

Kids in Museums – Written Evidence (LBC0110)

Kids in Museums works across the UK to support museums to become more welcoming and accessible to children, young people, and families. Our programme includes a Manifesto which has over 900 signatories, an annual award for the best museum for families in the UK, training and resources for museum staff working with children, young people and families, and Takeover Day, an annual day when children take on adult roles in museums, enjoying a unique behind-the-scenes experience.

The following response is drawn from our organisation's experience of the pandemic and that of the museums that we work with.

Positives from the pandemic

1. Digital engagement

Broadly speaking, digital activities were the only way that museums were able to engage with children, young people, and families during lockdown. Museums from all over the world developed and distributed creative online content that was free to access.

This meant that children, young people, and families were able to engage with museum collections, exhibitions, and activities from all over the world. They could view objects from prestigious institutions such as the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and the Rijksmuseum, New York, create art using Andy Warhol's techniques, build museums in Minecraft and use works from the National Gallery for mindfulness meditation from their own homes.

Many museums saw a huge increase in traffic to their website. Kids in Museums has seen a 57% increase in website traffic since the start of lockdown in March. Early research into digital audiences for culture during lockdown by the Audience Agency shows that at least a third had never visited the organisation that had created the website they were using. This is positive in terms of museums reaching new audiences.

2. Increased engagement with local area

As well as digital engagement, there were a significant number of museums supporting families to engage with their local area. The University Museum of Zoology in Cambridge developed Garden Bingo to encourage people to notice the local natural world. Stockpiling Stories created by Dacorum Heritage Trust enabled intergenerational storytelling by encouraging children to correspond by letter with local older people who were living alone, reducing social isolation.

3. Museums supporting wellbeing

It has been really encouraging to see children, young people and families turning to museums and the cultural sector more generally to support their wellbeing during lockdown. We know from feedback submitted during the Kids in Museums Family Friendly Museum Award From Home that families have hugely valued the contribution that museums made both to home schooling and their leisure time.

The same Audience Agency research shows that around 60% of 16-24 year olds engaging with online culture felt it helped to reduce stress and anxiety. We are pleased to see

museum collections valued in this way and hope that museums will play a greater role in supporting young people's wellbeing in the future.

4. New ways of working

The lockdown and the economic impact of the pandemic have pushed our organisation and many others to consider new ways of working. To mitigate lost income, we have moved out of our office space until spring 2021. In this context we have been able to deliver all our core programme of activities successfully with a little investment in IT hardware and software.

In the future this means that we will be able to offer more flexible working to staff and travel less for meetings and events. This will have benefits for staff wellbeing and reduce our environmental impact.

What are you most worried about?

1. Digital inequality

Lockdown has highlighted issues around digital inequality in the UK. Children, young people, and families who do not have access to devices, data or broadband will have had little or no access to museums during lockdown as well as education and other essential services. It is also worth noting that not all digital museum content was fully accessible, further restricting the numbers who were able to engage with museums.

Given that social distancing and potential future local lockdowns mean that physical access to museums is likely to be restricted for many months, it is essential that these inequalities of access are addressed so that they do not become ingrained. This means building awareness within the museum and heritage sector around how to create accessible content and more broadly looking at how the heritage sector can support efforts to address digital inequality.

2. Place of children, young people, and families in museums

Over the past ten years, Kids in Museums has seen a step change in the way museums welcome and include children, young people, and families. As museums reopen many of the elements that have contributed to good family engagement, such as interactives, dressing up areas, trails and drawing and craft areas, have been removed or reduced because of hygiene and social distancing requirements.

We are concerned that cuts to museum budgets and workforce may mean this position becomes normalised and much of the progress of the past decade will be undone. This would lead to a generation of children and young people missing out on the benefits of visiting museums. Museums will become less inclusive and this will have an impact on the experience of all visitors.

3. Accessibility in museums

Before lockdown, children, young people, and families with additional needs already faced barriers to museum visits. We are concerned that this will be exacerbated as museums reopen. Many museums that have reopened to date have not updated access information

on their websites or offered essential facilities like hand sanitiser that is accessible to wheelchair users.

As museum budgets and staff capacity are reduced, there is a risk that access will become a low priority and that services like Relaxed Openings will not be restored. This will exclude a large number of families from museum visits and mean that a large potential audience for heritage is lost.

4. Arts and culture in education

Given the amount of teaching time that children and young people have missed over the past six months, there is an understandable emphasis in catching up in core subjects for the first part of the 2020/21 academic year. This is likely to mean less teaching time for arts and humanities subjects, which are already being squeezed in school curriculums, particularly in secondary school. It will also be more difficult to run school trips to museums and cultural institutions because of the requirements of social distancing.

In the short term, this means that children and young people will miss out on the support that heritage and culture can offer for wellbeing and resilience as they return to school in difficult circumstances. Looking further ahead, we are worried that this will further erode the amount of arts and humanities taught in school and normalise a curriculum low on creative subjects.

What do you hope changes for the better?

1. Wider access to museums

Lockdown and the requirements associated with reopening with social distancing in place are encouraging museums to be creative about physical and digital access to their collections. We hope that as this process continues it will involve consultation and co-creation with audiences and build museums that are more relevant and accessible to their audiences.

2. Value of museums and culture

During lockdown, large numbers of children, young people and families have turned to culture to support education and wellbeing. It's clear that what museums have to offer is valued and appreciated by this audience. We hope that this perception of value remains across society and is reflected in choices made about future funding.

3. More flexible attitudes to funding

In response to the pandemic, many public and institutional funders have taken a more flexible approach to funding, removing restrictions on grants, and enabling organisations to experiment with new approaches. We hope that this new flexibility remains in culture and heritage fundraising and that the relationships between funders and organisations receiving funding continues to evolve.

4. Thinking about public space

Social distancing has been a key part of how we stop the spread of coronavirus. This has resulted in us inhabiting and experiencing public spaces such as museums in different

ways. Being required to stay indoors for prolonged periods during full lockdown has also increased the value we place on access to shared public space that is welcoming and accessible. We hope that this will feed into future thinking about the design of museums and heritage sites to be better places for all visitors.

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