through storytelling, object handling and expert guidance, young learners are empowered to engage with history in a way that is interactive, inclusive and inspiring.*

**Entry Points, Barriers and Motivations for Sustained Involvement**

A visitor survey revealed that home-educated families were regular visitors to museums, often attending family events during school holidays or visiting during term time through general admission. These families recognised the educational value of museums and expressed a strong interest in further engagement. However, barriers to participation were identified, particularly related to the individual needs of many children, most of whom were neurodivergent. Families also expressed a desire for more opportunities that catered for diverse age ranges, enabling siblings and parents to learn together.

The target audience for this programme is home-educated families, especially those with neurodivergent children. Their typical entry points into museum engagement include family events, general admission, and a growing interest in digital resources and online learning experiences. These families seek museum programming that supports their children’s individual learning needs while fostering shared experiences for the



whole family. For the Literacy Loans project, Preston Park Museum recruited participants from those who had completed the museum survey, reaching out to existing contacts and established groups within the community. The programme was designed to address the specific needs of these families, particularly those with children additional needs, who face challenges engaging in larger group settings. Families emphasised the need for smaller, more tailored group sizes, “warm-up” activities, and flexible participation, allowing anxious children time to contribute. Suggestions for using fidget toys to help children stay focused were also made. Additionally, parents requested short, engaging activities that don’t rely too heavily on writing, particularly for children with low concentration levels. For Preston Park Museum, this initiative became a priority as it recognised a gap in providing accessible, regular programming for home-educated families, who are often underserved by traditional school-oriented museum activities. The museum is committed to building sustained, meaningful relationships with this group and expanding its audience while embracing the principles of informal, child-led learning.

*“I want to express my appreciation for the care and attention your team showed in taking care of the children. It was evident that their safety and wellbeing were a top priority, and as a parent, that means the world to me.”*

To tackle the challenges identified in the survey and provide an engaging and accessible experience for home-educated families, Preston Park Museum adapted the Literacy Loans programme to suit the unique needs of this group. Recognising the importance of a creative, flexible approach, the museum collaborated with Richard O’Neill, a writer and storyteller from a traveller family, who brought valuable insights into the intricacies of home-education. By incorporating the findings from the survey, Richard worked to tailor the programme, ensuring it met the diverse needs of both children and parents. The programme began with a museum visit where children had the opportunity to engage with a Victorian Peg Doll, linking it to the role of servants at Preston Hall and exploring how toys have evolved over time. This hands-on, immersive experience provided a strong connection to history, offering families a deeper understanding of toys and the museum’s heritage. Following the visit, weekly calls from the Preston Park team and Richard O’Neill facilitated further creative exploration. Children and families were encouraged to develop their storytelling skills through character development, scene-setting, and narrative-building. The use of diverse materials – such as Lego, recycled items, and digital tools – allowed children to engage in creative expression in ways that suited their individual learning styles.

The final session brought families back to Preston Park to share their work, with some creating written stories, while others brought their narratives to life through animations or filmed presentations. This final showcase not only celebrated the creativity of the families but also provided a sense of achievement and connection to the museum. By integrating interactive elements, flexible delivery methods, and tailored support, the programme successfully engaged young audiences, fostering both learning and creativity in a way that resonated with home-educated families. Following each session, families were given creative tasks to complete, often collaborating together. Older children worked independently, while some adults served as role models, offering guidance and support. The open-ended nature of the activities allowed for a flexible approach, catering to a variety of learning styles and interests across different age groups. For families unable to attend the online sessions, a short weekly “catch-up” video was created to ensure they could stay engaged. Each session began with a positive and supportive environment, where families shared their creative work from the previous week, fostering a sense of achievement and community. This approach helped maintain momentum and ensured that all participants felt included and valued throughout the programme.





## Impact and Key Learnings

The programme significantly boosted participants’ confidence, with parents particularly valuing the variety of activities that catered to different learning styles. “The sessions gave a focus for writing, something that my daughter often avoids. She has enjoyed being able to use different media alongside written and craft.” (Parent feedback)

The collaboration with a published writer sparked a greater appreciation for literacy skills and their relevance for future careers. *“I’m particularly pleased with the impact it had on the children, who were able to express themselves creatively and gain a lot from the experience. From a museum’s perspective, this project has added a valuable new skill set in engaging with children and families who approach learning differently. It’s a model that could easily extend to children outside mainstream education who remain connected to schools.”* (Parent feedback)

The sessions proved to be popular, highlighting the demand for such opportunities for home-educated families. The use of the peg doll proved to be an effective tool for sparking creativity and story development, allowing families to personify the object and create characters and storylines.

The open-ended nature of the activities, which encouraged families to develop a character, setting, and event, provided a valuable opportunity for creativity, with virtual calls allowing for ongoing idea-sharing throughout the project. *“As a whole children were given plenty of opportunities to be creative throughout, and this worked well with the home educators group.”* (Parent feedback)

There are plans to replicate this model across other venues as part of the Literacy Loans initiative. In response to the demand for home educator events, ‘Museum Makers’ Has been created to provide further regular informal learning opportunities. across the region.

*“I’m particularly pleased with the impact it had on the children, who were able to express themselves creatively and gain a lot from the experience. From a museum’s perspective, this project has added a valuable new skill set in engaging with children and families who approach learning differently. It’s a model that could easily extend to children outside mainstream education who remain connected to schools.”*  
(Parent feedback)

### Find Out More

[Teas Valley Museums – Literacy Loans Project](#)







# We All Bloom Differently: Amplifying Voices of Care-Experienced Young People

## Dorset Museum and Art Gallery

South West | Independent Museum | Young People (14 – 18 year olds)

**D**orset Museum & Art Gallery's vision is to inspire and connect people with the rich natural and cultural heritage of Dorset. Through its world-class collection, the museum aims to inspire visitors to make personal connections and deepen their understanding of the region. The museum achieves this by employing storytelling, high-quality exhibitions, events, learning and research to engage visitors.

In 2021, the museum underwent a significant transformation following a major capital project supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and other donors. The redevelopment extended and modernised the museum, creating new permanent galleries, exhibition spaces, collection stores, a learning centre and a community space. This transformation has greatly enhanced the museum's ability to serve its audiences and support its mission.

The newly created community space has proven to be a valuable asset in engaging underserved groups and offering unique opportunities for co-creation. The space allows these groups to not only contribute to exhibitions, but also to develop their own programmes, engaging

with visitors and the broader community. This initiative plays a central role in the museum's strategy to create inclusive, participatory cultural experiences.

In 2023, Dorset Museum & Art Gallery was approached by Mandy Jarvis, Youth Voice Officer, to collaborate on a project for National Care Leavers Week 2024. Dorset Youth Voice is an initiative that coordinates activities on behalf of the council, aiming to ensure the voices of children and young people across Dorset are heard. The team works closely with young people, including those with care experience, to provide a platform for their views and needs.

Mandy, who supports children and young people who have been cared for by Dorset Council, was eager to create a project that would amplify the voices of care experienced young people. The aim was to provide an opportunity for young people leaving care to express their experiences and thoughts around identity, community, and what it means to have care experience. The project focused on exploring the role of the community as a 'community parent', as well as the emotional and personal impact of care, offering a platform for



these young people to be heard during National Care Leavers Week 2024.

This collaboration between Dorset Museum & Art Gallery and Youth Voice demonstrates a commitment to providing space for young people’s voices, particularly those with care experience, in meaningful and impactful ways.

Dorset Youth Voice is an initiative that coordinates activities on behalf of the council, aiming to ensure the voices of children and young people across Dorset are heard. The team works closely with young people, including those with care experience, to provide a platform for their views and needs.

Entry Points, Barriers and Motivations for Sustained Involvement

Coordinating a group of care-experienced young people to attend workshops at the Museum proved challenging, so a fluid, flexible approach was adopted. The young people were encouraged to visit independently at times that suited them. Museum staff were available to support these visits, but overall, the young people preferred to explore unguided. This allowed them to conduct their own research, connect with the collections, and gain inspiration for their own work.



Following a series of informal visits to the Museum, a “working group” of 8 care-experienced young people was formed, with different roles allocated. Submissions were invited through the Youth Voice Network, and an exhibition was curated, set to open during National Care Leavers Week in October 2024 at the Community Space at Dorset Museum & Art Gallery. The programming of activities during the exhibition was also led by the young people and included a series of round table discussions on what it means to be a care-experienced young person in Dorset. Initially, artists within the care-experienced network were slow to come forward; however, as word spread, a total of 15 artists submitted their works. The title “We All Bloom Differently” was chosen by the young people and became a theme throughout the project, reflecting their creative responses to what it means to be care-experienced. Visitors to the exhibition were also encouraged to respond to the question “What helps you bloom?” through creative interaction.

Key barriers to participation for care-experienced children and young people included a lack of prior engagement with Dorset Museum & Art Gallery, limited interest in museums, and potential feelings

“The exhibition outlines the importance of not using labels to define a care leaver. You are all incredible.”

of exclusion or discomfort in unfamiliar environments. Many had not visited the museum before and had little experience with cultural spaces. Geographic distance and the need to fit their individual schedules also posed challenges. Giving the young people ownership over their involvement – such as choosing roles in research, interpretation, design, and marketing – made the project more accessible and engaging. This involvement allowed them to shape the exhibition and created a sense of empowerment. Motivators for participation included the chance to have their voices heard and the opportunity to be part of a meaningful experience. The exhibition’s title, “We All Bloom Differently,” allowed the young people to explore their identity and experiences in a creative, supportive environment. Working alongside peers and the chance to showcase their work in a real museum were also significant drivers. By the end of the project, the young people felt a sense of pride and confidence in their contributions, and several have returned to the museum for independent visits, demonstrating the lasting impact of the experience.



Impact and Key Learnings

The exhibition in the museum community space received an overwhelmingly positive response, with over 60 members of the public engaging with the work on display. Visitors shared thoughtful feedback, highlighting the exhibition’s thought-provoking nature and the talent of the young people involved. One visitor commented, “An amazing exhibition, very thought provoking. A talented bunch of young people and a privilege to read your stories.” Another shared, “The exhibition outlines the importance of not using labels to define a care leaver. You are all incredible.” These comments reflect the successful outcome of the project in increasing public awareness and understanding of care-experienced young people.

The project has also provided the Youth Voice network with a valuable resource to extend the conversation about care-experienced young people within other community spaces and networks. It has opened opportunities for further dialogue and engagement, ensuring the voices of these young people continue to be heard.

The project required a total of 90 hours of development time, with 15 artists participating and 8 care-experienced young people forming the working group. The exhibition ran for two weeks, during which it received 60 visitor comments, demonstrating its impact and the meaningful connection made between the young people and the wider community.

Building trust with the care-experienced young people was crucial, and working closely with the Youth Voice Care Leaver Coordinator played a vital role in this process. The Museum and Youth Voice teams empowered the young people by allowing them to lead all aspects of the project, including the installation. While Museum staff and volunteers were available to support when needed, the young people took full ownership of the project, which proved to be an empowering experience for them.



The success of this initiative has inspired Dorset Museum & Art Gallery to extend their efforts. The Museum is now planning to collaborate with the Youth Voice team at Dorset Council to deliver a programme for young refugees in celebration of Refugee Week 2025. Additionally, the Museum is exploring work experience placements for care leavers, aiming to provide further opportunities for engagement and professional development.

The artwork created during the project will continue to have an impact. It will be featured in the In My Shoes training, a key part of the Youth Voice programme. A pop-up exhibition will be hosted in various community spaces and at partnership events, further promoting the voices of care-experienced young people. The work will also be showcased at a full Dorset Council meeting and a teaching conference, ensuring its continued reach and influence.



Find Out More

[dorsetmuseum.org.uk](http://dorsetmuseum.org.uk)  
[dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/children-families/youth-link/dorset-youth-voice](http://dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/children-families/youth-link/dorset-youth-voice)







# How the Roald Dahl Museum Supports SEND Families and Schools

## The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre

South East | Independent Museum | Young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre is an independent charity founded by Roald Dahl's widow, Liccy, dedicated to inspiring creativity and storytelling. Since opening its doors in 2005, the Museum has welcomed over a million visitors, including an average of 10,000 schoolchildren annually, all eager to explore Dahl's creative world. With access to Dahl's personal archive and the village where he lived, the Museum helps people of all ages unlock their own creativity and storytelling potential.

Through a combination of school programmes, public activities and online learning sessions, the Museum offers a variety of ways for audiences to engage with storytelling. Their public offer includes workshops, drop-in activities and themed events like Matilda Day and Tricks and Treats After Dark, catering to families, children, and adult fans of Roald Dahl's work.

As an independent organisation, the Museum receives no regular public funding, relying instead on ticket sales and gift shop revenue, with many years of generous support from the Dahl family.

The Museum recognises the importance of early learning and has expanded its offer for families with young children. Programmes such as Tichy Toddlers

*The programme allows SEND families to enjoy the museum's educational resources in a way that suits their individual needs, providing inclusive engagement for all visitors.*

during term time and Under 5s Days during school holidays ensure that even pre-literate children can engage with the Museum, experience the joy of storytelling and create their own stories, regardless of their familiarity with Dahl's work.

The SEND families programme developed as an outcome of the Museum's SEND schools programme. As the museum enhanced its schools offer, including the introduction of Explorer Bags and increased accessibility, the Museum recognised an opportunity to extend this initiative to families. This led to a programme allowing families to use the Explorer Bags, expanding the hands-on experience to a wider audience. The programme allows SEND families to enjoy the museum's educational resources in a way that suits their



*Interventions focus on supporting visits with visual stories, clear access information and tailored resources. The museum has developed materials such as Explorer Bags, designed to help SEND visitors navigate the space comfortably. Logistics involve practical adjustments to the site, including reducing capacity on certain days, adapting the physical setup with clear signage and providing additional support from Visitor Assistants. Content is designed with flexibility in mind, ensuring that workshops and activities are process-driven rather than outcome-focused, allowing visitors to engage at their own pace.*

Recognising the value of exclusive access for SEND schools, the Museum developed Explore Your Own Way days, adapting their existing resources and expertise to create a

On arrival, everyone is informed about the adjusted offer, ensuring a



To strengthen their offer, the museum has partnered with the National Paralympic Heritage Trust (NPHT). While some of their work remains independent, Fiona Darling-Glinski, Learning and Projects Manager at the NPHT provides valuable support in shaping specific aspects of the programme. The partnership is also reciprocal, allowing both organisations to learn from each other and refine their approaches.

The success of a relaxed 'Visit Santa' day reinforced the importance of inclusive programming, creating opportunities for SEND families to participate in a welcoming environment. Although not specifically designed as a SEND-only event,



its relaxed approach made it easier for families with additional needs to attend, encouraging further engagement with the museum's wider offer.

The main motivation for visitors is typically the adults within a family group, as they are the ones deciding whether to attend. Providing reassurance through activities and creating a comfortable environment with supportive staff helps adults feel confident about bringing their family to the museum. The museum strives to include as much supporting information as possible on its website and in its advertising to ensure families are well-informed.

The rural location, while being close to a train station and a car park, can present challenges for some visitors. In the last six months, the museum has introduced a Universal Credit ticket priced at £1 per person to help counter the financial and geographical barriers to attendance. However, some visitors have failed to attend on their chosen dates, prompting the museum to reassess when tickets are released and to consider the geographic distribution of ticket purchasers. Additionally, the museum is mindful of the reading ability required to engage with various parts of the museum, which has influenced how they programme sensory experiences.

### Impact and Key Learnings

The museum's SEND programme has had a transformative impact on both its visitors and staff, creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all. Through ongoing development and collaboration, the museum has successfully tailored its offer to meet the diverse needs of families, ensuring that everyone can experience the museum in a way that suits them.

The museum has observed that the age range of children attending specific events, such as the Halloween tricks event, has become younger, influenced by when children typically start reading Roald Dahl books. This insight helps the museum tailor its offerings more effectively for younger visitors. Over time, the personal development of the

*“One family said that their son had been in ‘a meltdown’ the night before at the prospect of coming, but once he’d watched the videos online he felt calmer and happier. He recognised me from the video too, which had helped him to regulate, feel comfortable and relaxed.” (Feedback from museum staff)*

entire staff team has become stronger. Staff now feel more confident in engaging with different audiences and gaining insights into the reasons people visit. They are eager to continue segmenting these audiences further to enhance the visitor experience. Visitors have reported that the SEND families programme has been transformative for their visits, allowing them to experience the museum as a whole family, rather than dividing into separate activities to accommodate the needs of different members. Families have expressed gratitude for this inclusive approach.

Small, cost-effective changes have also had a significant impact. For instance, featuring a staff member in the museum's visual story video helps young visitors feel more comfortable and at ease, as they recognise the staff member and feel reassured. “Two families that I spoke to specifically referenced the visual information and video content on the website, which had been crucial in enabling them to have a positive experience”.

*“One family said that their son had been in ‘a meltdown’ the night before at the prospect of coming, but once he’d watched the videos online he felt calmer and happier. He recognised*

*me from the video too, which had helped him to regulate, feel comfortable and relaxed.” (Feedback from museum staff)*

Working closely with SEND audiences has prompted larger conversations within the museum about accessibility, especially with the museum's 20th anniversary approaching. The museum continuously develops its programme, learning and adjusting to improve the experience for children and young people. They aim to avoid reacting too quickly to events that may not go as planned, instead focusing on learning from the overall experience.

The museum aims to better understand the diverse audiences who may benefit from their SEND programmes, including those with neurodiversity, hearing impairments and visual impairments, each of which may require a unique approach to experiencing the museum.

### Find Out More

[Museum's SEND Resources](#)

The museum plans to redevelop the site, incorporating lessons learned from the SEND activities into this process. They also aim to continue their partnership with NPHT and a local SEND school. This collaboration will support the development of new resources that are permanent for all visitors, as well as those that are activity-specific, encouraging visitors to make use of the outdoor spaces at the museum, which are underutilised.

The museum is also looking to enhance their “Explore Your Way” kits. While these kits work well for younger children, they believe that older children and adults would benefit from more autonomy in choosing items. Recent experiments with explore boxes during group visits have inspired plans to expand this idea, with the possibility of introducing a “build your own bag” concept to accommodate varying age ranges and interests. Additionally, there are plans to create sensory buckets for under-5s, as bags can be challenging for them to carry.

Ultimately, the museum recognises that by working with SEND communities, they are enhancing the experience for all visitors and are committed to providing the best possible experience for everyone who visits.







# A Platform for Young Voices: The Youth Panel at the Museum of English Rural Life

## The Museum of English Rural Life

South East | University Museum | Young People (14 – 18 year olds)

The Museum of English Rural Life (The MERL) is owned and managed by the University of Reading. Using its diverse collection, the museum explores how the skills and experiences of farmers and craftspeople – past and present – can shape our lives now and in the future. It works closely with rural communities, local audiences and specialist researchers to create displays and activities that engage with key debates on the future of food and the ongoing relevance of the countryside.

The MERL's lifelong learning programmes comprise of sessions for early years, schools and community engagement. Since 2018, engagement with children and young people (0–18) has significantly expanded, thanks to a strategic partnership with Reading Museum as part of the Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation (NPO). As 'Museums Partnership Reading,' The MERL and Reading Museum collaborate to provide cultural opportunities for Reading's young people and diverse communities through schools, volunteering, digital engagement and exhibitions.

*The Youth Panel was created in response to a gap in participation among this age group, who were not visiting the museum informally or independently.*

As part of its partnership work, The MERL has established a **Youth Panel** for young people aged 14–18.

The Youth Panel was created in response to a gap in participation among this age group, who were not visiting the museum informally or independently. As part of its status as an Arts Council NPO, The MERL and Reading Museum developed a shared Youth Strategy to better support young people's lives and increase opportunities for engagement with heritage. The Youth Panel was formed as part of this initiative, providing a space for young people to participate in heritage and culture, build confidence and self-esteem, connect with others and with collections, and develop workplace skills, while also shaping the museums for the future.



*“Something I love is that the leaders of the panel and the people at the museums that we work with treat me like an adult, they value my opinion and I feel empowered to make changes that will engage youth in our local history.”*  
(Member of the Youth Panel)

*An average of 8/9 young people attend panel meetings (which represents approximately 14 young people over the year) and projects run for 4 or 5 months. Young People are encouraged to sign up to be a part of a whole project, though sometimes this is not always possible, depending on the time challenges they might have.*

*“Something I love is that the leaders of the panel and the people at the museums that we work with treat me like an adult, they value my opinion and I feel empowered to make changes that will engage youth in our local history.”*  
(Member of the Youth Panel)



## Entry Points, Barriers and Motivations for Sustained Involvement

Young people are recruited through several routes, including The MERL's Widening Participation programmes (which support students from schools that face the greatest barriers to higher education) and The MERL's Supported Work Placement programme, which is designed for SEND young people. Others discover the Youth Panel during general visits or through the museum's digital channels.

Most Youth Panel members have an interest in heritage and further study, as well as a desire to build confidence and employment skills. Their projects and activities range from collaborating with museum staff, academics and partner organisations such as the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) and working with a collective of filmmakers to explore how collections remain relevant to young people's lives today.

The young people involved in the Youth Panel often have competing demands on their time, which can make it challenging for them to commit to every meeting or project. To accommodate this, the group remains informal, with relaxed expectations. Staff emphasise the benefits of participation, highlighting how it can enhance their CVs, develop valuable experience and expand their social connections.

The Youth Panel was established in recognition of the need for museums to take a proactive, consultative and responsive

*Museum colleagues from various departments share their expertise with the Youth Panel, inviting members to contribute to specific research projects.*



approach to remain relevant for future generations. Like many museums, The MERL and Reading Museum had historically seen low participation from 14–18-year-olds and sought to change this through meaningful engagement.

The Youth Panel is designed to provide collective work experience opportunities across The MERL and Reading Museum. Meeting monthly, members collaborate on a variety of projects that help them develop transferable skills. They influence current museum programming and projects, acting as change-makers within Reading's culture and heritage sector.

The Panel has worked on a wide range of initiatives, from exhibitions and displays to educational resources, film and animation. Through these projects, young people gain valuable insights into museum work, build transferable skills and connect with others.

Museum colleagues from various departments collaborate with the Youth Panel and members shaping specific projects or elements of museum work. The MERL's role as a University museum also provides unique opportunities for Panel members to collaborate with academic researchers in Reading and beyond. Recent examples have included **Agroforestry Futures**. These points of Higher Education connection enable participants to contribute to real-world research with tangible outcomes.

Other recent projects include Pandora Unboxed, a collaboration inspired by the



University of Reading's Art Collections. Youth Panel members curated an exhibition in response to a painting of Pandora from the collection, creating their own artistic interpretations. Their fresh perspectives help the museums engage a new generation with their collections.

Young people are recruited through various routes, including The MERL's Widening Participation programmes, which collaborate with schools that support those facing the greatest barriers to higher education. They can also join through The MERL's Supported Work Placement programme, designed for SEND young people, or by applying independently after encountering the museum during a visit or through its digital channels.

The Youth Panel appeals to young people for different reasons. Some are drawn to the opportunity to gain experience in the heritage sector, while others value the transferable skills they develop through participation. To ensure the collections feel relevant to young people today, a range of academic and staff resources are required to support meaningful engagement.

Reading has a large population, and most Panel members can travel to the town centre without difficulty, though some come from further afield. So far, transport costs have not been identified as a barrier, but the museums can provide assistance if needed.

The group includes members with diverse needs, who find that participation helps build their confidence and social skills. The museums are viewed as a safe spaces where they can be themselves and feel heard.

## Impact and Key Learnings

The Youth Panel typically involves around 14 young people per year (2024-2025 statistics), collectively contributing 75 hours of their time to Youth Panel activities.

The Panel has produced a range of outputs, reflecting the diverse ways in which young people engage with the museums. Each output has challenged the museums to continue listening and adapting.

*"I loved being able to share my love of museums and history through speaking at the launch event alongside my fellow Panel members and loved meeting other young people with similar interests in the heritage sector!"*

*(Youth Panel Member)*

The Youth Manifesto was a long-term Youth Panel programme that predated the pandemic, continued through it, and was officially launched in 2023. Developed by 40 young people in Reading, including both Youth Panel members and those who do not typically engage with museums, the manifesto serves as a guiding resource. Through a report and accompanying films, it has provided crucial insights into what young people want from museums and has shaped the museums' work since its launch.

The Digital Dig was a major project led by the RHS to digitise, transcribe, and map the horticultural history contained within more than 28,000 plant nursery catalogues. The RHS invited the Youth Panel to become Digital Ambassadors, working with catalogues that mirrored those in The MERL's collection. They created online content inspired by RHS nursery catalogues relating to Reading and received specialist training in filmmaking to share stories they uncovered. Their films can be viewed on the RHS YouTube channel.

Life on Land, Our Green Stories was part of the museums' wider efforts to explore climate change, sustainability, and biodiversity loss through their collections.





The campaign aimed to champion environmental responsibility and highlight the people and organisations working to make Reading a more sustainable place to live. The Youth Panel contributed by focusing on the Life on Land Sustainable Development Goal, using film and animation as mechanisms through which to express their views. As well as producing a series of films with local participatory filmmakers, Real Time, Panel members also produced an online exhibition in response.

The Youth Panel has acted as a springboard for ensuring that youth voice is not only heard but embedded within our museums. Their work has resulted in lasting legacies, both digital and physical, shaping how the museums engage with young people now and in the future.

For many of the Panel members, participation has been about more than just gaining experience – it has been about making a meaningful impact. As one member reflected, *“Museums are incredibly important institutions, and they should try their best to stay relevant, be responsive, and support the communities they represent and serve, especially the young people of these communities. I loved being able to share my love of museums and history through speaking at the launch event alongside my fellow Panel members, and loved meeting other young people with similar interests in the heritage sector!”*

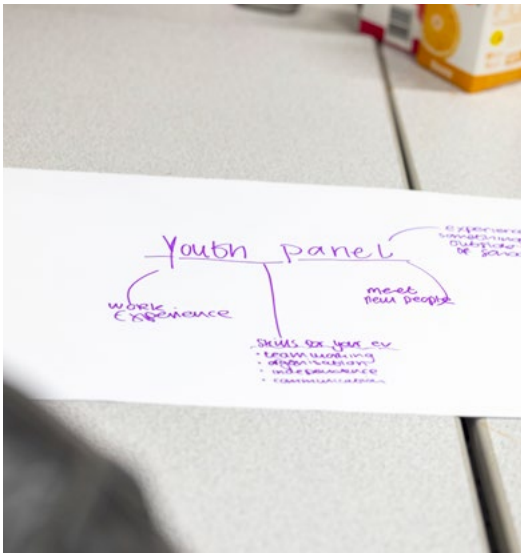
The sense of value and belonging fostered

by the Youth Panel has also been a key factor in its success. One member described their experience, saying, *“Something I love is that the leaders of the panel and the people at the museums that we work with treat me like an adult, they value my opinion and I feel empowered to make changes that will engage youth in our local history.”*

Programmes will continue to be developed in collaboration with young voices, ensuring that the Youth Panel remains a space where their ideas and interests shape the direction of museum work. In 2025, a Teen Writing Programme inspired by Jane Austen will launch to coincide with the 250th anniversary of the writer’s birth.

Building on the successes of past initiatives, the museums are committed to maintaining a dynamic and evolving programme that reflects the interests and priorities of the young people involved. The Youth Panel has already demonstrated its ability to create engaging content, sharing projects and learnings on social media to inspire other young audiences and showcase their contributions to the museum sector.

Looking ahead, further opportunities will be available for young people to engage beyond the Panel itself, including collaborations with youth parliament and participation in funded projects. By continuing to work alongside young people, the museums aim to remain relevant, accessible, and shaped by the voices of those who will carry them into the future.



### Find Out More

- [The Youth Manifesto](#)
- [About the Youth Panel](#)
- [About the RHS Digital Dig Project](#)
- [MERL- Our Green Stories Project](#)



# Acknowledgements

With thanks to all the contributors to the case studies:

*Ancient House Museum of Thetford Life*  
*Compton Verney*  
*Derby Museums*  
*Dorset Museums & Art Gallery*  
*Manchester Art Gallery*  
*Museum of English Rural Life*  
*PK Porthcurno*  
*Preston Park Museum and Grounds*  
*The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre*  
*Young V&A*

Thank you also to those who conducted the research and wrote the report:

*Sam Cairns*  
*Kara Wescombe Blackman*  
*Heather Thomas*  
*Katya Provornaya*  
*Rachel Tranter*

Thank you to all colleagues who participated in the survey and roundtable discussion.

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