

# ‘I didn’t know I could’: museums and young people looked after

## Introduction

This leaflet presents key findings and recommendations from a small scale qualitative study into the impact of museum-based activities for young people looked after.

The study was commissioned by Renaissance East of England and carried out by Local Level. It was based on seven programmes in 2010-2011, organised by:

- Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service
- Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service
- The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge
- Luton Culture

## Research methods

Formal interviews were carried out with young people looked after, museum staff, carers, social workers and other professionals. These were supplemented by observation of sessions, informal conversations, structured group discussions, qualitative monitoring forms and contributions by email. In total around 80 people (including 40 young people looked after) took part in the evaluation process.

Towards the end of the project, a research ‘playback’ workshop was run with a group of museum staff, partner agency staff and young care leavers in order to test and refine the early findings.

### Note: Young people looked after

This term refers to children and young people whose welfare is legally the responsibility of a local authority. Usually this means they are looked after in a residential care home, in foster care, or living with their parents or extended family subject to a care order.

## Key findings

The study found that young people looked after gained consistent benefits from participation in museum-based activities in terms of:

- confidence
- self-knowledge and identity
- social skills
- cultural capital
- learning

(See overleaf)



## The business case

The researchers assessed the costs for activities in two museums in some detail, and estimate that these benefits can be delivered with acceptable consistency for less than £30 per young person per hour. As experience accumulates, these costs can be expected to fall.

## Conclusion

This study provides support for an emerging movement of museum-based activities that contribute direct and consistent benefits to young people looked after.

The activities combine the creative use of cultural resources with appropriate understanding of the needs of young people who either experience exclusion or are at risk of being excluded from many social and economic opportunities and benefits. The work is empowering because it targets young people’s options for empowering themselves.

Pioneers in this field have shown that what has been tried is realistic, with positive outcomes consistently and inexpensively achieved.

### The key messages for policy makers from this study are:

- Museum-based activities tailored for young people looked after can address their issues of exclusion, identity and a place in society.
- The activities lead consistently to beneficial outcomes for the young people.
- There is potential to improve outcomes through following up on the experiences. The benefits can be sustained within existing formal and informal care programmes.
- The costs are such that these activities appear to represent exceptional value for money.
- This emerging field of expertise should be considered as a candidate for early intervention funding in the interests of minimising future costs to the state. The benefits are low risk and the costs of not addressing them are high.

# The impact of museums looked after

## Key findings

### Confidence, self-knowledge and identity

Questions of confidence were discussed more frequently than any other factor by professionals and volunteers working with the young people; and self-confidence was consistently cited by the participants themselves as the most obvious benefit they gained. This might come about for different reasons, such as discovering they could do something, or having a tangible record (a DVD of a performance, for example) to refer to afterwards.

Interviews with carers some months after the event confirmed how the confidence had been sustained:

**'He has not lost the confidence that he gained while attending the week's experience, if anything this has grown further. He now takes a lot more in his stride and has become quite cocky (in a nice way). He also sees things from others' point of view more. His understanding of how things can go on without him actually has improved. He has also gained some understanding of the fact that lots of people can do different things which compliment each other when put together.'** (Carer)

One young woman knew exactly what she was getting from the experience:

**'It's given me confidence, expressing myself. It's helped me describe myself... Yes, I'm confident that I'll keep the confidence. And I like to meet different people, it's easy to come here, not a threatening environment.'**

### Social skills

The activities were designed for young people whose personal experience of interacting consistently with others has been constrained, whose opportunities for friendships have been limited, who feel different, and who may have very good cause to be reluctant to trust others.

Museum-based activities gave these young people rare and valuable opportunities to learn to socialise. They learned to listen, make space for each other, tolerate disruption, disagree, agree, and to speak in turn. They discovered that working together can help you feel better as an individual.

Some of the chemistry in the encounters was remarkable to witness. For example, there was quiet celebration among staff and volunteers when one young girl, known to be selectively mute, spoke about what she was doing.

The research uncovered a great deal about friendships formed through the activities. One carer noted: **'Just getting on the transport was a challenge, but by doing so she met and made a friend.'**

For many participants, it was an unprecedented and valuable opportunity to talk to other young people in care.

**'Each time she goes she learns more, she's growing up through social interactions.'** (Carer)

In some cases the participants arranged to meet up independently, leading the carer of one boy to observe:

**'inclusion has never happened to him before'.**



### Summer Challenge, Norwich Castle

**Participants:** 19 young people aged 9-13, over 5 sessions.

**Activities:** A Beatles to Bowie exhibition inspired music, dance, art and craft workshops with some activities led by the participants themselves. Sketchbooks were used as a place to explore, reflect and store visual thoughts. The week culminated in a presentation by the young people of their work to an invited audience, including their carers.

**Partners:** Virtual School, Study Support Team, poetry animateur, artist, film animator, dance tutor, peripatetic musicians, archivist.



### Campaign! Make an Impact, Wardown Park Museum, Luton

**Participants:** 5 young people aged 12-16, over 15 sessions.

**Activities:** Museum collections showing historical campaigns inspired participants to choose, design and organise their own campaign, to 'Smash Racism' in Luton. They used creative campaigning methods from t-shirts, bags, badges and poster design to film making. They finished their project with a public 'Smash Racism' event.

**Partners:** E-Learning centre, schools (virtual and actual), E-learning manager/video producer, museums marketing, artist.

# on young people

## Cultural capital

Many people who experience social exclusion lack cultural capital – the resources of knowledge and behaviour that might help them become accepted by, and to associate with people who have influence. Museum-based activities help young people who are looked after to begin accumulating cultural capital. This can happen through conversations about ‘big issues’ like money, taste and fashion; or through an appreciation of the past.

One carer put it like this:

**‘Young people respond to their environment – in this case, one of cultural richness – facilities, space – and the chance to make links between things – music, the arts, research, arts practice and just “bouncing off each other”.’**

The young people learned that a range of museum resources exists, to which they are entitled to have access and which can be of interest and use. They began the process of opening a ‘cultural capital account’ and will know how to add to the investment, and to draw interest from it in the future.

## Learning

Young people looked after are vulnerable to low educational achievement, sometimes for complex reasons. Many of the young people have been excluded from school, some repeatedly. The researchers found that the museum environment seems to stimulate the essential self-motivation to learn – and to learn how to learn. The activities are not usually curriculum-based but have several key advantages:

- the young people all know that they are among others who are in care
- the museum’s resources – including physical space in which to move around - are available to them to discover, offering colour, variety and the sense of wonder
- the ratio of supervisory staff to participants is usually higher than in schools.

The diversity of the museum offer in these activities is important for inspiring learning. The context allows young people to hear about and visualise the past through objects, make things with their hands, fill in question sheets, create musical and theatrical events, analyse the significance of collections or objects, understand emotional content and so on, in a supportive non threatening environment – such possibilities in combination help ‘to bring them on’ (as one carer put it).

The researchers claim that investment in relationships with designated teachers and others in education as well as social workers and carers, would make the museum’s offer even more compelling and even better value for society.

**‘He seems to have learnt more than for a long while. He appears to have retained information more than at school... He is a lot calmer, in himself, and is putting himself forward.’** (Carer)



## Workshops at The Fitzwilliam Museum

**Participants:** 50 young people over 4 sessions, further sessions planned.

**Activities:** Young people spent the day together talking about paintings, sharing lunch and chatting. Some visits included a workshop element in the studio. The group made prints and mobiles on the theme of the sea, inspired by an exhibition of Suffolk based artist Maggi Hambling’s work. At another session they decorated ceramic plates which some took home as Christmas presents.

**Partners:** Achievement Officer (Looked After Children Education Support Service), University of Cambridge Admissions Office.



## Click! Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich

**Participants:** 8 asylum seekers, aged 16 to 18, over 4 workshops

**Activities:** Participants learnt how to use cameras to capture images of places that are important to them and to expand their skills and experiences. They took photos of the college, where they are studying English, the area near their house, the town centre and a local beach. The project culminated with a celebration event and an exhibition of participants’ work in Christchurch Mansion.

**Partners:** Brighter Futures, Asylum Seekers Social Care Team, photography tutor, translator.

# Recommendations from the study

## For museums practitioners:

- Seek to involve young people more in the design and development of activities.
- Ensure greater clarity over the nature of the offer and take responsibility for the way it is presented to potential participants.
- Strengthen partnerships with key agencies especially virtual schools, family centres, foster care networks, residential homes and social work departments.
- Improve formal and informal communication with carers and others during and after the activities.
- Develop the business case for museum-based activities for young people looked after.
- Continue to develop opportunities to take museum activities out to schools, clubs, residential homes and arts/cultural networks.
- Consider developing social enterprises, perhaps on a regional basis, to provide museum-based activities in collaboration with universities and schools, arts and libraries, third sector organisations and care services.
- Exploit professional networks and other appropriate resources to promote experience and good practice in this field.

*Local Level evaluation report, February 2011.*

To read the full report go to [www.mla.gov.uk/renaissanceeastofengland](http://www.mla.gov.uk/renaissanceeastofengland) and click on the link to News and publications.

## For young people looked after:

- Seek to play a role in the design and development of museum based activities, and explore ways in which they might be more closely linked with other areas such as school education, further education, and employability.
- Seek opportunities to review and build on the outcomes from activities with their carers and social workers.
- Seek to share and discuss their experiences of museum-based activities, making appropriate use of their contacts and networks.

## For social work departments, elected members with portfolio responsibility, other child care agencies:

- Use their convening power to work pro-actively and imaginatively with museums and other cultural agencies to develop their contributions to their service objectives.
- Where appropriate, incorporate museum-based activities into plans for young people looked after, with specific outcomes in mind, based upon assessments of need.
- Encourage feedback conversations among key workers, carers, museums and the young people themselves, on outcomes from activities and on the sustainability of those outcomes.

## Key contacts for the museums involved:

### Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service

Amy Cotterill, Community Outreach Officer  
Tel: 01206 506936  
E-mail: amy.cotterill@colchester.gov.uk

### The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Julia Tozer, Head of Education  
Tel: 01223 332904  
E-mail: jkt25@cam.ac.uk

### Luton Culture

Laura Lewis, Audience Development Co-ordinator,  
Tel: 01582 546659  
E-mail: laura.lewis@lutonculture.com

### Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service

Katrina Siliprandi, Head of Learning  
Tel: 01603 495892  
E-mail: Katrina.siliprandi@norfolk.gov.uk

## Programmes for children and young people:

Museums in the East of England offer a wide range of provision for children and young people. For more information of what's available and who to speak to in your local area contact:

### Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

Kate Brown, Museum Development Officer, Cambridgeshire  
Tel: 01223 715473  
E-mail: kate.brown@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

### Essex, Thurrock and Southend

Mark Curteis, Heritage Learning and Access Officer, Essex CC  
Tel: 01245 244661  
E-mail: mark.curteis@essexcc.gov.uk

### Hertfordshire, Bedford and Luton

Jane Munns, County Museums Development Officer, Herts CC  
Tel: 01992 556526  
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### Norfolk

Jamie Everitt, Museum Development Officer, Norfolk CC  
Tel: 01263 517964  
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### Suffolk

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Renaissance is the Museums, Libraries & Archives (MLA) Council's ground breaking programme to transform regional museums. Central government funding is enabling regional museums across the country to raise their standards and deliver real results in local communities.