

Fulham Palace is the historic home of the Bishop of London. Today, the site includes Tudor, Georgian and Victorian buildings situated in 13 acres of grounds, including a produce-growing walled garden. The Palace was the property of the Bishops of London from 704 AD until 1973. It is now run by Fulham Palace Trust. Visitor numbers for 2016-17 were almost 391,000.

SUMMARY

Palace Explorers is a one hour long weekly session for 2-4 year olds and their carers that takes place every Monday and Tuesday. As these sessions already existed, the primary focus over a 12-month period was to improve the quality of provision in order to provide a sharper focus on learning outcomes and more consistently connect the session themes with the Palace site.



To achieve our aims, we increased staffing capacity and employed a part-time Learning Assistant to look after the development and delivery of the programme. The Learning Assistant introduced more family-friendly themes for half terms, such as growing and eating. Our planning considered family adults too and ensured there were opportunities for them to learn, eg sharing facts about Victorian maids from the palace archives. All sessions included a visit to parts of the historic site.

Each week there was a focus on active learning using objectives from the Development Matters framework. We planned activities that we hoped would encourage repeat visits, such as the creation of a personal book of learning which is added to and displayed in the classroom every week. These books include examples of children's work, photographs and quotes. The classroom environment was always arranged in order to encourage families to feel ownership of the space, for instance by displaying the children's learning on the wall.

We also reviewed the booking system and introduced block booking for each term in addition to drop-in spaces. Block bookings supported regular attendance, built familiarity and connection with the site and also ensured a guaranteed income. Whilst drop-in activities allowed opportunities for new visitors to join in on the day.

We were extremely proactive in marketing the sessions. We provided Palace Explorers colouring sheets in the café, placed flyers around the whole site and sent email newsletters and reminders about upcoming sessions.

Finally we arranged a pop-up palace at a Sainsbury's store in the nearby ward of Sands End where 30% of the local community is either from a black or mixed ethnic background.

AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

We aimed to raise attendance numbers and increase retention rates in order to improve awareness of the site. Even within the immediate vicinity, people are often unaware of its existence.

For our audience

Many of our local residents were still not visiting, despite the palace being free and accessible to the public as a heritage site.

‘The palace is not for me’, ‘The bishops are boring’, ‘I’m not religious’.

Comments from residents of Sands End, a diverse area 30 mins walk from Fulham Palace, July 2017.

We wanted our local residents in Hammersmith and Fulham to feel welcome and interested in visiting our venue.

OUTCOMES

For our organisation

As a result of our actions, our numbers rose significantly. In autumn 2016 the average weekly attendance at Palace Explorers was 24 children. By spring 2017 this had risen to 34. The sessions were positively received by families and feedback from sessions included:



‘This is by far the best early years session in the area, the children learn so much.’
Parent attending Palace Explorers, September 2017

Palace Explorers is now a core component of our regular family programming and family engagement numbers have increased across all activities.

For our audience

The children were inspired and actively engaged in the palace’s history. Increased numbers meant that we had to alter the room layout slightly, however staffing levels were not affected and increased resource costs were minimal. Children developed a sense of belonging and ownership and those who attended over a long period of time demonstrated personal progression in learning. A parent told us that they ‘love how welcoming and friendly everyone is. The relaxed flow of the class and both indoor and outdoor activities that allow kids to think and have fun!’

Careful planning resulted in all parts of the palace being visited regularly. However, awareness of Fulham Palace among locals is still low and the attendance at Palace Explorers does not reflect the ethnic make-up of the local community. We had hoped that the one-off pop-up palace in the local Sainsbury’s would encourage more visits from local residents, however it seems to have had no discernible effect on Palace Explorers. These obstacles remain and are still a focus for the palace more broadly.

LESSONS LEARNT

- The adult should be as much a focus for learning as the child - their buy-in is crucial
- Do more research to find out how best to encourage all sections of the public to visit
- Share best practice and visit other settings. It enables educators to discuss, compare and work through possible resolutions to common issues. It is an opportunity to look at challenges through 'fresh eyes'.
- Termly themes help with preparation and save time
- Share clear objectives that are developmentally appropriate and help adults support their children's learning.

'I was able to use the phrases learnt at Palace Explorers to help my daughter when we were in the British Museum.'

Parent attending Palace Explorers, September 2017

- Step out of your usual framework to test out different types of activities, such as a musical session or free play dressing up so that you can learn what works for your audience
- Ask the audience what they would like to know, find out and do and take these on board
- Ask colleagues eg volunteers for feedback
- Evaluate, using different techniques and at different times ie not always at the end of a session or series of sessions.

TOP TIP

Have a very clear learning focus which is connected to the uniqueness of the site and ensures that both children and adults have opportunities to learn.

BUDGET

The figures below are based on September 2016 - August 2017. Palace Explorers runs for 46 weeks in a year.

Monthly income: £460 (tickets are £4 per child, rising to £5 from Sep 2017)

Monthly expenditure: £830 (broken down below)

- Learning Assistant salary - £600 per month, including delivery of one session per week
- Freelance staff - £180 per month for delivery of one session per week
- Resources - £50

FUNDING

Palace Explorers is funded internally from general learning department income. This is generated through school visits, hire events and the Palace Explorers programme itself.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Visit the Fulham Palace website:

fulhampalace.org/learning-school-visits/under-5s/

This case study was written by Jean Shipton, Faciliator at Fulham Palace.

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