

YOUTH MANIFESTO REPORT

How young people in the Reading area experience and engage with museums



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Foreword and Context

Museums Partnership Reading (MPR) is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. Its partners are The Museum of English Rural Life, at the University of Reading, and Reading Museum, part of Reading Borough Council. Together we created a Youth Strategy and Action Plan in 2018 and then delivered it from 2019-22.

Through our Youth Strategy we pledged that every child and young person in Reading would benefit from the MPR through opportunities to see, touch and understand the relevance of museum collections to their lives, participate in high quality age-appropriate learning activities, enjoy safe and welcoming museum spaces and make their own creative contributions.

The strategy and action plan embraced **Arts Council England's Quality Principles** for working with young people aiming to be rooted in dialogue and consultation with audiences including children and young people, their teachers, carers and parents. It sought to renew and extend each museum's complementary offer for children and young people to strengthen partnership with this audience and to enable sustainability and resilience and include children and young people with most need (through working alongside their teachers) including those at schools in receipt of high levels of pupil premium funding and schools with low participation rates in higher education.

Delivering our strategy

Years 1 and 2 were spent developing learning, work experience and access opportunities across the age range, from 0 – 25. Gaps in provision were addressed, existing programmes refined and new ones developed.

Year 3 (2021/2022) of the strategy saw the full delivery of our children and young people's offer and the development of a Youth Manifesto. At the same time, the University of Reading had launched a Community Fund in partnership with the John Sykes Foundation. This two year pilot initiative aims to support projects that benefit the people and community of Reading. The MPR received a generous grant from the Community Fund to support the Youth Manifesto work.

From early research it became clear that there had been considerable work already undertaken in Reading to look at the life experiences of young people. The project particularly drew on the research of Reading Voluntary Action's Youth Social Action Team in partnership with the University of Reading's Participation Lab, titled "Growing up in Reading."

It was also obvious that there was little need for a further document and it was decided to engage young people and seek their views through the medium of film. This would not only provide a more engaging way to present young people's thoughts and ideas but could also provide a skills development opportunity as those same young people could be trained to film the interviews themselves.

The Youth Manifesto project was delivered in partnership with Real Time Video, Reading's participation media organisation. The Youth Manifesto has benefitted from close working with other current Real Time projects including Yomem, the Erasmus funded Young Messengers of European Memory, Action Media, a young person led production company Real Time lead and 2VIP, an Erasmus funded project looking at Video and Virtual Reality for Successful Youth Participation in Democratic Life.

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Introduction

This report presents the findings from the Youth Manifesto, a collaborative project undertaken by Real Time Video, The Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) and Reading Museum.

This project aims to provide insights into how young people in the Reading area experience and engage with museums. Throughout this project, Real Time interviewed numerous young people, teachers, and museum staff in the Greater Reading area.

Adults and young people were broadly asked the following questions:

- What do you think the purpose of museums are?
- What do you like about museums?
- What do you dislike about museums?
- What can museums do for young people?
- What do you think museums can do to become more relevant for young people?

Real Time have collated the responses to the above questions in this comprehensive report and produced a series of findings and recommendations. The recommendations will be presented to Reading Museum and The Museum of English Rural Life, to direct them on how they can improve their institutions to boost engagement with young people in and around Reading.

The Youth Manifesto project also consists of a one-page manifesto to sum up the findings of the project and a short video that documents the experience and provides behind the scenes material.

Methodology

As part of the Youth Manifesto project, Real Time worked with young people using participatory video as an action research tool. Video is a powerful tool and an excellent motivator, as it encourages participants to critically explore complex issues.

The young people involved developed not only technical skills required for using video but also a wide range of communication, research organisational and social skills. In doing so, they learned more about themselves and each other. Moreover, through group activity, video helped build confidence and self-esteem among the participants.

All the sessions held were practically based and the young people involved used the equipment from the beginning of the project. An emphasis was placed on collaborative working and co-production and the sessions were planned to be as enjoyable as possible.

Since the outcome of this project was to be of benefit to the widest number of young people in Reading, Real Time was able to involve students from Activate College as part of their work experience opportunity. In total, 5 groups comprised of 20 young people each worked on a specific part of the Youth Manifesto. One group worked exclusively with Reading Museum and another helped develop a plot for how to involve young people in storytelling using MERL's collection as a starting point. Students from John Madejski Academy did not attend the museum themselves but were able to offer insights about museums from a distance. They also took part in an outreach session, where they looked at artefacts and photographs from the MERL to explore more about the themes and subject areas that the museum represents.

Overall, more than 40 young people were directly involved in the aims of the Youth Manifesto project, exploring together what museums mean to them and to other young people.

For the Youth Manifesto, Real Time interviewed young people from across Reading reflecting a range of background cultures and educational opportunities these included:

- Young people who attended local state schools
- Young people who attended local grammar schools
- NEETs (Young people who are not in education or work)
- Young people who had been excluded from school
- Young people with learning disabilities
- Young people who attended the local college

The young people were drawn from the following organisations :

- Activate (Reading College)
- Members of MERL's Youth Panel
- John Madejski Academy
- Starting Point/Action Media
- Addington SEN School

Real Time also interviewed local teachers and museum staff as part of the project.

Motivations behind the Youth Manifesto Project

A study conducted by Ecclesiastical Insurance found that museums are the most popular type of heritage attraction among young people in the UK.¹ However, a significant proportion of young people remain disengaged with heritage, with 19% of those surveyed saying they never visit museums, 36% never visiting galleries, 33% never visiting castles and 48% never visiting stately homes.²

OnePoll, found that there is a significant gender gap in attitudes to heritage, with 26% of male respondents saying they never visit museums compared to 16% of female respondents. The survey found that many young adults prefer to stay in and watch TV or use social media rather than go out and visit a museum or gallery.³ Moreover, National Museums Scotland undertook a

¹ Museums Association. *Museums are most popular heritage attraction among young people (2022)* - Museums Association. [online] Available at: <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2018/12/10122018-fifth-young-people-never-visit-museums/#>> [Accessed 16 June 2022].

² *Museums are most popular heritage attraction among young people* - Museums Association [Accessed 16 June 2022]

³ *Museums are most popular heritage attraction among young people* - Museums Association [Accessed 16 June 2022]

study where they found that museums can provide young people with positive personal, cultural, and learning experiences, develop their creativity, and improve their life skills.⁴

In conclusion, studies have shown us that museums can provide young people with positive experiences and help develop their life skills. However, there are clear limitations preventing young people in the UK from engaging with museums and cultural institutions, suggesting that they are not reaping the aforementioned benefits. This project was thus developed to bridge the gap between young people and museums and to provide museums in Reading with recommendations to boost their engagement with local young people.

So, what do young people think about museums and what can be done to engage them further?



What do young people think the purpose of museums are?

Generally, most young people identified that museums were for 'learning 'and 'history ' purposes. Many young people referred to being taken to museums as part of school trips, with only one student that we interviewed stating that they often went to museums with their parents. Some young people that were interviewed had never been to a museum.

One student who frequents museums with her parents, attends Kendrick Grammar School, stated the following:

'Museums do something that the internet cannot do, there's a whole atmosphere created through the dressing of the room...the 3D-ness of an object creates something that cannot be replicated through the internet.'

Furthermore, the student from Kendrick Grammar School also believes that museums can teach us about our 'past 'and 'teach us to not replicate the past.'

Some students were of the understanding that museums 'tell certain people about a certain place and a certain time'. As Reading Museum largely focuses on local history, it's understandable that many young people in the Reading area hold this opinion. Nonetheless, most young people didn't identify any needs that museums met outside of an educational environment.

The teachers that Real Time interviewed also held a similar opinion, as one teacher from John Madejski Academy stated:

'From a teacher's point of view, they're about education and experience, learning about something that they've learned in school beforehand. They're also about leisure time... if you're going on holiday you may want to experience the culture of a country by visiting a museum.'



What do young people like and dislike about museums?

⁴ National Museums Scotland, *Toolkit for Working with Young People in Museums* (2014) [Online] Available at: <<https://www.nms.ac.uk/media/353536/sc-toolkit-final.pdf>> [Accessed 10th June 2022].

Many young people that Real Time interviewed said that they have the tendency to view museums as 'boring' and 'stuffy', as they often don't contain objects or collections that they would be interested in. The teachers that Real Time interviewed for this project, also thought that young people tend to find museums boring and outdated.

Furthermore, students from Reading College expressed that they dislike how some museums, such as Reading Museum are 'curriculum-bound'. One student explained that it's often boring to only go to museums to explore subjects that you've already been studying at school, such as 'The Victorians'. Conversely, one student felt that Reading Museum promoted a sense of community as 'locals can relate to objects from their past.'

The students who explored Reading Museum, really enjoyed the Roman Gallery and its architecture as it felt as though they had 'stepped back in time'. The students particularly appreciated the 'immersive experience' that the Roman Gallery provided and valued a museum experience that didn't require them to predominately observe artefacts. Likewise, students expressed that they didn't enjoy spending lots of time reading the information cards for objects and that they much preferred being able to physically interact with exhibitions.

Many of the young people that were interviewed felt positive that museums were free to visit, as it makes them 'accessible to everyone in the local community'. Moreover, many of the students that were interviewed had been to the Natural History Museum in London as children with their parents. The young people that had been to the Natural History Museum held very high praise for it, particularly for the 'interactive' exhibitions that they experienced.

From the young people who were interviewed, those who had frequently interacted and worked within museums before, tended to have much higher admiration for them, in contrast to those who had never been before.

For example, Daisy, a work experience candidate at MERL had nothing but praise from her experience at MERL, as she has 'gained confidence and numerous other skills'. Daisy expressed that many of her friends think of museums as being boring, but due to her work experience she finds them 'magical places' as they 'help her social skills' and combine her three favourite things: 'working with people' 'working outdoors' and her 'passion for history & art'.

Amelia, a student from Kendrick Grammar School, expressed that she enjoys going to museums as she has been fortunate enough to visit them all over Europe with her parents from a young age. The student was involved with a project at Reading Museum where she helped curate the Reading Festival 50th Anniversary exhibition. She is also involved in a youth panel project, where her opinions about the way that museums are run are taken into consideration and heard.

Students at John Madejski Academy had rarely visited museums and didn't hold much of an opinion on them. However, when a staff member from MERL ran a workshop with them - the students were very engaged and really enjoyed the session. The students stated that it was very helpful to have a staff member present to explain the history of objects to them and to direct their learning and engagement.

Real Time also took students from Starting Point & Reading College to The Museum of English Rural Life to explore the collections. The students from Starting Point really enjoyed playing with the interactive sheep game and looking at all the old tractors and cars. However, they found it

disappointing that they couldn't touch any of the objects or sit inside the car or on any of the vehicles. Students from Reading College enjoyed interacting with the big straw horse housed in MERL, as it was artistic and gave them a sense about how rural life in England operated.

What can museums do for young people?

Taking into consideration the opinions that the young people expressed in the previous segment, young people would predominantly like to see more interactive elements in museums. Moreover, they would like to be able to handle more objects at museums instead of just viewing them from a distance. Real Time interviewed Rebecca, who runs handling workshops at Reading Museum with schools. During these workshops, she presents objects to young people, who can interact and handle the artefacts. The students from Reading College really enjoyed handling the objects and found these types of workshops to be very engaging. However, these are often organised workshops and young people cannot engage with objects whilst wandering around the museum without staff supervision. Furthermore, whilst exploring museums young people often feel as though they are being watched, discouraging them from fully interacting with objects. Understandably, not all objects in the museums – such as the pristine Land Rover at the MERL – can be touched. However, museums may benefit from having reconstructions of objects that cannot be handled. This would allow young people to kinaesthetically handle museum artefacts, as opposed to just observing them. Thus, offering young people a variety of ways to engage with artefacts and exhibitions.

The slightly older young people that we interviewed (16+), articulated that they would appreciate more opportunities to get involved with museums. Whether that be through internships, work experience or part-time jobs. Real Time interviewed Matt at Reading Museum, who also voiced that he would like to be able to offer more young people paid opportunities. Unfortunately, due to budget restrictions these are very rarely available. No young people believed that engaging with museums could lead to career progression and personal development. If more volunteering and work opportunities were available, young people may start to see the developmental benefits of engaging with local cultural and heritage institutions.

Furthermore, many young people communicated that they weren't aware of the various exhibitions hosted by both Reading Museum and The Museum of English Rural Life. Many young people were quite surprised to learn about the Reading Football Club exhibition hosted by Reading Museum, as they weren't aware of its existence. Most of the young people interviewed, stated that they would have been interested in attending the football exhibition had they known that it was running.

The students from Reading College and the student from Kendrick Grammar School, all agreed that museums are not doing enough to advertise their institutions. All students agreed that museums could encourage more young people to visit, if they communicated better with schools and young people. Students suggested that museums could send a monthly newsletter to schools about the activities that they are hosting the following month, so that the schools could relay this information back to young people to make them aware of museum activities. Moreover, some students stated that museums may benefit from displaying physical advertisements of their exhibitions around Reading town centre and at bus stops. Many students do not follow local museums on social media, and thus do not engage with their advertisements and posts. However, many young people frequently take public transport

around Reading, and would be exposed to a museum advertisement if it were to appear at a bus stop.

Young people also articulated that every time they have been to a museum through school trips, they only engaged with exhibitions bound to their curriculum – e.g., The Romans. Many young people found this quite boring, and if they were to go to a museum, they'd like to see something a bit different from what they had already been learning about at school. Additionally, many young people expressed that they would like to see more teenage representation in local museums. For example, at the MERL they would love to understand how young people like themselves fit into rural society at the time – as they struggled to relate to the museum as it was all relatively adult-centric. They also stressed that they would like more audio-visual cues, such as hearing the music that people listened to during different time periods. Conclusively, young people would benefit from experiencing immersive environments at museums. For example, The Museum of London has a permanent 'Victorian Walk' exhibition. Visitors to The Museum of London can walk through a reconstruction of a Victorian street in London. During the walk, visitors can gaze into Victorian shop windows and walk-through reconstructed cobbled streets – similar to how the Victorians would have. Both Reading Museum and The Museum of Rural Life could benefit from having more immersive permanent exhibitions, as these types of exhibitions were highly praised and engaging to young people.

One element that the young people Real Time interviewed emphasised, is that Reading Museum doesn't represent the current young person from Reading. Young people expressed that they'd like to see a 'Reading Hall of Fame' or an exhibition that displays local people who have made some sort of difference in Reading, as they often don't see people like themselves reflected in the exhibitions. For example, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery has a large timeline throughout the gallery that documents the history of the city from the Roman period to the current one. In the 'modern history' section of the timeline, the museum has a 'Hall of Fame'. The Hall of Fame contains pictures and artefacts from famous people from Birmingham, such as Ozzy Osbourne. However, it also contains photos and objects from non-famous locals, such as bus drivers, to reflect the wide diversity of the city.

In response to this, museums in the Reading area could curate more local exhibitions and local students could assist the museum in the research and development of said exhibitions. In doing so, young people would learn valuable research skills, and engage with museums and help preserve their local heritage and tell their own stories.

Moreover, the opening hours of museums can make it hard for young people to visit as they close relatively early. Museums could benefit from having one evening a week where their institution is open later than usual. Likewise, the geographical position of MERL poses a challenge when it comes to engaging with young people. MERL is located just outside of Reading town centre and isn't on a popular bus route. Thus, it can be difficult for young people to access the museum without being chaperoned or dropped off by an adult.

Report Conclusion

- School trips are essential in getting children involved in museums
- More communications around exhibits – let schools know

- Exhibitions that are like rooms – that you can walk around, music playing, fully integrate yourself into that experience, see the clothing that was worn.
- Have a youth panel to regularly meet and identify what the needs for young people are
- Work experience and career opportunities
- Museums only seem to be hitting certain types of demographics and not targeting the average state school students – these are the students who often had never been to a museum or were very disengaged with them
- More funding specifically for getting young people engaged with museums
- Active participation with young people, more of a community focus, learning about other cultures and understanding the needs of people around us
- Find out what young people need – how can the museums respond to this – is it work experience?, meeting new people - having a community place
- Communication barriers

A similar report was conducted by National Museums Scotland, where they found that:

‘Groups work best when there is a mixture of personalities, abilities, genders, ethnicities and individual experiences.’

They also found that it was key to involve young people in the planning and development of museum projects. Furthermore, young people responded well to behind-the-scenes visits of museums where they could discuss objects in the store. Understanding how the museum works as an institution.