

## Feedback from the Museum Forum

The NIMC annual Museum forum took place on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2018 at the NI War Memorial. The theme for the day was 'The Inclusive Museum' with consideration of Accessible Museums; Playful Museums and Dementia Friendly Museums. The session involved speakers from a range of organisations- local museums, RoI and UK museums, voluntary and community sector and individuals. As well as presentations the session involved a number of small group discussions. The purpose of the day was to reflect where we currently are as a sector and highlight opportunities for growth and pinpoint development priorities and action points.

Participants at the Forum were asked to reflect on what the term 'Inclusive Museum' meant to them. The responses received are summarised below.

- Participants at the Museum Forum broadly considered an inclusive museum as an accessible and judgement free space that was representative of and responsive to the diversity within their local communities.
- The majority of respondents focused on accessible and inclusive programming and physical environment adaptations.
- A few touched-on issues of inclusivity within workforces, collections and exhibitions.
- A number cited impartiality which is a challenging and arguably difficult stance to successfully achieve, can we ever truly be without opinion or bias? Perhaps acknowledging our own standpoint and challenging it with that of others is a more inclusive and arguable achievable aspiration? The majority focused on a welcoming and judgement free experience within which our own view point is recognised, and background is recognised and treated with a parity of those which the museum seeks to engage. When it comes to issues where access is limited, or compromised equality impartiality is not going to instigate change. As one respondent said there is the need to push boundaries to challenge the norm and say, for example, yes we need an adult changing area, or yes, we need pictorial signage, or yes, we need to learn basic Makaton. Discussion about the Forum continued on social media platforms afterwards and NIMC was reminded about the right to dignity and urged to remind museums of the need to provide adult changing facilities in their buildings if they are to become truly inclusive spaces.
- Self-reflection and critique is the key to the concept of an 'Inclusive Museum'.
- Listening is also key- asking the right questions but also being prepared to hear that what is assumed to be useful to promote access may not be so for all. For example, reminiscence may be useful and engaging for those living with dementia, but we heard loudly and clearly that not everyone living with dementia wants or is interested in reminiscence. That is not to say that tool is now rendered invalid- far from it but it highlights the need to ask, hear, and the necessity of adaptability and flexibility - and you can bet there will be those who want and need to talk about the 'past' as the 'past' is their current or lived experience.

## **Summary:**

People are different for a wide variety of reasons and there was a desire among participants that museums work to give voice and expression to all. Participants were not naïve in their conclusions that while much good work and practice is ongoing, we have a lot more learning, listening and adapting to do. The Forum provided a potential catalyst for incremental change and as some concluded small, informed changes can have a large impact. Meeting the needs of diversity is underpinned by the willingness to learn, respect for others and the true belief that everyone is important and has a right to access, engage with, interpret and create cultural heritage.

To achieve or work towards an inclusive museum another key feature is staff awareness and training. One person willing to adapt to change is not enough- awareness and change needs to be inclusive of the full museum team from front of house through to manager and beyond to governing body.

## **Action in relation to Dementia Friendly Museums:**

**Dementia Friendly is a priority for the sector and much has been done to make museums dementia friendly although the level is variable.**

- Explore the possibility of collaboration with Azure Network to deliver a Cross-border experience sharing.
- Further develop the relationship with Dementia NI and the local Empowerment Groups - consult and understand that one-approach may not fit all.
- Explore the JAM card training with NOW Group.
- Work on an accessible museum access guide- DEEP guide in conjunction with Dementia NI.
- Maintain the NIMC dementia friendly working group.
- Follow up the potential of Azure training for 2019- possibility of places for NI local museum staff to attend.

## **Action in relation to accessible Museums:**

**This was highlighted as the most underdeveloped of the 3 areas focused on. It was thought there was a need to do much more. It was discussed that many adaptations would support a variety of users, for example visuals and quiet spaces for dementia friendly would also support those living with ASD.**

- Funding and support for access audits.
- NIMC to take initiative.
- Baselineing of current provision.
- Training for the sector- Interest in JAM. Interest in Makaton.
- Consider an additional needs forum/working group.
- Explore a version of Playful Museums for Additional needs.
- Build partnerships with community/support organisations, for example, MENCAP and FunDays.

### **Action in relation to Playful Museums:**

**This was considered a priority and it was reflected that the Festival has become established and recognised. Provision for under 3s was highlighted as underdeveloped and a potential growth area as was intergenerational work.**

- Festival is important to maintain.
- NIMC support valued.
- Sharing knowledge and experiences useful for learning and improvement.
- Training is important especially front of house teams to ensure all staff are involved and on-board.
- Explore Partnership opportunities such as volunteer opportunities for Stranmillis students to assist with the Festival.
- Connecting museums with early years providers.
- Small grants are useful as simple adjustments are all that are required- toy box/play space.
- Attitudes of other visitors are important so kids in museums manifesto may be useful to promote. Or develop a manifesto for Playful Museums?
- Convening a working group or a post-Festival meeting could be useful.