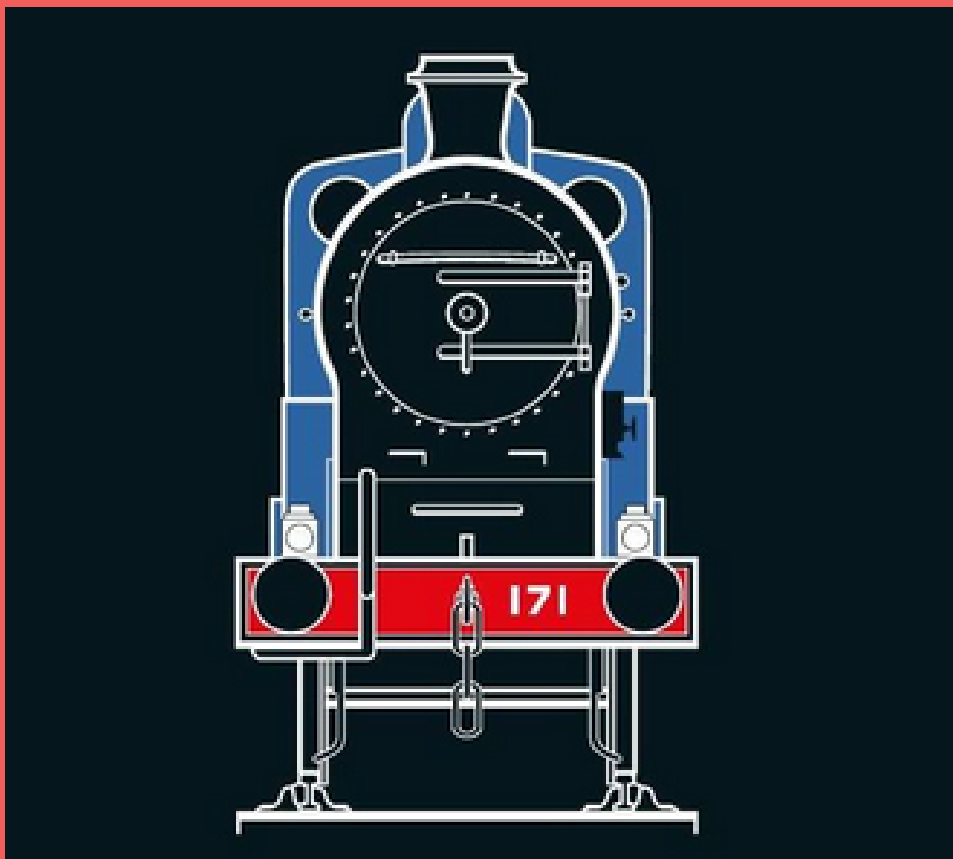

All Aboard: Improving Inclusive Access at Whitehead Railway Museum

A Case Study on NI Museum
Council's Grant Funding



Whitehead Railway Museum, home to the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland, is a unique heritage site where visitors can explore historic locomotives, carriages, and the craft of railway restoration. The museum blends engineering heritage with hands-on learning, offering families, schools, and enthusiasts an immersive look at Ireland's railway past.

Project Summary

The purpose of this grant of £5,853.09 from NIMC's Local Museum Small Grant Programme, was to significantly improve access for visitors with mobility challenges and neurodivergent visitors. The grant money helped to remove barriers to access and ensure that Whitehead Railway Museum is an inclusive space where everyone can discover, learn, and connect with their railway heritage.

The changes helped break down barriers to participation and encourage a wider range of audiences, including families, schools, and community groups, to engage fully with the museum. The grant funding enabled the purchase of upgrades that enhance the museum's accessibility to its community.



Context and Need

Whitehead Railway Museum has a unique collection of historic locomotives, carriages, and railway artefacts. However, prior to this project, several barriers prevented visitors with mobility challenges, sensory needs, or other neurodivergent conditions, from fully accessing or enjoying the museum.

The primary problem that arose prior to the project's funding was a lack of access. Some of these problems included:

- Limited physical access: via insufficient accessible parking and seating.
- Lack of sensory-friendly spaces, which impacted neurodivergent visitors of all ages
- Hearing loop and signage: with no hearing loop, individuals with hearing impairments were excluded, while visitors with visual impairments would have found it more difficult to navigate the café with smaller text on the menus.

The project, therefore, aligned closely with the museum's strategic aims to:

- Broaden its audience base
- Improve the visitor experience for all
- Meet best-practice accessibility standards
- Strengthen its role as a community resource

The funding was essential to address these long-standing access needs and ensure the museum could welcome every visitor with dignity and confidence



What the Funding Facilitated



Sensory/Quiet Room

Designed with soft lighting, calming colours, and sensory tools to support neurodivergent visitors and those who may become overwhelmed.

Sensory Bags

The introduction of sensory bags was also made possible by grant funding, which included ear defenders and fidget toys to support neurodivergent children and adults who may feel overwhelmed during their visit. The blue bags (7) are for children, while the red bags (3) are for adult visitors, allowing inclusivity for neurodivergent individuals regardless of age group.



What the Funding Facilitated



Large Print Menus

including larger-print menus and clearer directional signage to support visitors with visual impairments or cognitive differences.

Hearing Loop System

This was installed in the café area to improve communication for visitors with hearing impairments.



Accessible Seating

selected and assembled by museum volunteers to ensure comfort and stability for visitors with mobility needs.

Visitor Paths

Pathways were painted to improve safety, wheelchair access, and ease of movement around the site.



'These grants make a massive difference' – Rachele, Museum Manager



Impact: Access and Engagement

The project has significantly increased access and engagement across all visitor groups. The sensory room and sensory bags are now incorporated into every public event and visit, ensuring that neurodivergent visitors can participate comfortably.

Improved signage and accessible seating have made the museum easier to navigate and more welcoming for older visitors, wheelchair users, and those with visual impairments.



Impact: Accessibility

The accessibility upgrades have transformed the museum's ability to meet the needs of diverse audiences.

- Greater independence, as clearer signage and visual supports allow visitors to navigate the site confidently.
- Enhanced sensory accessibility, with dedicated quiet spaces and sensory tools reducing overwhelm and supporting self-regulation.
- Improved physical access, thanks to safer pathways, accessible seating, and designated parking.
- Better communication access, with the hearing loop enabling clearer interactions for visitors with hearing loss.

These improvements collectively ensure that the museum is now a more inclusive, equitable, and supportive environment.



Impact: Community



The impact on visitors and the community has been immense. According to the Whitehead Railway Museum, they have received 896 visitors since January 2026 and have reported a significant increase in neurodivergent visitors using the sensory space.

According to Rachele, the Museum's Manager, there has been a large number of parents and their neurodivergent children visiting as a result of the installation of the sensory room, showing just how significant an impact this change has had on accessibility and visitation.

Long-Term Impact

Over the next 3–5 years, the project will deliver sustained benefits, including:

- Increased visitor numbers, particularly among families, schools, and neurodivergent communities.
- Enhanced reputation as an inclusive, forward-thinking heritage site.
- New programming opportunities, such as sensory-friendly events and quiet sessions.
- Greater resilience, as improved accessibility broadens the museum's audience base
- Reduced maintenance costs, thanks to upgraded pathways and durable accessible furniture.

The project lays a strong foundation for future development and ensures the museum remains relevant, welcoming, and sustainable.

Overall Assessment

This project has delivered a transformative set of accessibility improvements that significantly enhance the visitor experience at Whitehead Railway Museum. The impact is clear measurable and meaningful for the community.

The funding was essential in enabling the museum to address barriers highlighted in an NI Museums Council provided Access Assessment. and could not have been resolved without that external support.

The project demonstrates excellent value for money, strong alignment with sector priorities, and genuine commitment by all at the museum to widen participation.

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