



NI
Museums
Council

Newsletter

Spring/Summer 2026



Big Impact Across Museums: NIMC Capital Grant Case Studies

Playful Museums Festival 2026

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

nimc.co.uk

Disaster Planning & Emergency Salvage

Strengthening emergency
readiness through hands-on
disaster training.

Education and Outreach Forum

Showcasing collaboration and
creativity in museum learning
and community engagement



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Cover photograph Mount Stewart Toytime outreach session using NIMC funded replacement toys for handling ©NIMC.

Top left: President Arthur Cottage, who achieved their first museum accreditation this summer ©NIMC.

Bottom left: Participants in Whitehead Railway Museum's Playful Museums Festival activities. ©NIMC.

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Director's Note



Dear friends and colleagues,

We step into the season on the back of a strong and productive 2025/2026, marked by growth, collaboration and a deepening commitment to the museums we serve. Our Board of Trustees has been strengthened by four new Ministerial appointments, and we are delighted to welcome our new Chair, Jessica Hoyle, whose leadership is already helping to shape an ambitious path forward.

Across the sector, our museums have been busy engaging with our training programme, taking up guidance and assessments through the Accreditation Scheme, and have benefited from a wide range of audits from access and security to collections care. Over the previous financial year, twelve museums benefited from these specialist audits, and we were proud to award thirty grants totalling £122,000, each one supporting projects that enhance public access, safeguard collections and build organisational resilience.

Partnership and advocacy continue to be at the heart of our work. We have been maintaining meaningful collaborations with the Group for Education in Museums, the Irish Museums Association, the Museums Association and the Heritage Council, delivering joint training, events and shared projects. A standout achievement was our work with DCMS as NIMC became the UNESCO Living Heritage Community Hub for Northern Ireland.

As we move forward, we are exploring new opportunities for investment and innovation. This includes a Peace funding application to measure the social impact of museums, ongoing discussions with the Education Authority around Sanctuary Schools and collaboration with Ulster University on initiatives addressing violence against women and girls.

Looking ahead, we are pleased to support the consultation on the NI Museums Policy and have shaped our Corporate Plan 2026–2030 to align with its aims. We continue to advocate strongly with the Department for Communities for increased funding. As this newsletter demonstrates, NIMC and our museums consistently deliver above and beyond what might be expected from the limited resources available.

Unfortunately, this year, funding constraints will be particularly acute across Northern Ireland, with all government departments affected by ongoing budget pressures and delays in finalising departmental allocations. As a result, the resources available to support the cultural sector remain limited, creating continued uncertainty and placing additional strain on organisations such as NIMC and our member museums, but our commitment remains steadfast: to champion our museums and support them to clearly demonstrate the importance of museums.

NIMC Director, Heather McGuicken

News in Brief



Launch of NI Museums Council Corporate Plan

The NI Museums Council's Corporate Plan 2026–2030 marks an important milestone in setting a clear and ambitious direction for the development of the museum sector across Northern Ireland. Built around four key pillars; Support, Empower, Strengthen and Harness, the Plan outlines how the Council will foster a vibrant, inclusive, resilient and innovative sector that places museums and their collections firmly at the heart of culture and community life. It reflects a shared vision in which museums are recognised not only as custodians of heritage, but as dynamic spaces that inspire, educate and connect people, making a meaningful contribution to wellbeing, identity and civic engagement.

The Council is particularly pleased to adopt this framework, as it provides a more coherent and strategic approach to coordinating its work in support of both the museum sector and its membership. By aligning closely with wider policy priorities, including the draft Museums Policy, the Corporate Plan ensures that the Council's activities, from grant making to advocacy, are targeted, effective and responsive to sector needs. It strengthens the Council's ability to build partnerships, support accreditation standards and deliver impactful programmes that promote excellence, collaboration and innovation across local museums.

At the core of the Plan is a strong emphasis on collections as the foundation of all activity. The Council recognises that collections, both tangible and intangible, are living archives of identity, memory and meaning. As such, all grant programmes, training initiatives and future projects are designed to enhance the care, management and development of these collections.

This strategic focus ensures their long term preservation while also equipping museum professionals with the skills, resources and infrastructure needed to meet recognised standards and respond to an evolving cultural landscape.

Importantly, the Plan also prioritises widening access and deepening public engagement with collections, enabling museums to share unique local stories and histories in more inclusive and innovative ways. Through the use of both established museum practices and emerging technologies, including digitisation and interactive interpretation, the Council aims to expand audiences, enhance learning opportunities and create more meaningful connections between museums and the communities they serve. In doing so, the Corporate Plan positions museums as forward looking, accessible and essential contributors to Northern Ireland's cultural and social future.

Recognising Resilience Across Our Museum Community

NIMC extends its sincere thanks and support to our member museums across the region who remained open, where it was safe to do so, during the recent period of unrest. In challenging and uncertain times, museums play a vital role as trusted community spaces, offering calm, reflection, and a sense of continuity.

We commend the dedication and resilience of staff and volunteers who ensured that doors stayed open, providing places of solace, learning and connection for all who needed them. NIMC stands firmly with its members and will continue to support the sector as it navigates these difficult circumstances.

A Fond Farewell and a Warm Welcome

NIMC extends its warmest thanks to Sean Barden of Armagh County Museum as he retires following many years of dedicated service to Armagh County Museum. Sean has also made a valued contribution to the NIMC Board, and we are grateful for the insight, experience, and commitment he brought to the organisation. We wish him every happiness and fulfilment in his retirement.

At the same time, we are delighted to welcome Sarah Weir of Armagh County Museum to the NIMC Board. Sarah brings a wealth of knowledge and enthusiasm, and we look forward to working with her as we continue to support and advocate for the museum sector.



Meet The Board Member: Pamela Baird

I was delighted to join the NI Museums Council Board in September 2025. Having worked alongside NIMC for many years, including delivering training for member museums, it has been a privilege to become more directly involved in supporting an organisation that plays such an important role in championing museums across Northern Ireland.

I currently work as Audience Insights & Planning Manager at National Museums NI and have spent the past 18 years there. In total, I have almost 30 years' experience in market research, audience insight and strategic planning. My background is in psychology, and understanding what makes people think, feel and behave the way they do has shaped my entire career.

I began my career in the Psychology department at McCann-Erickson Advertising, Belfast in 1997, and I worked as Psychology Director from 1999 to 2003, before moving to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (now Tourism NI) and later joining National Museums NI in 2008. While the sectors I've worked in have changed over the years, the underlying question has remained remarkably consistent: how do we better understand people and create experiences that are meaningful and relevant to them?

That question sits at the heart of my current role. A large part of my work involves understanding the climate in which museums operate, identifying social, cultural and economic trends, and exploring how those changes affect audiences and their relationship with museums. One of the things I enjoy most is helping colleagues make evidence-based decisions by bringing together audience insight, performance data and wider trends.

One of the most rewarding aspects of working in museums is seeing the impact they can have. Museums can spark curiosity, challenge perceptions, explore identity, build confidence and bring communities together. At National Museums NI, I have been leading work to streamline how we measure impact so that we can better understand and demonstrate the difference museums make.



As a Board member, I hope to support the development of NIMC's Museums Trends Survey so that it continues to provide robust and actionable insights for the sector. Good evidence is essential if we are to advocate effectively for museums, and I hope my experience in audience research, together with the partnerships I have developed across the museum, tourism and cultural sectors, can contribute to that work. I also hope that insights from National Museums NI and the wider networks I work with can help inform and strengthen NIMC's role as a voice for the sector.

One thing that has struck me since joining the Board is the incredible work being delivered by local museums. I have been genuinely humbled by what many organisations achieve with small teams, modest budgets and an enormous amount of passion and commitment. It is often these museums that are closest to their communities and most deeply connected to the stories and people they serve.

A personal museum highlight was seeing my own Crazy Prices badge included in the Ulster Museum's Collecting the Past / Making the Future exhibition. It was a reminder that museums are not just about preserving history; they are about collecting the stories, memories and experiences that connect us all.

What I love most about working in museums is that no two days are ever the same. I genuinely believe museums are for everyone. Our challenge is to continue breaking down barriers to participation, listening to communities and creating experiences that feel welcoming, relevant and meaningful. NIMC's member museums are leading that work every day, and that is one of the reasons I am so pleased to be part of the Board.

Accreditation News

Celebrating Continued Success Across the Sector

There has been much to celebrate in recent months as museums across Northern Ireland continue to demonstrate their commitment to best practice through the Accreditation Scheme.

We are delighted to congratulate [Garvagh Museum](#) and the [Somme Museum](#), whose return applications were successfully assessed earlier this year. Following thorough assessments and verification visits, both organisations were confirmed as achieving Full Accreditation in February. This is a testament to the strength and consistency of their governance, collections care and public engagement. We are also pleased to note that [Green Lane Museum](#) has progressed from Provisional to Full Accreditation, marking an important milestone in its development.

Further good news comes from the Mid-Antrim Museum Service, where the [President Arthur Homestead](#) achieved Full Accreditation following its first-ever application. Managed in partnership between the council's Tourism and Museum Services teams, this success is a real credit to the strength of collaborative working and shared expertise across services.



President Arthur Cottage interior © NI Museums Council.

Progress is also evident among those working towards Accreditation. [Larne Museum](#), [Ulster Aviation Society](#) and [Hillsborough Castle](#) have all been confirmed as eligible and are now Working Towards Accreditation. These important steps highlight the growing engagement with the scheme and a shared commitment to continuous improvement across the sector.

Alongside these achievements, work continues at a national level on the redesign of the UK Museum Accreditation Standard. As partners in the scheme, NI Museums Council is actively contributing as a key stakeholder in shaping the future of Accreditation. We are particularly pleased that [Irish Linen Centre](#) and [Lisburn Museum](#) participated in the test group, helping to pilot the redesigned Standard.

This representative test group of eight museums—spanning independent, local authority and national organisations, took part in a series of online sessions between February and April 2026. The group played an important role in ensuring the revised Standard is both user-focused and achievable, with participants testing draft content, exploring practical approaches to evidence gathering, reviewing elements of the application and assessment process, and sharing feedback with the wider sector. Their input will play an important role in ensuring the revised Standard is user focused and achievable, and will inform its wider rollout in the coming months.

A second phase of testing is about to get underway, with Expressions of Interest open for museums wishing to take part. This next stage will involve a further round of online sessions and practical tasks between July and September 2026, giving participants the opportunity to test emerging elements of the redesigned Standard and its processes. Museums from across the sector are [encouraged to get involved](#) in shaping this important development and to contribute their experience and insight to the evolution of Accreditation.

These achievements reflect the continued dedication, resilience and ambition within the museum community. We warmly congratulate all those involved and look forward to supporting further progress in the months ahead.



Small Grants, Big Difference

How targeted funding is strengthening museums, supporting learning, and enriching communities.

My name is Lara, and I am a placement student with the Northern Ireland Museums Council alongside studying for my Master's in Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies at Ulster University. As part of my placement, I have been creating detailed case studies that document how museums across Northern Ireland benefit from the funding they received from NI Museums Council. I focussed on the Local Museums Small Capital Grants Programme, where museums could apply for £500 - £10,000 per funding application, or the Museum Collections Capital Grant Programme, where museums could apply for £500 - £5,000. The grants, funded through the Department for Communities, help museums improve the care, accessibility, and interpretation of their collections.

During this time, I reviewed applications, visited museums across Northern Ireland, gathered evidence of impact, and produced case studies showcasing how grant support strengthens learning, engagement, and collections care.

This experience has been hugely valuable, giving me practical insight into how museums operate, how funding is allocated, and how projects create real benefits for communities. It has been inspiring to see such a wide range of museums and the meaningful impact their work has had on children, young people, and local audiences.



"Seeing the difference this support makes and the dedication of museum staff has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my placement."

— Lara Wilguas, Northern Ireland Museums Council placement student.

I hope you enjoy exploring the following case studies and feel inspired by the creativity, commitment, and impact of the museums featured. Full versions of the case studies can be found [here](#).

Mount Stewart House & Gardens

'Equipment for Education, Learning and Collections'



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, it offers immersive, hands-on opportunities for children and young people to explore nature, wildlife, and heritage.

Mount Stewart received £9,604.77 through the Museum Collections Capital Grant Programme to enhance its learning and engagement offer. The funding enabled the museum to introduce high-quality taxidermy specimens, secure display cabinets, and implement new handling collections for their outreach programmes.

Context and Need

Demand for Mount Stewart's learning programme has grown significantly, especially from schools seeking high-quality environmental education. Staff identified several challenges:

- Ageing handling collections at risk of deterioration
- Limited outreach materials restricting engagement with rural schools
- A lack of sensory-rich, child-friendly natural heritage resources
- Barriers to delivering impactful environmental education

Without investment, the programme risked stagnation and reduced relevance for young audiences. The grant allowed the museum to address these needs with durable, engaging, and inclusive learning tools.

What the Funding Supported

The grant supported a wide range of improvements that have transformed Mount Stewart's learning offer:

- New taxidermy specimens — high-quality, engaging wildlife resources for children and young people
- Secure display cabinets — protecting specimens while enabling public display
- Improved interpretation — refreshed boards and planned push-button audio guides
- Upgraded learning spaces — enhancements to the Lookout and outdoor classroom for year-round use
- Expanded outreach capacity — enabling more school visits, rural outreach, and summer-scheme programming
- Inclusive learning tools — sensory elements and replica objects supporting SEN and early-years learners

Together, these improvements have strengthened both on-site and off-site engagement.



Improved Engagement

The project has significantly increased access to natural heritage, stories, and collections. Since completion (Mar-May 2026), 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 often arrive unaware they will see taxidermy, and staff describe their reactions as: “Their minds are blown”, and “You could hear a pin drop”. The specimens have become one of the most effective tools for teaching environmental stewardship.

Outreach has been especially valued by rural schools with limited budgets, while the renovated Lookout now supports year-round interpretation. The outdoor classroom is usable in all seasons thanks to new shelters, and the taxidermy will feature in upcoming summer schemes.



Accessibility Impact

The project has transformed both sensory and intellectual accessibility. Storytelling, object handling, and multi-sensory activities now allow even very young children to engage with heritage in an age-appropriate way. SEN learners benefit from replica toys and tactile resources that support safe, inclusive participation.

Outreach delivery also removes transport barriers for rural schools and supports sustainability goals by reducing travel. Staff confidence has grown significantly. Team members “love” the new resources and are “looking for reasons to use them.”

The taxidermy has even inspired new programming with groups experiencing anti-social behaviour, helping young people aged 16–18 develop respect for animals and understand “what it takes to make a place beautiful”.



Organisational Impact

The grant has strengthened Mount Stewart's capacity in several key areas:

- Increased staff confidence in delivering environmental and historical education
- Improved ability to run year-round outdoor learning
- Greater sustainability of the handling collection
- Enhanced ability to meet Accreditation standards for access and engagement
- Improved care and longevity of taxidermy specimens through secure, lockable cabinets

Staff described the cabinets as "great," noting that they keep specimens safe and protected from environmental and handling risks.

Building for the Future

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

- Sustained intergenerational engagement
- Expanded summer programming
- Manned interpretation during peak seasons
- Future sensory and audio-enhanced displays
- Broader community involvement, including older generations

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

Why This Funding Matters

This grant funded 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.



© Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

Ballymoney Museum 'Museum Minis Refurbishment'

Ballymoney Museum refreshed its much-loved Museum Minis area — a dedicated early-years space where young children and families explore local heritage through play. The project was made possible by a £10,000 grant as part of the NIMC Local Museum Small Grant Programme. The refurbishment introduced new tactile, sensory, and interactive elements, all themed around the Our Museum Day children's book project. The space now features bright visuals, new furniture, creative play stations, and a feature wall where children can "design their own museum display."

What the Funding Supported

The project enabled the museum to:

- Redesign the layout with child-friendly furniture and interactives
- Add tactile and sensory elements for hands-on learning
- Introduce four themed sensory packs for children with additional needs
- Create a cohesive story-driven environment using Our Museum Day illustrations
- Improve accessibility and strengthen the museum's family and schools offer

Feedback Highlights

"I think it was really good. I liked the teddys 😊."

"It was the best."

"Brilliant... clean, varied. The whole museum was a great find."

"My two-year-old LOVED it! She wouldn't leave lol."

"The kids area is brilliant this year. Well done!!"

Impact on Families & Early-Years Learning

The refurbished space has significantly increased engagement among young children. Families, teachers, and carers report that children spend longer exploring, are more focused, and enjoy the new creative activities. Sensory packs have improved accessibility, supporting inclusive participation during both school workshops and independent visits.

The museum has also seen increased use of the space, more repeat visits, and new school sessions themed around Our Museum Day. Staff have observed higher levels of interaction and enthusiasm across all age groups. The strong visitor response, evidenced above, led to an unexpected but very welcome nomination for the Kids in Museums Family Friendly Museum Award 2026 — submitted directly by families.

Why This Funding Matters

The grant made a refurbishment possible that the museum could not have delivered otherwise. It has revitalised a key family space, strengthened early-years learning, and improved accessibility for

children with additional needs. Ballymoney Museum would welcome future funding to continue updating galleries, improving digital access, and supporting conservation work.





Armagh Robinson Library & No. 5 Vicars' Hill 'Protection of Our Loose Pamphlet Collection'.

Armagh Robinson Library, founded in 1771, is the oldest public library in Northern Ireland and a remarkable centre of scholarship, heritage, and preservation. Its collections of rare books, pamphlets, manuscripts, and prints offer unparalleled insight into religious, cultural, and intellectual history. Together with No. 5 Vicars' Hill, the Library provides an engaging space for visitors, researchers, and learners to explore historic collections through interpretation, object handling, and hands-on discovery.

Armagh Robinson Library received £1,063.05 from the NIMC Museum Collections Capital Grant, allowing the Library to undertake essential improvements to protect and stabilise its significant loose pamphlet collection which is an important research resource spanning religious, cultural, and intellectual history.



© Armagh Robinson Library & No. 5 Vicars' Hill

Context & Need

Before the project, the pamphlets were tightly packed without protective covers. Removing one often caused pages to tear or snag, while acidic card surrounds contributed to deterioration, this was "a constant worry." Some of this damage can be seen in the images below left.

What the Funding Supported

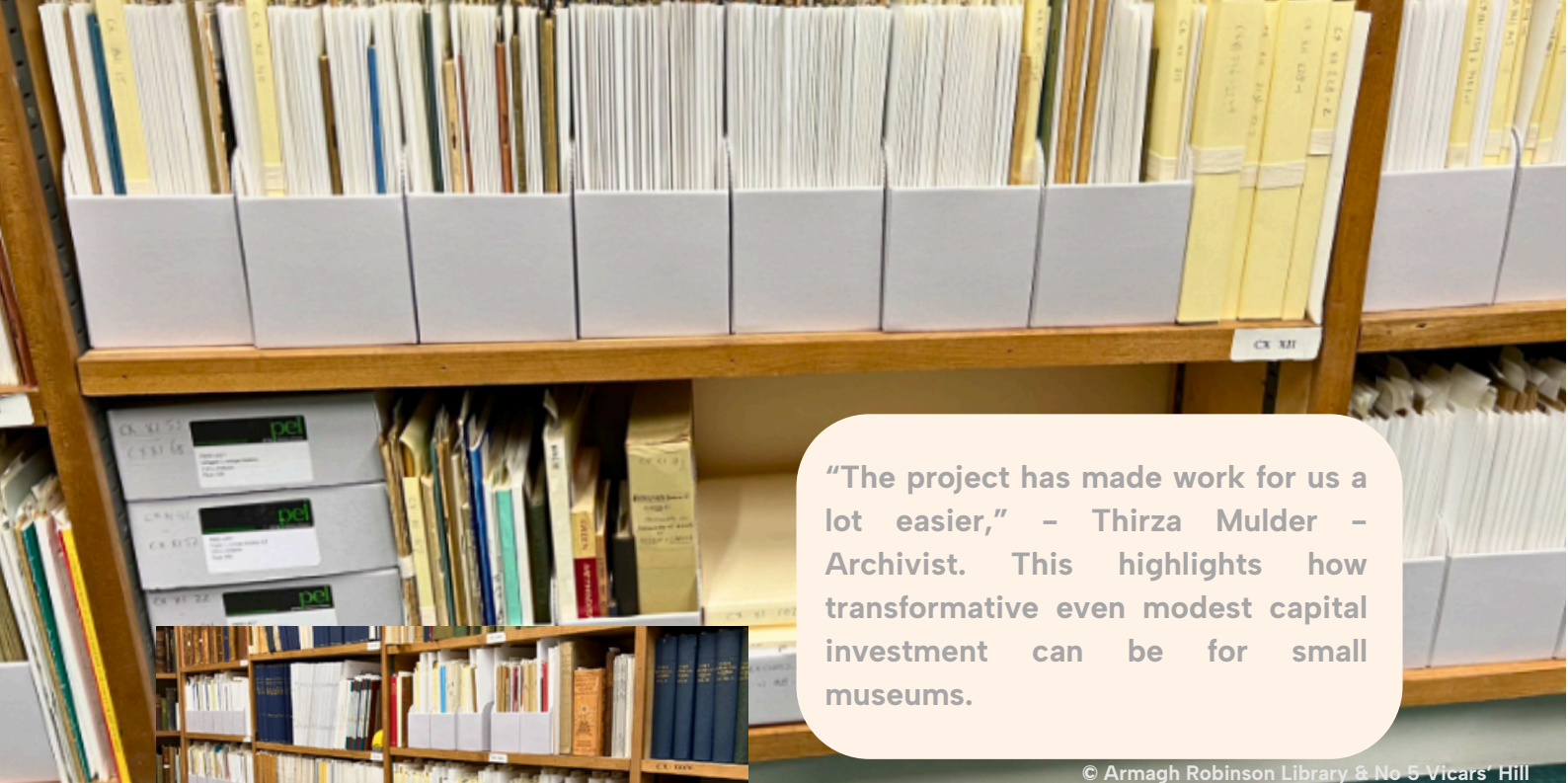
The grant enabled the Library to purchase high-quality, conservation-grade materials, including:

- L-velope folders
- Juris-expansion folders
- Acid-free shelf files
- Replacements for acidic historic surrounds

Using these materials, the team carried out:

- Full rehousing of over 2,000 pamphlets
- Removal of damaging historic card supports
- Reorganisation of shelving to reduce pressure and distortion
- Improved retrieval systems with clear labelling
- Preventive conservation measures applied across the collection

This work has transformed the safety, organisation, and long-term stability of the pamphlets.



“The project has made work for us a lot easier,” – Thirza Mulder – Archivist. This highlights how transformative even modest capital investment can be for small museums.

© Armagh Robinson Library & No 5 Vicars' Hill



© Armagh Robinson Library & No 5 Vicars' Hill

Impact on Collections Care

The project has had a profound impact on the preservation of the collection. Pamphlets no longer sag or distort, and items can now be safely removed without disturbing neighbouring materials. The removal of acidic surrounds has slowed chemical deterioration, while labelled shelf files reduce unnecessary handling.

Staff confidence has “increased considerably,” with the Archivist noting they can now retrieve items “without worrying.” Volunteers also reported seeing “a massive difference,” with Assistant Keeper Carol describing the improvement as “amazing.”

These changes represent a major step forward in preventive conservation for a fragile and heavily used research resource.

Access and Research Impact

Although the project focused on behind-the-scenes collections care, the benefits extend directly to researchers, academic visitors, and the wider public. The improved storage allows the museum to:

- Provide safer, more reliable access to fragile materials.
- Share items with greater confidence during tours and consultations

- Support researchers with quicker, safer retrieval
- Enhance the Library’s reputation as a trusted research resource

The project strengthens the Library’s ability to offer meaningful engagement with its collections, ensuring that rare materials can be used without compromising their preservation.

Organisational Benefits

For a small independent museum with only four staff members, the impact of this investment has been substantial. The new system has:

- Increased staff confidence in preservation and retrieval
- Reduced time spent managing damaged or unstable items
- Strengthened preventive conservation practice
- Improved day-to-day workflow and efficiency
- Reinforced the value of NIMC support, described as “immensely helpful”.

Why This Funding Matters

This project clearly demonstrates how small, well-directed grants can deliver high-value, long-lasting benefits. Thanks to the grant funding and the dedication of the Armagh Robinson Library team, the pamphlet collection is now safer, more accessible, and better preserved for generations to come. It stands as a powerful example of how investment in collections care directly strengthens public access, research, and heritage preservation.

A young child with light brown hair, wearing a blue cardigan, is smiling and holding a small white toy train engine. The child is standing in front of a large, colorful, interactive train-themed display. The display features a red train engine with a blue window and a yellow bell, and a green train engine with a yellow bell. There are also various colorful gears and wheels visible. In the foreground, there is a wooden train track with a blue train engine and a red train engine. The background is a light green wall with a white shelf holding some small black boxes. The overall scene is bright and colorful, suggesting a fun and educational environment.

All Aboard:

Improving Inclusive Access at
Whithead Railway Museum

A collection of Whitehead Railway Museum merchandise. At the top, a red backpack and a blue backpack both feature the museum's logo and name. Between them is a white lantern and a toy train. Below the backpacks, a red and black backpack, a blue backpack, a green tray, and colorful spiky balls are visible. A book titled 'Trains' and a book titled 'SEYEWITZ' are also present.

The grant enabled the Museum Service to:

- ## What the Funding Supported
- The grant enabled the Museum Service to:
- A sensory/quiet room with calming lighting and sensory tools
 - Sensory bags (7 children's, 3 adult) with ear defenders and fidget toys
 - Large-print menus and clearer signage
 - A hearing loop in the café
 - Accessible seating for visitors with mobility needs
 - Improved visitor pathways for safer wheelchair access
 - These changes now support visitors of all ages and abilities

The improvements have transformed the visitor experience. The sensory room and sensory bags are now used at every public event, helping neurodivergent visitors feel comfortable and supported. Clearer signage and accessible seating have made the museum easier to navigate for older visitors, wheelchair users, and those with visual impairments. Staff report increased engagement, with visitors spending more time on site and exploring more confidently.



© Armagh Robinson Library & No 5 Vicars' Hill

Community & Volunteer Impact

Since January 2026, the museum has welcomed 896 visitors, with a noticeable rise in neurodivergent families using the sensory space. According to Rachele, the Museum Manager, many parents now visit specifically because the sensory room provides a safe, calming environment for their children.

Long Term Impacts:

Over the next 3–5 years, the upgrades will support:

- Increased visitor numbers
- New sensory-friendly programming
- A stronger reputation for inclusion
- Greater resilience through broader audience reach
- Reduced maintenance costs thanks to durable improvements



Why This Funding Matters

This project has delivered meaningful, measurable improvements to accessibility at Whitehead Railway Museum. The grant allowed the museum to address long-standing barriers, widen participation, and create a more equitable visitor experience. It represents excellent value for money and a strong commitment to inclusive heritage.

Tower Museum

'Stitched – The Shirt Factory Quilt Project'.

© Derry and Strabane District Council

The Tower Museum carried out the Stitched – The Shirt Factory Quilt Project to conserve, document, and rehouse 20 quilts and 2 textile wall hangings linked to Derry-Londonderry's shirt-making heritage. This project was made possible through the NIMC Museum Collections Capital Grant Round 2, with a grant of £1,685.10. Working with a volunteer group of experienced local quilters, the project improved collections care, strengthened documentation, and generated new interpretation for future use in the DNA Museum.



What the Funding Supported

The grant enabled the Museum Service to:

- Rehouse quilts using archival-quality boxes and acid-free materials
- Carry out minimal, reversible conservation work
- Create detailed catalogue records and update historic documentation
- Capture specialist knowledge from volunteer quilters
- Improve storage, labelling, and retrieval systems

Begin new oral history work with former shirt factory workers and industry contributors

Community & Volunteer Impact

A key strength of the project was the involvement of local quilting groups. Many participants were older women with personal or family connections to the shirt-making industry. Their expertise enriched the museum's understanding of quilt construction, materials, patterns, and textile traditions. This is knowledge that had never been recorded before.

Their involvement also led to new relationships, research leads, and donations of archives, textiles, and four additional quilts, expanding the collection beyond its original scope.



Oral History & Engagement

The project sparked strong interest in oral history participation. Contributors identified include a former factory owner, manager, machinists, an engineer, an inspector, and local residents with lived experience of the industry. This work will support future interpretation and storytelling within the DNA Museum.

Social media activity during the project generated 1,678 views, showing continued public interest in shirt factory heritage.

Why This Funding Matters

This project shows how a relatively small collections care grant can deliver wide-ranging benefits. Beyond conservation and storage, it strengthened documentation, expanded the collection, deepened community engagement, and opened new pathways for oral history and future exhibitions.

The Museum Service described the grant as highly valuable and would apply again. They noted that future programmes could benefit from skills development opportunities and knowledge-sharing between funded museums.



© Derry and Strabane District Council

Disaster Planning and Emergency Salvage



On 25 March 2026, we were pleased to welcome seventeen delegates from museums across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to a full day of disaster planning and emergency salvage training delivered by Spencer & Fry. The Irish Linen Centre & Lisburn Museum generously hosted the NI Museums Council training event, offering a beautiful and atmospheric backdrop — the perfect setting to talk about how to protect the heritage our museums care for.

Spencer & Fry, specialists in preventative conservation and safeguarding historic interiors, brought their wealth of experience from heritage sites across the UK. They were joined by our own Claire Magill from the National Trust, adding local expertise to the mix.

Building the foundations:

The day began with a structured and practical introduction to emergency planning, guiding delegates through the full lifecycle of responding to a disaster from assessment and prevention through to recovery and review.

A key focus was understanding the wide range of risks heritage organisations face. While fire and water damage are often front of mind, the session highlighted a much broader spectrum, from theft and vandalism to mould outbreaks, building collapse and even cyber attacks and pandemics. This reinforced the idea that effective planning must be flexible and adaptable rather than focused on a single scenario.

Participants also explored how common incidents are within the sector, underlining one of the day's core messages that emergency planning is not optional but an essential part of responsible collections care.



Prevention and preparedness

The training placed strong emphasis on prevention as the first and most effective line of defence. Practical measures were discussed, including improving building maintenance, managing water risks, storing objects off the floor, and ensuring appropriate fire detection and suppression systems are in place.

From there, attention turned to preparedness, particularly the importance of having a clear and usable emergency plan. Rather than creating lengthy documents that are difficult to navigate, attendees were encouraged to focus on plans that are:

- Easy to access and understand in a crisis
- Regularly updated and tested
- Developed collaboratively across departments

The sessions emphasised that the process of planning is just as valuable as the plan itself, helping teams build shared understanding and confidence before an emergency occurs.

Practical guidance was also given on what a strong plan should include, such as key contacts and roles, floorplans and access information, priority object lists for salvage, pre prepared documentation and incident logs, and clear procedures for communication and decision making.



Responding and salvaging

Another important part of the taught session focused on how to respond once an incident occurs. attendees were introduced to the equipment required for salvage, from personal protective equipment and absorbent materials to packing supplies for stabilising objects in the short term.

They also learned core salvage principles, including prioritising objects at immediate risk before those already damaged, keeping items and their labels together, separating wet and dry materials, and packing quickly and safely even if it is not to museum standard.

Crucially, the training reinforced that human safety must always come first, with clear guidance on when not to enter a space and the importance of using appropriate protective equipment.

Key takeaways from the morning

The taught element of the day left attendees with several clear takeaways:

- Disasters are common and varied, so plans must be comprehensive and adaptable
- Prevention and preparedness are the most effective tools for reducing damage
- Simple, practical plans work better than complex ones in real situations
- Prioritisation is essential, as not everything can be saved
- Practice is key and plans must be tested through exercises
- People are central to any response, and their safety and wellbeing must remain the top priority



From theory to practice

After lunch, the tone shifted from theory to action. Without warning, the trainers announced a “disaster” in the next room. Participants rushed in to find a staged emergency scene waiting for them, giving them the chance to put their learning into practice and get hands on with salvage equipment.

Working through the scenario, it quickly became clear how important communication and teamwork are in an emergency. Participants had to work together to assess the situation, make decisions, and prioritise objects, often under a bit of time pressure. It was a useful reminder that responding to an incident is rarely a solo task, and that clear roles and good coordination make all the difference.

The exercise also brought the morning’s learning into sharper focus. Tasks that seem straightforward in theory, such as moving objects safely or separating wet and dry materials, became more challenging in practice. Having the opportunity to try this in a controlled setting helped build confidence and highlighted where good preparation can have a real impact.



Just as importantly, the session reinforced that safety must always come first. Even in a simulated exercise, thinking about risks, using appropriate equipment, and looking out for one another were central to the response.

By the end of the day, there was a strong sense that practising in this way is just as important as having a plan in place. It gives teams the opportunity to test their approach, identify any gaps, and build the confidence needed to respond quickly and effectively if the worst does happen.

Feedback from attendees underscored the importance of hosting this type of training locally. As one participant noted:

“Great to have this offered in Northern Ireland — in the past it often seemed that the only option for such training was abroad, which is not always an option for everyone.”

This event marks an important step in strengthening resilience across museums in the region, supporting staff to work together effectively in challenging situations and helping to safeguard our shared heritage for the future.



Following the success of two previous collaborations, we are delighted to celebrate the launch of our third **Our Museum** book, created in partnership with Armagh County Museum.

A Place for Treasures was developed through a series of creative workshops led by author Kelsey Carroll (Squiggles and Giggles) and illustrator Becky Stewart (Greenhouse Makes), working closely with museum staff and the children of Saints & Scholars Nursery. Together, they brought to life a charming story about a little bird who visits the museum and discovers the treasures within.

The children played a central role in shaping the book, selecting objects from the museum collection to feature in the story and creating their own museum-inspired artwork that Becky skilfully wove into the final illustrations, ensuring the children's creativity is proudly showcased throughout the book.

During a lively ceremony on Friday 15th May at the museum, the children were delighted to learn how the ideas and artworks developed during their workshop were used in the new book. With Becky, they explored the pages of the book where they spotted illustrations of Armagh County Museum now known as 'our museum', as well as familiar objects such as their school bus, their principal's car, and lots of their favourite museum items they'd discussed on their visits. Kelsey then led sessions with movement and music getting everyone involved.



Afterwards the Deputy Mayor of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon, Councillor Jessica Johnston, congratulated the young artists and presented each child with a certificate and their very own copy of the book — complete with their artwork and name listed as a co-creator! Some parents of the children who came along, shared how happy they were that their child had the chance to be involved in the project and how proud they are for having their child's work published!

A Place for Treasures is now available in local libraries across the borough, helping the story, and the museum reach children and families throughout the wider community. This project supports creative learning across the Foundation Stage curriculum and builds confidence among early years educators to use museums as inspiring and accessible learning environments.



Education and Outreach Forum 2026



The Education & Outreach Forum is a key event in the calendar for museum practitioners and educators to meet and discuss topics of interest to their learning programmes, with a focus on the impact of museum on our communities. It is an informal and supportive platform for discussion, reflection, and feedback on the recent development of projects.

On 12th May 2026 the Forum brought together museum professionals, educators, and community partners from across the island of Ireland to explore how heritage organisations can foster dialogue, creativity, and connection. Set within the historic building of the Law Society, Dublin, presenters shared innovative projects that used objects, archives, film, craft, and collaborative practice to open conversations around identity, sustainability, and shared memory.

The event opened with a presentation on Objects, War and Memory in Ireland Past and Present, a collaboration between Kilmainham Gaol Museum and refugees living in Ireland. Using emotionally resonant objects as prompts, the project created an exhibition that “told stories of courage, resilience, love and hope,” while offering new ways to interpret the museum’s collection.

Cross-border collaboration was a strong theme, with the Northern Ireland War Memorial (NIWM) showcasing its Reconciliation Fund Project, which brings students from ten schools together to explore the shared experience of the Second World War. Through artefacts, walking tours and oral histories, participants discovered unexpected parallels in the community memory.

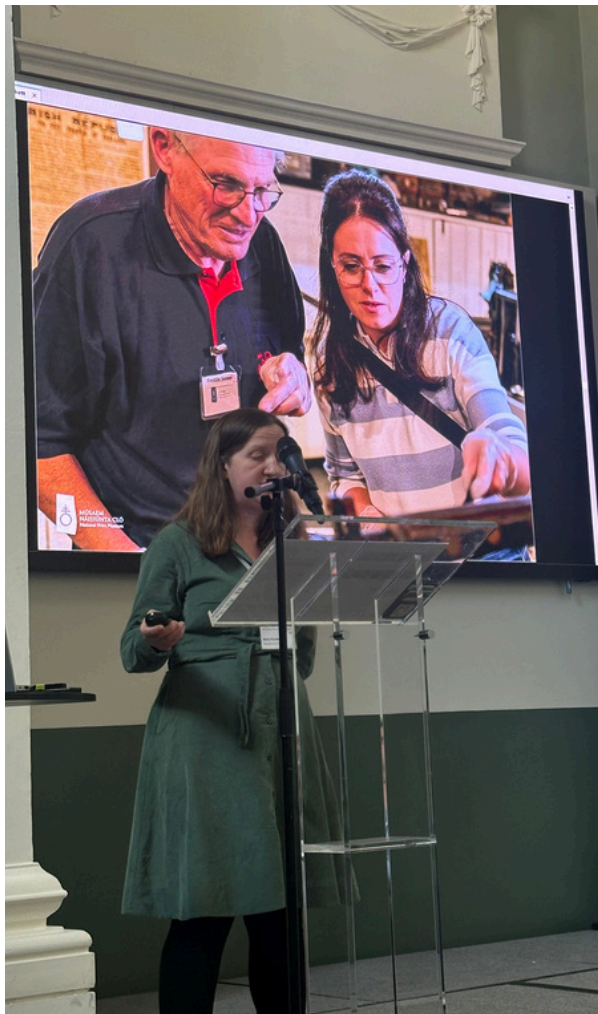
The NIWM is now moving forward to future iterations of the project which will focus on the rise of digital disinformation and how to counter the false narratives about Ireland's experience of the war that are being used online.



Community-centred practice continued with *Working Over By*, a Donegal–Scotland partnership documenting the working lives of Donegal emigrants from 1940–1990. People were placed the heart of the activity and community outreach and public programming were vital tools used to gather the oral histories that informed a touring exhibition.

Youth creativity featured prominently. The Irish Film Institute shared its Ballymun filmmaking project, where students explored archival footage and produced their own short films, later screened at the IFI and added to the national archive. Meanwhile, an educational initiative from the Hunt Museum encouraged young learners to design a sustainable Irish village for 2050, blending museum collections, climate awareness and hands-on model-making.

The Irish Heritage Trust outlined its approach to youth engagement, including an expanded Transition Year programme and a new SOLAS-approved apprenticeship supporting future heritage professionals. The National Print Museum presented its Skills Transfer Programme, which trains new volunteers in traditional letterpress techniques, preserving a craft now recognised on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list.



The event concluded with a case study on reconstructing the 16th-century Ballybunion Knitted Cap through citizen science and experimental archaeology. Participants brought an insight of the traditional skill that they could share with the museum while also gaining an opportunity to experience first hand the skills and labour behind historic textile production

Across all presentations, a clear theme emerged: museums are at their most powerful when they collaborate—across borders, disciplines, generations and communities. Whether through filmmaking, craft revival, shared heritage, or sustainable futures, the 2026 Museum Forum demonstrated the transformative potential of participatory practice in shaping how the island of Ireland understands its past and imagines its future.

The Ed+O forum is presented by the Irish Museums Association (IMA) in partnership with the NI Museums Council (NIMC).





Playful Museums Festival Delivers Again in 2026

The Playful Museums Festival made a vibrant return to Northern Ireland's museum scene this February, bringing energy, imagination and plenty of tiny footsteps back into our galleries. Across the month, 29 events took place in 9 museums, all designed to welcome under-5s, their parents, carers and early-years groups into museum spaces in ways that feel natural, joyful and genuinely inclusive.

Developed by the NI Museums Council, the festival continues to support museums in building the skills, confidence and organisational change needed to engage young children meaningfully. This year, more than 1,400 people attended, including over 140 first-time visitors discovering their local museums for the very first time – a clear sign that the festival is helping museums reach new families and broaden their community connections.

Support from the Art Fund was instrumental in 2026, allowing NIMC to focus on strengthening museums' capacity to deliver high-quality early-years programming. This investment arrived at a crucial moment, as many local authority museums continue to face budget cuts and hiring freezes that limit staff development and succession planning.

As part of this year's festival, NIMC launched the Playful Museums Grant Programme, awarding £5000 to successful museum applicants across Antrim, Armagh, Fermanagh and Down.

Funding supported a wide range of activity, including:

- Learning equipment
- SEND resources and visual stories
- Staff training and development
- Facilitator costs
- Travel support
- Early-years consultation and programme design
- Preschool loan boxes

NIMC also provided financial support for museums developing and creating marketing materials that will serve as a long-term legacy of the festival and reinforce each organisation's commitment to early-years inclusion.

Audiences reported positively to events delivered at this year's festival:

- "I would love to come back"
- "Very enjoyable, my daughter loved it."
- "We were welcomed the moment we arrived, and the morning was fun, interesting and varied. Great time in a truly remarkable location and a very fun event"

What Museums Experienced

Museums reported meaningful outcomes that will continue well beyond February:

- “We have built up great relationships with playgroups and nurseries within the town and outside of it. We have had repeat visits over the years, with nurseries commenting on how they plan and wait for our letter on what we are going to provide for the Playful Museum month. We have also gained new audiences as we look to change what we provide each year to fit around the themes of our exhibitions.”
- “The funding enabled us to pilot an inclusive programme that would otherwise not have been possible within our existing budget, allowing us to reach new audiences.”
- “Not all adults had even heard of the museum, let alone had visited it, so this was a great opportunity to welcome them.”

Two museums saw increased nursery visit requests within weeks, while two others have already begun planning future early-years events with local early-years units.

The 2026 Playful Museums Festival once again demonstrated the power of early-years engagement to strengthen community relationships, diversify audiences and embed playful learning at the heart of museum practice. With new resources, new partnerships and renewed confidence across the sector, the festival’s legacy will continue to grow long after the final event has ended.

If your museum is interested in engaging with early years, feel free to contact [NI Museums Council](#) for support and guidance in how to start.



Curating Curiosity At Armagh County Museum – Student Placements



By Queens University Belfast students Kate Murphy and Lucy McKinney

When visiting museums, we are drawn to the stories of objects, their history, and their previous owners, but often we gave little thought to the process of how they ended up in the display in front of us. As history students at Queen's University Belfast and museum enthusiasts, we wanted to explore the history of museums and thus selected the module 'Cabinets of Curiosity' in our second year. As our colleague Ace Cheatham discussed in the previous issue, 'Cabinets of Curiosity' offered us the chance to research an object at the Armagh County Museum and write an accompanying label for display.

It became evident over the course of the module that the history of women collectors and curators is much less well known and recognised than that of men. For women with the wealth and means to collect, their collections were still often relegated to the realm of what was considered acceptably feminine: the domestic, the home, the family. Even these collections could be consumed by the legacies of the men in their lives, sometimes donated in the names of their husbands or their sons. The first known female museum curator in the UK, Kate Hall, assumed the position at the end of the nineteenth century (Kate Hill, *Women in museums, 1850-1914* (Manchester, 2016). It wasn't until the World Wars, however, that women became more visible in the curatorial space.

The objects we selected reflect our desire to focus on the lives of women.



Kate Murphy

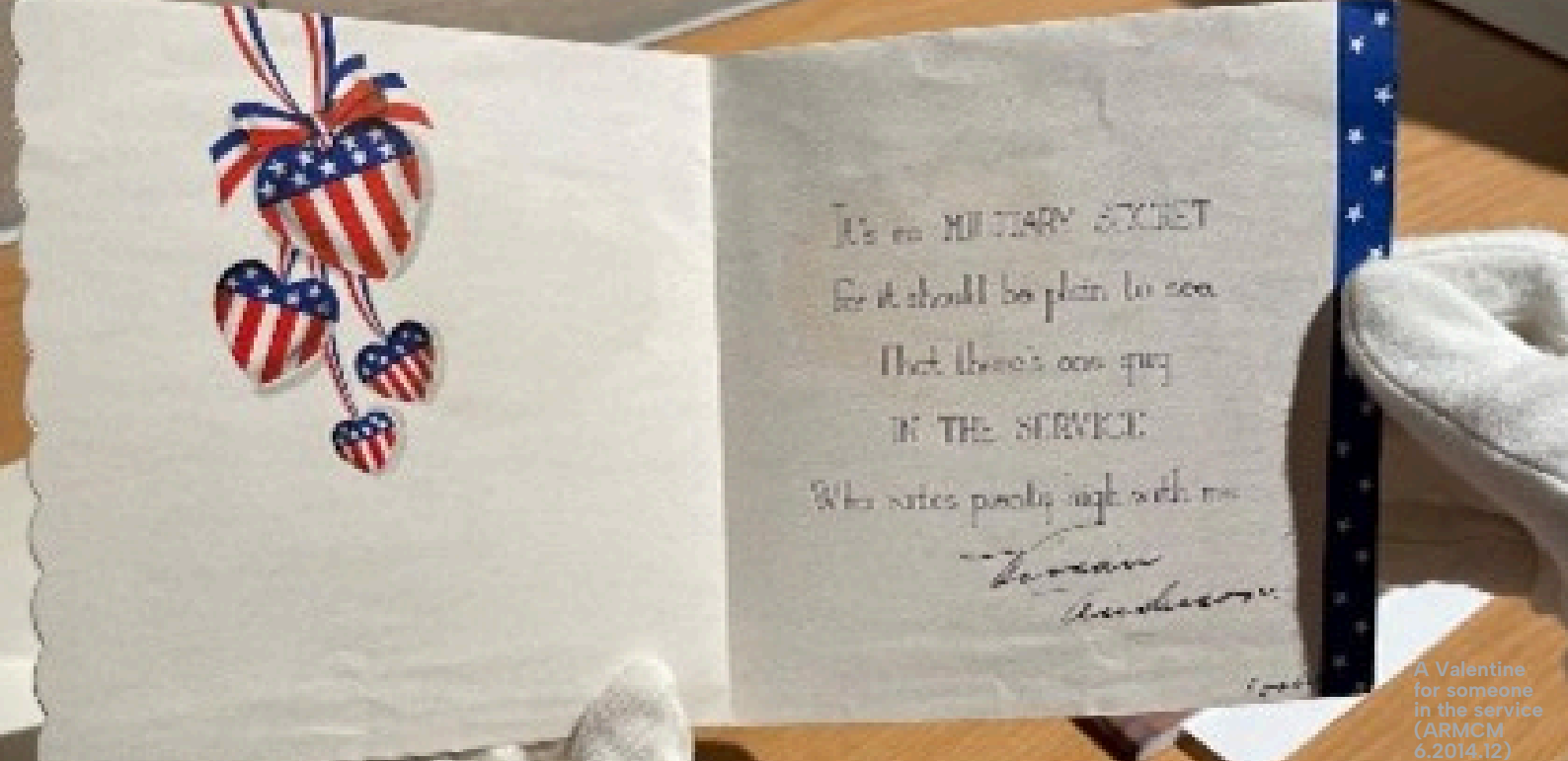


Lucy McKinney

Kate chose a wallet with tickets to the Dublin International Exhibition of 1865 and the Crystal Palace owned by Anna Malcolmson. On the surface, the tickets served as a tactile representation of museum history in Britain and Ireland, colonial expansion, the commodification of Empire, and the emergence of the Victorian middle classes. Yet, they also serve as an heirloom of an unspoken history.



Wallet and admission cards (ARMCM.224.1957)



Researching the owner of the tickets, Anna Malcolmson, proved frustrating and illustrates how women are often sidelined by the historical record. Her family were prominent linen industrialists in the Armagh area and her history has been largely defined by the men around her; her uncle, her husband, and her sons.

Lucy chose a 1943 Valentine's Day card written by American-born Vivian Anderson, addressed to an American soldier called Bill who was stationed in Northern Ireland. The emotional sentiment of the Valentine's Day card attracted Lucy; the expression of wartime love contrasted with the reality of one of the most brutal conflicts in modern history.

The card represents the correspondence of one woman out of millions affected by the war. When researching the card, Lucy's group was disappointed to find they were unable to identify Vivian Anderson. They had more success researching the card's male

recipient, Bill, despite the fact they had no biographical details bar his first name. His participation in the war meant that records of his life were more readily accessible.

Our collaboration with Armagh County Museum brought to light the wealth of local and women's history in the collection. When exploring the history of our objects, we witnessed the privilege of preservation. Wealth and status meant that Anna Malcolmson was easier to identify than Vivian Anderson. And in researching both Anna and Vivian, we found that they acted as footnotes in the stories of men, rather than chapters of their own. Taking part in this module has allowed us to tell a small part of their histories.

If your museum is interested in hosting a Cabinet of Curiosity project, NIMC can make introductions! Photography thanks to Armagh County Museum and Lucy and Kate.





An invite from – Dr Sara Thomas Programme Manager Wikimedia UK.

Back in 2015, I was the Wikimedian in Residence for Museums Galleries Scotland, a job that I applied for after finding myself intrigued by the job title in the advert. After having spent a decade in event management, and a few years in fundraising and digital training, it turned out that I had a fair few transferable skills that were relevant to the role. Eleven years later, and I'm now a Programme Manager at Wikimedia UK, with responsibility for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and volunteering across the UK. Over the years we haven't done as much work in Northern Ireland as we have in England, Wales, or Scotland, and I'd like to change that – so when the NI Museums Council offered the opportunity to write a piece for this newsletter, I jumped at the chance.

Most people know Wikipedia, but fewer know about the Wikimedia movement or its other projects like Commons and Wikidata. My role involves a lot of being enthusiastic at people about open knowledge, and encouraging engagement with the Wikimedia Projects, including providing training, and supporting volunteers. I talk to galleries, libraries, archives, museums (the GLAM sector, in Wiki-parlance), as well as universities, community heritage groups, and individual volunteers, all to support the Wikimedia vision of making the sum of all human knowledge free for anyone to access.

Wikimedia UK are an independent charity, and a chapter of the international Wikimedia movement, with a vision of a more informed, democratic and equitable society through open knowledge, and a mission to enable people in the UK to engage with open knowledge and access reliable information in order to develop their understanding of the world, and make informed decisions about issues that affect them.

At Wikimedia UK we're particularly interested in surfacing the stories of minoritised communities, or those who are under-represented on the Wikimedia Projects; improving access to information about the climate crisis, health, and other important topics, and work to improve information literacy and contribute to a healthy information ecosystem, especially in the context of AI and increasing mis- and disinformation. If any of this sounds like something that your organisation would be interested in, then I would genuinely love to hear from you. Most of what we offer is free, and we're always happy to collaborate on funding applications where the cost might outstrip our mutual capacities.

Engagement with GLAM & Education partners is a cornerstone of our work as a chapter. Sometimes this work happens with [large national organisations](#), and sometimes with [smaller local ones](#). We've worked with organisations to release images from their collections on open licenses through Wikimedia Commons (which allows them to be used on Wikipedia), and [drive more views to their content](#). We've helped to create [volunteering programmes](#) where participants learn to edit Wikipedia, and improve articles relating to a collection. We've worked with organisations to add data to Wikidata, thereby adding their authority control to that of other organisations worldwide, or which has allowed them to create [data visualisations](#) that deepen public understanding of a topic.

You have stores of information, and we have a way to share it. We want to fill the gaps in the way that society understands itself, and you are the experts in what's missing. If you'd like to know more about what we do, including some examples of our work, then our website can be found at www.wikimedia.org.uk, and you can reach out to me at sara.thomas@wikimedia.org.uk. I can talk about this stuff all day, and I'd love to have a chat!

NIMC Training Update

Since our previous newsletter, NI Museums Council have delivered a range of in person and virtual training and professional development opportunities for the NI museum sector.

Sessions have included SEND training from Insight Clinic, training from Collections Trust, a study day focused on Disaster Planning and Emergency Salvage and webinars on funding opportunities, becoming Accreditation Mentors, Dementia Awareness and Intangible Cultural Heritage.

We have also continued to collaborate with other organisations to deliver events, networking and training opportunities including the Education & Outreach Forum – with IMA, Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG): Sharing Approaches & Sector Dialogue –with UU, and the online Futures For All session with GEM which explored new ways to provide student placements.

If you would like to know more about any of these sessions, please reach out to catherine.doran@nimc.co.uk.

Upcoming NIMC Training

·NI Museums Council Forum & AGM – 23rd September 2026

·LET’S TALK: Ending Violence Against Women & Girls – 15th October 2026

·Ashes to Fashion Textile Care & Mounting – 19th October 2026

·Mastering the Art of Grant Fundraising – 17th November 2026

·LET’S TALK: Rethinking Touring Exhibitions – 8th December 2026

·Introduction to SPECTRUM – 23rd February 2027

If you would like to hear about upcoming events, please join our mailing list and visit our [website](#) and [social media](#).

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