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# Equipment for Education, Learning and Collections

## Mount Stewart House & Gardens

A Case Study on NI Museum  
Council's Grant Funding



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Mount Stewart is one of Northern Ireland's most celebrated historic estates, renowned for its vibrant gardens, rich biodiversity, and imaginative learning programmes. Welcoming thousands of families and school groups each year, the site offers immersive opportunities for children and young people to explore nature, wildlife, and heritage in a hands-on, memorable way

## Project Summary

This project supported four interconnected strands of learning and engagement at Mount Stewart: enhanced educational outreach, new taxidermy specimens and display cabinets, refreshed loan boxes for self-guided groups, and resources for their toy handling collection

Mount Stewart received £9,604.77 through the NI Museum Council's Local Museum Small Capital Grant Fund 2025–2026. This investment enabled the site to enhance its learning and engagement offer through new taxidermy specimens, secure display cabinets, and improved interpretation and learning spaces, creating long-term benefits for children, young people, and community groups..



# Context and Need

Mount Stewart's learning and engagement programme has grown significantly in recent years, with increasing demand from schools.

Staff identified a need for:

- More robust and engaging handling collections
- Improved environmental education resources
- Portable outreach materials
- Interpretation that could be used both on-site and off-site
- A way to introduce natural heritage in a child-friendly, sensory-rich way

The project addressed these needs by investing in high-quality educational equipment, taxidermy specimens, and new interpretive materials.

# Risks Before the Project

Before the project, the museum faced several risks:

- Handling collections were ageing and at risk of deterioration through heavy use.
- Outreach materials were limited, reducing the museum's ability to reach rural schools.
- The lack of engaging natural-heritage resources meant environmental education was less impactful.
- Interpretation in the Lookout was outdated, reducing visitor engagement.
- Without investment, the learning programme risked stagnation and reduced relevance for young audiences.





## What the Funding Facilitated

- **New taxidermy specimens** — introduced high-quality, engaging learning resources for children and young people
- **Secure display cabinets** — ensured the taxidermy can be safely displayed and protected long-term
- **Improved interpretation** — new boards and future audio guides to support year-round public engagement
- **Upgraded learning spaces** — enhancements to the Lookout and outdoor classroom for all-weather use
- **Expanded outreach capacity** — enabled more school visits, rural outreach, and summer-scheme programming
- **Inclusive learning tools** — sensory elements and replica objects to support SEN and early-years learners



**‘The impact has been deeper than we anticipated’ – Jilian, Senior Visitor Experience Officer.**



## **Impact: Access and Engagement**

The project has significantly increased access to stories, collections, and natural heritage. Since completion, 11 outreach sessions have been delivered, each engaging up to 32 children, with many more booked.

The taxidermy has been “a real hit” with young people – children arrive not knowing they will see taxidermy, and staff describe their reaction as “their minds are blown”, “you could hear a pin drop” as children become fully absorbed and far less distracted.

Outreach has been especially valued by rural schools with limited budgets. The renovated Lookout now offers year-round interpretation, and the outdoor classroom is usable in all seasons thanks to new shelters. Once the interpretation boards arrive, the displays will open fully to the public, supported by lockable cabinets and manned engagement during the summer. Many children are already booked to use the taxidermy as part of upcoming summer schemes.

Unexpectedly, the taxidermy has become one of the most effective tools for teaching children about local wildlife and environmental stewardship

# Impact: Accessibility

The grant support has had a strong positive effect on staff confidence and enthusiasm. Team members “love” the new resources and are “looking for reasons to use them.” The taxidermy has become a catalyst for new programming, including work with groups experiencing anti-social behaviour. Staff believe the specimens can help these young people (aged 16–18) develop respect for animals and understand “what it takes to make a place beautiful.”

The funding has also inspired long-term planning. Audio guides activated by push-button will be added to the displays to support inclusive learning, alongside new sensory elements. This investment demonstrates the museum’s growing confidence in delivering high-quality, multi-sensory learning experiences.

The project has significantly improved both sensory and intellectual accessibility for children and young people.

Storytelling and object-handling activities now provide highly engaging, multi-sensory learning experiences, allowing even very young children to interact with heritage in an age-appropriate way. SEN children have been able to fully participate in sessions, supported by replica toys that enable safe, inclusive play.

Simplified, hands-on interpretation helps children understand complex ideas, building confidence and curiosity. Outreach delivery also removes transport barriers for rural schools and supports the museum’s sustainability goals by reducing travel.

Together, these improvements ensure that a wider range of learners can meaningfully engage with the property’s natural and cultural heritage.



# Organisational Impact



- Staff confidence in delivering environmental and historical education increased
- Capacity to run year-round outdoor learning improved
- The long-term sustainability of the handling collection
- The museum's ability to meet Accreditation standards for access and engagement
- The new taxidermy cabinets and conservation materials have significantly improved the care, safety, and longevity of the specimens.
- Staff described the cabinets as "great," noting that they keep the specimens safe, secure, and protected from environmental and handling risks. The lockable design ensures that the displays can be opened to the public without compromising preservation.

# Long-Term Value

The project clearly strengthens:

- Staff confidence in delivering environmental and historical education
- Capacity to run year-round outdoor learning
- The long-term sustainability of the handling collection
- The museum's ability to meet Accreditation standards for access and engagement

The long-term opportunities created by this project extend far beyond initial expectations.

- sustained intergenerational engagement
- expanded summer programming
- manned interpretation during peak seasons
- future sensory and audio-enhanced displays
- broader community involvement, including older generations

These developments ensure that the taxidermy resources will continue to support learning, wellbeing, and community connection for years to come



The project creates a sustainable foundation for Mount Stewart's learning and engagement work.

By investing in durable handling collections, high-quality taxidermy, and flexible outreach resources, the museum is now better equipped to deliver consistent, high-impact learning experiences for years to come.

# Overall Assessment

This project has delivered strong, tangible impact across learning, access, and engagement.

It has expanded Mount Stewart's ability to reach children and young people, strengthened environmental education, and created inclusive, sensory-rich experiences that resonate with diverse audiences.

The enthusiasm from children, teachers, and group leaders demonstrates the project's success in making heritage accessible, memorable, and relevant.

Thanks to the grant funding and the hard work of the Mount Stewart staff team, the museum is now in a stronger position to deliver high-quality learning programmes that support both organisational goals and wider sector priorities.

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