

MAKING SPACE FOR UNDER 5S

The Great North Museum: Hancock is part of Newcastle University and Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums (TWAM). With galleries featuring natural sciences, ethnography and archaeology collections, the museum is often described as ‘the world under one roof’. Our dedicated early years space the Mouse House is supported by an associated programme of under 5s activities.



SUMMARY

In 2019, we began working with Newcastle’s ‘City of Sanctuary’ (CoS) after they asked if we could offer a bespoke session for refugee and asylum seeking families with children aged five and under. CoS welcome those seeking sanctuary to Newcastle and help them to rebuild their lives. They work to make Newcastle a place of safety and a city which is committed to integrating those seeking sanctuary into the lives of their communities. This is something that fits wholeheartedly with our organisation’s ethos; Newcastle University has been a supporter of City of Sanctuary since 2017 and is working to become a University of Sanctuary, while TWAM is now working towards Museum of Sanctuary status.

All our under 5s activities are free. In the museum we like to facilitate hour long mixed under 5s sessions for up to 30 people, this includes children and their adults. Initially we offered a one hour pilot session, which CoS then told their families about. CoS created a sign-up list to keep track of numbers and then supported families with finding the museum by providing them with directions and also taking contact numbers should anyone get lost. CoS staff joined in with the session too. In the session we explored ‘local wildlife’ in our Natural Northumbria gallery through colouring, crafts, toys, instruments and group songs. It was a great way to learn how best to engage with the group and what to expect from possible future sessions.

Participating families gave positive feedback:

'I did not know museums did things like this for little children and babies. It is amazing, we'll definitely come back.'

'I feel happy to know we can come to the museum and be welcome.'

Following the pilot, CoS asked if we could create a regular session for their group. We decided that working regularly with the group would create an opportunity to engage in a meaningful and sustainable way, which until that point we had not had. Therefore, we decided to create a monthly CoS museum session. We have since run sessions covering a range of themes including Animals, Dinosaurs and Archaeology.

AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

We strive to create a meaningful learning experience for all children who visit the museum, and aim to be welcoming, inclusive and accessible for all. Creating a new session especially for refugee and asylum seeker families allows us to introduce the museum as a supportive environment that can offer engaging learning experiences for families who have not visited us before, and who may have travelled from countries where there is less tradition of family museum visits.

For our audience

Last year we welcomed 470,000 visitors, of whom the largest proportion were families. Many of our visitors first visit the museum as a child, either with their families or part of a school visit. They then return to the museum again when they have their own children. We are proud to be a popular choice for families within the local area. But we started to consider 'what about families who are new to the North East, new to the UK and perhaps have never visited a museum before?' Offering a new session for refugee and asylum seeker families would showcase the museum in a fun and supportive way.

OUTCOMES

For our organisation

It has been lovely to welcome new families to the museum and to see them get excited as they realise it is a place for them; somewhere they are welcome and can enjoy visiting again and again. Participating families have told us that they have visited the museum independently, outside of the CoS sessions taking place, and plan to visit other Newcastle museums in the future. To be part of this has been incredibly rewarding.

The museum has also subsequently:

- Supported City of Sanctuary events with outreach, activities and information.
- Included monthly sessions for asylum seekers and refugees into the Mouse House under 5's programme.
- Been asked by CoS to apply for a 'Museum of Sanctuary' award.

For our audience

During sessions, we have observed the families exploring the galleries and learning together. Families who have taken part in sessions have since visited the museum independently which reassures us that the introduction of the museum as a free, safe, engaging space has been successful. The mix of media in sessions; objects, craft, songs and stories has supported children who were learning to talk alongside parents/carers and siblings who are learning English as an additional language.

Feedback from CoS staff, 2019:

‘The sessions have offered parents with small children the opportunity to engage with some of the brilliant things that the museum has on offer. For most of the people we have been working with it is the first time they have visited a museum. The children have all had a great time with so many different activities on offer and to see this, alongside their parents happiness watching the children explore, learn and play has been really special. This has been a brilliant example of the difference that can be made when organisations are open and creative about making places welcoming for people who are seeking sanctuary.’

LESSONS LEARNT

For our organisation

We learnt a lot from the pilot and it was useful to take time to implement these changes before offering a monthly session. Firstly, we decided to start future sessions in a separate museum space, our Mouse House under 5s area rather than a public gallery, to allow the initial coming together of the group to be easier. For many families they had never been to a museum before and found the building exciting but also big and loud when trying to get their bearings. Also, during planning we needed to consider that the children attending may have encountered traumatic experiences and a reduced access to Special Educational Needs assessment leading to varied socialisation skills.



Secondly, we decided sessions needed to be flexible so that older siblings could join in alongside the under 5s. Many of the families include children who are awaiting school places and so, engaging directly with their needs as well as those of younger children means that the whole family is able to attend and take part. As English was a new language for most participants and sessions were aimed at an under 5s audience, the sessions provided an engaging learning experience for the whole family – the museum became a new space where they could encounter new vocabulary and learn together.

Finally, although other early years sessions rely on participants booking in advance online, this simply would not have worked for the CoS group – since English is often an additional language and many families have reduced access to the internet. The circumstances of refugee and asylum seeking families also means that it can be hard for them to plan ahead. We quickly learnt that the staff member leading the session must be more flexible than usual so as to be able to adapt sessions on the spot depending on the families and children in attendance. For example when introducing the story ‘Dear Zoo’, an older child asked if she could read to the ‘babies’ in the group as she was familiar with the English words. With the support of the session leader she then read the story to the smaller children. The younger children enjoyed the story recognising the animals and joining in with animal noises and actions. Meanwhile, the older child was proud that she had been able to read the story aloud.

FUNDING

The project is funded through core staff costs as an integrated part of the regular programme. This equates to 2.5 hours prep time and 1 hour delivery per session.

TOP TIP

The knowledge and support of City of Sanctuary (CoS) has been invaluable in making the sessions successful. Working with a partner group or charity provides invaluable insight into the needs of refugee and asylum seeking groups and the individuals visiting. It also allows the families to be introduced to the venue and museum staff by an already known and trusted person.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Visit the Great North Museum: Hancock special projects page to learn more about this project:

<https://www.greatnorthmuseum.org.uk/learning/project-case-studies>

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