

**Northern Ireland Museums Council**

**Guidance on Measuring Visitor Satisfaction**

**Introduction**

Visitor Studies is the generic term used to cover the ways and means museums evaluate their operations and activities in light of the needs and experiences of their visitors and users. It is a wide ranging discipline that includes data collection, the evaluation and analysis of the information collected, and visitor profiling. Museums use such analysis to identify and address barriers to participation, assess the effectiveness of their programmes, determine how visitors rate their interactions with the museum, and to identify different perceptions and feelings about the museum as an organisation from both existing and potential audiences. In short Visitor Studies is about monitoring the relevance of museums and using findings to guide strategic thinking, to feed into key-decision making in a timely manner, and inform business planning and museum management.

This guidance aims to provide an insight into a fundamental component of Visitor Studies, namely measuring Visitor Satisfaction, as a step towards actively engaging in audience research and developing relationships with museum visitors.

**Visitor Satisfaction**

Visitor satisfaction focuses on visitors’ expectations of, and satisfaction with, particular components (or all) of the range of products, services, activities, places and infrastructure that contribute to their visitor experience. In light of this, visitor experience can include all aspects of a museum visit, from the programme which engages people with artefacts, to the support services provided, such as catering, car parking and retailing. Visitor satisfaction is often measured across visitors’ pre-visit expectations and their actual experiences of a visit or activity, through their immediate responses or through gathering impressions sometime after the visit.

**Why measure visitor satisfaction in museums**

Beyond the good business sense mentioned above, having an insight into visitor satisfaction is useful to your Board or governing body, and given that funders will want to know that you are meeting the needs and demands of the people you serve, it is a vital element when bidding for resources. Also, such intelligence is essential to meeting the prevailing standards and the UK standard for museums, the Accreditation Scheme, has specific requirements in this regard.

Section 3 of the Accreditation Scheme - Users and their Experiences – states that to satisfy the obligations of the standard,

*The museum must offer and develop good quality, stimulating services for users and potential users, in order to get the best out of its collections, resources and local area.’ (Accreditation Standard, Section 3.1-3.15)*

And that a museum applying for recognition:

* must understand who its users and non-users are
* must evaluate and analyse information to assess users’ needs
* must devise plans to broaden its range of users
* must have a culture of customer care with arrangements in place to make sure all users are treated with courtesy and care
* takes account of users’ needs, guided by a policy statement setting out a commitment to give everyone access to collections and associated information
* must respond to tourism and local priorities where appropriate

Undertaking visitor satisfaction surveys has been noted as one demonstrable means of meeting the requirements of the standard.

The Museum Code of Ethics also requires all those who work for, or who govern museums, to ensure that they *“Improve the quality of experience for all users.” (3.1).* By implication, this requires museums to ascertain what user perceptions are and eliciting suggestions on how their experience might be improved.

Thus measuring visitor satisfaction brings many benefits, enabling museums to:

* gather real evidence about how to meet their core aims and objectives
* explore the impact they have on their visitors
* develop ongoing relationships with their visitors
* encourage ongoing improvements and raising standards within the museum
* research how satisfied the visitor is with the services and programmes being delivered by the museum.
* understand the needs and expectations of visitors which in turn will inform future planning
* understand the way people interact with museums and what their expectations are from a visit
* raise staff awareness of the need to collect this information
* demonstrate to visitors and users that the museum is committed to providing a means to measure their experiences
* provide evidence to funders and governing body of the museum’s performance
* provide information on which the museum can maintain its current performance or improve performance
* identify benchmarks against which progress and targets can be measured
* determine if marketing campaigns have been successful

**How to measure visitor satisfaction in local museums**

**1. Assessing current methods**

You will know your museum and your visitors better than anyone, so you will be able to decide what information will be most relevant for your organisation to collect and the best methods to achieve this. A useful first step is to assess the veracity and usefulness of the methods you currently employ to gain an insight into visitor satisfaction.

What methods are already used to consult visitor opinion?

* visitor surveys
* comment cards
* visitor’s book
* online feedback e.g. via website contact forms, trip advisor, survey returns
* post-activity evaluations forms
* verbal feedback to staff
* social media comments
* booking systems e.g. ticketing systems/ databases
* e-mail marketing lists
* the organisation’s complaints procedures. This information may be collected elsewhere, for example there may be a central contact within local authorities.

You may wish to ask the following questions by way of assessing the effectiveness of your processes.

* How often do you survey visitor satisfaction?
* Who analyses the information?
* Who gets the analysis, how is it presented, and what do they do with the information?
* Does the survey tell you what you want to find out?
* What other methods are available and would be appropriate for you to use?
* Are the resources (money and people) to hand sufficient for future survey activity?

The analysis of your current approach will identify the strengths and weaknesses of your current approach and will likely suggest the objectives of any future survey you might undertake.

**2. Resources**

Depending on the budget available you may decide that you would prefer to commission a professional research agency to carry out your survey. However, for many museums, commissioning research directly from an agency is too expensive and thus the remaining options are to undertake the work themselves, or carry it out collaboratively, possibly with another museum or another part of your organisation (especially if the museum is council-run and is part of the wider cultural services on offer).

While no guidance can be provided on the amount of money needed to undertake a visitor satisfaction survey, budgets and the amount of staff time required to carry out the exercise will need to be defined as part of the definition of the survey objectives.

**3. Objectives**

The objectives you set for your visitor satisfaction survey will be driven by the rationale behind the work, which has been explored above. Nevertheless, your objectives should be defined, regardless of your approach, so that they are SMART.

* Specific – for instance, is there a particular issue or aspect of your museum that you want to know more about?
* Measurable – How much will it cost? How many people will be surveyed? Etc.
* Achievable – Are the necessary resources available? Can it be done within the time available?
* Realistic – Is what you proposed pragmatic and relevant? Talk to your colleagues to gather their ideas, and if you can, look at examples of visitor satisfaction surveys and reports undertaken by other museums.
* Time-bound – When will the survey be done? (Remembering there may be seasonal factors which influence your visitor profiles.) Do you want to repeat this survey to build up visitor trends over time?

**4. Sample size and Format**

A critical aspect of any visitor satisfaction survey is the sample size. Obviously, the larger the sample size the more detailed and accurate the findings are likely to be, which will be bound by the resources to hand, but may also be influenced by the methodology or format you adopt. Some museums have adopted a set figure – say 100 to 200 for a smaller site, 400 to 800 for a larger site – while others go for an agreed target figure based upon a percentage of the number of annual visitors to a site. Another alternative is to complete the survey having gained a representative sample according to pre-agreed profiles. For instance, you may wish to ascertain the levels of satisfaction amongst visitors or users of a particular age, gender, locality, interest or according to other [Section 75](https://www.equalityni.org/S75duties) groupings.

The manner in which you carry out the survey will influence the samples size. An electronic questionnaire and response may enable you to survey many more of your users, but its anonymity may not elicit a good response rate, or responses from your target groups, and requires foreknowledge of who will be involved in the survey. Alternatively, a face to face survey might allow you to gain more nuanced or qualitative responses, although possibly from fewer people with a possibility of interviewer bias (particularly if museum staff are conducting the interview). Posting out questionnaires is another alternative. Yet again, the more passive collection of visitor views, through suggestion boxes, may be the most suitable means of attaining your objectives. Whichever methodology you chose, it is essential to ensure that your staff are fully briefed on the survey aims, that they are able to answer associated questions from visitors, and will encourage people to participate in the survey.

Some museums have incentivised survey returns and increased response rates by offering prizes to participants, which might include a competition to win a family ticket, discount in the shop or a stand-alone prize (possibly from a sponsor).

**5. Timing**

As indicated above, specific and detailed consideration should be given to the timing of the survey and it should be agreed at the planning stage. Particular attention should be given to the possibilities of inadvertently influencing the outturns through conducting the survey at a particular time of day, on a particular day, or during a particular season. Alternatively, it may be your objective to ascertain the satisfaction rating across a particular group, for example tourists, or school children, in which case the survey may need to be time specific.

Consideration might also be given to timing if it is your intention to identify trends over a period. In which case you will design your questionnaire and allocate resources with the view to repeating the exercise at intervals, rather than once-off, possibly annually, more frequently, or at the time of a particular event.

**6. The Questionnaire**

As part of the process of agreeing what questions you wish to ask visitors (and possibly non-users) you should think how you will collate and analyse the results of your survey. This is usually done using either a statistical package (eg. SAS) or spreadsheet software (eg. Excel), and incorporates some form of coding of the answers that may be incorporated into the questionnaire.

Some points to consider when designing your questionnaire are

* How does it look? Is it visually attractive with adequate space to enter answers?
* Are the questions simple, easily understood and jargon free?
* Can it be completed within 10 minutes or thereabouts?
* Do the questions flow easily from topic to topic?
* Try to avoid terms that can be variously understood or misinterpreted, for instance; ‘often’ or ‘lately’.
* Attempt to quantify the answers to questions which concern a qualitative response, for instance; rather than being left open, the answer to ‘How would you rate the customer care you received on entering the museum?’ might be given the possible options of ‘very good/good/average/poor/very poor’
* Some questions may require the use of ‘show cards’ to provide a prompt to the person being surveyed, but these should be used sparingly and perhaps to elicit responses to visualised questions (on design proposals, for example).
* Proof your questions to avoid potential sensitivities on any personal information you may survey. For instance, asking people to self-describe rather than responding to pre-set options, or providing bands rather than having to be specific (about age, for example).
* Try out your questionnaire with people who will provide critical feedback before using it with the public.
* What data protection issues might arise and what will you tell people about what will happen to the information they supply. You may wish to design the questionnaire so that the personal data is not linked with particular opinions or views.

Here are some sample visitor satisfaction questions which have been used by local museums in Northern Ireland.

Programme

*On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, how satisfied were you with?*

The permanent exhibition 5 4 3 2 1

Interpretive material 5 4 3 2 1

The temporary exhibition attended 5 4 3 2 1

The event attended 5 4 3 2 1

*What improvements could be made?*

Services

*By choosing one of the options, please indicate your opinion of the museum’s*

Customer care Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor

Café Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor

Children’s activities Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor

Website Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor

Toilets Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor

*What was particularly noticeable?*

Overall experience

*Overall, how would you rate the museum compared with your expectations prior to your visit?*

* Much better than expected
* A little better than expected
* Just as you expected
* A little disappointing
* Very disappointing
* Didn’t know what to expect

*Would you like to say why?*

*Overall, how would you rate your visit to our museum? I was …..*

Very satisfied / Satisfied / Neither satisfied or dissatisfied / Dissatisfied / Very dissatisfied

*Would you like to say why?*

*Would you recommend a visit to this museum to a friend?*

Very likely to recommend / Likely to recommend / Neutral view / Likely not to recommend / Very likely not to recommend

*Would you like to say why?*

**Collating, Interpreting and Using the Data**

The rationale and agreed objectives behind the survey will inform the way in which the results are presented and to whom they are reported.

This might take the form of a one-off written report providing an overview of a particular time-bound exercise. Alternatively, the capturing of visitor data may be on-going and many museums undertake this as part of day to day operations (through an analysis of the visitor book entries, comment cards, evaluation forms sent to schools after visits, and the like). It is important that such information is collated systematically and reported on regularly, perhaps as standing items in staff meetings or executive reports to the museums governing body. It must be perceived as a valued tool rather than a routine duty and thus each report on visitor satisfaction should be accompanied by recommendations for action that are ascribed to an individual for action within a specified timeframe.

Local museums have exploited visitor satisfaction data to the following ends;

* to inform the museum’s forward plan or audience development plans
* to identify and address problems and issues immediately
* to answer complaints
* to proactively engage with museum users (informing all users, not just complainants of improvements undertaken)
* to promote the value and success of the service to funders and governing bodies
* to exploit or obviate trends emerging trends
* to inform the programme of exhibitions, events and activities
* to develop visitor and user focus groups
* to raise funds and improve income streams
* to inform staff training

**Sources of further information**

Details of the Accreditation Scheme can be found at <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/accreditation-scheme/> with the guidance on the *Users and their Experiences* section at <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/accreditation/users-and-their-experiences/>

The Museum Code of Ethics is available at <http://www.museumsassociation.org/ethics/code-of-ethics>

AIM (Association of Independent Museums)

Success Guides **–** SuccessfulVisitorExperience –Getting it Right

<https://aim-museums.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Successful-Visitor-Experience-2017.pdf>

AIM (Association of Independent Museums) – Visitor Focus

<https://aim-museums.co.uk/helping-organisations/aim-hallmarks/visitor-focus/>

Audiences NI <http://www.audiencesni.com/>

Northern Ireland Museums Council <http://www.nimc.co.uk>

Museums Galleries Scotland – Connecting with Visitors <https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/advice-article/connecting-with-visitors/>

Museum Galleries Scotland – Understanding your Audience through Evaluation

<https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/advice-article/understanding-your-audiences-through-evaluation/>

Office of National Statistics – Undertaking Visitor Surveys

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/economy/economic-value-of-tourism/measuring-tourism-locally/guidance-notes-1-6-v1-2011/measuring-tourism-locally--guidance-note-3--undertaking-visitor-surveys.pdf>.