

Children, Young People and Museums

Executive Summary

Targeted research into the learning programmes for children and young people delivered by museums across the Royal Opera House Bridge region.

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1. Introduction

This document summarises my research into the museum sector's offer to children and young people. It details my findings from desk based research and consultation activity with museums across the Royal Opera House Bridge (ROH) region between July and September 2012, concerning the state of their current learning programmes. It looks at the overall picture and identifies current trends in the provision. The major issues facing museums are discussed and recommendations given for ways in which ROH Bridge can support this sector.

I interviewed staff from 23 museums and one archive, either face-to-face or through telephone conversations. The targeted organisations were generally those that had staff with a specific learning remit or which delivered a substantial learning programme (generally receiving over 2000 students annually). A survey was also sent out to all museums in the four counties focusing on their provision for children and young people. 26 surveys were returned and this data is included in this analysis.

The overall picture reveals a resilient sector that despite suffering severe cuts and its repercussions, and an uncertain education climate, is engaging effectively with children and young people, particularly the age group between 5-11 year olds, and is generally maintaining its level of school visits. However, the lack of capacity to engage new visitors or develop new learning programmes is a real issue for the sector. The rapidly changing education landscape is also proving a challenge for museums to understand and respond to. These are the main concerns that ROH Bridge will need to find ways to support.

2. General Overview

Museum development officers in the four counties identified 80 museum and heritage sites across the region that engage with them. These sites range from local authority funded services to small independently funded sites with charitable status. Local authority funded museums tend to be the larger services in the region (16 organisations that I interviewed have local authority funding) and employ professional staff whilst volunteers staff the small independent sites. The largest services are

Chatham Historic Dockyard, Colchester & Ipswich Museum service and Luton Culture, all of which previously received Renaissance funding as 'Hub' museums and are now in the transition phase of restructuring their services. Museums are supported by county museum development officers, although this support has weakened over the last two years.

The strongest area of engagement is with children aged between 5-11 years old, either through a core schools programme or through family activities. Museums then struggle to engage children and young people, 11 years upwards. In the survey, 76.9% of respondents reported regularly providing school activities for children aged 7 – 11 years but only 12.5% reported regular provision for 11- 14 year olds.

3. Trends in Delivering Programmes

3.1 Budget cuts

Most museums see the effect of budget cuts and changing political agendas as the main issues that they are currently facing with regards to meeting the needs of children and young people. Local authority funded museums have suffered the most impact and the effect on services is that learning officers have wider remits or fewer hours to cover the same remit. This situation has not yet stabilised with many local authorities looking for further cuts in future years, so museums will continue to operate in this instable environment.

3.2 Number of school visits

The number of primary schools' visits has held up surprisingly well across the region. Notable steady losses in schools' figures only occurred at a handful of sites and some sites saw an increase in numbers. Schools seem to be prepared to travel between 45 minutes to 1.5 hours to visit sites. A major factor why museums have held their numbers despite the more difficult economic times is the common understanding by proactive museum services of the need to consult teachers and be flexible in matching their offer to meet school needs.

3.3 Nature of primary school provision

Supporting the primary history curriculum is still the main driver for schools visiting museums. There is also a sizeable science offer across the region in particular in Kent, as part of a Renaissance South East funded initiative, SLIME (Science Links in Museum Education).

Most museums charge for their learning services, particularly local authority museums, even if they have a free admission policy. However, there is no pricing consistency across the region for these services.

A noticeable trend is the increase in outreach visits by museum staff to schools. For all museums that were prepared to deliver outreach sessions, their frequency had increased and museums were more actively promoting them as a way of maintaining their numbers and solving the issues of coach costs and lack of physical capacity on their sites.

Artefact loan boxes which teachers can use in the classroom are also a feature of the museums' offer to schools. Luton Culture and Essex Police Museum also offer online outreach sessions.

3.4 Secondary school provision

Most museums struggle to engage secondary schools. However, the smallest museums may have a regular secondary school user if there is a local teacher who is enthusiastic and committed.

To attract secondary schools, museums are more flexible in their approach, and usually create a tailored package to meet the request of a school which then they promote to other schools. Generally, the history curriculum is not such a strong driver for schools at this level, Secondary schools are as likely to work with museums for curriculum enhancement weeks or targeting a particular group of students e.g. Gifted and Talented than as a regular visit to support a curriculum area.

3.5 Supporting all abilities

A great strength of museums is their ability to engage with children and young people of all abilities due to the multi-sensory nature of the experiences they offer. Virtually all museums work with a local special school and closely liaise with school staff and tailor sessions to meet the needs of students.

3.6 Barriers to engaging schools

Despite their success in maintaining school numbers, most museums feel that successfully engaging schools is more difficult now than it was two years ago. Barriers include:

- New school structures
- Limited school capacity
- Marketing
- Communication
- Museum capacity
- Financial constraints especially coach costs
- Administrative barriers
- Teacher cover
- Demonstrating impact on students' learning
- Fitting into schools' planning cycles

3.7 Use of Digital Media

Digital provision is surprisingly limited across the region with many local authority museums still struggling to achieve a reasonable website presence. For similar reasons, social media use is also in its infancy, as local authority museums in particular have to comply with authority rules. Facebook seems mainly limited to use by closed groups of young people working on a project together or as a general way of promoting events at museum services, and encouraging feedback. There was little evidence of harnessing digital technologies as interpretative tools that is now happening elsewhere in the cultural sector. Only the largest museum services were engaging with this technology. More of a priority for museums is to harness digital technologies to make it more accessible for visitors to research their collections.

3.8 Teacher consultation

Teacher consultation is a key feature of the successful learning programmes across the region. This occurs at different levels across the region, from using evaluation forms for school groups to formal teacher consultation. Proactive museum officers also network with teachers through hosting and attending meetings of school consortiums and subject specialism groups.

3.9 Under fives provision

The provision for this age group is growing across the region as museums recognise the potential in engaging very young children and potentially turning them and their parents into long term visitors. Some museums are also seeking to build up partnerships with Children's Centres as a way of supporting this age group.

3.10 Families provision

The informal learning offer for children (5 – 11s) is generally covered through the regular family activities that all museums run periodically in holidays and weekends. Museums of all sizes also run large family events. Certain national initiatives are also widely celebrated such as Heritage Open Days in September.

There has been a move away from activities requiring advance booking in which children stay independently from their parents to drop-in activities at which parents stay and support their children.

3.11 Working with 'uniformed' groups of children and young people

All museums work with 'uniformed' local organisations focussing on children and young people such as Brownies and Sea Cadets. Ways of working with such groups include income generating activities such as birthday parties and sleepovers. Young Archaeology Clubs (YAC) are also commonly supported by museum services.

3.12 Working with young people

For museums, this is probably their most challenging audience. Staff particularly at volunteer-run museum, do not feel they have the skills to engage young people and cite projects where enormous effort was spent working with a handful of young people so, in the present climate where all capacity is focussed on engaging the core primary school audience, many museums are not able to prioritise working with young people.

Nevertheless, at museums with audience development officers, there have been a wide range of partnership projects involving targeted groups of young people. Different ways of working with young people have included:

- Offering work experience and young volunteering opportunities
- Consultation groups
- Co-curated exhibitions
- Creating interpretation for displays
- Taking part in creative workshops
- Organising creative workshops

4. Strategies for supporting this sector

ROH Bridge needs to develop strategies to address the following areas:

- i. How to increase museum capacity to engage with children and young people
- ii. How to raise museums' profile with schools and colleges, particularly at a secondary school level, so that learning communities understand the depth and range of curriculum support which museums can offer their students.

Recommendations for achieving this:

- 4.1 Enhancing museums' offer to children and young people, through:
 - Using Arts Award effectively. Pilot schemes are currently running across the region with ROH Bridge support. The findings and good practice then needs to be cascaded.
 - Piloting digital media projects. The ROH Bridge could broker partnerships with local e-learning centres to develop tools that could encourage independent school visits and enrich the range of current museum resources.

- Encouraging co-curated exhibitions. In particular, working with Epping Forest District Museum touring model to embed a greater level of involvement from children and young people.
- Developing more targeted family provision. ROH Bridge could broker partnerships with local services targeting children and young people, particularly Children's Centres.
- Support the initiatives of national organisations concerned with children and young people in museums, e.g. Takeover Day supported by Kids in Museums.

4.2 Improving the interface between schools and museums, through:

- Mapping the emerging school clusters. If the school clusters and consortiums in each area were mapped out and points of contacts for each of those groups identified, museums could then attend cluster meetings to promote their services and develop stronger partnerships.
- Advocacy. ROH Bridge should network with specialist leaders of education, Teaching Schools and other organisations/ individuals who are setting the local schools' agenda and broker partnerships between them and cultural providers.
- Building schools' capacity to work with museums. ROH Bridge could work with schools to identify 'cultural champion' teachers with whom museums liaise. In school consortiums where extra support is needed to build up their cultural offer, a cultural project officer could be appointed to build up this relationship. This 'champion' or project officer would help identify potential projects, act as an advocate for the museums, recruit teachers and students for projects and raise funds.
- Encouraging targeted activity with secondary schools. With all the barriers secondary schools face in organising whole year group schools visits, a more effective way of engaging with museums would be to focus on groups of vulnerable students, be it underachieving students or Gifted and Talented.

- Strategically funding partnerships between museums and schools. ROH Bridge needs to develop small scale action research projects between schools and museums to encourage new cultural partnerships.
- Marketing. Museums need support in marketing to schools. With many museums switching completely to e-communication, there are greater issues with targeting relevant staff and reaching new audiences. Possible solutions include creating a one stop website that publicises cultural providers across the region, or more sustainably, linking up museums with local online learning communities such as Southend Education Trust website, SALT (Southend as a Learning Town).

4.3 Increasing capacity, through:

- Delivering training. Most common areas of training needs for museum staff included:
- Curriculum changes
- The nature of Academies, Teaching Schools, Early Years settings and other recent government innovations and their implications for cultural providers
- Changing legislation regarding children and young people

A potential training partner is SHARE Museums East which is managed by Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, and is a valued regional training deliverer providing free, high quality, relevant training.

Equally important is to offer training for teachers. Many museums currently offer placements to Initial Teacher Training institutes for students to achieve their teaching in "an alternative setting". With changes occurring to teacher training, ROH Bridge needs to ensure that these types of opportunities continue, particularly through Teaching Schools, and look at ways of extending it for qualified teachers.

- Brokering partnerships. Smaller museums in the region tend to be reactive partners, responding to offers from other community organisations, rather than proactively seeking them. Promoting ways to build up local partnerships with other pertinent organisations would raise museums' profile in the community and support capacity.
- Supporting networks. The main networks that museums attend are county museum learning groups. The ROH Bridge should use these as a way of networking with the museums. Alongside these networks, ROH Bridge should build up cultural consortiums that museums could attend to strengthen their local cultural partnerships.
- Supporting current strategic museum support. For small volunteer-run museums in particular, the county wide museum development officers are a vital support. As their capacity has been weakened over the last two years, it is essential that ROH Bridge works in partnership with them to bolster their roles and uses their expertise to understand the culture in their localities.

Appendix One

Museums consulted via interviewing staff with a learning remit

- Braintree Museum
- British Schools Museum, Hitchin
- Chatham Historical Dockyard
- Chelmsford Museum
- Colchester & Ipswich Museums
- Essex Police Museum
- Essex Record Office
- Epping Forest District Museum & Lowewood Museum
- Fleur de Lis Museum, Faversham
- Guildhall Museum, Rochester
- Hertford Museum
- Higgins Museum service, Bedford
- Knebworth House
- Luton Culture
- Natural History Museum, Tring
- North Hertfordshire Museum service
- Royal Engineers Museum, Gillingham
- Saffron Walden Museum
- Southend Museums
- St Albans museums
- Stevenage Museum
- Thurrock Museum
- Welwyn Hatfield museum service