Ulster University

Museums, Crisis and Covid-19

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Museums and the Pandemic:

REVISITING PURPOSES AND PRIORITIES

Museums, Crisis and Covid-19:

VITALITY AND VULNERABILITIES

Based at Ulster University Museums, Crisis, Covid-19: Vitality and Vulnerabilities is a UKRI Rapid Response project (AH/V012819/1) focusing on **how museums can contribute to community resilience and wellbeing in a time of crisis**. It addresses sector adaptability as it adjusts audience engagement and collaboration (such as new collecting practices, programming and exhibitions) in response to Covid-19.

Going forward, this project will **lead and inform the sector as it adapts to effective community-digital possibilities that still embraces new thinking in participation and engagement**. Alongside this, the project will evaluate how we adapt our practices to be mindful of audience diversity, digital poverty, and the isolation challenges for vulnerable audiences arising from Covid-19.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project team are indebted to the Northern Ireland museums community, so many of whom gave their time to participate in interviews, focus groups, surveys, workshops and the writing of blog posts throughout the course of our project. Particular thanks go to our project partners at the Tower Museum, Museums Association, Northern Ireland Museum Council, and National Lottery Heritage Fund.

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The Museums, Crisis, Covid project has been valuable, not only in capturing a picture of the challenges that the museum sector has faced, but also in highlighting the dynamic role that museums have in social and community wellbeing.

The ability of the project to track the response of the sector, to focus on areas such as the adaptation to digital and to provide substance for refection and debate has been hugely beneficial.

The feedback from the project will continue to support the development work of the NI Museums Council as it moves forward with charting the future for museums and making the case for museums as a vital part of the cultural fabric.

SIOBHAN STEVENSON, NORTHERN IRELAND MUSEUMS COUNCIL

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SUMMARY

The Northern Ireland Museum sector is committed to its societal role, is ambitious and caring, and willing to be agile and responsive.

ORGANISATIONAL HEALTH

The organisational health of a museum going into the pandemic had a significant impact on how well placed the institution was to address the challenges posed by closure, loss of income, and staffing changes. **Good institutional health gives more chance for a museum to map out a future beyond the pandemic** and to be able to address further potential challenges.

RECOMMENDATION

The sector needs to respond to the demand to revisit museum purpose. This is a sector aware of the need for change and an appetite for it to happen.

MANAGING COLLECTIONS

The change of pace during the pandemic enabled some museums to focus attention on their collections, improving collections care, documentation and digitization. The pandemic offered **opportunity to identify themes and priorities for new collecting and to build online awareness of their collections.**

RECOMMENDATION

We need to support museums to foster further online and in-person engagement with lesser-known collections as well as re-assessment of existing collections.

USERS AND EXPERIENCES

There is now a **better understanding of the inter-dependence of in-person and digital engagement**, recognising one inspires the other. The sector needs to undertake evaluation to garner greater insight into the characteristics of that digital experience, answering questions about quality, impact and diversity of audience engagement.

RECOMMENDATION

The sector is asking for support to find new methods to measure museum impacts that reflect the multiple ways people find value in museums.

CHANGES, CHALLENGES AND RECOVERY

Museums **need to gather up-to-date evidence base of impact on society**, health and wellbeing, to match the new needs of the society post Covid-19.

RECOMMENDATION

Partnerships are garnered that enable research into the health, economic and environmental impacts of museums.

The Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project provides a deeper understanding of the core factors that impacted on museum practice during the pandemic.

MUSEUMS AND THE PANDEMIC

When a crisis hits a family, community, or wider society the immediate, mid and long-term impacts of that event will vary. In these instances, generalisations are unhelpful, and only with deeper consideration of individual cases do we get a better understanding of the full impact of significant events and why the consequences can differ. The same can be said for wider society and the variations amongst the institutions within it.

When the Covid-19 pandemic led to the closure of museums the responses and outcomes varied across those institutions. For many museums, their **galleries were closed but engagement continued online**, either on museum websites or social media platforms. For other museums, closure of galleries was accompanied by what appeared to be a halt to activity; however, in the majority of cases staff used the period to improve their skills (such as digital), invest in forward planning; and focus on 'back room activity', such as collections care.

Our research has found the **Northern Ireland museums addressed the pandemic with determination and innovation**; nevertheless, in 2022 museum staff and managers are concerned for what the future may hold, with a challenging environmental, social, political and economic outlook.

1.1 The Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 Project

This report has been written by the team working on Museums, Crisis and Covid-19, a UK Research and Innovation funded research project based at Ulster University (December 2020-May 2022). **The project investigated the impact of Covid-19 on the museum sector, making recommendations for change as the sector moves beyond the pandemic**.

The project's focus is the Northern Ireland museum sector and to that end we partnered with Northern Ireland Museums Council and Curator Roisin Doherty, Derry City and Strabane District Council. The findings and recommendations can be used to consider the broader UK context. In pursuit of that, we partnered with Simon Stephens at the Museums Association UK and Stella Byrne of the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Northern Ireland.

This report maps out findings for the museum sector in Northern Ireland, with a focus on accredited institutions. The report is organised around the three key areas of the accreditation standard: organisational health, managing collections, and users and their experiences. Although we do not comment on every aspect of museum practice that is relevant to those themes, this report focuses on the areas of practice most significantly impacted upon during the pandemic. Our focus was further influenced by aspects of museum practice considered critical to shaping museum futures.

In Northern Ireland the Museum Accreditation Scheme, managed by Arts Council England, is administered by Northern Ireland Museums Council. In addition to National Museums Northern Ireland, in 2021 the region had 40 fully accredited museums local and/or independent museums (NIMC Annual Report 2020/21).

Although there are distinct variations in institution's individual experiences, **the Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project provides a deeper understanding of the core factors that impacted on museum practice during the pandemic**. This work will enable us to find measures that will mitigate against the most feared outcome for many– closure of museums, reduction in audience number and diversity, and loss of collections – both in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and in response to future crises.

1.2 The Northern Ireland museum landscape

Museum policy and literature may refer to 'the museum sector', as if it is one body of very similar institutions; in practice this is not the case. Instead, **the museum landscape is a network of differently managed and constituted institutions**. Of those institutions recognised as museums by the Arts Council England Accreditation Scheme, in 2021 Northern Ireland had one national museum (on three sites), 22 council-run museums, and 18 independent museums (NI Museums Council 2021). Each of these institutions have different governance, management and financial arrangements, which shape their everyday practice and forward planning.

ULSTER MUSEUM, 2020

In 2015 Northern Ireland's council-run museums experienced a significant change in governance arrangements, an outcome of the reform of local government, which in 2015 reduced the number of local councils from 26 to 11 (Birrell and Gormley-Heenan 2015). On the back of the reorganisation of local government, amalgamated councils now run multiple museums. This was a fundamental revision of how local museums operated in the region, impacting programme delivery, collection development, and potentially the cultural, social and economic contribution of museums (NIMC 2012, 2014). The disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has not been helpful for those museums still negotiating their services in these larger councils – the 2022 concerns over the operation of Down County Museum in Newry, Mourne and Down District Council being an example (Stephens 2022).

In this new local government structure, council-operated museums are placed in directorates with difference focus. In Ards and North Down Borough Council the museum sits within an Arts and Heritage Service Unit, which reports to the Community and Wellbeing Directorate; in contrast, in Derry City and Strabane Council the museum service sits within the remit of Business and Culture. **Which directorate the museum service reports to shapes perceptions of museum roles and purpose**, and affects the demands placed on the service, both during and post pandemic.

Northern Ireland's independent museum sector is growing and, in number, may soon exceed national and local institutions. The National Trust has seven accredited properties in the region and we have cultural institutions with accredited collections, such as the Linen Hall Library in Belfast and Armagh Robinson Library. Amongst these accredited institutions are independent museums, such as the Northern Ireland War Memorial and Somme Heritage Centre. Although most have paid staff, they all depend on volunteers for collections research, care and delivery of public programmes (such as the Whitehead Railway Museum). There are new independent museums that have been established in the past decade, which are working towards accreditation, such as the Museum of Free Derry and Siege Museum, both located in Derry/Londonderry.

Since 2001, Northern Ireland Museums Council has taken 5-year surveys of the local museum sector providing an account of the activity and operation of local museums in those years. The 2016 Mapping Trends survey offers a benchmark for what the accredited museum sector looked like pre-pandemic. At the time, the 39 accredited museums supported 479 FTE jobs as well as engaging 927 volunteers. **The sector was estimated to provide £9.1m contribution through tourism impact**, and in 2015 saw over 600,000 visitors attending museums. These museums delivered 368 formal learning programmes to over 50,000 children (NIMC 2016).

Emerging out of Covid-19, the Northern Ireland museum sector is determined to demonstrate and articulate its value.

> **Heritage is hugely valuable for us all - vital in creating economic prosperity, in making communities better places to live, and in supporting our personal wellbeing.**

PAUL MULLAN, DIRECTOR NATIONAL LOTTERY HERITAGE FUND, NORTHERN IRELAND OCTOBER 2020

Between 2011-2016 we see a growth in the number of museums and increasing number of people working in and volunteering with museums. The Mapping Trends survey records capital investment of £8m at Mount Stewart, operated by the National Trust, £3.1m at Whitehead Railway Museum, and £3.5m at Fermanagh County Museum. The sector reported a need for more time and resources for collections care and management, and a desire for more support for learning programmes. Each of these areas of activity was significantly impacted by the pandemic. Important given the recent challenges, **Mapping Trends warned that the 'security of future funding' was a significant issue facing the sector**. If that was a concern pre-pandemic, it is essential to investigate where the sector stands as a consequence of the pandemic.

1.3 Northern Ireland museums within the wider heritage sector

Within Northern Ireland there are other important heritage attractions making vital contributions to the vibrancy and dynamism of the region. **Although not accredited museums, they sit amongst a diverse range of tourism attractions contributing to the heritage character of Northern Ireland**, its attractiveness to home and international visitors, and its financial viability. Although the detail of the experiences of unaccredited heritage institutions is beyond the scope of the Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project, we recognise these heritage sites were significant investments for the region and make important contributions to the heritage landscape. The sustainability of such institutions has ramifications for the entire sector.

Now a decade since they opened in 2012, Titanic Belfast and the Giant's Causeway Visitor's Centre on the Antrim coast, were for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board the 'signature projects' of that year and were in receipt of significant public funding. In the same year, Belfast saw the reopening of Crumlin Road Gaol after a significant investment from Belfast City Council to restore the building and give it a new future as a visitor centre. In September 2016 Seamus Heaney Homeplace opened after a £4.25m investment from Mid-Ulster Council. Both Crumlin Road Gaol and Seamus Heaney Homeplace are operated in the only two Councils in the region without accredited museums.

The 2019 NI Visitor Attraction Survey, reported that Giant's Causeway, Titanic Belfast, and Ulster Museum were the most visited tourist attractions in Northern Ireland.

Together historic properties, galleries and museums, and heritage centres represent almost 38% of the visitor market. In 2019 Ulster Museum had 522,000 visits and Mount Stewart, operated by the National Trust, welcomed 239,000 visitors (NISRA 2020). Each of the institutions named make significant contributions to the cultural, heritage and tourist offer in Northern Ireland – adding to the experience of the region for local and international visitors. Amongst these are well-established attractions, such as Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre and Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge, both National Trust managed. The latter remained closed for two years, only reopening in May 2022 – the closure beyond the lockdown periods said to be a result of the difficulty of finding staff. The financial loss at usually high yielding sites, has potential to impact the entire Trust, including those properties that are accredited museums elsewhere in the region.

Another site that suffered during the pandemic was Historic Royal Palaces Hillsborough Castle, which opened Easter 2019 after a 5year-redevelopment, and £24m investment, into the eighteenth-century grounds and property. For an all too brief window, visitors enjoyed the lavish interior makeover and walled garden, and new visitor facilities. After barely a year, the house and gardens closed March 2020; three months later only the gardens reopened and by the end of 2020 over 30 job losses were announced. The 2021 Trustees Report put into words the devastating impact of the pandemic: 'Lack of funds through repeated closures throughout 2020-21 and the damaging reduction in international visitors for the foreseeable future meant HRP was left with no choice but to take drastic actions to ensure survival' (HRP Trustees 2021: 5). Admissions income for Hillsborough Castle for the 2019/2020 financial year stood at £805,000; in 2020/2021 that dropped to £241,000. At other UK sites the loss was even more dramatic, the income from the Tower of London reducing from £49,811,000 to £2,024,000 in the same period (HRP Trustee Report 2021: 57). We expect the legacy of this loss of income to be felt for many years to come.

The issue for these relatively new institutions is how recent public investment is protected for the longer term. The £24m invested in Hillsborough Castle, included support from National Lottery Heritage Fund as well as other donors. Paul Mullan, Director of National Lottery Heritage Fund for Northern Ireland, stated that at the outset of the pandemic protection of the sector NLHF has funded since the 1990s was a priority. As a consequence, the NLHF was amongst the first funders to provide a rescue package in the form of a £50m Heritage Emergency Fund, £5.5m of which was allocated to Northern Ireland.

In March 2020 Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport announced £1.57billion support package to protect culture, arts and heritage institutions from the impact of the pandemic. Offered in addition to other measures such as the Job Retention Scheme (Furlough), **this was the biggest one-off investment in the UK cultural sector and was pitched as a 'lifeline' to those institutions**

By nature, this was emergency funding, the priority being keeping the organisations alive.

that were 'hit hard by the pandemic' (DCMS 2020). £33 million was allocated to the Northern Ireland Executive: £19.52m of this was distributed to artists and art organisations by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland; and £5.7m was awarded to museums and heritage bodies, distributed by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (Bamford et. al 2021). By nature, this was emergency funding, the priority being keeping the organisations alive.

READ MORE ABOUT FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR THE SECTOR DURING THE PANDEMIC:

Emergency Funding: Successes, Challenges and Concerns. A work-In-progress briefing published by Museums, Crisis and Covid-19. December 2021

ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19/outputs

GUILDHALL, DERRY/LONDONDERRY

1.4 Format of this report

Emerging out of Covid-19, the Northern Ireland museum sector is determined to demonstrate and articulate its value. Since the onset of the challenges of early 2020, through maintenance of and adaptation, the sector has shown commitment to its public role. **There are multiple examples of new and engaging programming, as well as ambition for the future**, much of has been documented by the Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project.

The Museums and the Pandemic: Purposes and Priorities report should be read alongside other outputs published as part of the Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project and available to download at our project website (https://www.ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19). Amongst these are work-in-progress briefings on museum finance and furlough, digital media, and community well-being, (published December 2021-February 2022), which made recommendations to the sector mid-way through the project's funding period.

This report draws upon Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project interviews, focus group outputs, and other engagement activity, documenting the experiences of museums in Northern Ireland, both national institutions and members of the Northern Ireland Museums Council. The research is based upon interviews, focus groups, workshops, and surveys undertaken by investigators on the Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project. We have drawn from blogs written for our project by museum staff, as well as analysis of grey literature from the sector (such as press releases, museum reports). Our enquiry has been informed by those discussions as well as the issues raised in museum studies, cultural policy, and related literatures. The progress of the Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 was guided by our project partners in Northern Ireland Museums Council, the Museums Association, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and the Tower Museum, Derry City and Strabane District Council.

The UK Museum Accreditation scheme is central to how those working in museums approach their day-to-day practice. Because of that **we have used the three central themes of the Accreditation Scheme as the structure for this report**. The next three parts of this report focus on: **Organisational Health; Managing Collections and Users and their Experiences** with the final section concluding the report and providing thoughts for museum futures.

ORGANISATIONAL HEALTH

The organisational health of a museum going into the pandemic had a significant impact on how well placed the institution was to address the challenges posed by closure, loss of income, and staffing changes. Good institutional health gives more chance for a museum to map out a future beyond the pandemic and to mitigate further challenges.

For a museum to meet the organisational health standard of the Accreditation scheme, attention is paid to three areas:

1 A museum must have a **clear statement of purpose**, an appropriate constitution and satisfactory structure for governance and management

2 A museum must have **an effective business plan** and financial sustainability

3 A museum must be able to **assess and manage risk**, both for housing collections, good security arrangements and dealing with emergencies and disasters (Arts Council England 2018).

Across our interviews with museum managers and curators, a museum which was performing well in those categories was best placed to tackle the uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.1 Mission and Purpose

One of the more profound impacts of the pandemic was how it forced us to rethink our practice and shift our priorities. Reflecting in late 2021, Paul Mullan, Director of the National Lottery Heritage Fund Northern Ireland, commented **'there's lots of talk about the world cannot go back to the way it was'**. If we do not want to go back, we need to find the direction we want to go in. Mullan suggests we can do more to thinking about what it is we want to change, adding 'what do we want the world to be in comparison to what it was?' (Mullan, Interview August 2021).

A senior manager in the Northern Ireland museum sector proposed this was the time for each museum 'to really take a bit of a reset and decide for itself what are the priorities going forward' (Anon04, Interview June 2021). This clarity is essential to the ability of a museum and sector to articulate its purpose, amongst its team and to others. Associated with this clarity around museum purpose, is a confidence in the service provided. A Local Authority curator advised that in 'refocusing what we do' museum staff should be 'brave enough' to confirm what they don't do (FG2_03, April 2021).

At an online Museums Association Coronavirus Conversation event, in June 2020, participants agreed that **the pandemic encouraged us to reflect with a fresh perspective on the value of museums to society, the purpose of the museum, and how it connects with its publics**. Heledd Fychan, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at National Museum Wales, suggested 'it would be a huge disservice to our communities if we don't challenge ourselves about what we have learnt as museums' during the period of the pandemic (cited in Crooke 2020: 308).

This was felt across the Northern Ireland museum sector, with one historic house manager saying 'I sort of feel that this is the most amazing opportunity for us to completely reset and restart' (FG2_05, April 2021). The call to use the pandemic pause to revisit museum purpose, suggests a sector with an appetite for change; it might also imply a sector aware that change was needed. In that case, the pandemic was the stimulus to make it happen.

The call to use the pandemic pause to revisit museum purpose, suggests a sector with an appetite for change; it might also imply a sector aware that change was needed.

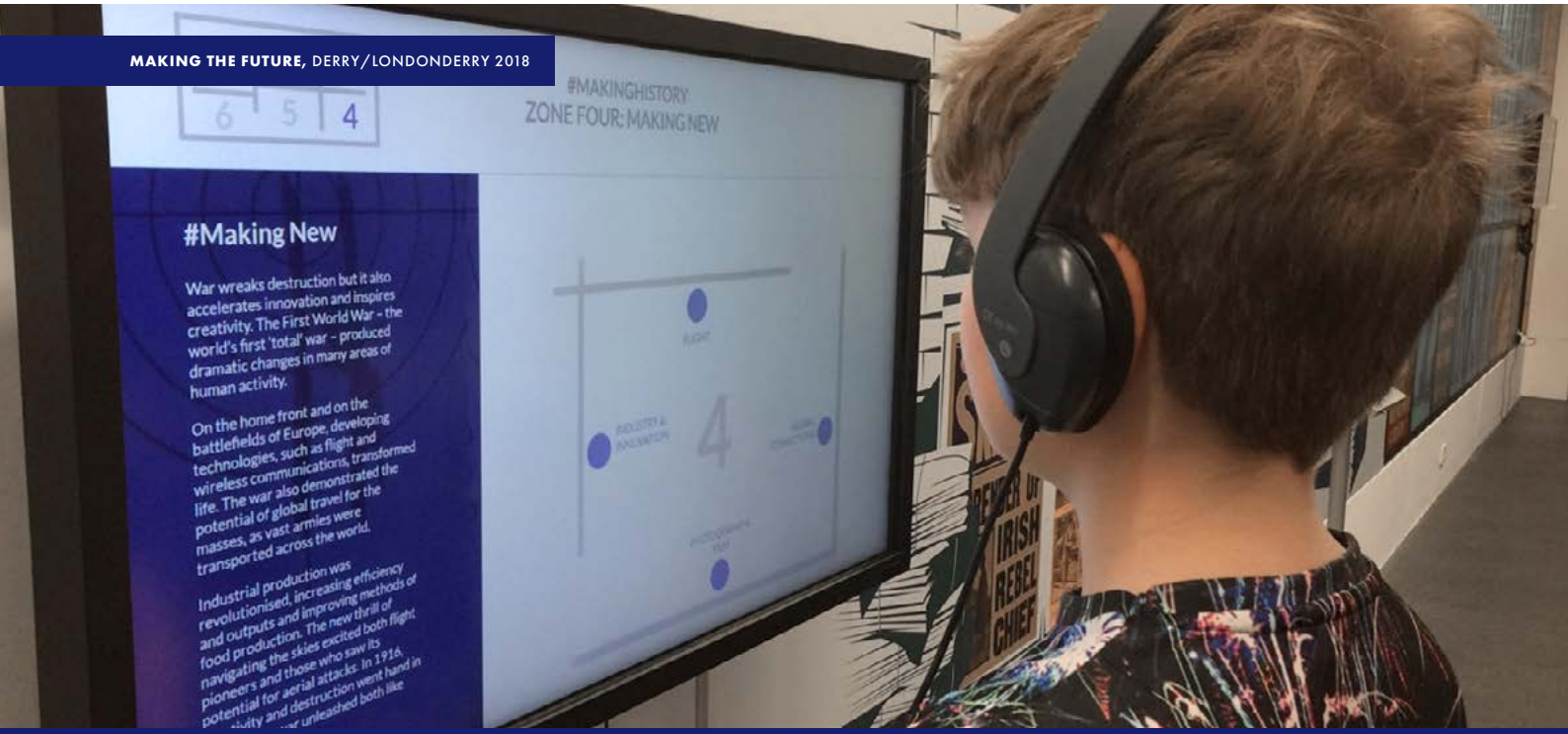
SOCIETAL RELEVANCE AND PURPOSE

In the past two decades, **how we assess and articulate museum value has changed, with a shared focus on demonstrating the social benefits of museums**. Despite museums focusing on how they change lives, there is a continuing gap between the work of museums, around community and outreach, and people's perception of that as a core business for museums. For instance, there remains a stubborn perception amongst those who have not visited museums since childhood that they are 'stuffy, aloof and boring'; whereas those with more recent experiences value museums as places for safeguarding heritage and learning about the past (Britain Thinks 2013).

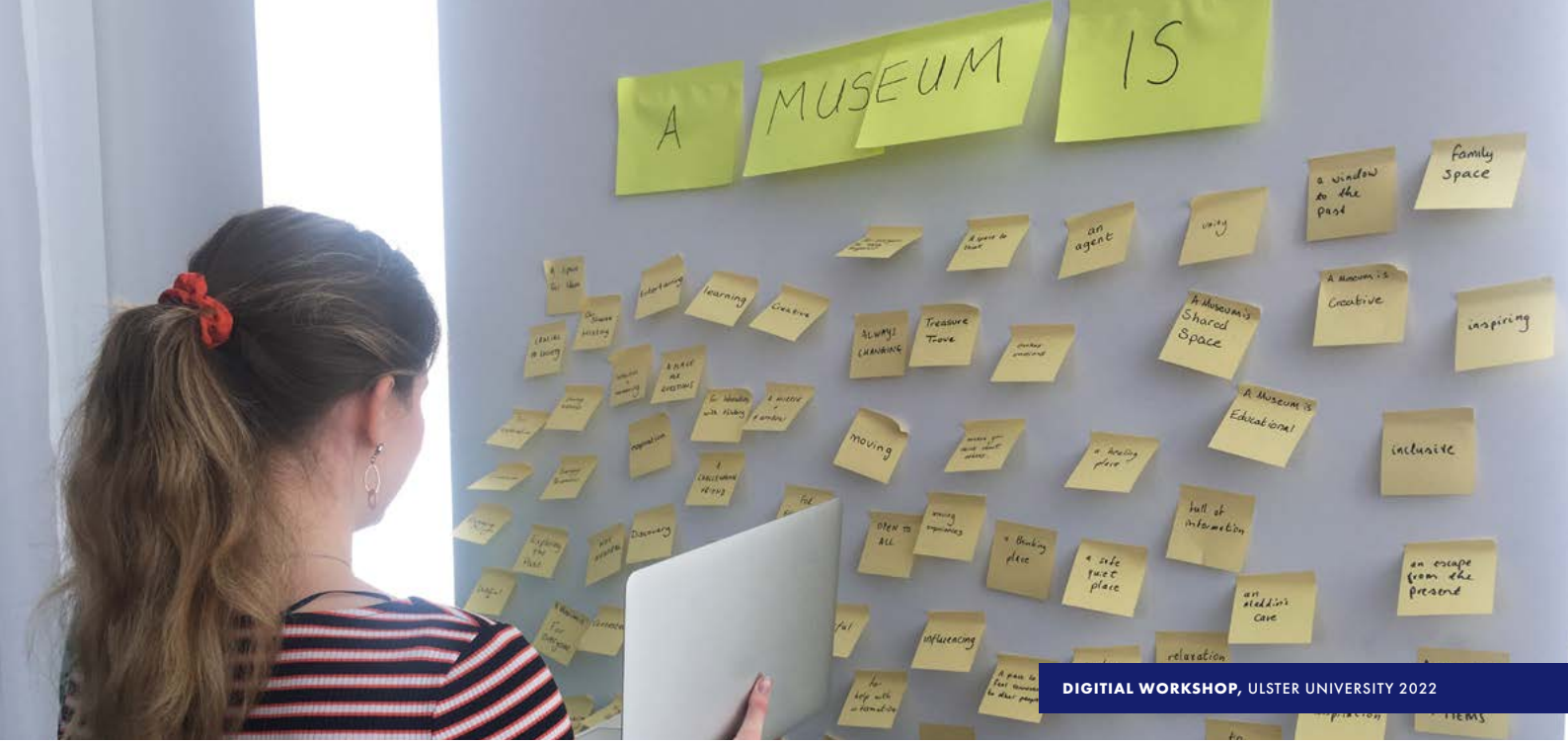
For many working in museums, the value of their activity goes beyond the obvious roles of collecting and display. Kathryn Thomson, Director of National Museums Northern Ireland, has described her realisation of the diversity of what the museum does, which she did not appreciate prior to taking up her post in 2016. She writes that, as a non-museum professional, '**what I found most staggering is the incredible breadth and depth of what museums do**, and the extent to which this is neither understood nor appreciated outside the sector' (Thomson 2021: 275). For those shaping a vision for the sector, this includes mapping museums to the broader government agenda 'be it around health and wellbeing, making this place a better place to live and work' (Anon04, Interview June 2021). Our interviewee at an independent museum reflected that their priorities have changed since March 2020, with the question of how to stay relevant in a changing society as essential: 'whether it goes back to what it is before, or what is the new normal, we're going to all have to find a way forward' (Anon03, Interview March 2021).

In the past two decades, how we assess and articulate museum value has changed, with a shared focus on demonstrating the social benefits of museums.

There is no doubt, **it is the museum's role to influence how museums are understood and to shape their futures**. The Department for Communities provides core funding for both National Museums Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Museums Council and, as the sector emerges from the pandemic, a clear narrative and purpose must be communicated to such stakeholders.



MAKING THE FUTURE, DERRY/LONDONDERRY 2018



DIGITIAL WORKSHOP, ULSTER UNIVERSITY 2022

A senior manager working in the Northern Ireland museum sector suggested museums must 'demonstrate how we contribute to the strategic priorities of the Northern Ireland Executive'; recommending that museums should be 'celebrating much more loudly and visibly the work they do and how they would contribute to the government's strategic objectives'.

Citing the Museums Association *Museums Change Lives* publication, our interviewee noted this demonstrates clearly 'how local museums can contribute to making this a better place and how we can contribute to health and wellbeing' (Anon04, Interview June 2021). Only with an evidence-base of that nature, updated to coincide with the new needs of the society post Covid-19, will we have the information we need to shape the future of museums in the region.

The drive to position museums as central to wellbeing is a key motivating factor for many in the sector.

In late 2020 staff at the Tower Museum in Derry City and Strabane Council hosted wellbeing workshops that combined relaxation techniques with viewing pieces from the art collection. In response to one of the workshops a participant commented 'we had a lovely morning at the Tower Museum yesterday, such a refreshing start to the week, it kept me chilled out all day, a real treat, I would highly recommend it, can't wait till next week' (via Facebook). Building on the earlier practice, in 2022, with the Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project, curator Roisin Doherty and Dr Breda Friel (CI) hosted a mindfulness and self-care session, exploring the museum space as a place of reflection and renewal (McDermott et al. 2021). A first for the museum, **this wellbeing initiative is an example of the enquiring and experimental practice of curators in the region**.

Reflecting on curatorial ambition, a senior manager, with an overview of the entire Northern Ireland museum sector, commented 'we have a lot of very passionate, interested and knowledgeable people working in the local museum sector in Northern Ireland, and they have so much to give' (Anon04, Interview June 2021).

> **We have a lot of very passionate, interested and knowledgeable people working in the local museum sector in Northern Ireland, and they have so much to give.**

ANON04, ADVOCACY BODY, INTERVIEW JUNE 2021

The first thing the pandemic did was expose our weaknesses.

LOCAL AUTHORITY MUSEUM MANAGER, FOCUS GROUP

2.2 Business Planning

The pandemic caused many museums to revisit their strategic planning in light of the wide-ranging and potentially lasting challenges posed by the pandemic. The change was profound, with museums reshaping their business and forward plans 'because what might have been a priority 18months ago, may not be one now' (Anon04, June 2021). A local authority museum manager reflected on the importance of getting it right, as the pandemic unfolded. She referred to **the 'awful responsibility', remembering 'people were frightened and they didn't know what was happening'** (Anon05, March 2021). This point reminds us that it was unchartered territory, and the importance of individual and institutional resilience to see the sector through.

When the pandemic hit in early 2020, National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI) were already well into what the senior management refer to as a 'transformational journey'. A new Director & Chief Executive had come into post in 2016 and found 'an organisation built on rigid hierarchies and orthodoxies', which she described as 'unjustified and outdated' (Thomson 2021: 274). In the years preceding Kathryn Thomson's appointment, the national museum had experienced 'protracted funding cuts', in the form of 50% reduction in government grants, which had led to 30% reduction in staff 'with no meaningful strategic response' (2021: 274). She also observed limited transparency in activity, decision making, and strategic direction; the result being **'from a sustainability perspective, the organisation was fast approaching a cliff edge'** (2021: 275).

Thomson saw two gaps that was jeopardizing the museum's future: a relevance gap, arising from poor communication of what the museum did; and a funding gap meaning the museum 'lacked tools to re-engage audiences'. Without change she anticipated a future that 'was much less certain than it had ever been before ... we could no longer assume our right to exist – we had to fight for it' (Thomson 2021: 276-277).

The transformational journey undertaken in National Museums NI, in the years immediately preceding the pandemic, redefined its core purpose, vision, mission and values. For senior management, this transformation informed how the museum then tackled the challenges of the pandemic.

Reflecting on the importance of good organisational health at this critical time, Colin Catney, Chief Operating Officer NMNI, stated grimly 'I would have hated to have gone into the Covid crisis with what went before – it would have been a disaster' (Catney, Interview March 2021). William Blair, Director of Collections NMNI, agreed 'If we were the organisation that we were five years ago, and Covid hit, I don't think we would have been able to deal with it... the culture of the organisation was not in the right place' (Blair, Interview March 2021). Important not only for NMNI, looking beyond the pandemic, Catney recommends that the sector is clear about its value. **In his experience, museums should pitch their value in the context of 'political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental agendas'.** He reflects, 'the critical factor for our sector is about being clear about core purpose and making sure it's shared by stakeholders and internally' (Catney, Interview).

2.3 Financial Stability and Managing Risk

The consensus across museum managers, whether independent museum, council-run or national institution, was 'economically it is going to be very challenging for everybody' (Anon02, Interview March 2021). Colin Catney, of National Museums NI, reflected when the museum's self-generating income dropped significantly the museum was on the 'cliff-edge financial reality'. He described the museum as being in a 'genuine hole' with a need to 'rethink what National Museums NI is about commercially'. He warned that recovery can be slow 'we can't switch that on immediately', instead there will be a 'lag effect' for the next 12months, and possibly longer' (Catney, Interview March 2021).

ULSTER MUSEUM, 2021

Part of the issue for National Museums Northern Ireland, which will be familiar to many in the UK museum sector, is **the pandemic arrived fast on the heels of economic austerity.** Black's point, that museums have witnessed funding cuts, alongside increasing demands on their service (2021: 7-9), was borne out in our interview with Catney. Catney recognised 'we've got to tighten the belt' and adds 'but tightening the belt has already happened over a number of years'. Reflecting on recent years, he tells us: 'Funding has gone down by 50%, but our collections have not gone down by 50%. Expectations of us haven't gone down by 50%'. Despite these cuts 'what we're expected to do has, if anything, risen year-on-year, yet we're still operating with 34% less staff than we had about ten years ago' (Catney Interview).

Here we see the challenge for museums in meeting both self-professed ambitions, for how they serve audiences, and the requirements placed upon them by funders expecting returns for their investment.

In terms of the risks arising from closure, audiences return, and staffing, during the pandemic there was a clear feeling that museums were in it together, and support systems were critical to mitigating risk. For Northern Ireland Museums Council, the monthly online 'Let's Talk' events were crucial for peer support and navigating the unchartered territory of mass closure as well as the uncertainty of how the pandemic would evolve. Across many interviews, individuals referred to the value of the tighter networks 'I think we've really connected better through this' (Anon05, Interview March 2021).

There was a clear feeling that museums were in it together, and support systems were critical to mitigating risk.

MANAGING COLLECTIONS

The UK the Accreditation Scheme asks that museums: 1 hold and develop collections; 2 hold useful and useable information on those collections; and, 3 care for and conserve collections. The pandemic had an impact on all three of those areas. The change of pace and activity caused by the pandemic enabled some museums to focus attention on their collections.

IMAGE WITH THANKS TO NEWRY AND MOURNE MUSEUM

The nature of the attention on collections varied with museums. In varied with museums, in some cases it was the ability to undertake collections care checks or it was an opportunity to update their collections information or create new digital images. The pandemic also offered opportunity to identify themes and priorities for new collecting; **and for some museums a chance to go online to build audience awareness of their collections.**

The pandemic also offered opportunity to identify themes and priorities for new collecting.

3.1 Hold and Develop Collections

Nationally and internationally museums were aware of the importance of capturing the pandemic. It was a moment in time that Spennemann suggests was considered 'instantly significant' (2022: 30), leading to museums wanting to represent it in their collections. This was the case at National Museums Scotland, where curators felt an urgency to record the pandemic for posterity (Laurenson 2020 et al.). In her analysis of collecting art during the pandemic, Debono refers to museums 'heading-hunting' the 'truth-revealing objects', which would 'tell the stories and histories of the present to current and future generations' (2021: 179).

For Hannah Crowdy at National Museums NI the pandemic was an opportunity for people to 'record their experiences and share their experiences and come to terms with what's happened'. The responsibility to collect is audience-driven. In her articulation of responsibility, Crowdy speaks of in terms of 'what that means to audiences, that there's that important record for the future around this extraordinary period' (Crowdy, Interview April 2021). Collette Brownlee, Community and Outreach Officer at Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum has a clear sense of the importance of the moment saying **'we knew we were living through something very big and, given the museum's social role, we felt a responsibility to collect at a time of crisis'.** For her, the experience of working on the Decade of Centenaries, made her mindful of the importance of museums for making that record, suggesting '100 years from now people will want to know what happened' (Brownlee, Interview April 2021).

In order to make that record, in 2020 Ordinary People, Extraordinary Times was launched by the Making the Future project, a Special EU Programme Body PEACE IV funded collaboration between National Museums NI, Public Record Office for Northern Ireland, the Linen Hall Library and the Nerve Centre. Ordinary People, Extraordinary Times was a 3-month online programme encouraging online and offline conversations between groups while documenting 'how we, ordinary people, experienced this extraordinary time ... our first jump into online engagement' (Gillespie 2021).

Nationally and internationally museums were aware of the importance of capturing the pandemic.

Making the Future was surprised by the scale of interest, and repeated the programme three times, leading to the receiving over 800 items, ranging from family objects to letters and photographs, which were shared through an online exhibition (www.ordinaryextraordinary2020.org). This initiated a further Stay Home Memories project, which documented the lockdown experience, in order to 'capture key details of daily life during the public health emergency' (https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/stay-home-memories-archive-launched).

PANDEMIC DISPLAY CASE: IMAGE COURTESY OF THE TOWER MUSEUM

Table 1: Types of Material collected by museums in Northern Ireland to record the Pandemic

Medical Related	e.g. scrubs, NHS tributes, locally made hand-sanitizer & masks.
Public information	e.g. Prime Minister's letter, Government Guidance, pandemic posters
Clothing	e.g. T-shirt sold to raise funding for a domestic abuse charity
Photos	e.g. of empty streets, Covid-19 -related signage.
Art, crafts, writing	e.g. Quilt inspired by the NHS
Testimony	e.g. Personal diaries and accounts e.g. Lockdown Diary National Museums NI
Anti-Vax	e.g. Ephemera

Forming pandemic-related collections, a Local Authority curator was certain it was their 'responsibility to collect what we can' and to be sure it was representative, including **stories from communities disproportionally impacted by the pandemic and individuals resistant to lockdowns and vaccines**. She was mindful of the ethical imperative when collecting personal stories, adding 'some testimonies were very personal, very raw. They won't be used immediately 'nevertheless 'we have an ethical duty not to use those stories just now'. Instead she suggested it is about 'readiness', knowing when communities are ready for experiences to be shared (Anon05, Interview March 2021). At National Museums Scotland this was framed as collecting with '*the highest levels of sensitivity*' (original emphasis) mindful of social responsibilities and political dynamics (Laurenson et al. 2020:334).

Rapid response collecting was not undertaken by all institutions, and the reasons varied, ranging from staff capacity, to not expecting Covid-19 to have the impact it did. One commentator suggested 'it might be as simple as we all thought this was going to last 3-4 weeks at the outset, possibly 2-3 months' (Anon04, Interview June 2021). For a Local Authority museum it was not the right time, with the museum manager saying **'none of us had the headspace to go and search out [collections] ... we consciously took a step back from that'; instead that museum looked for other ways 'we could link with people and uplift people', predominantly through social media** (Anon02, Interview March 2021). Another museum curator felt that some of the pressure to make collections was misguided, suggesting 'it was very much a knee-jerk reaction... [Another] Museum is doing Covid collecting and let's jump on the bandwagon' (Anon11, Interview March 2021).

> **Covid-19 has enabled opportunities around collecting and proving the relevance of museums.**
>
> **HANNAH CROWDY,** NATIONAL MUSEUMS NORTHERN IRELAND

The pandemic period was also a means for museums to share collections information in new ways via social media.

Going forward, a consideration for all museums is how to handle the material that came in during the pandemic. Morgan and Macdonald (2020) refer to pre-pandemic 'profusion struggle' in museums, emerging from decades of collecting fueled by anxiety over loss of cultural memory. For those museums that collected pandemic material, there is a suggestion coming from the sector that a significant task is ahead to assess what has come into our museums, both on the basis of representativeness and duplication.

3.2 Hold useful and useable information on collections

As well as getting caught up with the documentation backlog, at North Down Museum the curator used the working from home time to digitise the museum's photographic collection, which was then added to their collections management system for ease of use in the future.

Collections staff at Fermanagh County Museum used the time to improve their standard of museum documentation. The Development Officer for collections, who also has a responsibility for exhibitions, found her time freed up, because new exhibitions were on hold at the height of the pandemic. This gave her opportunity for 'concentrated work on the collections ... **It was a wonderful opportunity for us in terms of getting a lot of behind the scenes done in terms of documentation**' (Reilly, Interview May 2022).

The pandemic coincided with the introduction of a new collections management system and the staff had opportunity to focus on bedding the system in. Training on how to operate the new system, that was to be face-to-face, went online with instructional videos and Teams meetings. For Sinead Reilly, who is responsible for collections management, this was her first experience of online learning and she found the experience conducive to her area of work.

Training videos could be watched over, to be sure that nothing was missed, and revisited with new members of staff. The ease of meeting via Teams meant that questions could be answered very quickly. For Reilly, this mode of learning 'is the way forward' (Reilly, Interview May 2022).

The pandemic period was also a means for museums to share collections information in new ways via social media, with one museum manager stating they were 'very conscious of the importance of keeping our profile going and keeping our links' (Anon02, Interview March 2021). To maintain awareness of collections, staff posted a 'mystery object' on social media channels, as a means to engage people with their collections, liking the simplicity of the method. As awareness grew for the types of collections in the museum, this sparked donation of objects that connected in meaning or significance. The museum is located close to sports grounds, and pre-pandemic on Saturday mornings the area was usually busy with football players. With that halted during the pandemic, each Saturday the museum posted image from their sport photographic collection, asking for help to name the team and members. **As a result of this crowd-sourcing of collections information, the museum improved their knowledge of this collection**.

Social media was harnessed by other museums, to share collections information. In the run up to Christmas 2020, the Somme Museum shared a social media-focused advent calendar, sharing 24 objects from their collection online. The initiative proved hugely significant for the museum. It was an opportunity to share previously unseen from their collections and forge increasing interactions between the museum and their audiences. By posting questions on social media, people were connecting directly with museum staff in a way that had not happened previously. For the museum, this enabled them to unlock the collection by creating new virtual experiences.

3.3 Care of collections

When museums were closed, and staff began to go on furlough, **the responsibility for collections was at the forefront of historic house staff, museum managers and curators**. In Derry City and Strabane Council, Bernadette Walsh described the importance of ensuring that during the lockdown the museum had a plan for regular collection checks 'to ensure objects were in a safe and stable environment'. This was put in place early on in the pandemic and proved essential, for within a few weeks many of the national loaning bodies were in touch looking for confirmation as to current security and environmental levels (Walsh Blog 2021). Likewise, across National Trust properties, a 'skeleton staff' of collections and house teams, had to adapt collections care processes 'carrying out delicate cleaning and battling pests that thrived in the absence of visitors' (National Trust 2021: 7).

Many museums used the closure as a time to undertake collections care. Collections could come out of cases and move from stores into gallery areas for condition checks, without the need to consider visitors in those spaces. Basic work could be done, but this was not the time for more considered conservation work. Activity that required additional people, for example to move collections or make decisions about interventions, could not take place in such conditions. As one respondent noted 'you can't access everything in the same way. I would have loved to have been able to get some conservation work … but you're very conscious that you are not able to. And it would be wrong to encourage people to come out on non-essential trips. So, you're here, but you're very restricted' (Anon02 March 2021).

Collections staff were aware of the opportunity that was before them to focus on collections 'without people being here'. Work continued behind the scenes, with our interviewee from a Local Authority museum commenting 'you've got this time that you've been given, that you've not asked for, …and you think, well, I've got to make the most use of this because I'm not going to get it again' (Anon02, Interview March 2021).

In the first phase of lockdown at North Down Museum, a Local Authority museum in Ards and North Down Council area, all but the museum manager Heather McGuicken were placed on furlough. She used a portion of that time to catch up on collections care – improving the layout of stores, assessing the handling collection and, in that time, 'was pretty much able to catch up with the backlog'. She described this process of working on the collections, and completing this documentation, as 'very therapeutic … I liked getting my head around the collection a bit better' (McGuicken, Interview March 2021). This was very timely for later in the year, the museum experienced a leak in one of their stores, but because all the collections were stored off the ground, there was no damage to collections.

The lockdowns lead to a complete change in collections care practices at National Museums Northern Ireland. With the introduction of the furlough scheme, the staff number was reduced to only those needed to ensure the safety of the collection, with the Head of Collection Services, security staff, store manager, and collections care manager remaining in place. A priority at the outset was to reassess the existing disaster plan, to understand how staff would rescue collections, and still comply with government regulations, should the museum experience a disaster during lockdown. Even with this mitigation in place, Ciarán Lavelle, Head of Collection Services, is grateful their lockdown disaster plan did not need to be tested.

ARMAGH ROBINSON LIBRARY, 2022

When National Museums NI collections staff came off furlough, an opportunity arose for deep cleaning of the open-air sites and the transport displays. This was made possible because without visitors (and the good weather) staff could empty out the houses, while still maintaining social distancing. In conservation labs, social distancing was more difficult and staff had to work on site on rotation. During the lockdowns, pressures such as moving collections for display, photography, or to make them available for consultation were reduced, enabling the collections staff to think strategically about their service. Ciarán Lavelle describes this as **a 'breathing space' and a 'time to think'**. In this period, he describes that **the team 'got to know the collection better'**, using it to plan for how to increase collections access for the longer term. One of the most significant innovations was the finalisation of a new store for the transport collection and the acquisition of a new collections management system, with mobile digital equipment to assess collections information in store. The use of online platforms enabled the NMNI staff to consult colleagues in other UK national museums for advice on which system best suited their needs, meetings that would have required flights and greater expense previously (or simply would not have happened at all).

A valued lesson from the pandemic period was the importance of a team ethic. At a time of challenge, and now during recovery, Lavelle suggests that team approach is essential, asserting 'you can't do it on your own'. For him it is essential that team spirit is fostered, 'so we are all moving in the same direction' (Lavelle, Interview May 2022).

Other activity during the pandemic demonstrated the link between visitor engagement and collections care. With a small grant awarded from NI Museums Council, an independent museum bought camera equipment which they used to get images of their collections onto social media. Primarily a concern with audience engagement, **this enabled the museum staff to refamiliarize themselves with their collections**.

In usual circumstances museum staff could not work with collections on a daily basis. With many other activities postponed, and a new project in progress, 'we opened the collection, started looking at our own collection, started bringing it out, started photographing it. And while we had it out, we also did collections care on it' (Anon03, Interview March 2021).

For this curator-manager, the pandemic brought an entirely unexpected bonus: 'I have reconnected with our collection. I love ... I go in, even on a day when there's nobody else in, and I'll go in and just open up the collection'. This interviewee reflected on the multiple roles of museum staff, that can draw them away from collection, commenting that, pre-pandemic, 'I had lost that connection to the collection, so they just had become items. They were just items. They were something that we had to look after. They were something that had to be cared for'; with a chance to work on the collections 'now I have got the love of each item' (Anon03). This new awareness lead to a new online project 'my favourite item', in which staff selected and spoke about significant items. The audience response was phenomenal, with the over-riding message 'we want more, we want more' (Anon03, Interview March 2021).

The rise in online engagement in collections has been welcomed by museum staff and audiences. All those museums that began sharing collections online found a receptive audience, and activity that lead to sharing knowledge, making new connections, and on occasion donations. Digital is now essential to a museum's operations; however, staff whose focus is very much the material object in the museum space, are keen to make the point that return to museum and heritage spaces is vital so the collections could be experienced in person. This point was succinctly put to us by a historic house curator who said 'there's no substitute for actually being here. There's no substitute for being in this house and being with the collection' (Anon10, Interview April 2021).

Even with this love for being in shared and inspiring spaces, it is widely accepted that the in-person experience is connected to digital – they go in tandem, one inspiring the other.

The rise in online engagement in collections has been welcomed by museum staff and audiences.

USERS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES

Audiences, accessibility and engagement are core to museum practice, relevance and sustainability. Increasingly in museums how we think about users and experiences is tied to issues of inclusivity, democratic museum cultures, and community co-creation and participation (Black 2021, 2012).

The pandemic has changed the location of the museum user. Summer 2021, when museums and historic houses had reopened, the number of on-site visits had dropped significantly, with visitors still cautious about being indoors (Thrive 2021).

Instead, the online engagements increased, with both local and national museums reporting online engagements far higher than ever before. **Going forward, as we strive to embed digital connectivity into our programming, we will need to include evaluative work to garner greater insight into the characteristics of that digital experience**, answering questions about quality, impact and diversity of audience engagement.

For a museum to meet the Users and their Experiences standard of the Accreditation scheme, attention has to be paid to three areas:

1 museums are **accessible to the public**, and use an access policy and plan as part of that process;
2 museums **understand and develop their audiences**, understanding who uses the museum and who doesn't, their needs and have a plan to enhance the range of users;
3 museums **engage with their users**, improving their experiences, stimulating learning and discovery activities and maintaining effective communication (Arts Council England 2018).

4.1 Be accessible to the public

The pandemic ended our established way of understanding accessibility for the majority of museum users. With lockdown, and then highly choreographed visits, **the museum space was changed entirely, with new directional signage and 'don't touch signage'**. For decades museum activists and practitioners had been pushing for new ways of making museums accessible for those who could not visit the museum site in person. Disability activists, for instance, had looked to digital media to bring museums beyond the walls of the museums and closer to communities (Lisney et al. 2013; McMillen and Alter 2017). In 2020 the pandemic brought this method of reaching out to visitors to the fore of museum planning.

In 2019, the year preceding the pandemic, Fermanagh County Museum recorded their highest visitor numbers yet, boosted by visitors arriving via tour bus, and large-scale events on the site, including a music festival and continental market. Speaking in 2021, our interviewee expected 'we would need to remodel' the established offer, to provide experiences at a scale that would suit audiences. Indeed, by the end of 2021 events had started to return. In October 2021, the museum hosted a Silver Sunday event, in collaboration with South West Age Partnership and as part of Positive Ageing Month. This 'bubble event', provided visitors with a tour of art works followed by a painting class. Images were shared via social media, as a further way of getting the message out that museums have adopted safe ways of bring visitors back.

With growing confidence, in Spring 2022 Friends of the Museum visited a new display of paintings by TP Flanagan (1929-2011); and over three weekends, museum staff provided public tours of the renovations of the Enniskillen workhouse. For these events numbers were limited and, in the case of the Workhouse tour, took place outdoors and in well-ventilated spaces. **These events were important for starting the process of bringing groups back on sites**, and were testing the water rather than a full-scale return.

ENTRANCE, ARMAGH ROBINSON LIBRARY, APRIL 2022

> **If Covid has taught museums anything, it's that the potential we have to make a difference [has] never been more needed.**

MICHAEL FRYER, NORTHERN IRELAND WAR MEMORIAL

MUSEUMS ON THE MOVE, NATIONAL MUSEUMS NI

At National Museums NI engagement with audiences was maintained through the museum website, the adaptation of outreach and engagement programmes and new learning offer to schools. In her blog for the Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project, Louise Rice, Education Manager National Museums Northern Ireland wrote of the importance of a radical overhaul of the museum offer. She wrote 'There was a determination to come up with much more than a Covid sticking plaster'; instead, **the pressure placed by the pandemic to create new programming had the potential to 'resolve some persistent long-term barriers to engagement for schools'** (Rice 2021, Blog). The new offer took the form of 25 curriculum-themed loan boxes, that went out to class rooms, with museum staff joining via video-link. Success relied on teacher-engagement, in planning and implementation, resulting in feedback that 'reassured us that we were on to something special with this blended approach' (Rice 2021, Blog). The project was transformational. In a 10-week period the museum delivered 334 class sessions (10,020 pupil-engagements), and an even more welcome outcome was connecting with schools had had not used the museum service in over 5 years (20% of those taking part).

4.2 Understand and Develop Audiences

During the periods of lockdown, those museums that embraced online media found themselves engaging with new and broader audiences. For instance, for some smaller independent museum, focused on niche interests, were 'discovered during lockdown' (Anon01, Interview March 2021). In his blog for Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 volunteer events co-ordinator Robin Morton described how the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland, who operate Whitehead Railway Museum, 'hit the buffers' in March 2020 when Covid-19 'derailed the Society's plans' for its usual events (Morton, 2021 Blog). Like Fermanagh County Museum, 2019 had seen their highest visitor numbers coupled with increased income from steam rides. During lockdown the Preservation Society went online growing their social media presence with regular updates. By the time the museums and trains were re-opened in August 2020 the museum had a wider demographic, with growth of interest amongst family visitors.

September 2020-April 2022, TourismNI participated in the UK-wide marketing campaign 'We're Good to Go' to get the message out that the facilities were safely re-opening for visitors. The scheme developed an industry standard for operations of sites along government guidelines, including ticketless booking, sanitising stations, clear signage and social distancing, use of face covering and regular cleaning. With the 'We're Good to Go' logo prominently displayed, Whitehead Railway Museum announced its re-opening in August 2020. Their effort did not go unnoticed for a visitor, who wrote on Facebook: 'very easy to experience the museum while socially distanced and the volunteer guides were fantastic, as always. Hand sanitising stations everywhere and lots of clear and easy to follow signage' (https://www.facebook.com/WhiteheadRailwayMuseum).

As well as new audiences, there was an interest in building up a new type of museum offer, that appealed during the challenges of the pandemic. For Michael Fryer of Northern Ireland War Memorial, this was one of having 'a positive impact on people's wellbeing through their participation in our workshops'. He suggested 'if Covid has taught museums anything, it's that the potential we have to make a difference in this area has arguably never been more needed' (Fryer, Interview April 2021).

POSTER DISPLAYED AT CASTLE WARD, NATIONAL TRUST NORTHERN IRELAND

4.3 Engaging with Users

The experiences of school and university students, who had to quickly transfer their learning to online, was one of fast and sometimes difficult adaptation. The well-planned and intended online distance learning offer, is one that is drastically different to that which is forced through a pandemic and researchers suggest a 'social class achievement gap' is one of the consequences of the period (Goudeau et al. 2021). Yandell (2020) in his exploration of English teaching during the lockdowns found that the online teaching was a 'poor substitute for the real thing' because it cannot grasp the embodied and social nature of learning' which is more 'intricate, nuanced and multidimensional' (Yandell 2020: 263).

Those findings resonate with the museum sector, where digital engagement has been welcomed, with some caution. **Digital engagement falls foul in the same way in person engagement can, if it lacks collaborative planning and creativity**. Being digital is not alone an indication of innovation and imagination; rather, using digital badly can cause a retreat in practice. Museum academic and practitioner Graham Black fears that one of the outcomes of the pandemic is a 'threat to social interaction' leading to 'a resurgence in the passive, didactic display' (Black 2021: 298). The point he is making here is that, when going online, we must not return to 'old school' methods of museum programming lacking the discovery and constructivist methodologies of recent decades.

During the pandemic museums had to find ways of interacting with their users in a way that still embraces thinking, developed over decades, about how to make the museum space engaging and collaborative. At National Museums Northern Ireland, the final exhibition of the Making the Future project, which opened February 2020, switched from an in-person offer at the Ulster Museum to a fully digital experience. Co-created with the Nerve Centre, and including the blackboard from the hit Channel 4 series the Derry Girls, the digital version of 'CultureLab: Don't Believe the Stereotype' attracted 25,000 online users in their first week (see https://culturelab.makingthefuture.eu/). This instance demonstrates how critical multi-skilled collaboration is – the quick conversion of in person exhibition to a digital platform was made possible by the media skills of the Nerve Centre, a creative media hub established in Derry-Londonderry.

As we move out of the pandemic, there will be **an expectation that the museum offer will be a blended one, in-person combined with digital**. We are already experiencing the challenges of blended events: the added workload of simultaneously running an in-person and blended event; the worry over Wi-Fi in untested venues; and issues around positioning of cameras, lighting, sound and acoustics in rooms not designed for live-streaming. None of these matters are in-surmountable, but a reminder of the hybrid challenge.

> **It was all going great guns and then March 2020 hit, and absolutely everything changed.**

LYNSEY GILLESPIE (2021), ARCHIVIST PRONI AND PART OF MAKING THE FUTURE

Table 2: The 2021 Programme for Playful Museums Festival

NI War Memorial	Offered a fun and engaging WWII learning programme for under-5s by telling the story of their museum mascot, Jeannie the Hen. A digital workshop included recipes and activity sheets and a new 'Jeannie the Hen' video, distributed on YouTube.
Ballymoney Museum	Created a 'From Me to You' project for young people to create arts and crafts themed around the postal service. It was delivered virtually with animations, online instruction videos and downloadable resource packs posted on the Ballymoney Museum Facebook Page. A major part of this project was the creation of the child's own portrait stamp and postcards. These were posted to Ballymoney Museum and then delivered to care homes in the Borough as a way of connecting generations.
Armagh Robinson Library	Created new interactive videos, distributed via Vimeo, for under-5s, exploring the historic house, No.5 Vicar's Hill and the library. Museum staff welcomed their viewers and brought them through a specially scripted tour and introduces them to items in their collections. Viewers were invited to look at the buildings and objects and then look around the room they are in.
F.E. McWilliam Gallery	Hosted live arts and crafts workshops led by artists. These were connected with their established Toddler Tuesday events and the Mini Crafts for Little Hands, weekly digital craft series, in which they encourage young visitors to get involved in drawing, painting, collage and printing.
Mid-Antrim Museum at the Braid	Launched a new workshop 'Discover the Castle' for preschool and nursery children.

PLAYFUL MUSEUMS FESTIVAL

Playful Museums, has been a fixture of the Northern Ireland museum calendar since it was piloted in 2017 as an engagement project for under 5s, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The following year NI Museums Council launched the Playful Museums Festival and, **since the success of that initial project, museum members have kept the programme running,** with small funding interventions from NI Museums Council and allocations from their own budgets.

The challenges of 2020/21 did not dim museum's enthusiasm. In 2021 participants developed a creative online programme, specially tailored for the young visitors and their carers, which was marketed with the line 'Take care everyone & find ways to play despite Lockdown!' (Playful Museums Facebook 26 January 2021). This resonates with the findings of King et al, who found that the sector presented their adapted format in positive tones, offering museums as places of 'community comfort in a time of uncertainty' (King et al. 2021: 492).

As well as the five museums directly participating the Festival (see Table 2), **other museums engaged via social media, sharing collections relevant to the playful museums theme.** Included amongst these were Fermanagh County Museum sharing images of their toy collections, Armagh County Museum sharing historic photographs of local children, and the Headhunters Railway Museum (non-accredited museum, Enniskillen), sharing objects that would appeal to young visitors.

> **We're so looking forward to the day local museums across NI can reopen and welcome the public back in again for some fun and engaging learning! Until then, remember to stay home and keep safe. Thanks again Headhunters Barber Shop & Railway Museum for reminding us of the great times we have all had at our local museums in the past! And the great times we will have again soon! #NIPlayfulMuseums**

MESSAGE POSTED BY NIMC, FACEBOOK 3 MARCH 2021

MEMORIES, MOVEMENT AND MUSEUMS

Prior to the pandemic, Northern Ireland Museums Council had a growing reputation for **supporting the museum sector in gaining the skills and experience to engage with people living with Dementia**. January-February 2020 NI Museums Council piloted a new project that combined with Love2Move, a British Gymnastics Foundation Initiative. Working with three museums: NI War Memorial, Mid Antrim Museum and Tower Museum, dementia friendly chair-based exercises were combined with collections-based reminiscence activities. The sessions were specially tailored for residents in local care homes and delivered with the assistance of care providers. After the initial pilot, this programme moved to other museums. One was Armagh Robinson Library & No. 5 Vicar's Hill which in November 2020 worked with Love2Move and members of Dementia NI's Empowerments Groups to run weekly evening online sessions. The exercise element was combined with exploring museum collections.

> **We know the benefits for health and wellbeing that museums can offer, and our older visitors are the poorer for having to stay at home, just as we have missed them coming through our doors.**
>
> **MICHAEL FRYER,** NORTHERN IRELAND WAR MEMORIAL

With lockdown Northern Ireland War Memorial had to find new ways of connecting with their audiences. Working with an exercise facilitator and a local care home, mid-2020 they delivered workshops via Zoom, which lead to another programme later in the year based around Covid-secure loan boxes. Michael Fryer describes having objects that could be handled as bringing a highly valued multi-sensory experience to reminiscence sessions (Fryer, 2021 Blog).

'YOU SAY YOU LOVE ME, BUT YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW ME'

The creativity shown during the peak of the pandemic has continued in new formats of museum collaborations. An example is the 'You say you love me, but you don't even know me', partnership between National Museums NI and The Little Museum Dublin. Launched Valentine's Day 2022 it used **a hybrid of in-person and online activity to bring a focus on collections that can be used to explore identity in Northern Ireland**. The project uses 35 objects from the National Museum Collection (or 'treasures') as method to 'introduce, or re-introduce', Northern Ireland to the people of Dublin (www.littlemuseum.ie/you-say-you-love-me).

CHANGE, CHALLENGES AND RECOVERY

In the opening of his book *Museums and the Challenge of Change* (2021), Graham Black paraphrases Charles Dickens, with the words 'it is the best of times yet also the worst of times to work in museums' (2021: xviii).

For the most part the main text of the book, written by Black, with chapters from contributors, was prepared pre-pandemic with hurried additions added in the final months before going to print, aware of the relevance of a lifechanging pandemic. Although the pandemic was a challenge far greater than anyone could have predicted, for those working in museums change is a constant for a sector vulnerable to societal and financial pressures. With the onset of the pandemic this became more severe, with Black suggesting: 'the Covid-19 pandemic, which sped up things even more and has had a dramatic impact on the museum sector, adding to the challenges faced' (2021: xviii).

The findings of the Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project recognises those challenges observed by Black, which posed a substantial threat to how museums remained relevant to their communities.

Alongside the challenges of the pandemic, in Northern Ireland we have the added uncertainty of political instability. For three years immediately preceding the pandemic (2017-2020) we were without our devolved administration; then the Assembly collapsed again in February 2022 and, as we prepare this report, our Assembly is still failing to meet.

> **Bad weather, low consumer confidence, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic have all taken their toll.**
>
> **NATIONAL MUSEUMS NORTHERN IRELAND,**
> ANNUAL REVIEW 2019-2020

Each of the periods Northern Ireland has been without the Assembly have been critical times for the region: during 2017-2020 the mechanisms of Brexit were being negotiated, and most recently as we navigate our way out of the pandemic.

Today the continued uncertainty around the Northern Ireland Protocol, negotiated as part of Brexit, poses challenges for the operation of museums in the region – interviewees have raised the associated difficulties with procurement and are anticipating the impact of Brexit on international visitors.

Given the impact of the pandemic, combined with the local challenges of Brexit, and global concerns around cost of living and climate change, our attention turns to how to lessen those impacts. Through this report, as well as blogs and other outputs on the project website, we have documented the innovative character of the cultural sector which has strived, as much as possible, to turn threats into opportunities. It has certainly been the 'worst of times' for many of us, but through invention and collaboration the sector has opportunity to emerge with its societal role intact.

5.1 Museum Purposes and Programming

As challenge continues, we need to revise and articulate our core principles. During pandemic closures and re-opening, the sector called for change; this desire for change needs to be accompanied by ideas for how that change will be realised. Now, more than ever, we need museum participation that engages with the 'shared authority approach', with the museum as the nucleus (Anon05, Interview). Progressive ideals around democratic approaches to museum practice should be at the core of this thinking. Director of Collections in National Museums NI suggests that 'in good times and in bad times, values and ethics provide the essential touch point around which judgement can be exercised and decisions taken' (Blair 2021:21).

> **As the sector begins to emerge from what has been the most significant crisis we've ever faced, will our post COVID-19 world be one of bleak austerity, or an opportunity for museums to find a new fulfilment of their role and purpose in society?**

WILLIAM BLAIR, DIRECTOR OF COLLECTIONS NATIONAL MUSEUMS NI. (2021: 21)

SAFETY SIGNAGE IN MUSEUM RECEPTION AREA, 2021

5.2 Museums and the economic outlook

In December 2021 the OECD published a UK economic forecast, and **predicted the economy would reach pre-crisis levels by early 2022**; alongside that they predicted lower unemployment and rising inflation. This was, however, published before the war in Ukraine. What many anticipate is closer to what was suggested in by Benjamin Nabarro, the 'UK faces a long and difficult adjustment in the wake of both COVID and Brexit' (2020: 127).

The local museum sector is preparing itself for these multiple challenges. In Ards and North Down Borough Council, the Community and Culture Division (with responsibility for North Down Museum) is anticipating reduced budgets from Council and Central Government and a need for increased efficiency savings. They are expecting rising demands on services and workloads and further work negotiating the impact of Brexit. These challenges will be combined with the legacy of 'the negative impact of a global pandemic - Covid-19' (AND 2021: 12). The risks posed by this potentially lethal combination, means the sector must rally together to articulate its value underpinned by evidence of its societal impact.

In its Annual Report of 2021, the National Trust, which operates seven accredited historic houses in Northern Ireland, reported that the pandemic is 'having a very significant financial impact on the organisation (2021: 126). An outcome of this is expected to be a renewed focus on funding, suggesting that 'fundraising was more critical to the Trust's work than ever' (2021: 17).

When the pandemic closed National Museums NI to visitors, senior management in the museum remained ambitious. The team is currently planning for a redevelopment of its Ulster Folk Museum, which will require significant public investment, a case they are aware will need to be made carefully. It is the Director of Collections assertion that 'the economy needs ambitious projects' in order to 're-ignite the economy', adding 'this is not the time for contraction' (Blair, Interview March 2021). The case for this investment will, according to the Chief Operating Officer, be built around 'delivering solid outcomes that are linked to greater societal objectives' (Catney Interview March 2021).

> **The pandemic brings the need for change to the fore and provides the continuing impetus to make that change actually happen.**

GRAHAM BLACK, MUSEUM ACADEMIC AND PRACTITIONER (2021: 297)

As we emerge from the pandemic, with further challenges on the horizon, the task of measuring and demonstrating the societal impact of museums is key for survival.

5.3 Capturing museum impacts

A constant point, raised in museum-sector online events, and in our interviews with practitioners, was the issue of **capturing the public impact and societal value of museums**. The Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project has documented the concerns of practitioners during the crisis and, in its engagement with stakeholders, has acted as an advocacy tool when the sector was its most vulnerable.

Findings from this project were fed directly to the Culture, Arts and Heritage Taskforce to inform the direction emergency support. Later, work-in-progress briefings recommended changes to practice and policy in areas of funding, community engagement and digital, which were shared with individuals key to the future of the museum sector. **Our research, from early January 2021 through to May 2022 has demonstrated that the museum sector has remained relevant during the pandemic, providing valued services** to communities, including schools and care homes, as well as people in lockdown both in Northern Ireland and far beyond. This work, which included planning for organisational health and the care and management of collections, was forward-looking shaping a resilient sector, post pandemic.

As we emerge from the pandemic, with further challenges on the horizon, **the task of measuring and demonstrating the societal impact of museums is key for survival**. In our Focus Group meetings (March and April 2021) the question of capturing museum impacts was raised repeatedly. A participant from the local museum sector, identified a 'struggle of priorities' in museums and the task of 'proving your relevance even internally to your own governing body' (FG1_02). Reflecting back, another local sector curator commented that her team are 'in a whole twist' about how to capture museum visitors, school engagements, and 'how many hits on this and that', adding her managers are 'looking for hard facts to make sure you exist' (FG2_04). Her colleague added, the real difficulty lies in 'trying to judge ourselves on other people's terms' (FG2_02). Another, who works in the area of outreach, also used the word 'struggle', to refer to museums counting their value, expanding the point to say 'a lot of the work I do, it feels nearly impossible to really get hold of that properly'. Instead, she sees the true value of her work as 'setting the pebble in a pond and watching the ripples go out' (FG2_01). This after-effect of museum engagement is critical to truly **understanding the wider benefit of participation**. The beneficiaries of museum engagement have potential to go beyond the person who engaged that day, to be of value to those they encountered later.

The beneficiaries of museum engagement have potential to go beyond the person who engaged that day.

When recording visitors, we must think more broadly of the ecology and life-cycle of the museum visitor.

How museum practice is documented and measured needs to change to keep pace with a new service, employing creative ways of capturing impact, both online and in person. When recording visitors, we must think more broadly of the ecology and life-cycle of the museum visitor. Online or in person, our children might visit with school; visit again with parents; parents might visit with extended family, or at different times of their lives when the museum is local or on return visits when living away. That family might have multiple ethnicities or include people with health conditions or impairments. As a sector, we don't collect longitudinal data documenting the impact of lifetime of cultural participation or museum visiting. Using ten years of data drawn from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, researchers found higher levels cultural participation led to lower incidences of dementia (Fancourt et al. 2018). By not gathering information on the immediate 'ripple effect' as well as the lifecycle of the museum visit, we only understand a small portion of the museum visit. Given the limits on resources for museums to gather that data, we suggest taking a partnership approach to research, which could include working more closely with other sectors.

5.4. Strategic Planning for the Museum Sector

In late 2021 the *Local Authority Investment in Museums after a Decade of Austerity* (Rex and Campbell 2021) exposed the dearth of data on Northern Ireland's museums. A study covering the four nations, **the empty columns for Northern Ireland reveals a sector lacking open and comparable data.** As we navigate the challenges of the post-Covid and post-Brexit landscape, the museum sector needs the resources to gather and share data on museum funding, visitor numbers, workforce, societal impact, and museum infrastructures. We can garner limited information on the use of museum services from the Continuous Household Survey, and add context from NMNI Annual Reports, but this is insufficient for an important cultural sector that needs data to underpin informed and collaborative practice as well as long-term planning.

The Northern Ireland Museum Policy (2011) has now been in existence for over a decade, and needs to be re-issued to reflect the changing Northern Ireland landscape. In the time since it was published we have seen a restructuring of central government departments – the Department for Culture Arts and Leisure no longer exists, with the NI Museums Council and National Museums NI now receiving their support from the Department for Communities. Further to that, the Review of Public Administration, which reduced the number of Councils from 26 to 11, resulted in Councils with multiple museums, raising a new dynamic.

As we navigate the challenges of the post-Covid and post-Brexit landscape, the museum sector needs the resources to gather and share data on museum funding, visitor numbers, workforce, societal impact, and museum infrastructures.

DIGITIAL WORKSHOP, ULSTER UNIVERSITY 2022

With this changed museum landscape, the development of a new museum strategy is vital for the sector.

More fundamentally, **Northern Ireland is no longer part of the European Union, which funded museum capital and community projects**; the full outcome of Brexit for the sector is still to be seen (Crooke and O'Kelly 2018; McCullough 2021). There have also been demographic changes as an outcome of both the Peace Process and EU integration. Joining established ethnic minorities from China and India, are sizeable populations from Poland and Lithuania. More recently the so-called global and European refugee crises have driven increased numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, which has diversified the population further (McDermott 2018). If we add those changes to the economic and societal impacts of the pandemic, the Museum Policy of 2011 has limited value for a sector with ambition across societal impacts.

With this changed museum landscape, the development of a new museum strategy is vital for the sector. Working collaboratively across education, health and environment sectors, we need to gather diverse forms of data that both justifies strategic partnership in these areas and provides evidence of the lasting societal impact of museums.

The Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project has demonstrated a sector that is aware of its societal role, is ambitious and caring, and willing to be agile and responsive. It is a sector confident that, through shared practice and participation, museums can be transformative.

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RESEARCH DATA

These reports are the results of 18 months of data gathering, analysis, continuous dissemination, and sector engagements. Since February 2021, the project conducted two focus groups, twenty-five in-depth interviews, and a start-of-year survey with individuals from across the Northern Ireland museum sector.

In addition, three work-in-progress briefings and workshops provided mid-project feedback and input from project stakeholders, including museum staff, advocacy bodies, and representatives from Department for Communities. Presentations were delivered to Northern Ireland Museums Council, the Museums Association, Irish Museums Association, Pandemics and Beyond, and Ulster University, each of which generated new insights.

Pilot projects have included a digital skills workshop for heritage postgraduate students, the development of interactive documentaries with media students, the prototype of a digital AR tool, and guided wellbeing sessions within heritage space. This data has been supplemented by attendance and interactions at sector workshops and regular informal discussions with project partners and individuals from the museum and related sectors.

Interviewees

Aaron Ward	Head of Audience Development, National Museums NI	11 May 2021
Brona Moffett	Head of Experience and Enterprise Development, National Museums NI	2 July 2021
Ciaran Lavelle	Head of Collection Services, National Museums NI	30 May 2022
Clare Maguire	Service Manager, Youth Engagement Service, Derry-Londonderry	6 July 2021
Colin Catney	Chief Operating Officer, National Museums NI	1 March 2021
Elaine McEnarney	Curator Armagh Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council	15 March 2021
Eva Lynch	Development Officer, Northern Ireland Museum Council	18 October 2021
Hannah Crowdy	Head of Curatorial, National Museums NI	21 April 2021
Heather McGuicken	North Down Museum Manager	23 March 2021
Lisa Rea Currie	Heritage Officer, EastSide Partnership	3 November 2021
Louise Rice	Education Manager, National Museums NI	16 July 2021
Michael Fryer	Outreach Officer, Northern Ireland War Memorial	30 April 2021
Niamh Kelly	Youth Ambassador, Reimagine, Remake, Replay, Project director, Coming of Age in Covid-19	12 May 2022
Paul Mullan	Director of Northern Ireland, National Lottery Heritage Fund	9 August 2021 11 May 2022
Roisin Doherty	Curator, Derry City and Strabane District Council	6 May 2022
Sinead Reilly	Fermanagh County Museum	10 May 2022
William Blair	Director of Collections, National Museums NI	1 March 2021

Anonymous Interviewees

Anon01	Local Authority Museum Manger	8 March 2021
Anon02	Local Authority Museum Manger	12 March 2021
Anon03	Independent Museum	24 March 2021
Anon04	Advocacy Body	31 March 2021
Anon05	Local Authority Museum Manager	4 May 2021 20 October 2021
Anon06	Curatorial, National Museums NI	7 June 2021
Anon07	Curatorial, National Museums NI	19 October 2021

Focus Groups (10 March 2021, 28 April 2021)

FGS1	Heritage Freelancer
FGS2	Independent Museum
FGS3	Local Authority Museum
FGS4	Local Authority Museum
FGS5	National Trust

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PROJECT REPORTS, JUNE 2022

1. Museums and the Pandemic: Revisiting Purposes and Priorities
2. Museums and Digital Media: Innovation, Engagement and Practice
3. Museums and Community Wellbeing

WORK IN PROGRESS BRIEFINGS, DECEMBER 2021 - JANAURY 2022

1. Finance and Furlough
2. Museums, Covid-19 and Digital Media
3. Museum and Community Wellbeing

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