

Guidelines for developing heritage projects with adults with severe physical and /or learning disabilities

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'The students and staff have felt an immense sense of pride in work they produced for the final exhibition.'



'I cannot over emphasise how much the students have loved going out into the community and meeting new people.'

'It has been a great success and has kindled some real interest and excitement among the student group who have entered a new world of experiences!'

'As a support worker the experience of watching a student who only ever draws flowers become interested in something completely different has been fantastic.'

'I felt very proud of the work in the exhibition. As an individual I have very much enjoyed the opportunity of finding out more about the museum and have been genuinely excited when it has been our turn to go!'



These guidelines have been developed from working on the 'Your Past, My Present, Our Future' project. This was a partnership project between Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery and the Hamlet Centre, a local community organisation that works with adults with severe physical and/ or learning disabilities, and also Gemma Orton, an ex Clare School student with severe physical disabilities. The project's aim was to find new ways of working with people with severe physical and/ or learning disabilities at Norwich Castle, both from a community group and as individuals. The project involved students from the Hamlet Centre and Gemma Orton discovering the history of change in Norwich Castle and creating their own visual or aural creative responses to this change. The final pieces were displayed in the Keep at Norwich Castle for four days immediately after completion and will be displayed in Norwich Castle's Cultural Olympiad weekend in July 2011.

Guidelines for working with people with severe learning/ physical disabilities, developed specifically from the 'Your Past, My Present, Our Future' project:

Project Development

- Offering a number of project ideas that can then be developed with the community group was a successful way of developing a project that met both organisations' needs.
- To attract individuals to a project there need to be concrete ideas to appeal to them. Therefore for this project it was easier to get individuals (Gemma Orton) involved once the project plan of basic ideas had been developed.
- Facebook, even with known contacts, does not work to attract people to a project which wants to involve the participants in the development. Old fashioned conversations are the way to get individuals interested in projects, particularly with people with severe physical and/ or learning disabilities, as they need to know that the organisations they are working with are recommended and appropriate.

Project Management

- Ensure that everyone involved in the project tells the museum what their preferred job titles are e.g. Hamlet Centre had students and helpers and Gemma had a personal assistant.
- Being flexible. Numbers of people attending the sessions changed up to the last minute as did the start times for the sessions
- Having an introductory session to meet participants and understand their needs was essential
- Giving the helpers the same benefits as the students (i.e. museum passes and free lunches) meant they were committed to the project too.

- Ensure that all staff in the museum are familiar with the evacuation procedure for people with wheelchairs, and a consistent policy is put across about the number of wheelchairs allowed in different areas.
- It is not simply wheelchair access that is the issue but also access to toilets with hoists and a private area (which is not a toilet) if someone feels unwell. This space should be identified at the beginning of the project.
- Creating individual responses and projects is time consuming but rewarding!
- Particularly when working with individuals, ensure there are additional opportunities after the duration of the project.

Interacting with people with severe physical and/ or learning difficulties in a museum

- Making eye contact with the people you are talking to and making sure you talk to the students as well as the carers so they have a feeling of being valued.
- When you start a conversation or sit down with someone with limited mobility ensure when you are easily in their vision – so they will not need to move to have eye contact.
- The opposite of normal good practice in object handling – most questions for people with limited comprehension or speaking skills need to have closed questions so that there can be either a positive or negative answer.
- Due to the nature of the group, there can be a lot of absences due to illness and preoccupations with medical issues and appointments .
- If wheelchairs, mobility aids cannot get into an area then ensure there are photographs/ computer programme to show them what they cannot see.
- Ensure there is always seating available for those that need it for all tours, talks and handling sessions.
- One hour for a tour of a museum of any description is the most this group can manage due to having to cope with new noises and people and logistically negotiating around the building
- Having the informal time during the lunch is really useful for talking to both the students and the helpers to work out what they enjoy and where they want the project to go next.

Issues of working with a community group

- Starting times for sessions – the group invariably turned up 15 – 30 minutes late and this needs to be taken into account in planning – if possible give the start time for session earlier than it needs to be or include in the timing for the session time to overrun if necessary. The session needs to be run on ‘Hamlet Centre Time’ rather than museum time.

- Contingency transport costs are essential; due to funding shortages the Hamlet Centre's bus is deteriorating which meant that it broke down on several occasions therefore increasing the transport costs with the use of specialised taxis instead.
- Ensuring that a visit to an unfamiliar environment is appropriate and useful can help the community group to do something that they would not normally do. In this case the Hamlet Centre rarely leaves Norwich, but the group really enjoyed their trip to the blacksmiths, which they would not have done if it had not been organised for them.