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# **Museums and Community Wellbeing**

# Museums, Crisis and Covid-19:

## VITALITY AND VULNERABILITIES

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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.

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# 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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**Museums, Crisis, Covid** has been fantastic at working with the sector to highlight the many challenges that museums faced during the pandemic and the Museums Association (MA) has benefited hugely from the insights that the project has provided.

The project has shown the enormous impact that museums can have on community wellbeing by bringing people together in inclusive and welcoming spaces.

Supporting people with dementia, engaging children and their families and tackling social isolation are just a few of the ways that museums are promoting wellbeing. The most forward-thinking museums are also able to empower communities and give them a voice.

The **Museums, Crisis, Covid** project has highlighted many inspiring examples of how the sector can promote wellbeing, which reflects the aims of the MA's key campaign, **Museums Change Lives**, which supports museums to have a positive impact on the lives of the communities that they serve.

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**SIMON STEPHENS, MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION**

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# SUMMARY

The *Museums, Crisis and Covid-19* project demonstrates how museums maintained and enhanced their wellbeing services during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**We argue that museums are central to rebuilding lives and communities after the devastating impacts of the pandemic.**

Building on the *Museums Change Lives* report (Museums Association 2020) we demonstrate the important roles museums have in enhancing quality of life, supporting health and wellbeing and promoting participation.

Now more than ever, given the collective and traumatic experiences of Covid-19, **museums must garner their entire capacity to contribute to improving societal health and wellbeing.**

Now that society is reopening, we need to engage with individuals and communities isolated during the pandemic, giving over the museum as a shared space for their use. By connecting out to communities, we need to use these (hybrid) spaces

for rebuilding community confidence, enabling museums to operate again across a wide range of purposes.

Museums, heritage projects and cultural institutions can take **a central role in recovery from the pandemic.** Museums can be important therapeutic spaces for both individuals and communities to reflect on the wide-ranging social issues emanating from lockdowns, restrictions of movement, and personal losses and grief.

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**Now that society is reopening, we need to engage with individuals and communities isolated during the pandemic, giving over the museum as a shared space for their use.**

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

This report documents the thoughtful and innovative practice maintained by museum staff, despite the acute and massive upheaval of the pandemic. The following recommendations reflect the conversations we have had with the sector across interviews, focus groups, workshops and sector events.

**1** Museums should be supported in their potential as a location for post-pandemic recovery by providing **a shared space, where individuals and communities can rebuild, and a narrative space for acknowledging, exploring, exchanging varied experiences of the pandemic.**

**3** Museums should be supported to **continue in their work in partnership with health and wellbeing agencies to build effective and sustainable programming.**

**2** The museum sector is aware of the inequalities exposed during the pandemic, impacting education, health and incomes. Building on its experience in access and inclusion programming, **museums can offer a space for programming to address societal inequalities.**

**4** Museum staff are directly witnessing the benefits of museum-engagement for individuals and communities. If we are going to nurture museum spaces in this wellbeing role, **the sector needs local and national support in fostering new measures that acknowledge the qualities of wellbeing work.**

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**Museums can be important therapeutic spaces for both individuals and communities to talk about and reflect on the wide-ranging social issues emanating from lockdowns, restrictions of movement, and personal losses and grief.**

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# MUSEUMS, COVID-19 AND WELLBEING

In the first year of the pandemic the UK had excess death rates, which The Health Foundation described as 'amongst the worst internationally' (2021:4). The pandemic also exposed systemic inequalities, leading to unequal burdens amongst different population groups and regions (The Health Foundation 2021). Those who were already most vulnerable, due to existing social inequalities, will have found themselves **most at risk to the social, physical and economic impacts of the pandemic.**

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**The impact of Covid-19 is likely to have long lasting legacies on our society and on economic, social, and cultural recovery in the coming years.**

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The pandemic has led to wider considerations about the nature of community and society. Terms such as 'community' frequently create a perception that such groups are homogenous, which is not the case. While those belonging to a 'community' will share characteristics around ethnicity, socio-economic status or a geographical location they may have many distinct views and opinions on other aspects of their lives. **Covid-19 was a threat to community togetherness** particularly if there were opposing views around vaccines, mask wearing, shielding, and social distancing (Friel and Beavis 2022).

Within and across communities there has been the deep sense of grief and trauma for those who lost loved ones, or who were ill with the disease, and are still suffering its consequences. Those not bereaved will also be feeling the effects of **the collective trauma of the pandemic, with these impacts as yet unclear.**



## Museums Changing Lives

Community-practice in museums is built on decades of scholarship that has addressed the social role of museums and the development of ethical practices at the heart of museum work. If we consider the literature from Richard Sandell's edited collection *Museums, Society and Inequality* (2002) to the more recent *Museum Activism* (Janes and Sandell 2019), and related work in between, we see two decades of scholarship, combining the practice of academics and practitioners, committed to museums making a positive difference in society.

### **In Northern Ireland, the importance of the museum as a shared space for promoting inclusion and community cohesion is especially recognised.**

In Northern Ireland Executive's *Together: Building a United Community* museums were presented as places that can help to 'address issues of social inclusion and cohesion and support the cultural rights and expressions of people and communities in our society' (T:BUC 2013). This strategy has been extended to working with minority communities (McDermott 2012, 2018) and for addressing the legacy of the Troubles (Crooke 2016, 2020; Breen 2015).

The sector's commitment to social impact is evident in the practice of Northern Ireland's local authority and independent museums as well as national institutions. Published pre-pandemic, the *Museums Change Lives Northern Ireland* report (Museums Association 2020) opened with the description of our time as being one of 'massive upheaval' with communities experiencing 'poverty, division and loneliness' as 'constant themes of contemporary life' (Museums Association 2020:3). Little did any of us know that the upheaval was going to become more acute and ramifications more entrenched.

### Recognising the challenges of recent times, **Museums Change Lives demonstrates how the work of museums is committed to improving lives.**

Museums Association President Maggie Appleton presents the Northern Ireland museums sector as 'stepping up to the plate' for the needs of society. She refers to museums using collections to support people with dementia, engage creatively with children and families, and providing 'inspiring spaces' to debate key issues. In this report we demonstrate how, during the pandemic, this continued to be the case. Now, as we contend with the fall-out of the past two years, the need for museums as places of care and recovery is needed even more.

*Museums Change Lives* identifies three areas in which museums in Northern Ireland are enhancing health and wellbeing and, in the light of the pandemic, aspects of those three thematic areas are given further consideration in this report. The three areas of focus are:

- 1** Museums as places that enhance our quality of life and improve our mental and physical health.
- 2** Museums as places that work in partnership with health and wellbeing organisations to support people in society with different needs.
- 3** Museums as places that promotes participation, volunteering, and building people's self-confidence.

# MUSEUMS AND ENHANCING QUALITY OF LIFE

**With the spread of Covid-19, museums ‘previously deemed safe havens of society and culture’, became ‘petri dishes to avoid’.** This description, provided by Joanna Cobley in her introduction to an edited commentary on the impact of the pandemic, leads to a chain of events familiar to many: ‘museums first removed toys from their cafés and children’s spaces, then the museum doors closed and staff worked from home. In some cases, front-of-the-house staff were redeployed to support back-of-the-house staff with cataloguing and digitization projects. **You could smell fear everywhere**’ (Cobley 2020: 111).

This description of the uncertainty of March 2020 was widespread. Pre-vaccine, pre-lockdowns, and before we knew how best to treat Covid-19, **people were fearful for their health and that of others**, for their jobs, for the health service, and for the economy.

By adapting their programming, learning services, and digital offer, museums provided important services for people at home and unable to interact with others in usual ways (Crooke 2020). Later when museums began to re-open, and recognising, ‘the public want to feel safe in the spaces that they use’ (Anon04, June 2021), museums managed their galleries in new ways, inviting people to feel at ease in shared spaces.

## 1.1 Community outreach in lockdown

The museum space can have many meanings, and increasingly **the community, outreach and participatory potential is at the core of museum practice** (Black 2012; Crooke 2007). During lockdowns, and while people were shielding or reluctant to go into shared spaces, the in-person community engagement programming either halted altogether or was adapted for digital delivery.

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## Given the uncertainty at the outset of the pandemic, and potential for isolation during lockdowns, museums acted quickly to keep audiences and users connected.

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The timing of the outreach activity, in relation to the pandemic was key to determining whether the project continued or was postponed. A community project that was already up and running was likely to adapt; a project only just getting started was often postponed, because the relationships between the museum and the group had not yet been forged. Adaptation to digital depended on the group: whether participants had smart devices, sufficient data, reliable Wi-Fi, or a quiet space to engage with others while online.

### MEMORIES, MOVEMENT AND MUSEUMS

In the year before the pandemic, Northern Ireland Museums Council had begun working with local museums to **deliver programming for people living with dementia and their caregivers**. In 2019 the Council established its Dementia Friendly Museums Working Group with representatives from Alzheimer's Society NI and Dementia NI, delivering dementia awareness sessions to museums. This led to a pilot project, working with Love to Move, a British Gymnastics Foundation Initiative, focused on specially tailored chair-based exercises for residents in local care homes, provided alongside collections-based reminiscence activities. In 2019-20 the Council supported five museums delivering the Dementia Friendly Programme to 220 individuals (NI Museums Council Annual Report 2019-20).

At the point when the pandemic hit, the Council were considering how to extend the pilot project. With support of museums, the dementia friendly programming went online, in May – July 2020 three museums delivered 6 weekly online sessions delivered via Zoom to 135 care home residents and dementia support users in the community. This led to a new programme 'Memories, Movement Museums', taking a similar format and delivered by four museums to 340 participants in 30 online sessions (NI Museums Council Annual Report 2020-21).

Michael Fryer, Outreach Officer at the Northern Ireland War Memorial, was mindful of the sensitivity of adapting such programming describing the original shift as 'experimental'. In the first online session he shared images of collections on screen, the success of which depended how many participants and care assistants were in the group. Finding the screen-sessions had some limiting factors (such as vision issues), for the later sessions he created Covid-secure loan boxes which were sent to the home for participants to handle during the sessions. This he said 'made a huge difference for people living with dementia because **it brought in that multi-sensory element** which has always been an important part of our reminiscence workshops' (Fryer, Interview April 2021).



ULSTER MUSEUM, 2021

‘Memories, Movement and Museums’ has been an important programme for the care home participants. Referring to the sessions with NI War Memorial, the care home co-ordinator described the resources as fantastic. Feedback recorded that **the residents were very engaged, stimulated by handling the collections and the contributions of the outreach officer.** The co-ordinator in the care home recorded ‘strongly agree’ for participant’s looking forward to each session, talking about the sessions during the week, feeling less isolated, and for the project having a positive impact on their mood; concluding, ‘the project was brilliant and the smiles during each session and afterwards proved its success’ (Anonymous Feedback, NI Museums Council).

### ATISHOO, ATISHOO, WE DON’T FALL DOWN: PANDEMICS PAST AND PRESENT

When pre-existing relationships were already in place, digital technologies **allowed for the continuation of community engagement projects.** Just when the pandemic hit, Lisa Rea Currie, of the Belfast social partnership and regeneration organisation EastSide Partnership, was completing a National Lottery Heritage Fund project, Eastside Lives. At the onset of the first lockdown, EastSide Partnership continued to work with some of these participants on creation

of a new co-created exhibition *Atishoo, Atishoo, We Don’t Fall Down: Pandemics Past and Present* displayed at the Ulster Museum (June 2021 -present). For EastSide Partnership, socially distanced meetings and Zoom calls during lockdown allowed for a co-created project to emerge, while also providing a means to ‘keep social contact going’ during times of isolation.

In our project interviews a number of **museum staff recognised the sensitivity around collecting and displaying the pandemic.** In the case of the EastSide Partnership community-led project, the process of exploring the 1918 Spanish Flu and outbreaks of tuberculosis, whilst reflecting on the Covid-19 pandemic, was an opportunity to think about ‘the resilience of the community as whole’ as well as ‘how communities had faced things in the past and come through them’ (Rea Currie Interview November 2021).

For the participants in the EastSide Partnership this was an important project that helped them navigate the pandemic. In our interview Rea Currie said that for some participants, only for the project, they would be going days without talking to anyone else. By breaking down isolation this community project was a distraction from anxieties related to the pandemic (see a full discussion of the initiative in Farrell-Banks and Rea Currie 2022).

## READ MORE ABOUT MUSEUMS ADAPTING AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

**Museums and the Pandemic: Revisiting Purposes and Priorities**

## READ MORE ABOUT MUSEUMS AND DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY READ OUR REPORT:

**Museums, Covid-19 and Digital Media: Innovation, Engagement and Practice**

### 1.2 Challenges for digital connectivity

While we recognise the unique achievements of digital-based outreach and engagement activity, during project workshops and interviews we were reminded that **some methodologies of engagement work did not work remotely**. This was not only about technical issues, for some individuals and groups part of the appeal and success of museum or heritage community projects is bringing them out of their homes, into new shared spaces (McDermott 2012). Those working in community sectors also found that the most vulnerable were often the hardest to reach during the pandemic (Maguire Interview July 2021). This is also the case for the museum sector, a pattern that continued during the pandemic (Mughal et al 2022).

A project at an independent museum, designed to work with vulnerable groups, found those groups harder to reach at the beginning of the pandemic. It was only later, when participants had become more familiar with platforms such as Zoom or Teams, that the target audience got involved (Anon07, Interview October 2021). A museum manager reminded us that **not everyone can manage the technology, 'and that's isolating for people if they can't keep up'** (Anon Interview March 2021).

A curator at a council-run museum described how the Covid-19 initially stopped community initiatives, which were serving important health and wellbeing roles. She told us

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**As we build the digitally integrated museum, we must address digital exclusion.**

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that 'our age friendly officer, for instance, had to put on the backburner the reminiscence work that was going to happen. Because obviously going into care homes is very challenging and really not possible'. Later the museum was able to go online with some of the groups, she continued to explain 'there's been some online engagement with older groups and reminiscence, so it has been possible to reshape it a bit' (Anon05, Interview March 2021).

Clare Maguire, Service Manager with the Youth Engagement Service located at Our Space, a facility for 11-25 year olds in Derry/Londonderry, described the 'big shock' of closing their doors to young people in the city. Our Space is funded by the Education Authority Youth Service and the Public Health Authority as a drop-in service for young people, many of whom were vulnerable. Going online meant that Our Space **had to navigate new procedures around safeguarding and consent, as well as overcoming barriers** – not just whether participant had digital equipment, but also if they had a quiet space, WiFi, and data to engage with digital programmes.

Maguire also found that building trust between staff and young people, leading to the young person feeling at ease, was difficult to recreate online. She described the shift in what Our Space provided 'we were delivering group work programmes, we were delivering drop-ins ... all those kinds of stuff was delivered online'; and cautioned 'it just wasn't the same as being in that physical space together where people were free to do their own thing, and then access support whenever they needed it' (Maguire Interview July 2021).

Across our interviews, focus groups and workshops, there was a recognition that digital platforms bring new opportunities, particularly for those who cannot physically visit museums or heritage sites. As we build the digitally integrated museum, **we must address digital exclusion using blended engagement to overcome any limitations in using digital platforms for building trust and rapport**. If the digital experience is based on principles of inclusion, participation, discovery and creativity, then it brings exciting new opportunities for the sector.



# MUSEUMS SUPPORTING HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The case for museums as locations to enhance wellbeing has already been well made, focusing on the value of therapies in non-medical settings (Chatterjee and Noble 2016; Dodd and Jones 2014; Ioannides 2017). There is a growing case being made for the health benefits of visiting museums. A paper published in *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, which tracked the impact of museum visiting over a ten-year period, found that **museum-based activities that were 'mentally engaging, enjoyable, stress-reducing and socially interactive** could be protective against the development of dementia' (Fancourt et al. 2018: 661).

Aware of the multiple benefits of connecting with people, museums are positioning themselves as providing unique offerings for users and audiences. Nuala Morse presents museums as **places of care – care for communities, people, collections and staff** (2021). In relation to the pandemic she suggests that museums will be locations that will 'provide some of the vital resources we will need to heal after the pandemic' (2020: 125). Post pandemic, David Gaimster, of Auckland War Memorial Museum, offers his museum as a place that will help the region 'recover its equilibrium' and re-establish 'public confidence in civic life again' (2020: 117).

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# This has been one of the real opportunities for museums to really showcase the benefits for wellbeing of what they do.

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MICHAEL FRYER, INTERVIEW APRIL 2021

In the Northern Ireland setting, where museums and heritage projects have a long association with fostering good relations, **the skills in working with communities can now be transferred to exploring the impacts and legacies of the pandemic.** At the height of the Troubles, museums were presented as an 'oasis of calm' and a location for exploring difficult issues, fostering tolerance and enhancing understanding (Crooke 2007). An example is the work of Healing Through Remembering, a project that through story and object-based work used experiences and memories of the conflict to foster community healing (Crooke 2021). The healing role can become central to museums post-pandemic, by expanding the focus upon museums as places of care.

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## Museums can be a place of enquiry.

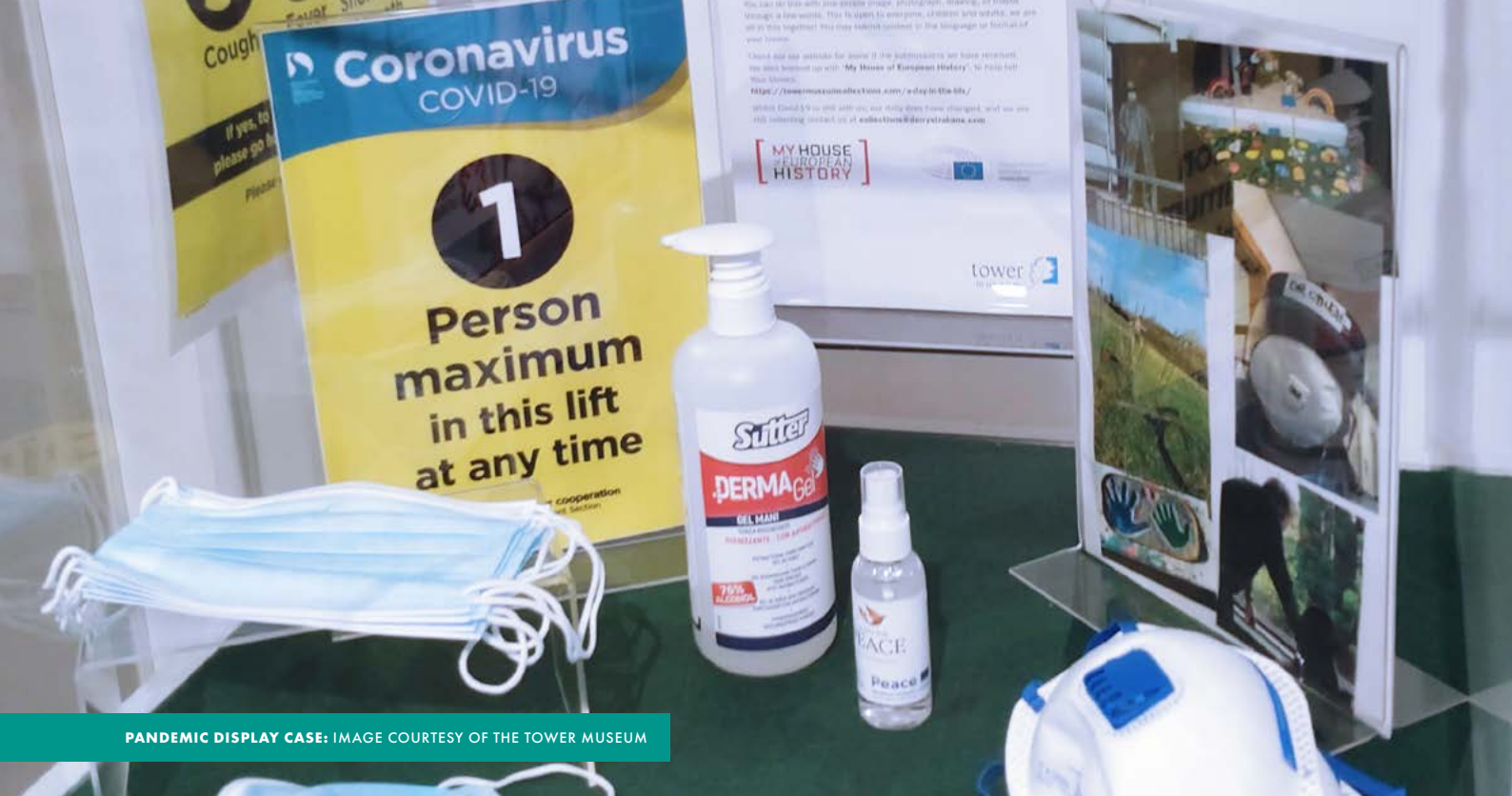
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### 2.1 Storytelling and the pandemic

**Museums, heritage projects and cultural institutions can take a central role in post-Covid19 recovery as important therapeutic spaces for both individuals and communities** to talk about and reflect on the wide-ranging social issues emanating from lockdowns, restrictions of movement, and personal losses and grief.

Museums can be a place of enquiry where we can ask questions and challenge how we think about issues of identity and belonging. In marking the experiences of the past two years, **museums have potential to be places of narrating and commemorating the trauma of the period.** They can be 'hubs of education, information-sharing, and collective reflection on the causes, responses, and impacts of this global crisis' (Gaimster 2020: 117).

It is well-established that objects have a memorial role, and can be used to remember, navigate loss, and explore life experiences (Crooke 2019). Aware that such collecting needed to be undertaken ethically and without causing harm, the UK Museums Association asked that collecting Covid-19 material should be treated with 'sensitivity and respect' (Museums Association, 2020).



PANDEMIC DISPLAY CASE: IMAGE COURTESY OF THE TOWER MUSEUM

Wellbeing and healing techniques in museums, using artefacts and narrative enquiry, are embedded in museum practice in Northern Ireland. Such projects have allowed participants to use museum objects to elucidate aspects of their own stories or memories. The concern during the pandemic was how to retain these programmes for the participants

Those museums and archives in Northern Ireland that quickly moved to collecting the pandemic, framed it as building collections so we would later have the material culture that would enable us to **reflect and foster a better understanding of how to mitigate global crises**.

#### 'COVID-19 AND ME'

At the Irish Linen Centre & Lisburn Museum the 'Covid-19 and Me' project collected stories, memories, photographs, videos and audio files that **captured experiences of the pandemic**. Inspired by their centenary programmes

of the past decade, the museum asked 'what stories or lessons do you think future generations should take from the pandemic' and 'a hundred years from now people will want to know what happened, how we experience and dealt with the pandemic'. Part of their motivation was to **enhance participation and interaction at a time when people may have been fearful or lonely**.

Aware that life-writing is often therapeutic, even when the experiences are traumatic, Lisburn Museum encouraged individuals to describe their situation, asking how 'you do things differently now', 'is communication different', 'how do you feel about social isolation' and 'is there something that has made you happy or encouraged you to be positive during the present situation'? The museum advised contributors 'take your time and enjoy the process of writing ... perhaps you could phone a friend and share experiences and stories' (ILCLM 2020).

**Museums are best placed to help society to recover from Covid ... they're the places where people naturally come together to talk things over, to reflect on things.**

CURATOR, NATIONAL MUSEUMS NORTHERN IRELAND



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# As we emerge from the worst of the pandemic, there is a need to recognise the different health and wellbeing needs of museum audiences.

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## 2.2 Museums as healing spaces

Now more than ever, given the collective and traumatic experiences of Covid-19, museums must garner their entire capacity to improve health and wellbeing.

Andrescu (2021), in her 'meditation on Covid-19 social trauma', **reminds us of the images of crowded hospitals, the retracted social world, and the mass disruptions during the pandemic.** She documents her own rising anxiety 'about obliteration, of being crushed and overwhelmed by unpredictable events' exacerbated by concern for 'the ability of the national and global health, social, economic and political systems to withstand the affronts of the pandemic' (2021: 224). The impact of the pandemic is presented as a traumatic event that will 'leave indelible marks upon community's consciousness, marking memories and changing future identities in fundamental and irrevocable ways' (2021: 225). She suggests that healing can be garnered by sharing that experience through participatory artistic projects that explore our vulnerabilities through an 'expanded form of community' (2021: 230).

A curator at National Museums NI, with a wealth of experience of community projects, is certain that museums will have a role to navigate the experience and legacies of the pandemic, asserting 'museums are best placed to help society to recover from Covid' adding 'they're the places where people naturally come together to talk things over, to reflect on things' (Anon07 October 2021).

**To foster community resilience in the wake of the impact of Covid-19, the museum can build on its role as a space of social renewal and community healing** (McDermott, Friel and Doherty 2021).

Led by co-investigator Dr Breda Friel, in May 2022 Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 hosted a mindfulness workshop in Derry/Londonderry, in collaboration with curator Roisin Doherty. The workshop used the unique character of museum spaces to enable experimentation. One of the participants welcomed the workshop because she saw museums as 'traditionally calm places'. Another valued the museum working on wellbeing because of the connections that can be made between 'past, the present, and the future'. Ultimately, it was the shared space of the museum that appealed for one participant, describing the museum as 'public spaces where all citizens have access' (Participant feedback, Wellbeing Workshop, Guildhall Derry/Londonderry 10 May 2022).

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## Now more than ever, given the collective and traumatic experiences of Covid-19, museums must garner their entire capacity to improve health and wellbeing.

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# MUSEUMS PROMOTING PARTICIPATION

At the height of the pandemic, the UK Government told us 'Stay Home Save Lives'. When museums and heritage sites began to re-open in the periods between lockdowns, the focus was on **making people feel safe in the museum space**. This was achieved by introducing booking systems, sanitising stations, and one-way routes around the museum.

In their exploration of how community assets can 'redress health inequalities', Mughal et al. (2022) consider how **museum engagement can boost psychological and physiological wellbeing**. They suggest the museum provides opportunities for 'aesthetic engagement, evocation of the imagination and emotion, cognitive stimulation, sensory stimulation, social interaction and physical activity'. Engaging with arts, culture and museums can lead to better coping and emotional strategies, lower stress hormone responses, reduce loneliness and isolation, and encourage healthier behaviour and skills development (Mughal et al. 2022).

Now over two years from the first lockdowns, and with fewer lethal cases of Covid-19, it is better for many of us to return to shared spaces and to engage with museum programmes.

## 3.1 Safely back in shared spaces

When the doors of Castle Ward, the 18th-century National Trust mansion in County Down, were open again to visitors, property manager Neil Watt said that visitors 'consistently reiterated how **the highlight of their visit was simply being inside the historic spaces which brought a sense of comfort and safety** in a precarious world' (Watt, Email June 2022). Here we get a sense of the relief that normality was returning and people could ease themselves back into what they enjoyed pre-pandemic. The historic house, its grounds, and other facilities, provided respite for visitors, with Watt suggesting 'with our doors being closed for so long, there was a tangible desire for the public to revisit the places and spaces which they had hitherto taken for granted, and a genuine civic relief when we did open again to the public' (Watt, Email June 2022).

A curator at a council-run museum described how in Summer 2020, when lockdown measures eased for the first time, **there was a desire among the general public to 'get out and about'**. They wanted to go to places that they trusted, and where they were confident that socially distanced measures would be in place (Anon March 2021). Our interviewee from another Council museum told us, 'we had the facility to open things up for small groups to come in socially distanced safely'. She continued to say 'it was that awareness that people wanted to do something safer. They wanted to come out but feel safe in a safe environment – and we could facilitate that' (Anon05, Interview March 2021).

**Visitors consistently reiterated how the highlight of their visit was simply being inside the historic spaces which brought a sense of comfort and safety in a precarious world.**

NEIL WATT, JUNE 2022

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## The focus was on making people feel safe.

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### POSITIVE AGEING MONTH OCTOBER 2021

Museum contributions to Positive Ageing Month October 2021 provides insight into how **in the later stages of the pandemic museums adapted their services for older people**, many of whom were still wary of mixing with other people. Launching their programme of events for 2021, the Chair of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council invited people to a blend of socially distanced, in person or virtual events. This and other programmes in the Council Area were designed to counteract the increased feelings of loneliness and isolation arising from the pandemic.

Amongst the new programming was an outdoor 'age friendly' reminiscence trail, of text and images developed by Fermanagh County Museum in partnership with the Age Friendly Network Northern Ireland. Sited in the green space adjacent the museum, known locally as the 'Broad Meadow', visitors follow the 'Around the Meadow' trail to 12 locations with pop up panels telling snippets of history at each point. Described by one person as a 'path of memories', it is part of the Council Age Friendly Strategy to **enable older people to lead more independent engaged and socially connected lives**, and is funded by the Department for Communities Access and Inclusion Programme.

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# Museums are best placed to help society to recover from Covid ... they're the places where people naturally come together to talk things over, to reflect on things.

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## 3.2 Inviting people out of isolation

Supporting the wellbeing and inclusion role of the sector, in early 2022, Northern Ireland Museums Council worked with Armstrong Storytelling Trust to deliver a **community engagement programme with local museums targeted at groups who had been socially isolated** during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

At the Tower Museum, Derry City and Strabane District Council, the 4 week programme partnered with a local women's group based in a Neighbourhood Renewal Area. According to the Noble Multiple Deprivation Measure, such areas are considered amongst the most deprived 10% of Wards in Northern Ireland (Department for Communities 2003). The participants were in the 50-70+ age group, some lived alone and relied on the local community centre for companionship.

The museum provided the group with reminiscence boxes on themes of Home Life, Factory Life and the 1950s, and used the objects to trigger storytelling from within the group. With the help of the Armstrong Storyteller stories emerged and were exchanged, with a light-hearted mood running through the meetings. The project took a blended format delivered via Zoom and with collections at the community centre.

**For this group, the Zoom format worked well and provided reassurance with one participant saying 'It's just like having the person in the room with us'.**

The practice of reminiscence worked for the participants, with another saying that sharing stories about the local shirt factory 'brought back memories that she had forgotten' (Doherty, Email June 2022). The Storytelling workshops led to the museum displaying, in the local community centre, a travelling exhibition on the showbands (1950-1980s dance bands), drawing other locals back into the venue.

For their storytelling sessions, North Down Museum worked with a group chosen by a local Support Network and Age NI. The museum delivered 4 in-person sessions to 45 people based around items from the museum's handling boxes, photographic collection and newspaper archive. The scheme coordinator was found the project very successfully, adding that the project encouraged residents to use the communal space and for some it was their first time being in contact with other residents. The museum staff noticed that often residents stayed behind at the end of the session to share a private story or memory and that some residents brought along their own information to share during the activity.

**Through working closely with the health sector, the museum sector can build skills and become specialists in shaping the therapeutic role of museums, in support of health and medical services.**

# CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Health Foundation Covid-19 impact inquiry report *Unequal pandemic, fairer recovery (2021)* found that ‘the UK experienced some of the poorest outcomes from the pandemic when compared with similar and neighbouring countries, along with some of the worse economic impacts’. Furthermore, the pandemic **highlighted pre-existing inequalities, meaning the most vulnerable in society were most significantly impacted** (The Health Foundation 2021: 76).

The pandemic exacerbated educational, employment and economic inequalities for the most marginalized and mental health services have seen a rising demand. Tackling the legacy of the pandemic, Friel and Beavis (2022) recommend **‘preventive, universal and targeted provision’ for individuals and communities most effected; with the need for spaces that can provide ‘physical, emotional, and psychological rest, restoration and reflection’** (2022: 19).

As society is reopening, **we need to engage with individuals and communities isolated during the pandemic, offering museums shared spaces for their use.** By connecting our to communities, we need to use these (hybrid) spaces for rebuilding community confidence, enabling museums to operate again across a wide range of purposes.

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OUTSIDE THE ULSTER MUSEUM, 2021

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## Our focus needs to be less on the quantity of visitors, exhibitions, programmes, and more on the quality of those engagements.

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Going forward, changes at the Northern Ireland War Memorial echo what many are calling for in the sector.

**There is a desire to focus less on the quantitative measures, such as how many school visits, and look more to the nature and impact of the experience,** suggesting 'it's not going to be a numbers game, it's going to be much more about qualitative feedback'. Rather than counting numbers, we should be asking 'What's the depth of the engagement? What sort of comments are we getting back from people? Are people enjoying our programmes? Are people engaging with our programmes?' (Fryer Interview April 2021).

If museums are to play a role in the post-pandemic recovery, placing inclusion and wellbeing at the core, we need to rethink our expectations of what museums do. Our focus needs to be less on the quantity of visitors, exhibitions, programmes, and more on the quality of those engagements. As we embed such approaches, so too must we think differently about how we measure and report museum impacts. The methodology for this must be created collaboratively, involving a full range of museum stakeholders: museum users, museum staff, funders, civil servants, councillors and ministers.

**Those working in museums are witnessing the health and wellbeing impacts of their work. If we are going to nurture museum spaces in this wellbeing role, the sector needs local and national support in fostering new measures that acknowledge the qualities of this work.**

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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

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

## Anonymous Interviewees

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

## Focus Groups

(10 March 2021, 28 April 2021)

<b>FGS1</b>	Heritage Freelancer
<b>FGS2</b>	Independent Museum
<b>FGS3</b>	Local Authority Museum
<b>FGS4</b>	Local Authority Museum
<b>FGS5</b>	National Trust



## UKRI RAPID RESPONSE PROJECT

# Museums, Crisis and Covid-19

 [ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19](https://ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19)

 [@UlsterResMuseum](https://twitter.com/UlsterResMuseum)

## 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 - JANUARY 2022

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

