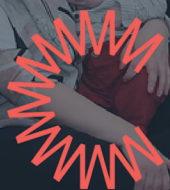




Playful Museums Case Study

Armagh Robinson Library
April 2023



NI
Museums
Council

The Playful Museums Festival

The Playful Museums Festival was launched by the NI Museums Council in 2016 with funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and has continued each February since then. The Festival aims to help local museums engage children under 5 years of age, and their parents / carers through play and age-appropriate creative sessions.

The Playful Museums Festival represents a first interaction with local museums for many of the attendees, and is highly valued by participating museums and local communities.

Qualitative feedback shows that audience members and their children enjoy the events they attend and want more local year-round under 5s programming. Museum staff report that their audiences have changed as a result of the Festival and feel that their museums are perceived as being more welcoming to families.



Armagh Robinson Library

Armagh Robinson Library was founded by Archbishop Richard Robinson in 1771. Located in a Georgian building, the Library houses a collection of 46,000 printed works on a diverse range of subjects from medicine and science to theology and travel. It also holds collections of ancient and medieval coins, manuscripts and sulphur gems. The permanent collections are exhibited in the Long Room alongside temporary exhibitions. No. 5 Vicars' Hill is a museum displaying Diocesan records and other collection items from the Library.





Aims & goals

Armagh Robinson Library is small and does not have a separate education space. When they started out, the Library was primarily seen as a space for tourists and researchers. They had always wanted to be more welcoming for families with young children and local groups like nurseries and Sure Start Centres, but were concerned that the Long Room was not well-suited to meeting their needs. The Library staff felt they needed external support to start working with under 5s and the initial Festival funding and training gave them the impetus they needed. They wanted families to be able to attend Festival events and go away with a warm feeling that encouraged them to return to the Library at another time.

Overview of activities

In the first year of the Festival, the Library felt it was important to consult with the local Sure Start Centre and other early years groups to find out what they would need from a visit. This learning combined with training provided by PlayBoard NI, Anne Harding and an audit by PlayBoard NI informed the activities they have run annually during the Festival and the facilities they introduced to the Long Room.

Over subsequent years of the Festival, funding from NI Museums Council has enabled the Library to run a range of different events.

These are generally delivered by external facilitators, but staff also have important supporting roles. Festival events have included:

- Arts and crafts
- Illustration
- Music
- Storytelling
- Tartaraghan Puppets

Events have either been thematically linked to temporary exhibitions or had seasonal themes such as spring flowers. Wherever possible the Library tries to ensure children have something they have created to take away. For example at one 2023 illustration event, the children made hearts for Valentine's Day.

Outcomes

The Library felt that taking part in the pilot Festival was a risk, but overall it has paid off. Their involvement over the past six years has had a hugely positive impact on their programming, facilities and staff confidence and enthusiasm for working with younger audiences. There is now a desire to do more work with under 5s. At the moment this is only possible with the local Arke Sure Start Centre, but if they are able to increase their staff capacity they will start to run more events outside the Festival.



NIMC funding has enabled the Library to experiment with a wide-range of under 5s events that they would otherwise not have been able to deliver. Feedback from parents about the events has been very positive and they have seen families return to the Library to visit between Festivals.

In addition, the initial grant funding from NIMC supported the installation of baby changing facilities and enabled them to have play mats, books and toys in the Long Room all year round. This makes visits for families with young children more comfortable and means parents/ carers can explore the exhibitions while their children play.

The Library has built a long-term partnership with the Arke Sure Start Centre around the Festival. Every year they collaborate with the Centre around the themes of their Festival events so the Sure Start Centre can create links to their activities. The Sure Start Centre also used the Long Room as a space for their reflexology for babies sessions, valuing the calm atmosphere it offers.

Overall, the Festival has been a wonderful opportunity to engage with early years groups that had not expected to come to the Library or No.5 Vicars' Hill.

Lessons Learned

The partnership with the Arke Sure Start Centre has been really valuable to the development of under 5s provision at the Library. They have offered expertise in what young children need, collaboration on programming and help to promote Festival events. While many families hear about the Festival through the Centre, it has been important for the Library to have a variety of promotional channels. They have also found that the local press and social media, especially Facebook, have been valuable in reaching local families.

The Library has tried to run different Festival events every year. This means that returning families and the Sure Start Centre are able to have a variety of experiences. The Tartaraghan Puppets for example enabled under 5s to interact with the young puppeteers.

Since the first Festival, the Library has worked hard to make things as easy as possible for family visitors. They provide space to leave buggies and access to car parking for all Festival events. This has been important in helping families to feel comfortable in the Library and feel it is a space where they are welcome.

Peer learning and sharing has been very helpful to Library staff. Hearing about successes and challenges at other museums has supported planning and ideas development for future events.



"The whole idea of Playful Museums was really timely for us. We needed the outside support to find out what was possible. It was a wonderful opportunity for us to engage with early years groups in the locality, who wouldn't have expected to come to us."
Armagh Robinson Library

The NI Museums Council acknowledges the work of 'Kids in Museums' and Charlotte Derry (Playful Places), who were commissioned to develop the content underpinning this case study.



Top Tips

1

Consult with local organisations that work with under 5s to build understanding of what families need from a museum event.

2

Use external expertise, training and support when you are starting out in working with under 5s to build staff skills and confidence.

3

Make families comfortable in your space by making simple changes such as purchasing play mats, toys and books for under 5s.

4

Build local partnerships with organisations like Sure Start to encourage Festival attendance and develop event ideas.