



NI
Museums
Council

Newsletter

Spring/Summer 2025



Our Museum Books

Ballymoney Museum Launch
Their New Children's Book

Playful Museums Festival 2025

A look back at the month
of fun engagement with
under 5's.

Accreditation Awards

Four local museums
maintain Full Accreditation.

Museum Trends 2023

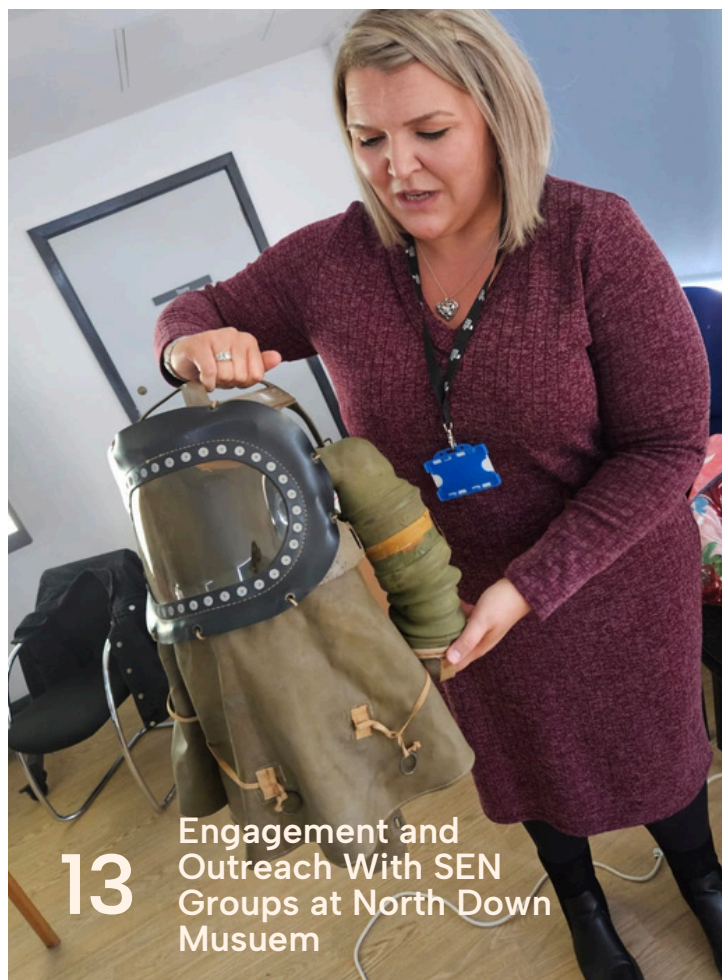
Our museums' collective
SWOT analysis.

nimc.co.uk



@NIMuseums

Contents



13 Engagement and Outreach With SEN Groups at North Down Museum



09 EPIC Study Trip

Cover photograph of Ballymoney Museum 'Our Museum' book launch ©NIMC thanks to Peter Carson. Top left: Ruth Verner leading a workshop © North Down Museum. Bottom left: Collage of famous Irish faces from interpretation in EPIC museum Dublin.

03 Director's Note

A brief update from our new Director Heather McGuicken.

04 News in Brief

05 Meet The Board Member

Meet Matthew McMahon who works at Armagh Observatory and Planetarium

06 Museum Trends 2023 Results

A look at the sector SWOT analysis.

12 Double Win for Downpatrick and County Down Railway

17 Museums of Hope

Reflections on our FOBP shared learning day.

19 NIMC Training Update

20 NI Challenge Award Launch

21 Heritage Emergencies Study day

Looking at the planning for, response to, and recovery from emergencies.

23 A Gift of a Ukrainian Translation

24 Cabinets of Curiosity at Armagh County Museum

27 Playful Museums Festival 2025



NI Museums Council
153 Bangor Road
Holywood
Co. Down
BT18 0EU

johnathan.dalzell@nimc.co.uk
info@nimc.co.uk



www.nimc.co.uk



Director's Note



Dear friends and colleagues,

After twelve years of hands-on experience working in the field, stepping back into the Museums Council feels both surreal and incredibly exciting. It's a privilege to return to a role where I can leverage my experiences and dive deep into addressing the challenges that the sector continues to face. In many ways, the museum world has made significant strides, overcoming many of the obstacles it's been confronted with over the years. Yet, there remains a fundamental issue— one that feels as persistent as ever: the lack of adequate resources. It's these ongoing challenges that I'm most determined to tackle as the new Director, with the goal of providing support to the museums that serve as the heart of our local communities.

Reflecting on my time away from the Council, I've had the opportunity to immerse myself in two distinct roles that broadened my perspective on museum operations and collections. I spent nearly a decade managing North Down Museum, where I had first-hand experience of the day-to-day struggles and triumphs of running a local museum.

After that, I had the honour of looking after the vast collections of National Museums NI as the Collections Operations Manager. Both roles provided invaluable insight into the operational and strategic aspects of museum management, but perhaps more importantly, they allowed me to see the immense potential our museums have in using our collections to engage with local communities.

As I return to the Museums Council, I'm driven by the need to advocate for stronger support for our members, particularly through more robust grant funding and allocation of resources. The Corporate Plan, Museums Policy, and Museum Trends survey will provide both a roadmap and a framework through which we can address these pressing issues. But it's clear that without improving the Museums Council's resources, much of this potential cannot be fully realised.

One of my primary objectives will be to assess the resource gaps facing our museums and explore how NIMC can play a role in addressing these challenges. This will involve conducting site visits and engaging in meaningful conversations with museum staff, curators, and stakeholders to better understand their unique needs. Key issues such as collections management, funding shortages, and overall resource constraints will be explored to pinpoint where support is most needed. Additionally, I and the team will focus on identifying opportunities for securing additional funding, offering specialised training, and initiating new projects that can drive the sector forward.

It's an exciting time to be back in this space. The work ahead will not be easy, but it's a challenge I and the team are ready to embrace. After all, museums are about looking to the future while honouring the past and as we continue to meet the evolving needs of our communities, I believe we'll find that our relevance is more important than ever.

NIMC Director, Heather McGuicken

News in Brief

NI Museum Council Annual General Meeting & Museums Forum Save The Date!

Afternoon of Tuesday
23rd September 2025

Programme and booking details will be
announced soon!

Global Voices Local Choices Represented at Museum + Heritage Awards



The decolonisation project was highly commended as Best Partnership at the prestigious awards in London. Along with National Museums NI and ACSONI colleagues, we were honoured to represent the partnership, the local museums and communities involved in this fantastic decolonisation project.

It was an inspiring evening and a great opportunity to honour all the great work museums of all sizes across the UK are doing. Congratulations to the Pitt Rivers Museum for winning the category, a very deserving win! Thank you again to Esmée Fairbairn Foundation/MA for funding our project. Thank you also to all the community participants and the local museums involved. We're delighted to share this success with you!



Accreditation News

We are pleased to share that four local museums have been recognised with Museum Accreditation Awards – an award for museums whose return applications have been assessed in 2024/2025 and have maintained their Full Accreditation status. Museums who received Full Accreditation this year were:

Ballymoney Museum, Ballycastle Museum, Limavady Museum and Coleraine Museum.

Sarah Calvin (Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services Development Manager) and Jamie Austin (Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Officer) were pleased to accept the Accreditation award certificates for their museums at the recent launch of Ballymoney Museum's new book Our Museum Day (see more on pg. 7).

Green Lane Museum were also assessed and received Provisional Accreditation to allow them time to agree a partner organisation to open the site on the Service's behalf.

The Inniskillings Museum were removed and excluded from accreditation for a period of five years backdated to 2022, due to irreversible actions taken by Governing Body members in 2022 which went against the shared ethical basis of the scheme by contravening the standard.

Meet The Board Member

My name is Matthew McMahon and I joined the NI Museums Council Board in September 2023, as an Independent Museum's representative.

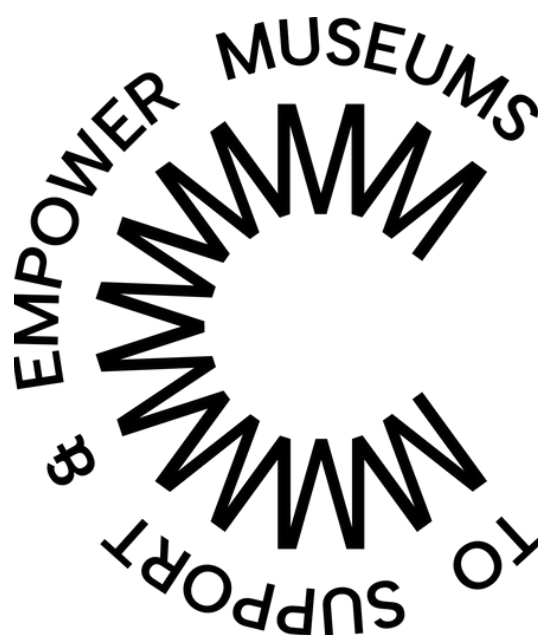
I've been a member of the Northern Ireland Museum Council since the very start of my career. I fell into the world of Museums nearly by accident, when I took the opportunity to volunteer at the Tower Museum in Derry/Londonderry during my undergraduate in History at Ulster University. It was at the Tower Museum that I was first encouraged to join the NIMC, and to take advantage of the fantastic training that was on offer. I have been at several museums since then, and since 2019 have been at the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium. My daily work is the same as hundreds of other ardent professionals across the Museum world, cataloguing, conservation, education and research. Serving on the board, and representing the wonderful Independent Museum's, was a chance to give back to the organisation without which I would be significantly less prepared for the daily onslaught of the unforeseen that are part and parcel of life in a small museum.

The Independent Museums of Northern Ireland are a particularly eclectic mix of institutions, with varied funding and governance structures. However, they have a common thread that runs among them all—their fantastic staff and collections. The two are intertwined so tightly it can be hard to see where the boundaries lie, as the staff pour their energy and passion into the collections that are entrusted to their care. Today's staff, and volunteers, are part of the collection for tomorrow. Their names, and decisions, form an essential part of the institutional story that makes the Independent Museum's part of their local community.

However, in a changing cultural and political landscape, in which museum funding is increasingly strained, this passion can be a double-edged sword. Small teams and shortened working hours combine to create a stressful environment in which these dedicated and passionate staff feel the weight of their responsibility keenly. They pour themselves freely into their collections, doing more and more with less and less.



The Northern Ireland Museum Council offers training but often more importantly to the Independent Museum staff, it offers community. I was struck by the depth of friendship and support that was evident at the Museum Forum in September 2024. The conversations that I was part of reflected on the challenges facing our institutions, and those challenges have only grown in the months since. But I was encouraged to hear how eagerly collaboration and assistance was offered, to pool resources to lessen the burden. The training events are an amazing opportunity to come alongside your fellow professionals in the field, some who are very new, and some who have seen great changes in the sector over the decades. The varied perspectives, creative problem solving and engaging conversation are one of the things I have come to love about meeting my colleagues and I look forward to seeing you all again at this year's Museums Forum in September!





Museum Trends 2023 Results

Our accredited museum members spent much time and effort filling in our Museum Trends survey questionnaires and developing their 'Museum Impact Statement' at the end of 2023.

The purpose of the survey was to provide focused quantitative and qualitative data about local authority and independent museums so that NIMC can argue effectively for their social, cultural and economic value and help to secure the resources they need collectively. The Museum Trends Survey offers NIMC an opportunity to discover what museums are doing well, and to celebrate that. It also offers an opportunity to discover what is not being done, and why that might be, which is key to advocating for increased provision. The survey was divided into three themes mapped to the UK Accreditation Standard:

1. Organisational Health (workforce, finance, infrastructure, strategic outlook)
2. Managing Collections (collection scope, development and management)
3. Users and their Experiences (audience / digital engagement and impact)

Over the course of this year, NIMC will produce information around the results of this survey through Museum Beat, social media and our website so that museums can get a better understanding of the sector and their place in it. We've started with analysing our collective strengths and these can be found in the Resources section of our website. Further analysis will also be added there.

An overview of the SWOT analysis' provided by NI accredited museum respondents found the below:

Strengths

The collective strengths of our museums include strategic locations, strong community ties, and dedicated, experienced staff and volunteers. Our museums benefit from supportive boards, strong relationships with local councils, educational programmes, and active partnerships with schools, universities, local community groups and other cultural institutions.

Opportunities

The opportunities identified suggest several strategic areas such as diversifying audiences, expanding partnerships and identifying alternative sources of funding where the local museum sector can leverage its strengths to grow and enhance its services. By focusing on these opportunities, museums can increase their relevance, sustainability, and impact within their communities and beyond.

Weaknesses

The self-assessed weaknesses highlight significant areas where the local museum sector needs improvement to enhance sustainability, visitor engagement, and operational efficiency. Addressing these weaknesses is crucial for ensuring that museums continue to serve their communities effectively and preserve their cultural heritage.

Threats

The threats identified such as financial stability, succession planning and environmental challenges highlight significant factors that can impact the sustainability, visitor engagement, and operational efficiency of museums. Addressing these threats requires proactive planning and strategic initiatives.



'Our Museum' Early Years Book Launch at Ballymoney Museum

We are delighted to share the success of the first launch event for Our Museum — an early years book project supported and facilitated by the Northern Ireland Museums Council. This pilot initiative is part of our commitment to strengthening the role of museums in the lives of young children. The early years are a vital stage of development, and we believe museums can be powerful places for curiosity, creativity, and connection during this formative time. Our Museum explores how museums can not only engage our youngest visitors, but also learn from their unique perspectives.

Ballymoney Museum and North Down Museum were selected to lead this pilot, working closely with local early years settings to co-create a storybook with and for children. Through a series of engaging, play-based workshops led by artists and illustrators, children developed their own characters and storylines set in their local museum. The result is a beautifully illustrated book that reflects the imagination and voices of the children who helped create it.

These books will now become part of the museum's collection— a lasting legacy for future generations. Copies are also being distributed to local libraries, nurseries, and the children themselves.

A Special Day at Ballymoney Museum

On 11 April, Ballymoney Museum hosted the first launch event for the Our Museum book. The celebration was attended by Deputy Mayor Councillor Tanya Stirling, Councillor Kathleen McGurk, and representatives from Libraries NI, alongside local families and playgroup participants.

The highlight of the day was the involvement of Ballymoney Playgroup, whose children co-created the book and were each recognised as "museum superstars," receiving a certificate and a personalised copy of the book. The event featured a joyful story time led by Vicky McFarland of Tale Time Stories, supported by the creative team of Jamie Austin (Ballymoney Museum) and illustrator Kerrie McNeill, who helped bring the children's ideas to life. The day also included themed activities, colouring sheets, stickers, and badges, all designed to encourage further exploration and connection with the museum.

The event was not only a celebration of the children's creativity but also a powerful reminder of the importance of relationships between museums, early years educators, families, and wider community partners.

"My favourite bit was making a person for the book, I liked doing their hair"
— Ballymoney Playgroup Co-Creator



Looking Ahead

We are thrilled that the next launch will take place at North Down Museum in June. Causeway Coast & Glens Library Services are also planning a community event to celebrate the arrival of the books in local libraries.

NI Museums Council are currently producing a short project video and undertaking evaluations to better understand the impact of the initiative. Our hope is to grow and expand this model, supporting more museums across Northern Ireland to develop similar projects that inspire young children and connect with families in meaningful ways.

Photography: Page 7 and Page 8: 'Our Museum Day' book launch at Ballymoney Museum. © NIMC thanks to Peter Carson.



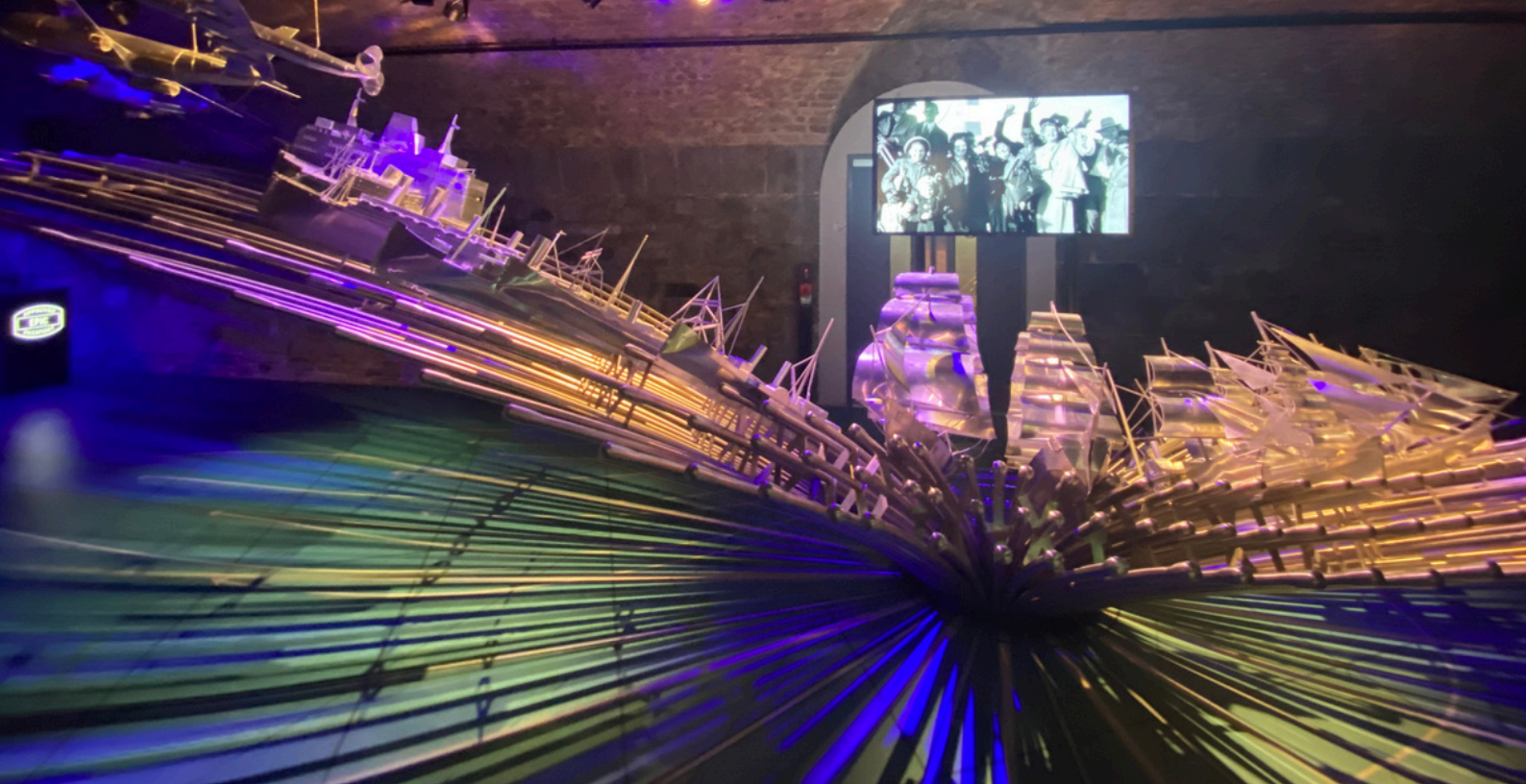


On 28th January 2025, NIMC members took part in a thought-provoking study visit to EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum in Dublin. Organised by NIMC in collaboration with Nathan Mannion, Head of Exhibitions and Programmes at EPIC, the trip aimed to strengthen sector connections and encourage peer learning across museums and heritage organisations.

EPIC is housed in the historic CHQ Building, formerly Stack A or the Tobacco Store, which dates back to the early 19th century. Nestled on Custom House Quay, overlooking the River Liffey, once a key departure point for countless emigrants, the site is a deeply resonant setting for Ireland's emigration story. The museum offers a powerful sense of place, blending historical significance with cutting-edge interpretation.

Since opening, EPIC has welcomed hundreds of thousands of visitors annually and earned the title of Europe's Leading Tourist Attraction for three consecutive years (2019–2021). Its digital-first approach explores the diverse experiences of the Irish diaspora and their global impact, tackling topics ranging from trauma and displacement to pride, culture, and celebration. Temporary exhibitions keep the content responsive to contemporary events and social themes.





After exploring the museum's immersive and digital exhibitions, the group met with Nathan Mannion and Luke Smith, Director of Technology, to delve deeper into EPIC's interpretative approach. They shared insights into both the opportunities and constraints of the museum's location, particularly the challenges posed by its low, vaulted cellar spaces, and how these inform curatorial and design decisions.



The conversation also touched on EPIC's forward-thinking ethos, encapsulated in its forthcoming 10-Year Strategy, Learning and Education Review, and Annual Action Plan 2025. A recurring theme was the museum's commitment to a continuous cycle of evaluation, feedback, and adaptation, ensuring the visitor experience remains dynamic and relevant. Interestingly, the museum attracts more domestic than international visitors- an audience that continues to shape how stories are told and helps to feed into its Historian in Residence programme.



Nathan and Luke offered practical advice on managing the balance between high-tech innovation and cost-effectiveness. From choosing the right hardware to strategies for avoiding the all-too-common "Out of Order" signs, their insights were a highlight for many of the visiting professionals.

The visit concluded with a tour of the Jeannie Johnston, a replica famine ship moored just outside EPIC. Guided by the knowledgeable and engaging Steve, the group explored the ship's poignant history, gaining a human perspective that deepened the interpretative themes encountered earlier in the museum. The tour was a fitting and emotional end to a day centred on migration, memory, and storytelling.

This study trip offered a rare opportunity to see how a peer organisation successfully navigates the space between museum and tourist attraction, between high and low-tech approaches, and between domestic and international engagement. It also underscored the importance of thoughtful, responsive interpretation in addressing the breadth of human experience- from famine and forced migration to resilience, creativity, and global achievement. Sincere thanks go to Nathan, Luke, Steve, and the entire team at EPIC and the Jeannie Johnston for their hospitality and generosity in sharing their expertise. Some of the feedback from the group included:



"It was helpful to see how their organisation functions and how they use the floor space they have. Additionally, it was interesting to see their interpretation and how they choose their content and how they market it to the public."

"It was interesting to see how EPIC approached attracting and catering for local visitors as well as visiting tourists. There is scope for us to create more engaging audio-visual material and to think about offering a package for more in-depth research at an appropriate price point."

"The tour of the Jeanie Johnston was also very interesting and beneficial, as I was able to include information gleaned from the tour in a talk I recently presented. The study trip was also a great opportunity to meet colleagues from the sector and learn about their work."

NIMC regularly offers members peer sharing opportunities, to find out more please visit our website nimc.co.uk.

Photography:

Page 9, Top: NI Museum Council staff and members under the light installation 'We all come from somewhere' at the entrance to the EPIC galleries. © NI Museums Council.

Page 9, Middle and bottom, examples of interpretation including collage style graphics and touch tables. © NI Museums Council.

Page 10, Top: Sculpture of vessels used in Irish migration throughout the centuries. © NI Museums Council.

Page 10, middle and bottom, examples of digital interpretation used in EPIC, including sound booths, interactive screens, and quizzes using motion sensors. © NI Museums Council.

Page 11, top: The Jeannie Johnston docked at the north wall of the Liffey across the road from EPIC. © NI Museums Council.



Double Win for Downpatrick & County Down Railway at CO3 Leadership Awards

The Downpatrick & County Down Railway (DCDR), an accredited museum and the only full-size heritage railway in Northern Ireland, has added to its impressive awards tally with a remarkable double win at the prestigious CO3 Leadership Awards, held on 27th March at the Europa Hotel, Belfast.

Chairman Robert Gardiner was named Leader of the Year (Small Organisation), while Finance Officer John Noble received the Trustee of the Year award, recognising their outstanding contributions to the voluntary and heritage sectors. The ceremony, part of CO3's 40th anniversary celebrations, honours inspirational leadership across the third sector.

Both recipients praised the volunteer spirit at the heart of DCDR's success. John Noble acknowledged the award as a reflection of the railway's entire team, while Robert Gardiner expressed gratitude to his colleagues and the wider DCDR community, highlighting the unique challenges of running a volunteer-led social enterprise.

This recognition comes as DCDR marks its 40th anniversary in 2025. Despite recent setbacks—including the 2023 Downpatrick floods—the railway continues to thrive, having secured seven major awards in the past six months and reaffirming its role as a leading force in heritage preservation and community engagement.

Photography: Thanks to DCDR.



Building Skills, Building Confidence: Celebrating the Success of Our Programme for Adults with Additional Needs

By Ruth Verner, Education and Outreach Officer at North Down Museum, Bangor.

In 2023, North Down Museum conducted a pilot project involving adults with additional needs, focusing on tailored workshops about local history. The project's success has fostered ongoing work with special educational needs (SEN) groups.

Why it became a priority

Following Covid we were aware that some groups in our community were more adversely affected by the pandemic. The need to protect our most vulnerable individuals had, unfortunately, led to prolonged social isolation. As a local authority museum service, we were keen address this and prioritised engagement with these groups in our new accessibility plan.

Although this was identified as a priority, the reality of re-establishing a schools' programme, which grew rapidly, allowed little time for this important work. However, a request for a tour of the museum in the summer of 2023 led to the implementation of our pilot project.

How it started

In the Summer of 2023, a local organisation working with adults with additional needs requested a tour of the museum. This provided the opportunity to create a bespoke tour that would be pitched appropriately for the needs of the visiting group. The visiting staff also used the opportunity to assess their clients' abilities to communicate, ask appropriate questions and show an understanding of what they were being taught.

"Throughout the tour with that initial group, I kept thinking to myself how this would be much more meaningful to adults with SEN if we could take our time and learn about the history of our local area over multiple sessions, rather than a whistle-stop tour. Their staff would also benefit from seeing their clients engage with a local service on a regular basis and be able to assess their needs, abilities and interests over a sustained period of time. Little did I know how much I would also gain from the experience." – Ruth

Following the tour, an evaluation was completed which led to the discussion of further involvement with the museum. This was well-received but, unfortunately, the organisation lost its funding and had to close. A month later, the Elderly Learning Disability Service (ELDS) in Bangor contacted the museum to request a talk for their clients. The opportunity arose to discuss the possibility of a series of workshops which was welcomed by the organisation.

How it developed

In collaboration with the ELDS, we established a calendar of 8 monthly visits starting in November 2023. The service was given a choice of participating in-house or through outreach and opted for the visits to take place in their own setting. The monthly workshops would focus on a different aspect of our local history starting with the Bronze Age and finishing with the 1950s.

With a previous background in primary education, workshops were created with an existing knowledge of additional needs and the strategies required to cater to these needs. Each session included learning through visuals and no text, a handling collection to support the learning (and some dress-up where possible), and arts and crafts to reinforce the learning. Additional 'workbooks' were also created to reinforce and extend the learning post-visit.

"The thing I love most about these group sessions is that I get to build a relationship with the people who attend. I get the chance to see what piques their interest and stirs their imagination, but I can also learn about their individual needs and can use this understanding to ensure they feel comfortable in a relaxed atmosphere where they can respond and ask questions freely. Although I'm not particularly 'arty', the arts and crafts element at the end of each session are incredibly enjoyable as the participants tend to communicate better when they're completing a task, and they feel a sense of achievement." – Ruth

How it went

The first session was a great opportunity to assess the needs of the group. Each individual comes with their own range of needs, so it was important to adapt future sessions. With a month's break between each visit, enough time was granted to produce the next session with a greater knowledge of the

participants and with regular feedback from the clients themselves and their staff.

It was important to always ensure time was given at the beginning of each session to recap on prior learning and how that would link to the new learning. It was also possible to tap into people's interests, for example, there were a few members of the group who had a real interest in monarchs through the ages, some who loved looking at photographs from the past of places they knew locally, and others who responded well to music clips.

Each session did come with challenges. At times, some clients could become disruptive or disengaged, so it was important to constantly adapt on the spot. The staff were always on hand to deal with any issues that arose, and it was important to ensure that the session continued, unaffected, for the rest of the group. Building a positive working relationship with the staff at the centre was integral to ensuring the success of these sessions, knowing that we could trust each other to enact our respective roles.

"The group really looked forward to their visits. They have enjoyed learning interesting facts about history and it's great that they can take something home at the end of each session. The quality of each visit is excellent and very suitable for the level of the group's understanding."
– Elderly Learning Disability Service





How it's going

Since the completion of the pilot project, we have rolled out the programme to four more groups. Two groups are now able to run alongside each other on a fortnightly basis (alternate Fridays), taking four months to complete the sessions before working with another two groups.

Strides Day Opportunities Service, Bangor; Bramblewood Care Home, Bangor; and Avondale Hub, Newtownards; have all completed or are in the middle of completing the workshops, with Avondale's second group currently participating and a third group booked to take part from June 2025.

With participants ranging from 19 to 90 years old and group sizes from 6 to 20, sessions have taken place both in the museum and in respective settings. Some have even added an additional session by visiting the museum for a tour at the end of the programme to summarise their learning and get up close and personal with artefacts we have regularly spoken about.

"Ruth was very person-centred and got to know each person's character. The sessions were fun as well as adaptive. We cannot fault the outreach sessions. Both staff and service users learnt so much."
– Avondale Hub

"At Strides we like to avail of all kinds of learning. Ruth has taught us all about our local history starting from the Bronze Age running up to and including the 1950s. She is incredibly engaging and makes every class fun and informative. We all look forward to the next session, our personal favourite was learning all about the Vikings (we even got to try on some of the Viking costumes)." – Strides Day Opportunities Service

Observations

For each group that has taken part, the purpose of the programme has not just been to learn about their local history but also to build links, foster relationships and increase social skills and self-confidence. Throughout the programme so far I have seen the participants: make links between the past and their own lives; make links between the past and what is happening in the world today or what they have seen in the news and/or social media; empathise with people from the past who have led very different lives; listen to and take instruction from an adult other than their own staff; grow in confidence when interacting with an adult other than their own staff; and grow in confidence when asking and answering questions and making statements based on what they have learnt.

"My confidence in delivering these sessions has increased greatly and I look forward to every Friday visit. Even though in my previous career I worked with many children with additional needs, I am new to working with adults and the sessions can still present many challenges, so it is important to adapt and learn and seek advice. Relationships are paramount."
– Ruth

Going forward

We are currently at capacity with the number of adult groups that we can work with at one time, but we would like to be able to continue this programme for as long as we can by reaching as many SEN groups as possible, as well as care homes. We also hope to be able to increase our handling collection, including more costumes suitable for adults, as this continues to be a high point.

Each group is entirely different, but through relationship-building, the initial pilot programme can be re-used and adapted accordingly. We are currently still able to fund these programmes ourselves and hope to be able to continue to do so, knowing how stretched these services are. We see ourselves as an important part of the community and our desire is to continue to make our museum and its collection accessible to everyone. All photos accompanying this article are thanks to Ruth Verner/North Down Museum/Strides.



By Eva Lynch, Development Officer, Northern Ireland Museums Council

On 11th March 2025, I had the privilege of co-organising and attending a shared learning day at the Ulster Museum as part of the Fixing Our Broken Planet (FOBP) Community of Practice. It was a truly inspiring day- bringing together colleagues from across the museum, education, environmental and community sectors to explore how we can collectively respond to the climate and biodiversity crises.

The event, hosted by the Natural History Museum in partnership with National Museums NI, Northern Ireland Environment Link, and myself at Northern Ireland Museums Council, was all about collaboration. It created space to share projects, challenges, and ideas—and to reimagine how museums can empower action for a fairer, more sustainable future.

Throughout the day, we heard from a wide range of voices. Amy Bell from Climate NI kicked things off with a timely look at how policy, partnerships and

communication are essential to tackling climate change here in Northern Ireland. Camilla Tham from the Natural History Museum shared insights into Generation Hope, a programme that places young people at the heart of climate action, through skill-building and storytelling. Anna Taylor from Armagh Observatory used fun and engaging interactive activities – ‘Spot the Penguin Poo’ and ‘Match the Sea Creature to the Consequences of Human Impact’, to highlight the vital role of space science and satellite data in understanding our changing planet.

We also rolled up our sleeves with interactive sessions. Nigel Cook from National Museums NI ran a fantastic beginner’s workshop on biological recording, complete with an outdoor species-spotting walk in the Botanic Gardens. It was brilliant to see how accessible biodiversity monitoring can be and how museums can help support citizen science.

One of the highlights for many was a guided tour of the Wild Ireland: Past, Present, Future exhibition led by Dr Mike Simms. This stunning gallery explores

Ireland's natural history through the art of Julian Friers—bringing extinct species like the Irish elk and woolly mammoth to life, while reminding us of the urgent need to protect what remains today. Mike is keen that elements of the exhibition might travel to local NI museums once finished at the Ulster Museum. If you are interested in this do get in touch with either Mike or me.

In the afternoon, World Café sessions opened up rich, informal conversations. We heard from:

- Artitude (Northern Ireland Resources Network), who use creative storytelling to explore climate justice and the circular economy;
- A Growing Story (Quarto Collective), which connects people through urban growing and food heritage;
- and Interconnected, a new Natural History Museum initiative supporting community-led sustainability programming.

What stood out for me was the strong sense of hope and possibility that emerged throughout the day. Even while discussing complex and often overwhelming challenges, the atmosphere was energising and full of thoughtful exchange, laughter, and a shared commitment to doing better. I left feeling both uplifted and deeply grateful to our partners, our speakers, and everyone who came along and contributed. These kinds of cross-sector conversations are essential if we want to embed sustainability meaningfully in our work.

You can find a full digital summary of the day including links to resources and further reading: in the Museums of Hope Sway in the Users and Experiences section of our Supporting Documents area on our website. I'm looking forward to seeing where this momentum takes us next.



"It was an interesting day bringing together people from multiple backgrounds. We share the common vision of caring for our planet, and it was good to interact with people I had not previously met."

(Event participant)



Photography

Page 17, Top Right: Museums of Hope attendees take part in AOP activity to find penguin populations by spotting their poo via satellite © NI Museums Council.

Page 18, Top Right: Museums of Hope attendees hear about the work of CEDaR and try out some species recording a go in Botanic Gardens. © NI Museums Council.

Page 18, Right Middle: Participants have a go at some of Armagh Observatory and Planetarium's interactive games, as method to use scientific data to share learning about climate change and environmental impact. © NI Museums Council.

Page 18, Bottom: Dr Mike Simms take participants on a tour of the Wild Ireland: Past Present, Future exhibition. It is on in the Ulster Museum until 31st August 2025. © NI Museums Council.

NIMC Training Update

NIMC Training Programme: Spring 2025 Highlights

Since our last newsletter, the Northern Ireland Museums Council has delivered a dynamic mix of training sessions, peer learning, and study visits to support the museum sector.

LET'S TALK Series

- Funding (Jan 13): Explored available funding streams for NI museums, featuring insights directly from funders.
- Digital & Museums (Feb 25): Discussed the ethical and environmental impacts of digitisation, with contributions from the Museum Data Service.

Collaborative Events

- Poverty Proofing Culture (Jan 30): In partnership with Thrive and Children North East, this training introduced strategies to remove barriers for individuals experiencing poverty, marking its first delivery in Northern Ireland.
- Fixing Our Broken Planet (Mar 11): Co-hosted with the Natural History Museum, this study day at Ulster Museum focused on the climate emergency and the role of museums in promoting sustainability. (See page 17)
- Heritage Emergencies Study Day (Mar 24): Held at Hillsborough Castle in collaboration with ICON NI and ICRI, this event addressed emergency preparedness and response for cultural heritage institutions. (See page 21)

Study Trip

- EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum (Jan 28): Members visited Dublin's award-winning museum to explore innovative digital storytelling and exhibitions on the Irish diaspora. (See page 9).
- Hillsborough Castle's Research Producer, Emma Lawthers, provided insight into the background of the LGBTQ+ History tour of Hillsborough Castle, which was created by Kris Reid. Afterwards, Palace Host, James McCabe, led us on the LGBTQ+ History tour through the State Apartments of Hillsborough Castle.

Upcoming

NIMC Museum Forum – SAVE THE DATE
23rd September 2025!



Photography:

Page 19, Top & Middle: NIMC Members enjoy learning about and taking part in the Hillsborough Castle LGBTQ+ tour. © NI Museums Council.



NI Challenge Award Launched With Scouts NI

The NI Challenge Award scout badges bring an innovative refocus on local culture and heritage, whilst encouraging young people to explore local museum collections and develop real-world skills through hands-on, interactive learning.

Along with our partners Scouts NI, NI Museums Council were delighted launch the NI Challenge Award badge programmes, on Wednesday, 30 April 2025. These new challenge awards, featuring a badge for each section from Squirrels to Network, were officially launched at our accredited member museum HMS Caroline in Belfast. The launch marked a new chapter for these historic badges, which were refreshed for a modern audience with a new syllabus and look.

Sponsored by NI Museums Council with funds from Department for Communities, an intrinsic element of these badges is to encourage young people to visit, volunteer, and learn at local museums across Northern Ireland. Ten accredited museums are offering activities for Scouts to complete as part of this redesigned badge programme, with further museums planning to join and develop new activities as time goes on. Whether it is via interacting with exhibitions, to gaining hands-on experience, the NI Challenge Awards provides young people with the chance to develop new skills, discover new interests, and connect with their local community. From Downpatrick, to Armagh, up to Ballymoney and Derry/Londonderry there are accredited local museums ready to welcome everybody!

Attending the launch of the new Scouts NI Challenge Badge, Communities Minister Gordon Lyons said:

"This NI Challenge Award is a fantastic initiative that encourages young people to engage with and explore the incredible stories held within our local museums, enriching their education and fostering a greater appreciation of our cultural heritage. I am pleased to support this innovative collaboration with NI Museums Council which will spark curiosity, learning and a deeper connection to our shared history and community."

We're looking forward to this initiative having impact in communities across NI, and developing further! Further details of the NI Challenge Award and museum activities can be found in the supporting documents section of our website or do get in touch to get involved!

A photograph showing a man in a blue shirt and dark trousers standing in front of a large, classical building with many columns. He is gesturing with his hands as if speaking to a group of people. The group is seen from behind, looking towards the speaker. The building has a grand facade with multiple windows and columns. A sign on the building reads 'JACC NI AI Castle Conservation'.

Heritage Emergencies Study Day

On 24th March 2025, NI Museums Council (NIMC), in collaboration with Institute of Conservation NI group (ICON NI) and the Institute of Conservators and Restorers in Ireland (ICRI), proudly delivered the Heritage Emergencies Study Day at Hillsborough Castle and Gardens.

Bringing together over 40 heritage professionals from across Northern Ireland, this vital event gave an overview and insight to every stage of heritage emergency management. Structured to reflect the lifecycle of an emergency – from risk assessment and planning, through response, to recovery – the programme included specialist-led sessions from across the sector.

We began the day by unpacking the principles of risk reduction and emergency planning, using a museum-focused lens. The introductory presentations from NIMC and Historic Royal Palaces (HRP) framed key concepts around types of emergencies, how to identify and mitigate risks, and the importance of integrating planning into day-to-day museum operations. Delegates explored how understanding climate, infrastructure, documentation, and organisational resilience all play a role in building an effective emergency strategy. Participants were then taken on a walk and talk around the castle learning about the emergency response strategies and techniques practiced at Hillsborough Castle. The team's integration of emergency planning and preparedness into their daily work was inspiring and it was great to hear their experiences of running emergency drills in combination with NI Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS).

The afternoon brought real-life urgency to the concepts covered in the morning sessions, through an impactful case study from Downpatrick and County Down Railway. Chairman Robert Gardiner took us through the 2023 Storm Ciarán floods, sharing a candid account of the damage, emotional toll on volunteers, phased recovery, and public engagement efforts. His presentation reminded us that emergency recovery is as much about people and morale as it is about buildings and collections.

The learning continued via presentations from Harwell and NIFRS sharing crucial incident preparedness and response strategies, NIFRS encourage all museums and heritage sites to invite their local emergency services on site for familiarisation visits. This was followed by post-incident recovery insights from Claire Magill (National Trust) and Fergus Purdy (Freelance Conservator). They shared experiences of the response and recovery from the devastating water damage caused by a leak on the upper floors of The Argory in Dec 2010. Claire spoke about the plans and strategies used by the National Trust for response and recovery. Fergus shared how he supported recovery through remedial furniture conservation. One of the key learning points was that the recovery cannot be rushed, time and resources are needed for drying out and recuperation processes, it took 7 years for some of the rooms in The Argory to be reinstated, but it was worth it!

The organising team were keen to fully evaluate the day, so that we could understand its effectiveness and plan further learning opportunities. To do this we asked participants to fill in evaluation forms that included questions for completion at both the start and end of the day.

In these responses the range of real-world examples and practical advice was frequently praised, with attendees valuing the "openness of others and sharing of knowledge and ideas."

What We Achieved

- *100% of attendees reported they now felt better equipped to work more effectively in emergencies.*
- *90% said their confidence in emergency planning increased, with nearly half rating that increase as significant.*
- *97.5% learnt something new, and 100% felt the day was good value for money.*

As one attendee said:

"These events make a difference. Exceptionally good value and incredibly informative."

Many participants appreciated the diversity of voices and openness from speakers across the day:

"It was great hearing cross-organisational approaches and seeing how different teams manage salvage planning."



This event made clear that heritage emergencies are not isolated incidents — they are shared challenges that require shared solutions. The Study Day was a powerful step in developing that network of mutual support and expertise across Northern Ireland's heritage sector.

We extend our thanks to all speakers, contributors, and participants. Your engagement made this event not just a learning opportunity but the start of a community of practice.

To stay involved or explore future training and collaborative opportunities, get in touch with us at the NI Museums Council.

Photography: Pg 21 top: David Orr, Castle and Collections Manager, Hillsborough Castle and Gardens shares HRP emergency preparedness techniques with participants outside Hillsborough Castle. © NI Museums Council.

Page 22, top: David discusses emergency supplies and equipment kept in storage ready for use. Middle: Fergus Purdy gave examples of issues caused to furniture by water ingress and how this can be tackled. © NI Museums Council.

The Gift of a Ukrainian Translation

Armagh Robinson Library is a graded four-star visitor attraction on the Hill of Armagh. Over time, the information flyer which is used to encourage visitors to look at the objects on display, has been made available in different languages.

Aware that there are now more Ukrainian visitors coming to the Library, the Library's team is keen to make them feel warmly welcome and to enable them to read the information in their own language. When the County Armagh based group of Ukrainian families learned of this, they generously agreed to translate the information flyer as a gift to the Library.

One of the local Ukrainian mothers, Inna Shynkevich said, "It was an honour for me to contribute to the translation of the flyer. This experience has been incredibly meaningful, not only as a way to support the library but also as a chance to help Ukrainians feel more welcome in this wonderful space. I sincerely hope that this translation will encourage more Ukrainians to discover Armagh Robinson Library, not just as a place where books are stored, but as a warm and inviting community where they will always be welcomed."

Maryna Opanasenko said, "Armagh Robinson Library has become one of the most important and welcoming places for us in Northern Ireland. It is where we can meet, get to know each other better, and deepen our understanding of Northern Ireland and Armagh. The Library is truly a warm and inviting space, with incredible people working in it, a fascinating history, and thousands of antique books that make every visit special. We are delighted to contribute by providing the Ukrainian translation of the flyer so that more Ukrainians can learn about this wonderful and unique place."

The Assistant Keeper of the Library, Carol Conlin, added, "The local Ukrainian families have been so supportive of our projects. They have taken part in museum projects with us and have helped us to promote European Heritage Open Days and Armagh's Georgian Day. The translation of our information flyer is another example of their kindness and we appreciate it very much. By having the flyer in Ukrainian, we hope that more visitors will feel welcome and enjoy this eighteenth library with its Greek inscription, which we translate into English as the 'healing place of the soul'."



© Armagh Robinson Library

"For us, Armagh Robinson Library has truly become a place of healing for the soul! Carol and colleagues always greet us with an open heart, warmth and care. Every time we learn a lot of new things for ourselves and reveal our personalities from different creative sides. This is a real treasure island with a huge number of old books, coins, precious stones, seals and manuscripts. Archbishop Richard Robinson's large-scale contribution to the history of Armagh is very admirable. We are very glad that now Ukrainians, thanks to the flyer, will have the opportunity to understand and feel the depth, warmth and grandeur of this place."

–Olena Kulaga



'Cabinets of Curiosity' at the Armagh County Museum

Belmont University Nashville and Queens University Belfast history student Ace Cheatham shares their experience co-curating an exhibition with Armagh County Museum.

This semester, I was privileged to study at Queen's University Belfast as an exchange student from the United States. With a History and German background and a deep passion for museum work, I was eager to immerse myself in a new academic and cultural environment. Coming from Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, to Queen's was a jump, one that I was going to take willingly. My time in Belfast was short—just one semester—so I had to choose my classes carefully. One course stood out immediately: Cabinets of Curiosity: Museums Past and Present.

This class offered a comprehensive overview of museum history, exploring how they came into being, who collected their contents, and the roles they played in their communities. From ancient Greek artefacts to porcelain and taxidermy, the course



unpacked the evolution of museum practices and the complex narratives they help construct. We also explored contemporary debates around ownership, provenance, and museums' ethical responsibilities in interpreting and displaying cultural heritage. All important things to know when pursuing a career in museums.

The culmination of our semester was a hands-on assignment known as the Object Project—an opportunity that felt tailor-made for someone like me who aspires to work in museums. We collaborated with Sean Barden, Curator at the Armagh County Museum. The experience began with a visit to the museum's stores, where we encountered a remarkable variety of items—from medals and catalogues to taxidermy specimens. The collection's diversity was inspiring, revealing the hidden stories held in museum archives.

Working in groups, we selected an object from the museum's collection, many of which had never been displayed before. My group chose to work with a Meccano Catalogue published in 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War. We were immediately drawn to its vivid design and nostalgic charm: a bright yellow cover featuring a boy surrounded by illustrated trains in motion. Inside, it contained colorful advertisements and short articles about the toys' functions and significance. The catalogue had been donated to Armagh County Museum by Professor R.H. Buchanan, who had owned it as a boy and who contributed several other toys to the museum. We were surprised to learn that it had never been publicly displayed before—a fact that made our project feel all the more meaningful.

Once we had selected our object, the research and label-writing process began in earnest. We drew on a range of sources, including museum databases, journal articles, newspaper archives, and even online marketplaces like eBay, to find comparable items. We aimed to uncover not only the catalogue's historical context but also its cultural significance, especially in terms of how toys like Meccano helped shape mid-twentieth-century ideas about childhood, gender, and technology.

The final stage of the project involved designing and installing a museum case that would display our selected objects. I was fortunate to be among the few students who visited the museum in person to help with installation. This was an incredible opportunity—not only did I get to arrange the exhibit physically, but

also learned to use Mimsy XG, the museum's collections management system. Contributing to the official museum record by entering my name as a "Mover" who helped arrange the case was a moment of quiet pride. It was a small but significant step toward my future in the field.



The finished display was beautifully balanced, with each group's object given equal space and careful consideration. Seeing our Meccano Catalogue in a public exhibit for the first time, surrounded by other thoughtfully selected and researched items, was an unforgettable experience. I was proud of my contribution and the collaborative effort that made the project a success.

Participating in this collaboration with Armagh County Museum deepened my understanding of what it means to work in museums today. From curatorial decisions to cataloging and ethical research, every stage of the project reflected the professional practices I hope to one day be part of. Most importantly, it affirmed my passion for public history and object storytelling. Being able to contribute meaningfully—even as a student—to the public interpretation of a historical object was a privilege I won't soon forget.

Reflecting on my time at Queen's, I'm immensely grateful for the chance to blend academic study with hands-on experience. This course did more than educate—it empowered me. I now return to my studies in the U.S. with renewed purpose, new skills, and an even stronger sense of where I want to go next.

Photography:

Page 24, Middle, Ace Cheatham.

Page 25, Top: Zoélie, Liberty, Ethan, Ace and Daria at Armagh County Museum.

Page 25, Bottom, Meccano catalogue (ARMCM.134.1983).

Page 26, Bottom: 'A Cabinet of Curiosities' display at Armagh County Museum.





Playful Museums Festival 2025



In February 2025, eleven museums across Northern Ireland opened their doors to our youngest audiences during the annual Playful Museums Festival—a month-long celebration of creativity, curiosity, and early years engagement.

Launched by the NI Museums Council in 2016, the festival continues to grow as a powerful way to connect with children under five, along with their parents and carers. Thanks to generous support from the Art Fund, this year's festival featured 47 joyful events across the region, reaching over 1000 people.

From hands-on workshops, storytelling and music sessions, to an imaginative Irish-language 'workout', activities were carefully designed to inspire and delight while drawing from museum collections, local history, and the NI Early Years curriculum.



Some museums focused on creating legacy resources—investing in new materials and equipment to help embed early years engagement well beyond the festival month. This forward-thinking approach builds trust with families and educators and reinforces the message that museums are for everyone.

While evaluations are still coming in, early signs are promising. Several nurseries have already expressed interest in return visits, and participating museums are brimming with ideas for next year's programme.

Save the date! The Playful Museums Festival will return in February 2026. If you're part of a museum team, now's the perfect time to start dreaming up how you might get involved. For advice, inspiration or support, reach out to the NI Museums Council—we'd love to hear from you.



Photography:

Page 27, top: Wee Critters at Ballymoney Museum © NI Museums Council thanks to Peter Carson.
 Middle left: Wee Critters at Ballymoney Museum © NI Museums Council thanks to Peter Carson.
 Middle right: Jo Jingles at Fermanagh County Museum (FCM) © FCM

Photography:

Page 28, top: Living Art at Tower Museum © Tower Museum.
 Middle left: Terrific Toys at North Down Museum © NI Museums Council thanks to Peter Carson.
 Middle right: On The Farm at Coleraine Museum © NI Museums Council thanks to Peter Carson.

© NI Museums Council 2025

Registered in Northern Ireland as a Limited Company,
 Registration No. N277356.

Charity Registration Number: NIC101873