

Museums as Learning Spaces

Supporting small museums in the East of England to develop learning opportunities



Museums as Learning Spaces is part of the SHARE Museums East development programme for the East of England which is funded by Renaissance and managed by Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service. For further information see www.sharemuseumseast.org.uk.

This booklet has been compiled by Judith Carruthers, Museum Learning Consultant with support from Jane Munns, Hertfordshire Museums Development Officer.

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Introduction



“The Museums as Learning Spaces course was inspirational.”
Gill Jackson,
Volunteer, Woburn
Heritage Centre

Museums as Learning Spaces is a programme that has been delivered across the East of England to support staff in small museums to develop sustainable learning opportunities for visitors. As approximately two-thirds of museums in this region are volunteer run or heavily dependent on volunteer support, County Museum Development Officers across the region had particularly identified the need to build up the skills and confidence of staff at these museums.

Originally, a two day course was created by a steering group of these regional officers and delivered through SHARE Museums East, a regional museum development scheme funded by Renaissance. A consultant, Judith Carruthers, was commissioned to work with these officers to develop their ideas further and deliver the course. The course itself comprised a mixture of learning theory and practical activities, which included developing activity trails and creating simple interpretative techniques. An important aspect of the course was active exploration of the host museums and showcasing their resources for visitors.

The project was piloted in Cambridgeshire in March 2010 as part of the development stage for a Heritage Lottery Fund ‘Your Heritage’ bid and then

“I am convinced that this training has given the confidence and practical knowledge to volunteers who previously would not have thought they could deliver learning in their museum. It allowed them to explore their own collections in ways that they had not considered and see how with limited resources they could make a difference.”
Beverley Hoff,
Cambridgeshire
Museums
Partnership Officer

rolled out in Essex, Hertfordshire and Suffolk. Due to its success, the course was repeated in 2011, in Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. Over 60 museums have attended the courses.

In Hertfordshire, a second stage of the programme was developed. Six months after the initial programme, the original participants and other interested museums were invited to take part in further sessions to give them support to build up family learning opportunities.

Run by the County Museum Development Officer for Hertfordshire, Jane Munns, and the original consultant, Judith Carruthers, this group attended a half day training focussing on family learning activities. Each museum was then offered a small grant plus a half day of support from the consultant to develop family resources. Four months later, the museums met again to share what they had developed and celebrate their successes.

The success of this model has led to other counties in the region replicating it with support from the SHARE Museums East programme. This booklet evaluates the success of this programme and highlights its impact on the museums who participated across the region.

“For many museums who are dependent on volunteer support, the main issue in developing new activities and making their museums more accessible, is training the other volunteers who give a regular commitment to the museum but are not involved in developing these resources. Briefing other volunteers gives them an understanding and ownership of the resources.”
Judith Carruthers,
Museum Learning
Consultant



What factors contributed to the success of the programme?

Effective collaboration: It was created collaboratively by a steering group of SHARE advisers and County Museum Development Officers from across the region. Over several meetings, they shared their common aims and objectives for the course and shaped its structure. A Museum Learning Consultant, Judith Carruthers, was then commissioned to deliver the programme across the region.

Based on local needs: This core programme was developed further by the consultant who worked with each County Officer to ensure that the programme met the differing needs of each area. In Cambridgeshire there was more of an emphasis on live interpretation, whilst in Suffolk the programme incorporated work that had been developed with Early Years.

High level of professional support: Each County Museum Development Officer supported the course in their area, encouraging museums to attend and providing follow-up support as needed. The ongoing commitment of these officers gave them ownership of the programme's objectives and ensured the sustainability of the project in the museums they were supporting.

"Accessing courses outside the county can be an issue for volunteers so this style of course is ideal as it brings the training to them."

Ruth Gillan, Suffolk Learning Project Officer



"I liked the structure of the course and the way we were encouraged to participate. I felt valued."

Sue Gore,
Volunteer, Tring Local History Museum



“Hands-on activities were wonderful and helped with interpreting and absorbing the information given.”
Jo Rooks, Museum of East Anglian Life

Committed attendance by the participating museums: Museums were encouraged to send two participants to the course. Sometimes a professional staff member would attend to support a group of volunteers. Individual planning time was built into the course to enable the participants to consider how to incorporate the ideas from the course in their own museums.

Practical and easily accessible activities: Participants took part in learning activities and explored ideas that they could apply directly back to their own museums with minimal resources.

Active use of the host museums: The participants used the host museums’ spaces in a number of creative ways which helped to reinforce their learning and increased everyone’s awareness of what other museums in their area offered.

Reflection time: The course took place over two days, usually two weeks apart, allowing museum staff to go back to their museums and share their research with other staff and come back with greater confidence to the second day.

“Clear information, delivered clearly, lots of interaction and feedback, exchanging ideas and views with other museums. A very interesting and stimulating course.”
Participant, Norfolk course

“It was really useful to look at another museum from the point of view of users.”
Participant, Suffolk course



“It was good to have a group from various museums where ideas could be bounced around and which can be adapted to use in our own museum.”
Participant, Essex course

Networking opportunities: By meeting over two days, the participants had more time to build up their relationships with each other and share their experiences more effectively.

Offering focussed and practical follow-on support for participants: The subsequent support offered in Hertfordshire resulted in all the participating museums creating new sustainable family activities.



“As Museum Development Officer, I felt it was vital to find some mechanism to offer continued support to the museums so that they continued to develop the work they had started. This model of delivery seems to suit all museums extremely well. Having a timetable they signed up to meant that they knew from the start of the project what was expected of them and the time frame they had committed to.”
Jane Munns,
Hertfordshire
Museums
Development Officer

Impact on participants

- Museum staff developed their confidence in offering learning opportunities to visitors.
- The programme gave participants ideas for developing a wide range of simple low cost activities that broadened their family resources and opened their eyes to the fact that family trails do not just have to be written sheets but should encourage child-led exploration and family interaction.
- Being part of the project raised museums' awareness of different learning styles and showed them how some simple adjustments could be made to accommodate the needs of a greater range of their visitors.
- The project emphasised the importance of a welcoming atmosphere in museums which is created by friendly and knowledgeable staff.
- It broadened their knowledge of other museums and created opportunities to network.

"The learning volunteers gained confidence in how to use objects and how simple it can be to inspire visitors."

Elly Wright,
Education Officer,
St Neots Museum



"It was great to be surrounded by people with such varied experiences of education. The opportunities to bounce ideas between us were great and being able to share what had been achieved by each museum during the project was so inspiring."

Beth McDougall,
First Garden City
Heritage Museum

Impact on museums – overview



- Many participating museums have increased the number and variety of family activities they offer which has increased the number of families who visit them.
- Participating museums have improved the quality of family visits to their museum.



“The training gave volunteers more confidence to take more of a lead on family activities. As a result, in the holidays we now have two activity days per week rather than one. This has dramatically increased the number of families that visit the museum for these activities.”

*Elly Wright,
St Neots Museum*

“The new resources have encouraged visitors with younger children to attend. Some families had commented that they hadn’t returned from previous visits as there were not enough things aimed at their younger children.”

*Becky Wash,
Essex Police
Museum*

- The new activities encouraged repeat family visits to the museums.
- Volunteers are able to take a more active role in developing learning activities in their museums.



"We reviewed our presentation to schools and also our family Millie Mouse Trail. This has led us to develop a more questioning style when working with children: How do you think this works? What does it do? etc. It is very apparent from our evaluation that the visit has become a much more shared experience."

Pat Clarey,
Volunteer,
Stotfold Mill

"Taking part in workshops with other museums has been an inspiring part of the creative process of developing family activities and I look forward to applying what I have learned to future projects."

Nollie Cacciaroe,
Volunteer, Much
Hadham Forge
Museum

Impact on museums – case studies

All the museums who participated in the programme reported that they had learnt a great deal from being part of this project. They developed new resources and activities; identified barriers and resolved issues; used the opportunity of support from the consultant to share the outcomes with other volunteers and staff in their museums.

The following short case studies give a flavour of a few of the exciting directions that the museums took as a result of being part of this programme.



Encouraging family interaction...

Cambridge & County Folk Museum

The Folk Museum used the training to review their current family resources. Their museum touch table was redesigned as an old-fashioned grocer's shop. This includes a range of traditional items for children to weigh, sort and package (using appropriate bags, string and paper). In addition to traditional money, scales and a till, children were encouraged to take part in further activities with opportunities for dressing up as a shopkeeper and preparing customer 'orders' using a real receipt and account book.

They also installed a 'pop-up' pocket money shop which is free for families to visit. This allows children to experience being an old-fashioned shop keeper while spending their pocket money on low priced sweets and toys.

"She [my granddaughter] has been pestering me to come back to the museum for weeks to do this. It's the best thing she has done all summer!"
Visitor



"Parents and grandparents have enjoyed playing alongside their family and have used this as an opportunity to share their memories of shopping in the past, using old weights, measures and money."
Susan Miller, Visitor Services Officer

Communicating with visitors...

Essex Police Museum

Essex Police Museum has built on what they already offered to families by improving their communication with children and by introducing new activities for pre-school age children.

Comments cards for children have been introduced which are displayed on a pin board for all visitors to see. This has given children more ownership of the museum and museum staff have valuable feedback about what their children enjoy doing at the museum.

New jigsaw puzzles have been introduced for the younger children. There are also new toy vehicles such as police cars, ambulances and fire engines for them to play with, which has sustained the children's interest in the museum and lengthened their visits.

"As a small museum, we are always looking for new ideas to reach out to the community. The new resources have enabled us to do that."

Becky Wash,
Curator

"We have found the new toys and games really stimulating. It's great to be able to touch real police objects."

Visitor



Active exploring...

John Bunyan Museum

This museum wanted to broaden their offer to families. The original offer had been a quiz sheet which required the children to be able to write, or to be helped to write, their answers. Nicola Sherhod, working with two volunteers, created two photograph trails in which families were encouraged to look for artefacts or parts of the building that matched the images. The trails were differentiated so that one photograph trail was harder as only parts of the artefacts were shown. The museum also drew on children's own experiences by putting together a drawing trail where children had to look for and then draw the seventeenth century version of modern objects such as lamps and vacuum cleaners.

For younger children, they also developed a Materials trail in which children had feely bags containing examples of different materials such as leather and bone which they had to match to appropriate objects.

"It was great to see the children really take an interest in the objects. The parents helped and it brought them together to find the objects... it was a bit of an adventure for them."

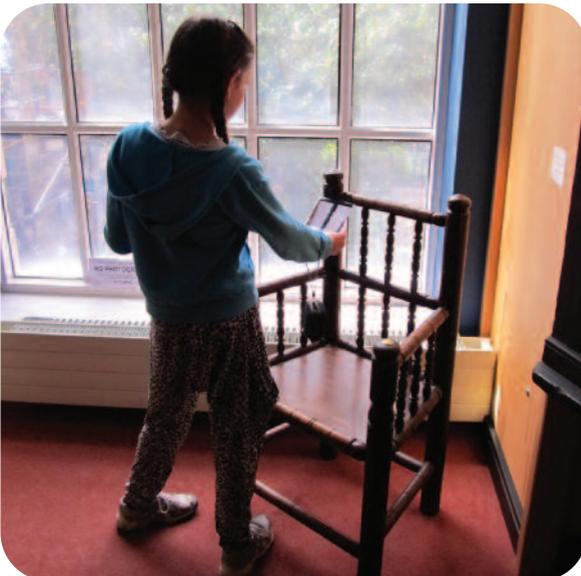
Volunteer steward

"Very interesting – it makes you look and read."

11 year old visitor

"This was a very positive and worthwhile project that we were really pleased and lucky to be a part of. It was great to see the diverse and interesting trails other museums had produced and it felt nice to be able to show the group our trails and get positive feedback."

Nicola Sherhod,
Curator



Facilitating creative role play...

Lowestoft Museum

This volunteer-run museum hosted the Suffolk course and benefited from the ideas of other participants which fed into the development of some significant new resources, also supported by an Early Years project they were taking part in. For the first time ever, each gallery now has family activities in place. For example, in their china gallery, containing a valuable collection of tea sets, there is now a role play tea set for young children and in their World War Two space, they have built a 'black-out' den. The museum has also developed an imaginative picnic loans box, Time for T that goes out to pre-school borrowers and encourages not only creative role play but also aims to stimulate children's communication and language development.

"It is fantastic that they have welcomed children in the Early Years to the museum, sharing their knowledge and giving children an opportunity to see how things were in the past."

Visitor



"The Learning Spaces training helped them see how they could make their collections relevant, accessible, fun and interesting to visitors."

Ruth Gillan, Suffolk Learning Project Officer

Developing sustainable resources...

Much Hadham Forge Museum

With no front of house staff in their galleries, the museum needed to develop family activities that were easy to manage. This was achieved by creating Detective bags that children collected at the reception desk. These packs offered them different ways of exploring each space. In one room, the children hunt for animals in the beautiful wall paintings whilst, in another room, they match replica objects to artefacts in the cases.

Other activities were developed further to increase their use. For example, families can now create different coats of arms on a magnetic board near to an existing puzzle.

"The training days ensured that we set aside time to rethink our approach to family visitors and provided the opportunity to add more structured learning activities. Brainstorming the ideas with other museums and Judith has given us the confidence that the changes are well planned, low cost and sustainable."
Cristina Harrison,
Curator



"To develop a project from the research stage to its fruition has been very fulfilling for me as a volunteer."
Nollie Cacciaroe,
Volunteer

Stimulating a creative response...

St Neots Museum

As part of the Learning Spaces training, volunteers and staff put together basic outlines of possible family activities. One idea they developed back at the museum was *The Story Factory* in which visitors followed simple steps (guided by objects) and pieced together a short story. This idea was first used as a self-led family activity in their 'Fenland Stories' exhibition. Visitors were provided with a little fold-out book to write their story and illustrations, which they could then take home.

One volunteer had also worked on a 'Museum at Night' idea with a school so the two ideas were brought together to encourage families to create imaginary situations together. This area was named the **Imagination Station**.

*"Simple, free activities such as the **Imagination Station** play an important part in our repeat visits."*
Elly Wright,
Education Officer



"I really enjoyed making a ghost story – it scared my family!"
Visitor

Using all your senses....at low cost...

Swaffham Museum

Swaffham Museum is running a two year community project, 'Swaffham: Within Living Memory' in which the museum is collecting the stories of Swaffham's people, buildings and events from 1930 to 2010. It will form an archive of recorded memories and a permanent display in the museum to tell the story of Swaffham, both past and present. Staff have been training up volunteers to take part in this project. The culmination of this project will be a permanent exhibition showcasing the archive.

The Education Officer was inspired by ideas she gathered from the course to enhance the exhibition. In particular, she is planning to create 'talking suitcases', to bring alive the archive. These suitcases will contain objects belonging to local residents, with MP3 players playing excerpts of interviews with those residents.

"From the course, the idea that had the most impact for me was a family learning activity that combined artefacts and sound. It consisted of a suitcase with items in it that could be handled whilst listening to a Jamaican woman talking about arriving in Britain in 1950s. Its low tech simplicity appealed to me and I realised it was something I could set up quickly and easily by myself."

Sian Howard,
Education Officer



Involving other staff...

Tring Local History Museum

Tring Local History Museum, a small volunteer-run museum has only been open for a year, but staff took part in the course in the early months of its opening. This commitment has ensured that the museum already offers families a variety of activities that encourage them to make the most of the small space and inspires them to return to the museum. Families are offered a range of activities from matching images and objects to taking a pet toy tiger for a walk to search for his friends in the gallery.

These activities are stored in an attractive chest at the entrance to the main gallery, and visitors are able to pick up the activities with encouragement from the volunteer stewards. Importantly, the activities are easy to understand and maintain and so it is not complicated for the stewards to supervise. In order to demonstrate the value of these resources to the rest of the volunteer staff, Judith Carruthers was invited to a meeting attended by the volunteer stewards where she briefed them on the purpose of these activities and how they could most effectively support visitors.

"The best thing was having the resources to make the activities exciting. The volunteers have tried the activities during 'quiet' times and seem to find the activities easy to understand."
Sue Gore,
Volunteer



"It was a good idea for the museum. I love it."
Child visitor

Making it fun!...

Woburn Heritage Centre

This volunteer-run organisation wanted to create activities that would stimulate families to spend longer in their venue which acted as a visitor information centre as well as a museum. Two volunteers created a 'Spider Trail' in which families hunted spiders (made by the volunteers) throughout the building. For older children, there were questions to answer on finding the spiders and for young children there were simpler hands-on activities. All children received a certificate on completion of the activity.



"We wanted to make museums fun by removing their stuffy image."

Gill Jackson,
Volunteer

"Two elderly ladies in wheelchairs with helpers loved the spider trail. They said they were looking forward to showing other residents of the home their certificates!"

Volunteer Steward

"Lovely museum. Very child friendly. My children loved the spider trail."

Visitor

Acknowledgements

Developing and supporting the course

- Sally Austin, Education Officer, Ely Museum
- Karen Chancellor, Wide Skies Learning Coordinator
- Fatima Choudhury, Learning Development Officer, Luton Culture
- Hazel Courtley, Museums Development Project Manager, NMAS
- Mark Curteis, Essex Heritage Learning and Access Officer
- Jamie Everitt, Norfolk Museums Development Officer
- Ruth Gillan, Suffolk Learning Project Officer
- Sarah Girling, Essex Heritage Education Officer
- Beverley Hoff, Cambridgeshire Museums Partnership Officer
- Jane Munns, Hertfordshire Museums Development Officer

Museums who hosted the course

- Braintree Museum
- Cambridge & County Folk Museum
- Dragon Hall
- East Anglia Transport Museum
- Ely Museum
- First Garden City Heritage Museum, Letchworth
- British Schools Museum, Hitchin
- Long Shop Museum, Leiston
- Lowestoft Museum
- Mid-Suffolk Light Railway Museum
- Much Hadham Forge Museum
- Swaffham Museum
- Wisbech Museum

All the museums who participated in the programme.

Luton Culture Museums Learning Team who lent many of the artefacts used in the training.

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