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Museum Learning Research 2024

What are the priorities for
the museum learning sector?

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Introduction

The Group for Education in Museums (GEM) is the leading sector support organisation for museum and heritage learning and engagement. Founded in 1948, its vision is 'of a connected and equipped community of people enabling learning across museum, heritage and cultural settings, creating inspiring experiences, relevant for everyone; that promote equality – transform and enrich lives.'

GEM delivers its mission through a range of services including professional memberships, training opportunities, mentoring, publications, dedicated area representatives across the UK and internationally as well as collaboration, partnership and advocacy. To date it has 739 individual members and 240 institutional members.

2023 marked GEM's 75th anniversary and its success in becoming an Arts Council England Investment Principles Support Organisation (IPSO). This has enabled GEM to deliver a programme of activity supporting ACE's Let's Create Strategy including Quality and Ambition and Inclusivity and Relevance investment principles to increase place-based support in Levelling Up for Culture and Priority Places, diversity and inclusion in the sector and support for the profession in areas of digital access and professional development. This activity also includes a review of museum learning to gain an insight into current challenges and future needs of learning and engagement practitioners.

Scale of the research

The research was carried out over 15 days during a period of 6 months. The findings are based on a combination of 99 survey responses comprising 67 GEM members and 32 non-members and discussions and interviews with 60 museum and heritage learning professionals, academics and policy makers, including 2 roundtable discussions with learning and engagement leaders in the sector. Participants represented 18 Arts Council England Levelling Up for Culture Places of which 10 are Priority Places plus 3 additional priority places in London and 1 priority place in South East England. There were also contributions from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

The research is not an in-depth research report or academic analysis. It primarily serves to capture current sector themes and concerns to ensure GEM's plans and services are responsive to current priorities.

Research questions

- What is working well in museum /heritage learning?
- What are the main challenges?
- What themes and ideas are informing future planning?
- What sector support is needed?

739

Individual members

240

Institutional members

99

Survey respondents

2

roundtable discussions with learning and engagement leaders

60

interviews with museum & heritage learning professionals



Executive Summary

This research reflects the experience of the sector at a time of well documented significant fiscal and social challenge for the UK, with some museums experiencing redundancies, reduced opening hours and threat of closure and increased or total dependency on external funding and commercial income. Within this context, some research participants reported they felt vulnerable (particularly freelancers) and overstretched, some only employed because they had fundraised for their own roles.

Yet despite these pressures, they shared inspiring stories of engagement, peer support and innovative thinking about a sector they care passionately about and which now more than ever, needs considerable advocacy, support and effective partnerships to thrive.

“How do we balance the books and have access for all?”

Roundtable discussion, 2023

‘Announcement of ACE priority places allowed us to invest in places that had been neglected previously and it forced NPOs to target their work a bit better in these regions. EDI is being taken seriously in many organisations and is seen as non-negotiable. Cross sector partnerships have taken off in some places and become second nature. Creativity is alive.’

GEM Survey, 2023

Key Findings

The research reflects a divide within the sector, mirroring a divide in the UK with 50% of practitioners able to innovate while 50% are really struggling.

Rachel Tranter, Director GEM

Improvements since the Covid-19 pandemic

Post-covid working has encouraged experimentation and a more flexible approach to engaging community groups and schools. This includes digital access and engagement for audiences and increased training and networking opportunities for the sector as well as remote and flexible working with GEM members crediting GEM's support and services during and since the Covid-19 pandemic as being invaluable. Participants also said there had been improvements in staff wellbeing; equality, diversity and inclusion and increased effort to make museums accessible.

Challenges

Financial insecurity because of immediate lack of funding and declining funding over the past two years has resulted in an over reliance on external project-based funding for roles and programmes and this insecurity coupled with low salaries and fees against increased living costs was significantly impacting some research participants' progression. Whilst some participants shared stories of increased levels of audience engagement, others reported they were engaging below pre-pandemic levels because of capacity and cost of living affecting audiences, particularly schools and family audiences.

Sector research and thinking

Recent policy, research and publications as well as participants' own work and reflections, identified the following areas for consideration; health and wellbeing; early years; children and young people; equality, diversity and inclusion; climate action and environmental sustainability and, digital technology.

Support required

Participants valued GEM's services of professional development, networking and knowledge exchange. Future priorities included

continued advocacy around funding schools travel to museums; communicating to museum and heritage leaders and funders the impact of over-dependency on external funding for learning and engagement work; increasing recognition of fair pay for museum learning and engagement roles, including freelance positions. Continued training and networking opportunities were most sought in leadership, mentoring and inter-museum exchanges, advocacy, diversity and inclusion and, anti-racism as well as increased learning opportunities around environmental sustainability and digital innovation specific to learning and

Context

Let's Create (Arts Council England - ACE), *Heritage 2033* (National Lottery Heritage Fund - NHLF), *Museums and Schools* (Department for Education - DfE/ACE), and the *Cultural Education Plan* (Department for Culture, Media, Sport-DCMS), reflect national policy level recognition of the value of the creative and cultural industries on communities and society in England. This is mirrored with recent arts and museum strategies in Scotland and Northern Ireland and in Wales, the influential Welsh National Curriculum. However, this resource and optimism is against a background of regional and cross sector austerity with some civic and independent museums reporting serious financial uncertainty, too dependent on council funding and short term project-based funding.

Sector support organisations (IPSOs and non IPSOs) as well as Museum Development delivery partners in England share a plethora of opportunities, resources, events, advocacy and support for the museum sector but the challenge is to ensure this support is relevant, navigable, accessible and sustainable.

Health, Social Care and Education sectors mirror the austerity felt by some museums and now more than ever, supporting partnerships between these industries could be vital to the financial sustainability of cultural learning programmes.

The museum sector has seen enormous progression and achievement in museum learning and engagement since GEM's foundation 75 years ago; since Anderson's report on learning and engagement, *A Common Wealth* (1999) and more recently, the *Manifesto for Museums, Learning & Engagement* (2021). However, it is now critical that the museum sector and the museum learning community within this, clearly articulate, celebrate and evidence the value and social impact of museum learning work, to protect access and inclusion for audiences as well as practitioners delivering this work.

FINDINGS

I. What is working well in museum and heritage learning?

Sector support organisations provide targeted support and advocacy and those accessing these services share positive experiences of knowledge exchange, stories of successful community engagement practice, of regional collaboration, research-led work, professional progression and strategic planning.

In addition, for some, project funding has provided opportunities for new practice, spaces and leadership, aiding wellbeing and a broadening of opportunity and diversity. This infers a positive shift in wider museum strategy that places learning and engagement central to museum future planning, supported and valued by museum and heritage directors and policy leaders, even though some of those leaders now face challenging funding contexts.

Policy changes such as flexible working have also improved work/life balance and lowered transport costs. This has been particularly welcome for learning/engagement practitioners who often work weekends, evenings, school and public holidays and can live a considerable distance from work because of rental and housing prices.

In addition, recovery of learning programmes since the Covid-19 pandemic is improving for some research participants who report they are back to pre-pandemic levels of engagement and developing new programmes with additional resources and staff.

Gained extra member of staff. Recognition of the project work that we do and the impact it has – demonstrated through writing and sharing an impact report.

Survey participant, 2023

I'm pleased that Education is featured as a key strand in Museums Galleries Scotland's strategy – we need a voice advocating for the work of those in museum learning.

Survey participant, 2023



Focus and Flexibility

For some, the pandemic enabled a 'reset'² - a chance to refocus and carry out research, listening to how audiences wanted to engage with organisations. Research participants talked about how the pandemic allowed the opportunity to step back and experiment with new ways of engagement, making their programme offer more local and flexible to help with varying needs and challenges of schools and families. Two interviewees shared they had seen an increase in numbers of primary school visits because they now provided flexible arrangements and tailor-made sessions with some expanding to enable whole year groups to visit, made possible with DfE Museums & Schools funding. Those with outdoor spaces, picnic facilities and hybrid learning offers were thriving.

Demand hasn't diminished from schools – we're back to pre-COVID numbers now, with 6000 pupils a year.

Interviewee, 2024

The pandemic made everyone much more flexible and open to new ideas as we had to stop some aspects of our work completely and either replace it or find new ways of presenting it.

Survey participant, 2023

We have strong relationships with our local primary schools who use our loan box scheme and book on annually to our themed museum tours which are led by our museum assistants. The tours and loan boxes link well to the primary curriculum (World War II, Romans, Victorians, local history etc) and everything is free of charge.

GEM Museum Learning Basics course participant, 2024

Digital Inclusion

Some research participants commented that diving into digital delivery when museums were closed during the Covid-19 pandemic meant they now had the confidence to continue with hybrid programming, enabling increased engagement with new audiences and to engage with school groups who would otherwise only visit once a year or not at all because of coach costs. There have also been opportunities to engage with community groups in new ways e.g. enabling a community group to join in online if they were unable to attend in person. This has been especially valuable to individuals with caring responsibilities and transport barriers.

As well as offering digital engagement, participants talked about the huge advantage of online training available that meant they too could access professional development and improve and develop their work where previously the cost and time required out to travel would have been a barrier. This is evidenced by the increased participation in online GEM events and training to 2,706 (2021) compared with 368 pre pandemic in 2019.

I think the progress in digital provision and delivery has been huge, it's opened up new channels and opportunities that we were struggling to engage with pre-pandemic.

GEM Survey, 2023

The bulk of our digital resources were created during 2020 and we're really pleased with how they continue to be used.

GEM Survey, 2023

I've since been successful in obtaining funding to recruit a digital learning producer.

Interviewee, 2024

Partnerships and Sector Support

Cross-sector partnerships have been developed with museum learning teams recognising the value of working with expert partners to affect stronger beneficial outcomes for participants. *Working Together*, a partnership between the Culture Health & Wellbeing Alliance and GEM exemplifies this cross-sector strategic provision and in Yorkshire, The Association of Independent Museums' *Connected Community* grants enabled museum learning professionals to increase skills and confidence in working with vulnerable groups, supporting the cross-sector needs of arts professionals working with health and social care.

Research participants talked about how cultural partnerships had been critical to their survival and CPD, especially those between “well-funded nationals”³ and regional museums. They described how working together through Cultural Educational Partnerships (Hampshire and Midlands), NPO consortiums (Cornwall, Isle of Wight) had focused programming on local need and a sharing of training, resources and expertise. Participants really valued their colleagues and professional/social networking opportunities through local networks, memberships with organisations like GEM, AIM, Engage and MA. Freelancers too, found opportunities through these for training and mentoring, to be particularly supportive. Some participants (interviewed in 2023 and before the new 2024-27 Museum Development England programme was announced) shared how their regional Museum Development services appeared more focused on collections care, curatorial and commercial and some had been directed to GEM “as they do learning”⁴. They emphasised the importance of the provision of GEM’s training and professional development services and with the services of other IPSOs such as Artsworld, Engage and Kids in Museums.



“My background is in collections and exhibitions and now I’m responsible for learning and engagement. This was the first time I’ve attended the GEM conference and I felt like I’d found my people.”

Interviewee, 2024

“GEM offers a lot of valuable support already of which I am grateful for. GEM, for me, offers the opportunities that are sector specific and relevant to the roles within our organisation. Case studies by peers are always a really good source of information and inspiration. The annual GEM conference on the occasions I have been able to attend have always been useful opportunities to hear for peers and network.”

GEM Rising Leaders’ Course Evaluation, 2023

FINDINGS

2. What are the main challenges?



Some interviewees emphasised that challenges they were experiencing had been made ‘worse’⁵ by COVID-19 but were prevalent before and that too often the pandemic was given as a reason for a cut in budgets and resources, with some sharing that commercial use of learning spaces now took priority over education bookings.

A key issue for them was the over-reliance on external funding for learning and engagement work which often competed with commercial activities, preventing roles and work with communities ever feeling secure or embedded, even though this work attracted major funding investment.

Unstable fees, salaries and contracts as well as limited opportunities for progression featured prominently in discussions and the subsequent impact of this on career appeal and viability. This, combined with increased isolation experienced by some because of reduced workforces with teams of just 1 or 2 including remote working or shift working, was affecting wellbeing.

The cost of living was also having an impact on audience engagement in about 50% of the museums involved in the research, particularly school and family audiences visiting museums with admission costs.

Whilst the shift to remote working has had benefits in terms of access to training, work planning, and more flex-ible engagement with colleagues, and an improvement in work/life balance - there have been some negative im-pacts on members mental health and wellbeing. Some members have expressed feelings of isolation and challenges in balancing their work flow with being at home. GEM could support its members by developing their resil-ience and helping them to manage their work/life balance more effectively. This could be through wellbeing sessions being presented at the GEM conference, through training, or signposting to other support organisations and peer-to-peer support networks.

Paddy McNulty – GEM 2023 Survey Results

“How do we shift from firefighting to strategic?”

Roundtable discussion

It is a challenge to keep education a priority within our organisation when other lucrative sources of revenue such as events and weddings sometimes require use of the same spaces or education building.

GEM Survey, 2023

People are leaving the sector due to low pay or relentless resilience talk and so it’s hard to be in the sector right now.

GEM Survey, 2023

Funding and Value

Museum and heritage museum learning roles can be multi-faceted: an educator, a producer, a curator, a convenor, a freelancer, a facilitator. Interviewees delivered either one programme or many with some also fundraising for their own salaries and programmes, managing volunteers and freelancers, reporting, advocacy, interpretation, project management, capital projects, digital marketing and quite often, leading on diversity and inclusion whilst generating new audiences and increasingly, income. Although this broadness and diversity of opportunity was sometimes welcomed within the sector, some research participants commented on their increasing vulnerability, with freelancers and non-freelancers seeing a ‘creep’⁶ in unremunerated and unsupported additional accountability.

As museum and heritage learning work can be easier to acquire funding for compared with other activities, research participants commented on how roles frequently shapeshift to meet funding requirements, thereby impacting on the quality and impact of work. This also affects the wellbeing of staff who feel increasingly undervalued and interviewees consistently reported on ‘back-to-back’ temporary project funding taking its toll and successive reporting limiting time for planning, creative thinking or professional development. There were concerns too, that work could be led by funding requirements, rather than from research and need identified by the learning professionals themselves and they effectively felt like administrators of projects with overconfident outcomes, to ensure buy-in from investors.

Whilst the welcome announcements of a further year of funding from the DfE/ACE Museums and Schools funding has been confirmed for some English museums as well as NPO and NLHF investment, funding models continue to be challenging for a sector needing the security of longer term funding to plan learning and engagement work strategically, particularly programmes for schools, families and community groups where building relationships takes time and is fundamental to genuine audience sustainability and programme success.

Funding is the biggest challenge in my role. I have been in post as Education Officer since the end of February 2024. The role is funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund until March 2025, giving me just over a year to create and implement a Learning Programme that can continue to run after I have left. As a team of one, it is a big challenge to plan a programme for all audiences!

GEM Museum Learning Basics course participant, 2024

We have to advocate and fight for our place a lot.

Survey participant, 2023

The Paul Hamlyn Foundation’s Our Museum project was in 2012 and was looking at embedding practices and sustainability – why haven’t we moved forward? In fact, it feels like we’ve gone backwards.

Survey participant, 2023

Salaries and Fees

Of those surveyed just under half (48%) earned under £30,000 per annum. The next two significant brackets were £30 – 35,000 (17%) and £40-45,000 (19%). Freelance fees, although generally equivalent to that of a supply teacher or visiting lecturer, not always paid for planning or meeting time with some saying that they often felt they were giving their ideas away for free. Respondents also commented that when applying for a first job, applicants were likely to be in competition with those who could evidence prior experience and postgraduate qualifications. They would also be expected to be able to work flexibly, taking TOIL for working evenings, weekend and bank holidays. Few of those already in museum learning roles felt able to do so because of workload.

A disparity in salaries plus increased costs of living was having an impact on some individuals and this is reflected in the Annual Museums Development South West England 2023 Survey.

48% earned under £30,000 per annum

17% earned £30 – £35,000 per annum

19% earned £40 – £45,000 per annum

Employees are often underpaid and our priority communities are often underpaid -meaning both the service provider and service user are facing barriers to working and engaging effectively.

Survey participant, 2023

“I have come to work in this sector because I can – I’ve paid off my mortgage and my kids have left home – it wouldn’t have been possible otherwise.”

Interviewee, 2023

Salaries. Pay is far too low compared to the work and responsibilities. Having the MA salary guidance is all well and good but that money for fair pay needs to come from somewhere.

Survey participant, 2023

“Salaries are excluding!”

Roundtable discussion, 2023

Museum and Heritage Career Routes

Whilst IPSOs, sector support organisations and museum development providers are actively investigating, investing in and sharing case studies to influence and support routes into training and careers (examples include Engage, NHLF), there is concern in the sector that reduced funding for creative and humanities courses at HE level and low sector pay, means fewer young people will consider museums and heritage as a viable career pathway and this will affect the diversity of the sector. This concern is reflected in commercial creative industries where one organisation is intensifying outreach and CPD schemes in schools with higher levels of disadvantage and offering paid traineeships, including partnering with a housing provider to provide affordable rent, recognising that a major barrier to securing talent in the creative and cultural industries is the cost of living.⁷

Museum and heritage learning teams play a lead role introducing the museum and heritage sector to young people, promoting the full range of STEAM subjects that could lead to museum careers. In addition, widening youth programmes in museums have increased opportunities for young people-led programming and co-production, extending experiential learning and career awareness, with 34% of survey participants saying that they offer early career apprenticeships as part of their work. Projects such as *Circuit* (Tate) and *Kick the Dust* (NLHF), evidence the value of investment in interventions for young people and the influence that young people can have on museum policies and practices with project findings emphasising the need for ambition and action; 'Best practice is being shared more widely – but more action is required to embed young people in the wider heritage sector'.⁸

Organisations like Westminster Adult Education Service's Cultural Learning Apprenticeship, The Foundling Museum's Tracing Our Tales programme, Wessex Museums' *Bridging the Gap* project (2023) and *Careers for All* programme, led by Leeds City Museum and Gallery also provide examples of practice for the sector to be inspired by and learn from, achieved through cross-sector strategy, funding and action.

Yet it's not only young people that experience potential barriers. Examples of exclusion to entering, re-entering or progression in the museum and heritage learning community were also shared by survey participants and interviewees, because of gender, class, age and ethnicity. With a plethora of potential talent and experience available to the museum and heritage sector, increased training around unconscious bias and antiracism would aid much needed diversity of expertise and talent in the industry.

Participants saw a lack of representation of diversity in the sector and in leadership, directly contributing to inequality. Although there were a number of curatorial training initiatives, projects and apprenticeships, few were offered in other areas of museum practice, potentially narrowing the perception of museum employment and routes in to it.

“What is the pipeline into the sector? We need to start early.”

Roundtable discussion, 2023

“We talk about external facing exclusion, but not enough about internal exclusion.”

Interviewee, 2023

Poor pay (a recurring answer), stereotypes about who museums are for and what they do remain, getting a foot in the door through volunteering is exhausting and unaffordable for many.

Survey participant, 2023

“There are different routes to employment – most are through traditional routes, how do we bring in different perspectives and value lived experiences?”

Roundtable discussion, 2023



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Progression



Interviewees recognised that lack of training and professional development were barriers to the development of their work and progression often caused by their limited awareness of what was available and increasingly, financial and time constraints preventing access and opportunity. This also affected those working in financially secure organisations where internal training programmes were offered, but were seldom relevant to their roles. This necessitated in making a very strong case for external training and here, timing was crucial. They urged support organisations to promote training and events earlier, ahead of the early autumn budgeting and planning rounds so that these could be accounted for in department bids and included in externally funded project plans.

Progression was also seen as a major barrier, particularly in the North and on islands, where 'people don't move from their jobs – you have to wait for them to retire'⁹ and therefore, local opportunities to engage in projects, networking and action research offered through partnerships and sector support organisations, were highly valued.

When asked what would be most valuable to them, progression routes were seen as a priority and those already engaged with GEM highly valued opportunities offered from Foundation to Leadership level courses.

We don't have the flexibility to gain new skills – when we're not delivering programmes, we have to help out selling in the gift shop.

Survey participant, 2023

Our organisation had a training budget in the past but this is no longer the case. We include training in our grant applications where possible.

Survey participant, 2023

“Training has all but stopped. There's no money – you have to pay for your own professional development.”

Interviewee, 2023

“Our museum offers training, but not anything that's learning focused, we have to organise that separately which is a bit complicated”.

Interviewee, 2023

FINDINGS

3. What ideas and themes are informing sector planning?

Inspiring examples of practice are being shared between GEM members in conferences, journals and the wider museum community, with increased dialogue on co-production, social justice, cultural rights, health and wellbeing, anti-racism and decolonisation, LGBTQ+, climate change, diversity and digital technology. Socio-geographical and political contexts are also shaping policy and ideas with childhood poverty and Early Years considered a priority. This thinking is underpinned by a plethora of reports, research and policy from Northern Ireland Museum Council, Historic England, NLHF, ACE, NESTA, Art Fund and more.

Within this is growing critical discussion and debate about ethical approaches to socially engaged practice, with learning practitioners seeking advice, case studies and research to underpin their work.

In addition, leaders are looking at new models of governance and how to use data and evaluation for internal advocacy as well as new funding models, so learning and engagement work can become more financially independent.



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“In the last five years we’ve moved from a basic understanding of what learning can be to building a programme focused on the needs of audiences and asset based co production, integrated with the exhibition programme.”

Interviewee, 2024

“There is a lot of theoretical EDI work – we need more practical action”

Interviewee, 2024

“We do look at recycling our resources, but as a military museum it’s not easy to link this in – and it’s not what schools come to us for.”

Interviewee, 2024

Children and Young People

With rising concerns about the effects of poverty on early childhood in the UK there has been increased discussion and activity around how the cultural sector can support Early Years development and prevent poverty affecting children's engagement with culture, with several research participants and roundtable contributors commenting on Early Years being a key strategic area of focus for them and referencing the work of the Art Fund well as the work of the Cultural Learning Alliance (CLA) and National Society for Art and Design Education (NSEAD), to address creative and cultural provision in primary and secondary schools.

Arts Council England's *Let's Create Strategy and Investment in Children and Young People's Programmes* highlight the importance of responding to the findings of the Durham Commission and in an interview said a key consideration for ACE was how to 'poverty proof'¹⁰ arts for children and young people in future. In addition, The Art Fund's *Teachers' Insight*¹¹ report evidences regional disparity and poverty as key indicators to children's museum engagement, signalling a need for place-based regional funding and interventions, a need that has been seen a response in the work of Local Cultural Education Partnerships (LCEPs) and NPOs as well as organisations like the Clore Foundation, in their place-based work with an Academy Trust in Hastings.

The Gulbenkian Foundation's report *The Arts in Schools* encouraged Arts organisations to; 'ensure resources can be made easily available and relevant to schools (including online), and responsive to their needs'¹², a call that has been answered by Art UK with the recent launch of the *Superpower of Looking*, making art collections and interactive lessons accessible from the classroom, along with a number of museums and heritage organisations (Leeds Museums and Galleries, UK Parliament) continuing to offer digital sessions alongside in-person programmes.

Coinciding with this activity, the 2023 Kids in Museums *Youth Support Summit* highlighted the work that museums need to do to re-think engagement with young people, with 90% of the summit attendees saying museums were not relevant to them citing admission costs, behaviours and over-assumptions about needing to engage young people through digital activities being key barriers to engagement.¹³

"We're working closely with Children's Services and the Schools Partnership Alliance as well as the School Improvement Service and we have an active Cultural Education Partnership."

Interviewee, 2024



Health and Wellbeing

A focus on health and wellbeing and place-based work has been reinforced since the Covid-19 pandemic with increasing levels of need reported across the four nations. Programmes such as *Working Together* delivered by *The Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA)* in partnership with GEM and six museums to explore how health can be embedded in museum place-based work, exemplifies the opportunity and potential of heritage and health sectors collaborating to support local communities.

Social responsibility and giving agency to communities were important to interviewees. Participants gave examples of how since the Covid-19 pandemic they opened up museum spaces for community led events and found more equitable ways of engaging communities to help tackle local health, wellbeing and poverty. Examples of inspiring programmes provided by research participants included museums collaborating on the provision of food banks (Museum of the Home), clothes washing (Scottish Museums) and warm spaces (Barnsley Museums) and bringing museum collections out to other community settings (Open Museum Glasgow) including in Job Centres (Ipswich Museums).

Alongside this programming, museum learning practitioners are keen to equip themselves with the training and skills required for sometimes emotionally challenging work, such as Trauma Informed Practice and they talked about the importance they placed on implementing equitable partnerships that allowed for co-development of ideas as exemplified in the guidance *An Ethical Framework for Collaborating with Communities* produced by the Museums & Gallery Research Centre, Leicester University in partnership with Kettle's Yard.¹⁴



“Wellbeing is huge on my agenda for my team and audiences.”

Interviewee, 2023

“We’re looking at ‘Warm Spaces’ and thinking of ways our museum spaces can help people’s basic needs.”

Interviewee, 2024

“Being in the North the increase in deprivation is huge and there are pressures on adult and social care and uncertainty in the arts.”

Interviewee, 2024

The challenge for the next decade is making heritage relevant to the lives of young people, preserving and interpretation is not enough.

GEM Survey, 2023

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Increasing diversity in the workplace, audiences and programming is a key theme in the museum sector with the learning and engagement community actively exploring this in the way they work and programming ethos and some research participants reporting progress in their organisation's training, recruitment and audience access. Conferences, research and publications provide examples of best practice and evaluation reports such as Wessex Museums', *Bridging the Gap* project, providing useful guidance for sector approaches.

When asked how successful people were in embedding diversity into their working practices, out of 91 survey responses:

11% scored 5 (with 5 being the most successful)

40% scored 4

38% scored 3

10% scored 2

1% scored 1

33% of survey participants said training in anti-racism, neurodiversity and recruitment were most relevant to them. Furthermore, discussions and interviews revealed the need for learning and engagement specific training and resources, rather than museum-wide sector training, which was always relevant to the needs of communities or barriers to working in a cultural learning role.

Of significant importance to research participants was the need for increased diverse leadership, which they considered vital to a sector that should be more representative of the diversity of its communities and that GEM could support this through its professional development work and advocacy.



“There is a lot of theory and talk in our museum, but we need more action”.

Interviewee, 2024

“Community and EDI work and values should be embedded by organisational leaders and within policies.”

Roundtable discussion, 2023

“We need an allyship group in this sector”

Interviewee, 2023



Climate Action and Sustainability

Increased dialogue and case-studies about how museums can support the climate emergency are prevalent in the sector with projects such as *Urban Nature* led by the Natural History Museum in partnership with 11 museums, *Nature + Love* led by the Horniman Museum and Art Fund's *The Wild Escape 2023*, demonstrating inspiring learning and engagement programming. Similarly, a focus on sustainability initiatives by Museum Development providers and the NLHF, provide new opportunities for investment, partnership and training.

Questions in the GEM Museum Learning survey about engagement with environmental responsibility received a high response rate with survey respondents reporting they were actively participating in green working groups and taking on roles as sustainability champions with 12% recording they had either already attended carbon literacy training or were about to and 84% learning programmes already included environmental responsibility content.

When asked about what they would like to learn more about, survey respondents selected: Education for Sustainable Development; the National Climate Education Plan and working with community and activist groups as being of particular interest and in conversations and interviews, many said that they would value examples of best practice and practical starting points.

I would like there to be a specific network for museum educators grappling with issues of climate change and justice. Could GEM do this?

Conference interviewee 2023

'As a newly opened organisation, I feel this is something we need to work on'

GEM Survey, 2023

'We have started to programme more workshops and events related to climate.'

GEM Survey, 2023



Digital Engagement

*'The lasting impact of the pandemic has been the normalisation of remote working and video conferencing. During the pandemic and the period following this there was an increase in education and learning sessions being delivered digitally. Digital resources are still being developed and offered as education and learning resources, however, as the world has normalised there has been a return to a more face-to-face delivery methods.'*¹⁵

Digital strategy and innovation have headlined museum and heritage sector publications and events including increasing discussion and funding for experimental approaches to the use of artificial intelligence, virtual reality and other immersive technologies. This follows a period of digital acceleration in museums since the Covid-19 pandemic with projects such as NHLF's *Digital Skills for Heritage* (2020) and The Art Fund's insight report *Digital Activities in Museums and Galleries*¹⁶ identifying skills, capacity and resources the sector needs to continue to build into their work.

When asked about how they use digital technology, 70% of the GEM 2023 Survey research participants said they used it to deliver downloadable digital learning resources, 65% to delivery online streaming sessions and activities; 56% to engage with online audiences/groups; 46% to deliver pre-recorded content; 4.6% to deliver or participate in staff training.

Common barriers cited to digital programming included practical, infrastructure and personal attitudes:

- Poor wi-fi
- Lack of budget for upgrades
- No technical support or time to learn
- Local digital poverty
- A need to prioritise in-person programmes in line with budget and investment criteria

Some commenting that they personally had 'digital fatigue'¹⁷, and that 'schools want in person visits'.¹⁸

Despite these challenges, research participants and interviewees shared an appetite to experiment with technology, how to acquire funding to do so and to plan ahead for '2, 3, 8 years'.¹⁹

We need to experiment more – but we need the time and resources to do this

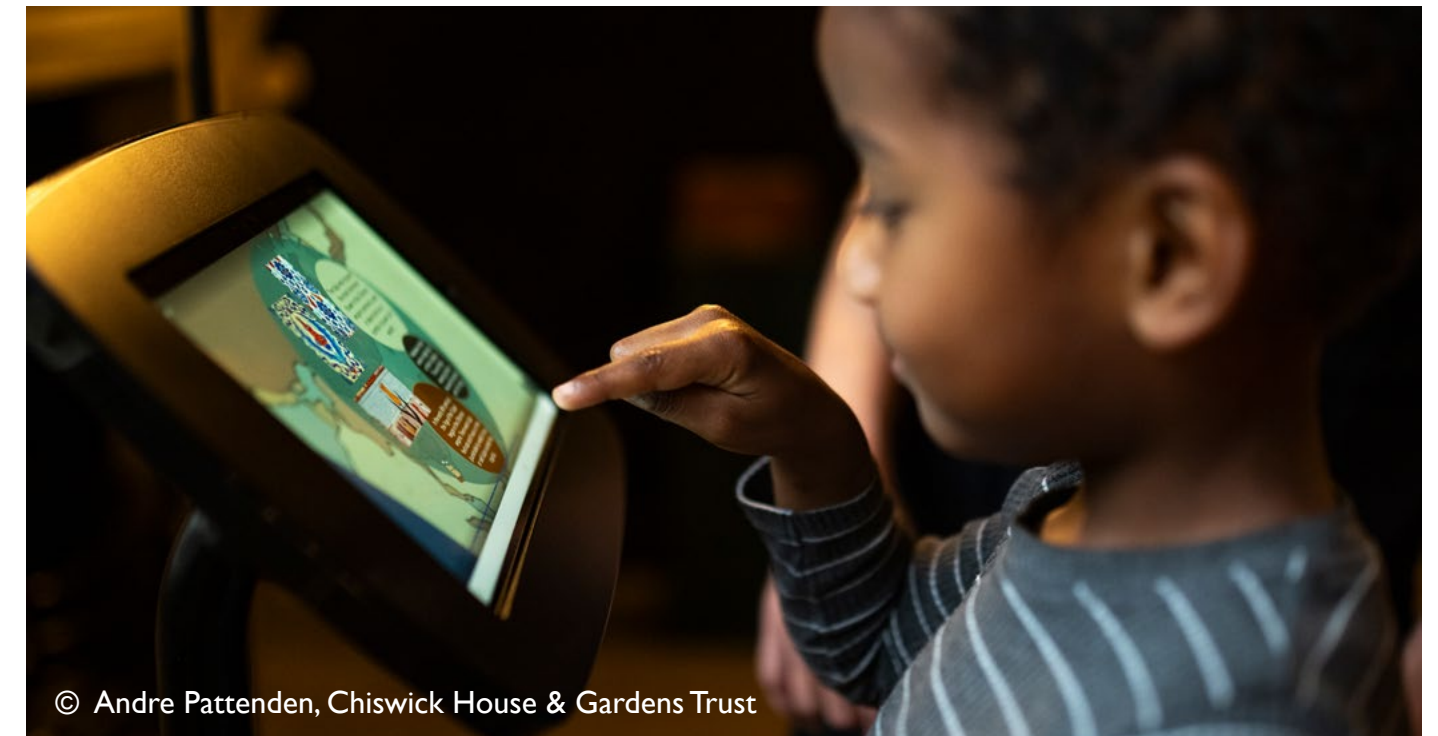
Survey participant, 2023

“The digital element of basic skills - there's a real disconnect and siloing between digital teams and learning teams especially in larger organisations. In smaller organisations there are issues with workload/capacity/wellbeing.”

Roundtable discussion, 2023

“Confidence, skills and capacity - not yet effectively weaving digital skills into role descriptions, recruitment and people management.”

Roundtable discussion, 2023



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FINDINGS

4. What support is needed?

As the remit of museum learning and engagement work expands into wider social engagement practice and the needs of communities' increase, change and diversify – the provision of up-to-date training, place-based peer support and access to recent and relevant case-studies are vital. In addition, those working in museum learning and engagement roles increasingly needs to be skilled in recruitment, digital practices, safety management, evaluation, fundraising, finance and advocacy. Sector led training, knowledge exchange and resources are vital to this increasing need, particularly where people are working on their own, in small teams or independently as freelancers and consultants.

GEM is highly valued by its members. When asked to reflect on 5 key statements members responded as follows:

• **GEM strongly supports the cultural heritage education and the learning sector**

91% agree/strongly agreed

• **GEM has a thorough understanding of the learning and education sectors' needs**

91% agree/strongly agreed

• **GEM supports and inspires positive change**

89% agree/strongly agreed

• **GEM is supporting the development of blended learning and education provision (a mix of digital and physical provision)**

80% agree/strongly agreed

• **GEM helps support my professional development**

“Back to basics training”

Round Table discussion, 2023

“Advice on connecting with teachers”

Interviewee 2023

“Funding as always”

Interviewee, 2023

“Advice on training on how to advocate internally”

Interviewee, 2024

“Exchange visits with other museums”

Interviewee, 2023

“The importance of linking learning and collections”

Interviewee, 2023

“Diversity and diverse leadership”

Roundtable discussion, 2023

Advocacy

Research participants asked for increased advocacy for museum learning and engagement, specifically around highlighting to statutory funders, trust and foundations the challenges of short-term funding and lack of core multi-year funding and to challenge unfair salaries and fees that could prohibit retention and sector diversity.

Collaboration between the Museums Association, GEM, Engage and Art Fund are viewed as important by museum learning practitioners, with *A Manifesto for Learning and Engagement* highlighted by some research-participants as invaluable advocacy in its articulation of learning and engagement work as key to eight museum areas: collections, cultural rights and cultural democracy, social justice, activism, community participation, research and evaluation, partnerships and workforce.

Research participants also encouraged the sector support organisations to come together to promote museum and heritage learning work, to help protect employees and secure career entry and progression opportunities.

Participants also saw school travel costs and the maintenance of free admission in civic museums as priority policy review and advocacy areas.



© Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Art Gallery

A more prominent role for GEM at strategic level and being the sector leaders for learning and education.

Survey participant, 2023

“How to value and report social impact and financial impact and understanding the difference between the two. We’re bridging charitable aims vs business/ commercial needs – how can we evidence the value we bring- the importance of social impact, what’s the added value? Helping visitors to increase interest in the world.”

Roundtable discussion, 2023

“We’re a heavy driver for mission statement but how do we shout about it?”

Interviewee, 2023

Professional Development

Professional development requests varied between those in their early career to experts and included knowledge share to practical skills, mentoring and coaching with 50% of GEM's non-members citing the following as most important:

- Regional networking
- Developing and delivering diverse and inclusive programmes
- Training on Impact and Evaluation
- Training/guidance on Environmental Sustainability in working practice/programme content
- Training on diversity and inclusion (e.g. SEND, Neurodiversity, LGBTQIA+, Anti-racism).

When survey participants were asked what career progression support would be most valuable:

- 48% – *leadership training*
- 32% – *coaching*
- 32% – *work experience at another museum or cultural heritage organisation*
- 30% – *mentoring*
- 20% – *formal qualifications*
- 14% – *work experience in another related sector*

Practical experience in museums was considered by museum learning professionals as being vital to students and young people, through increased availability of work experience, paid internships and apprenticeships.

With an increased need for business skills and communicating the impact of programmes both internally and externally, there was demand for courses and resources on all aspects of administration from writing business plans, policies and strategy to recruitment, evaluation and report writing.

Training themes viewed as most relevant to future programme delivery included: income generation, environmental responsibility, digital practice, neurodiversity, social prescribing, decolonisation, anti-racism, and trauma informed practice.

'Keeping up to date' with current policy and practice was also important, particularly to freelancers and those re-entering the profession after redundancy or moving into the sector from another.

There was also an unexpected demand for what some called 'basics' and 'refresher' training. Examples contributed included: object based learning and object handling; safeguarding; programming; planning and delivering learning activities.

In museums that provided in-house training, none provided learning specific training and it was felt harder to acquire these skills with increased numbers entering the profession from a wider range of professional and academic backgrounds and experiences and often, not having someone who could mentor them 'on the job'.²⁰

“Back to basics – whether that’s formal learning or using objects. The focus over the last few years has made it feel that we’ve lost the basics or people new in the sector never had the chance to learn.”

Interviewee, 2023

“I can work with the team and partners to figure out development plans for them, or mentees, but when it comes to me it’s always hard. A lot of the things we need as leaders are so specific that formal support (like courses) don’t work or aren’t quite what we need. There’s something there about carving out time and space for peer support / peer mentoring and reflection”

Roundtable discussion, 2023

“Even after 30 years there’s a feeling of not feeling confident in strategic spreadsheet land. There’s a power in being financially fluent that I don’t feel.”

Roundtable discussion, 2023

“Business planning skills are needed.”

Roundtable discussion, 2023

Collaboration and Networking

Opportunities for networking and collaboration were considered a key motivation for becoming a member of an organisation like GEM. With varying socio-geographical and political considerations, there were requests for increased area activity to include regular regional events, hybrid networking opportunities and local and regional knowledge share. Many of those participating in group consultations and discussions asked for similar informal opportunities to network and ‘talk’ – to share challenges and advice and to join subject networks.

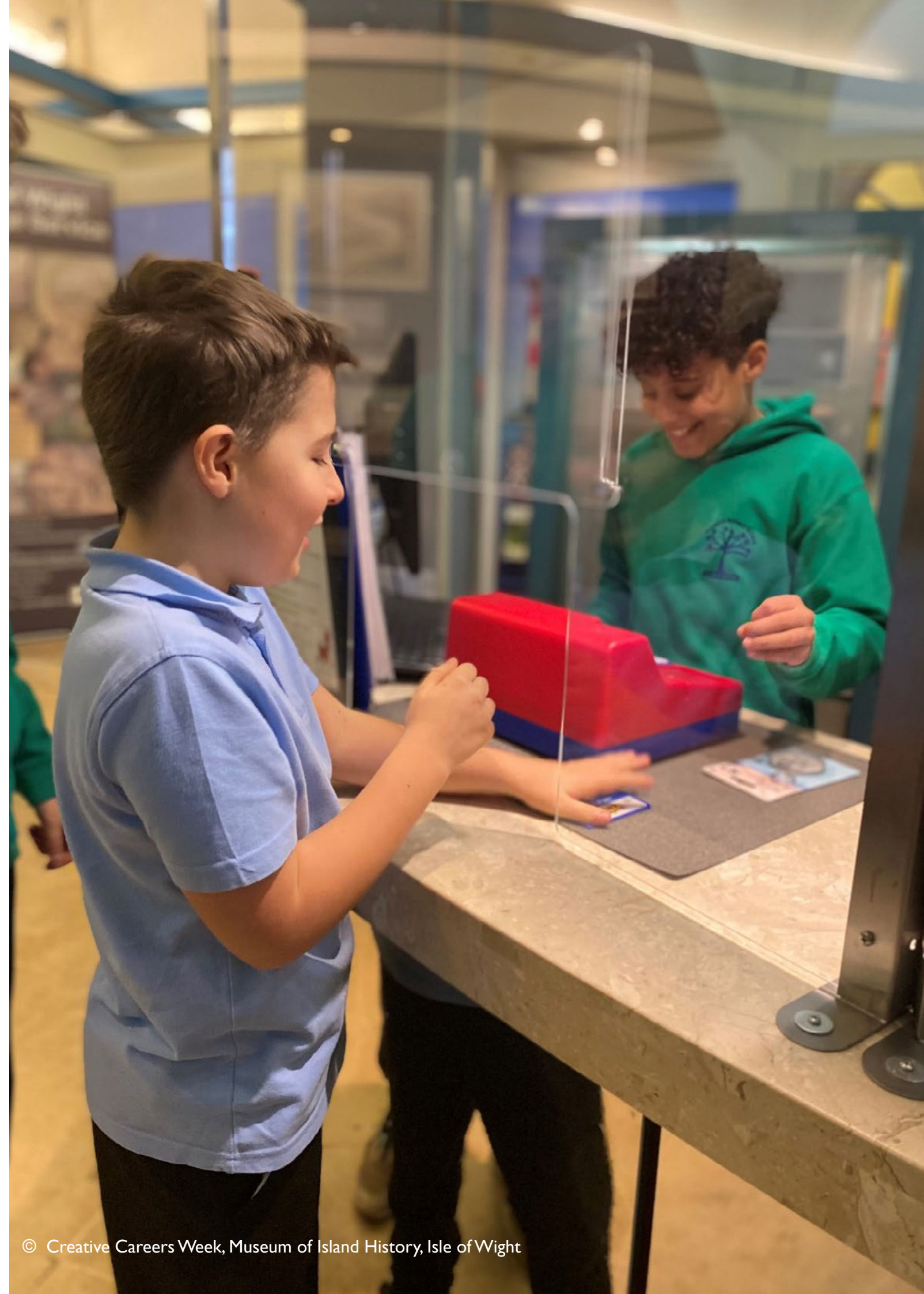
There is also demand for hyper local level activity (as opposed to regional) and collaboration in areas identified in this report such as apprenticeships and school-based work experience, secondments and cross-sector partnerships which sector support organisations would potentially be able to support, coordinate and ‘get off the ground’.²¹

“It would be useful to have a conversation about how we reframe what we do and develop pipelines into the sector and help with retention.”

Roundtable discussion, 2023



GEM Conference 2023 took place at Chatham Historic Dockyard (Medway) and was planned in close partnership with the Chatham Historic Dockyard team.



CONCLUSION

This research shows that there are many opportunities for museums to be the kind of organisations that their local places need, providing cultural entitlement for children and young people, embedded in local community, supporting sustainable development, enhancing and enriching lives. Museum learning should be a must have, a fundamental human right and it is everyone's responsibility to make that possible not just in some postcodes but in every postcode across the UK.

Rachel Tranter, GEM Director



Amplify existing services and impact



Host subject-based networks and biannual consultations



Advocate for museum learning



Professional development



Strategic place-based

Headline Opportunities for GEM

1. Amplify existing services and impact

GEM already provides much of what the profession needs: mentoring, support, professional development, training, networking, knowledge exchange and place-based cross-sector programmes as well as advocacy and this is valued by its members. There is now an opportunity for GEM to amplify its work, its bursary schemes, case studies, support for freelance workers and action research and so that its work is recognised by new members and relevant sectors.

2. Host subject-based networks and biannual consultations

Host cross-sector subject-based networks in themes such as Museum and Heritage Learning Career Routes, Health & Wellbeing, Schools & Teachers, Environmental Sustainability Programming, Digital Learning Innovation and signpost resources, case-studies and training of specific use to museum learning and engagement practitioners ensuring museum learning is represented in cultural policy development and knowledge exchange. Build on this research to inform future work, coordinating bi-annual consultations/listening sessions with senior leaders and GEM members in museums and heritage.

3. Advocate for museum learning

Continue to advocate for the value of museum learning in the cultural and education sectors and for fair pay and contracts for employees. With sector partners, explore how issues like the cost of school travel to museums could be addressed and increase access to museum and heritage careers – driving this change through schools’ engagement and place-based interventions.

Continue to track and share data on museum learning and engagement – working in partnership with academics and statistics experts, to evidence changes in workforce scale, salaries and diversity.

4. Professional Development

Continue to build a dynamic and accessible in person and online service: an active library of reports, research, policy, case-studies, how-to videos, discussion forums as well as online and signature in-person training from Foundation to Leadership. Carry out a feasibility study to expand courses to include accredited apprenticeship and postgraduate level courses in partnership with Further Education and Higher Education institutions, whilst continuing to promote and expand the well-regarded mentoring programme.

5. Strategic and place-based

GEM already works with specific places and through its IPSO programme is delivering interventions in Levelling Up for Culture Places. This is viewed as important by participants who seek active area meetings and support. There is now potential in years 2, 3, 4 of GEM’s IPSO programme to identify action-based projects linked to subject networks and themes identified in this report viewed as priorities.



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Headline Recommendations for Wider Sector

1. Recognise the value of the museum learning sector

Consider the impact on museum audiences in future without museum learning – champion the need for this work in core funding. Make museums learning led and value employees' wide-ranging skills and experience. For museums without learning leadership, seek support from GEM to understand the value and scope of museum learning and engagement work and how to implement this.

2. Protect access to museums and heritage for children, young people and communities

Ensure museums are central to future discussions on education and cultural access and that museum learning is protected to ensure all children engage in high quality museum experiences. Champion community learning programmes and the interventions that museum learning professionals provide to support the health and wellbeing of communities.

3. Support Fair Pay and working conditions

Promote fair pay for museum learning practitioners and ensure museum learning professionals are not unfairly burdened with justifying their work or fundraising for salaries and freelancers' fees.

Ensure museum learning colleagues have access to suitable and specific training that protects them in their work and supports the delivery of high-quality activities. Encourage opportunities for progression and seek advice and support from organisations like GEM and Engage.

4. Create a diverse and inclusive workforce

Review recruitment practices and training to increase diversity and inclusion and work in partnership with organisations like GEM, Engage, the Museums Association, NHLF and other relevant sectors to expand career pathways and diverse leadership.

Endnotes

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18. Interviewee, 2024
19. Interviewee, 2024
20. Interviewee, 2023
21. Interviewee, 2024

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