

Case Studies

The Sensational Museum

Vol.35 2025



Introduction

Between April 2023 and October 2025, The Sensational Museum project explored what happens when museums embed multi-sensory thinking in their working practices.

The project focused on two areas of museum work: recording information about museum collections and communicating objects' stories to visitors. This disability-led project was based on two important principles. Firstly: provisions put in place to improve accessibility for specific groups benefit all visitors, not just the people who it was originally designed for. Inclusive content works best when it is offered to all visitors. This idea, known as "disability gain", describes how the lived experience of disability can improve how museums work for everyone. Secondly: no one sense should be necessary or sufficient to experience a museum. Given

museums' current reliance on sight to communicate with visitors, the project focused particularly on creating exhibits or experiences that do not rely solely on vision to communicate meaning.

This volume explains what happened when some of the pilot museums tested The Sensational Museum's resources and tools. It also shows how museum practitioners are finding inclusive ways of bringing the non-visual senses into the museum experience for both visitors and workers.

Keswick Museum, Herefordshire Museum and the **Roman Baths** were among the pilot museums who used The Sensational Museum's [Multisensory Interpretation Toolkit](#) to create exhibits that allow all visitors to engage with objects using whichever combination of senses suit them. By working with groups of disabled co-creators, the museums centred the lived experience of disabled people and included sensory elements that everyone

can experience. The emphasis on co-creation also strengthened links with community organisations and built staff confidence. These museums are now embedding what they learnt from The Sensational Museum into the development of their permanent exhibitions.

The lived experience of disabled visitors was also central to **The Fitzwilliam Museum's** Take A Walk in My Shoes project and helped create resources that will make the museum more accessible to all visitors. The use of walking interviews that mapped the multi-sensory richness of the museum experience emphasises the embodied nature of the museum experience whilst also shifting the focus away from sight to acknowledge the value of engaging a range of sense impressions. This was a valuable way for all staff to learn more about the experience of disabled visitors.

The Garden Museum's Community Garden reveals how engaging a range of sense impressions can improve the visitor experience for all visitors.

Whilst both the Garden Museum and **Jo Grace's Sensory Projects** started by using sensory stimulation to engage specific audiences (such as visitors with profound and multiple learning disabilities or people living with dementia), offering these experiences to all visitors as part of a museum's mainstream provision can attract visitors who do not identify themselves with the targeted groups.

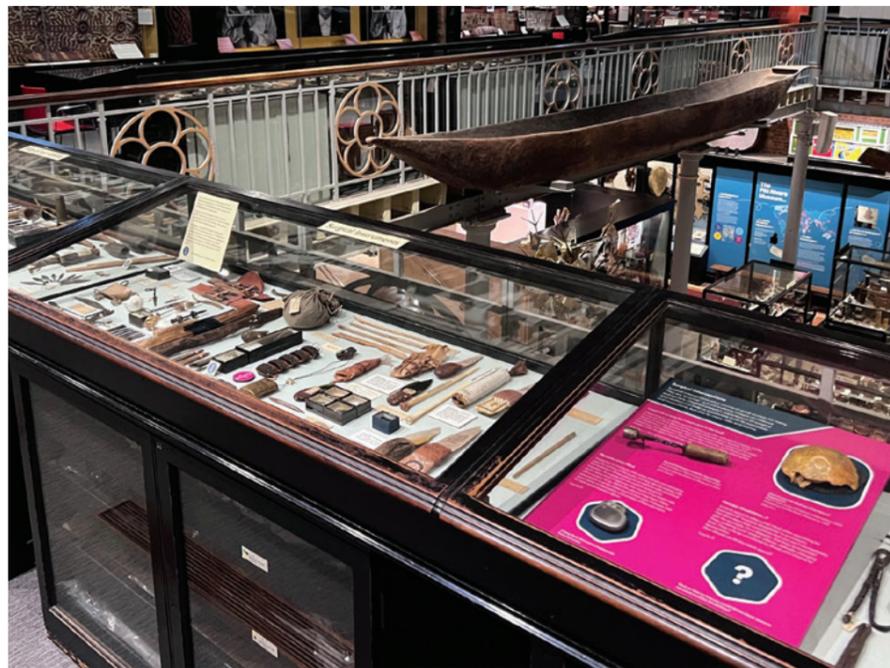
Fulham Palace Trust used The Sensational Museum's [Sensational Thinking resources](#) to support their development of a set of workshops for special schools. Like Jo Grace's work, their approach shows how sense-based activities allows learners with profound and multiple learning disabilities to be included.

Sam Bowen's interview with **The Beaneys** staff **Leanne Macdonald** and **Murray O'Grady** also highlights how embedding multisensory inclusive provision into the museum's work can have substantial wellbeing benefits for both visitors and staff.

Several museums discovered how sensory engagement can support outreach and community engagement. Fulham Palace Trust increased trust and confidence by exploring their sensory entry points during visits to the school. **The Catalyst Centre's** soap workshop project uses smell to engage the local community and make the science of chemistry more meaningful through connections with everyday experiences.

Hasting Museum's development of a Community Trail shows how The Sensational Museum resources can help co-creation groups and museum practitioners work together to think beyond traditional sight-based museum displays. Creating audio descriptive guides and sensory displays is an inclusive and engaging way of making museum content more accessible to all visitors. The Sensational Museum resources helped museum staff learn how to think differently about museum content. The Operation Ouch! Exhibition at the **Science and Industry Museum** in Manchester also used the idea of 'sensory gain' to give visitors several different ways of accessing interactive content, so that hearing and touch were available alongside vision. Like Hastings, they also created an audio descriptive guide for all visitors that draws on the lived experience of blind and partially blind people. **The National Paralympic Heritage Trust** also used the notion of "sensory gain" to add audio description and references to a range of senses to objects in their Global Virtual Museum. NPHT also piloted The Sensational Museum's [Collection Management demonstrator](#) to help make their catalogue entries more multisensory.

“**Kyle Jordan's work at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford exemplifies the productive relationship between Curating for Change and The Sensational Museum. The lessons learned from the co-production groups run at both Oxford and Hastings helped us provide concrete advice to museums in our toolkit.**”



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Importantly, several case studies, including Hastings, Herefordshire and the NPHT used the project to explore previously untold stories and to include content relating to disability. The Curating for Change and Curating Visibility programmes run by Accentuate taught us how to use multisensory access to diversity museum narratives. Kyle Jordan's work at the **Pitt Rivers Museum** in Oxford exemplifies the productive relationship between Curating for Change and The Sensational Museum. The lessons learned from the co-production groups run at both Oxford and Hastings helped us provide concrete advice to museums in our toolkit.

It was crucial that all Sensational Museum events were inclusive and accessible to all participants. The final case study outlines what the team

learned about how to plan and deliver accessible events that truly enable everyone to participate in equitable and meaningful ways.

The Sensational Museum was funded by a standard grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/ X004643/1). We thank the funder and the 4 universities involved in the project (Royal Holloway, University of London, University of Leicester, University of Westminster, University of Lincoln). We would also like to thank all our pilot museums and partners and all the co-creators and freelancers who took part in the project.

Prof Hannah Thompson
Royal Holloway, University of London, Principal Investigator, The Sensational Museum

Far left A dark wood and glass exhibition case crammed with artefacts. The right-hand side of the case houses objects and text on a bright pink background.

Left A diverse group of women stand and sit in a green garden space surrounded by buildings. They are sketching or making notes.

Above Two girls sit smiling in front of a model of a giant human eye. Pulses of green light are reflected in the huge iris.

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The Power of Choice: Embedding Equitable Engagement in Curatorial Work

Summary

As a pilot museum in The Sensational Museum project, the Keswick Museum team worked with a pan-disabled group of co-creators to develop a multisensory installation for our gallery.

Background

Keswick Museum is a small, independent museum. Our audience typically expects a traditional museum experience of engaging with objects visually, alongside written interpretation. In 2023, we took part in the Museum Development Access for All cohort which broadened the team's thinking around accessibility, inspiring us to challenge ourselves further with this project.

Challenge

The main challenge was to create a new way of engaging visitors with our stories, and enabling an equitable learning experience for a variety of people using the principles of Sensory Gain.

Approach

We aimed to address this through running workshops with our co-creators, who each had lived experience of different disabilities and/or neurodivergences.

Intended outcomes

The intended outcomes were for the museum to create relationships with community co-creators and to change our thinking about how we traditionally engage with museum objects and stories, creating a display which allowed everyone to have an equitable learning experience. We were trying to create multiple ways that people could experience a museum display, giving everyone the opportunity learn about the topic in whichever way best suited them.

Intended outputs

This would be achieved by a multisensory installation in one of our galleries, designed by Barker Langham using a brief written by the co-creators and me as the museum's facilitator. The brief would come out of the workshops with the co-creators and reflect their choices for the installation.

Obstacles and issues

Due to delays in the project, we realised that the initial large space we had offered to the co-creators would not be fully available, leading to changes in design. The group advocated for their installation to be accessible to as many people as possible by having multiple elements available with all of them being choice-based, so people's engagement with each was always an active choice. However, the installation now shares space with an audio-heavy exhibition which could be overwhelming to some visitors, making it less accessible.

Actual outcomes

We were lucky to work with a group with a wide range of experiences, an interest in museums, and experience of disability advocacy in other areas of their lives, who engaged thoughtfully and passionately with the project. This led to a huge change in thinking for the museum team, and some of our co-creators have also told us how much they learnt from the experience, which they have taken into other areas of their life. Facilitating our group's advocacy for wide and choice-based access has shown me what is possible and given me confidence to implement new ways of working.

Actual outputs

The final installation is a compromise and not as choice-based as our co-creators intended, due to the issues we faced. It retains the core narrative that the co-creators worked on and the different sensory elements

which visitors can choose whether or not to engage with, so I feel it stays true to what they wanted to achieve. Because the installation shares space with a potentially overwhelming exhibition, we have now begun offering quiet opening times to allow people more choice in how they can access this and other displays. We are also making additional interpretation available based on the feedback we have received since it has been installed.

Lessons learned

The team learnt so much from working with the co-creators on this project. Due to their passionate and informed advocacy which they generously shared with us, we are now more conscious of how we can create different ways into objects so people can choose to engage in ways which are accessible to them and match their preferred learning style.

We also learnt how to compromise between competing projects. Next time we would set expectations better at the start of the project working with co-creators, as the change in size and design did lead to some understandable disappointment.

I learnt from the co-creators' experiences to be confident and ambitious in trying new ways of working, leading to suggesting quiet openings to the operations team.

Next steps

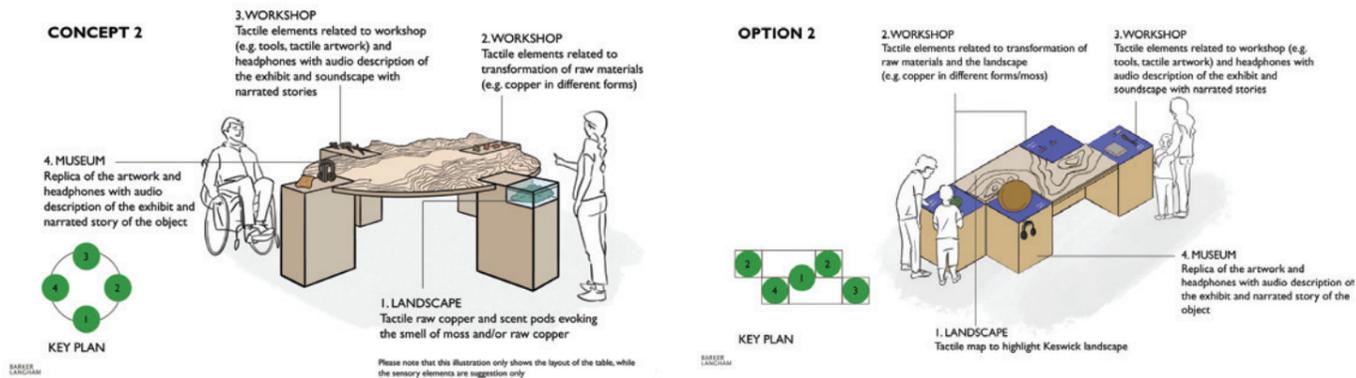
We continued to offer quiet openings throughout this display, and likely after it ends if we find there is interest in visiting the museum during a quiet time.

I am also planning to work with some of our co-creators again in the future on another multisensory project, and will continue to challenge myself and others when designing learning experiences.

“The intended outcomes were for the museum to create relationships with community co-creators and to change our thinking about how we traditionally engage with museum objects and stories, creating a display which allowed everyone to have an equitable learning experience.”

Far left Two artists' impressions show how the 'museum' 'workshop' and 'landscape' elements of the display might look. The sketches show visitors using touch, hearing and sight to explore tools, a large wooden model and finished objects.

Left A photograph of the final installation in the museum. One visitor touches the copper nuggets whilst another bangs a hammer onto a shiny surface. The wooden landscape dominates the display, flanked by a luscious pool of green moss and a beautiful metallic plate.



Find out more
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keswickmuseum.org.uk/blog/2025/sensational-museum
soundcloud.com/thesensationalmuseum/keswick-ad

Sensing Change

Summary

Herefordshire Museums and Galleries partnered with The Sensational Museum project to explore how sensory experiences could enhance not only accessibility and inclusion but also the museum experience for all visitors. Using the History Store as a testbed, a co-production approach was taken, involving local participants with lived experience of disability. Together, they developed a new display called 'Sensing Change' that embedded sensory and accessible design from the outset.

Background

Herefordshire Museums and Galleries is currently undergoing an ambitious redevelopment to transform how the region's history and culture are presented. The redevelopment aims to create modern, accessible and engaging galleries that tell the story of Herefordshire from 400 million years ago to the present. To ensure the museum is truly inclusive, we were inspired by the ideas of The Sensational Museum project, which advocates for the creative use of sensory engagement in museum experiences.

Challenge

Our first challenge was recruiting co-creators. We reached out through local disability organisations, schools like the Royal College for the Blind, and council communication channels. Open days and group visits helped form a committed



“ This project has helped shift our thinking away from traditional, behind-glass displays and toward a more participatory and sensory model of engagement.

and enthusiastic group, many brought a genuine interest in museums and a desire to help improve how they are experienced by all.

Approach

The project used The Sensational Museum toolkit to run workshops encouraging museum staff and co-creators to explore objects through multiple senses. Staff sessions laid the groundwork, while co-creators drew on lived experience to shape themes, sensory elements and accessible interpretation, embedding inclusion from the outset through a fully collaborative process.

Intended outcomes

- Increased accessibility – improved accessibility through multi-sensory design;
- Empowerment through co-production – enable people with lived experience of disability to shape museum practice;
- Enhanced community engagement – build lasting relationships with local disabled, D/deaf, and neurodiverse communities.

Intended outputs

- New exhibition – a sensory-focused exhibition delivered at the History Store;
- Innovative sensory interventions – tactile, auditory and smell-based elements incorporated alongside more traditional visual displays;
- Accessible labelling – labels produced in large print, braille and audio formats such as W-ICAD audio descriptions.

Obstacles and issues

Creating an inclusive, sensory-rich exhibition at the History Store came with challenges. The space is small, with fixed display cases, and also serves as a venue for learning sessions, so any changes had to work within tight spatial constraints and preserve flexibility for educational use. Specialist resources required for sensory interpretation and accessible labelling were not always easy to source or afford. Some co-creator suggestions, such

as 3D-printed replicas of all display items, couldn't be fully realised due to space and budget limitations. Designers Barker Langham also had to balance the museum's existing branding with accessibility needs, carefully considering layout, presentation and colour contrast to ensure an inclusive display.

We had to make careful decisions about what was possible, balancing ambition with feasibility. In the end, we focused on delivering the most meaningful and impactful interventions, staying true to the project's core values while adapting to practical realities.

Actual outcomes

- Improved visitor experience – visitors enjoyed the opportunity to engage multiple senses, which really helped bring the displays to life.
- Co-produced content and design – co-creators helped shape the final exhibition, from themes to object labels.
- Sustained community involvement – relationships built during the project have led to continued engagement and interest from participants.

Actual outputs

- Sensory-inclusive exhibition delivered – an exhibition featuring objects interpreted through sight, sound, touch and smell where no one sense is strictly necessary.
- New sensory interventions installed – features such as touchable replicas, audio interpretation and scent samples were introduced.
- Accessible labels in place – a complete set of labels in braille, large print and audio formats was produced and installed.

Lessons learned

Co-production is essential to inclusive practice, but it requires time and dedicated resources. Recruitment took longer than anticipated, and we found that building trust and creating accessible pathways into the project took more time than expected. In future projects, we will start this

process earlier and provide more time for relationship-building.

We also learned the importance of flexibility and responsiveness. Some of our original ideas had to change in response to practical limitations, but the co-creative process helped us adapt and stay grounded in our shared goals.

Next steps

This project has helped shift our thinking away from traditional, behind-glass displays and toward a more participatory and sensory model of engagement. Co-creators' insights have directly influenced the design of this intervention and will continue to inform the redevelopment of HMAg.

We have now formed a new accessibility co-production group, made up largely of participants from this project. This group will play a key role in guiding our work and helping ensure that the new museum is truly accessible, inclusive and reflective of the communities we serve.

Left A diverse group of co-creators handle various museum artefacts. They are gathered around tables in a museum gallery.

Find out more

<https://sensationalmuseum.org/resources/the-history-store-herford-museum-and-art-gallery-audio-description-and-transcript>

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History lives here – Herefordshire Council:
[herefordshire.gov.uk/history-lives](https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/history-lives)



Sensing the Roman Bathing Routine

Summary

The Roman Baths, a site of immense historical significance, is in the development stage of a transformative project to reinterpret and enhance its displays. This project aims to incorporate multi-sensory interventions to make the museum more accessible and engaging for all visitors. This was the motivation behind our application to participate in The Sensational Museums Project.

Background

The Roman Baths, Bath, is a renowned site featuring a thermal spring, a museum, and a Scheduled Ancient Monument. It is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the city of Bath and holds significant collections contributing to our understanding of Romano-British culture. The museum attracts over a million visitors annually and has been the subject of extensive research and excavations.

The Roman site features a temple dedicated to the goddess Sulis Minerva, as well as one of the most recognised Roman bathing complexes in the world. The cultural centre in the Roman city of Aquae Sulis was a pilgrimage site for many visitors from across the Roman Empire who sought to experience the hot baths filled with sacred water from the thermal spring. For the local population, this vibrant experience would have been unmatched by anything they had encountered before.

In today's context, it can be challenging to convey the diverse sounds, aromas, sights, tastes and physical sensations that the Romans experienced during their visits to the baths or temple. However, if we could recreate as much of this sensory experience as possible, it would greatly enhance our visitors' understanding of Roman social interactions.

Challenge

The museum's displays have not been updated in some time, so they do not reflect the latest research and discoveries. The traditional methods used to display objects have also limited accessibility for many visitors. Furthermore, the museum lacks a temporary exhibition space and faces challenges in incorporating "hands-on" interactive elements due to high visitor traffic and the unique nature of the site.

Approach

The museum is embarking on an ambitious transformation. The Sensational Museum Project aims to test and implement sensory approaches in the current displays, which will support our ambitions to integrate these methods into future developments. This includes exploring the use of smells, which we currently do not do, to create a more immersive experience.

“We are planning further sensory projects that explore the sensory experience of votive offerings from the Sacred Spring and introducing additional multi-sensory interpretation panels around the site.”

Intended outcomes

The project aims to recreate the bathing routine by engaging the senses to explore the sights, smells and sounds experienced by Roman visitors, offering visitors a more comprehensive and inclusive experience.

Intended outputs

- Updated displays that engage visitors and evoke an emotional response;
- Enhanced accessibility for all visitors through tactile, olfactory, audio, and visual interpretations;
- A more engaging and immersive experience that brings the history of the Roman Baths to life.

Obstacles and issues

The project encountered challenges when considering the location of display panels with interactive sensory elements. The layout and flow of the museum are determined by the archaeological monument, resulting in a linear visitor route. Given the high volume of visitors, it was important to consider potential bottlenecks. Additionally, since the monument is a protected site, there are limited options for attaching panels or incorporating displays.

Actual outcomes

The new exhibits were installed in the East Baths, which was chosen as the location because there is more space for visitor flow, and the sensory panels could be attached to the existing railings without affecting the monument. Additionally, the bathing routine can be explored in a distinct area.

Actual outputs

- The new exhibits align with our immersive audio tour, which describes the various rooms and what happened there.
- Tactile panels include a floor plan and image reliefs.
- The rooms identified on the floor plan are made from stone, wood and metal, allowing visitors to feel the different materials used in each space.
- Smells are included to evoke what occurred in each space.
- The new exhibits complement the existing projections, providing a full sensory experience of the bathing routine.

Lessons learned

Throughout the project, testing our ideas in the museum was crucial. Standing in the temple precinct and observing visitors helped the co-creators appreciate some of the challenges of the site. Experimenting with different smells in the space helped determine their suitability and narrative fit.



Above In the foreground, a display panel with a tactile map of a set of rooms, a raised image of burning wood and two scent cannisters. High contrast text and braille is also visible on the display. In the background, the remains of one of the rooms in the Roman Baths; a video projects images of Romans enjoying the bath house.

Find out more

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Seeing the Unseen: Rethinking the Museum Experience

Non-visible
disabilities

Summary

Take a Walk in My Shoes is a research project exploring the multi-sensory experiences of adults with non-visible disabilities at The Fitzwilliam Museum (University of Cambridge), and how these experiences can inform museum practices that support health and wellbeing.

Background

Part of a wider health and wellbeing research programme at the Museum, *Take a Walk in My Shoes* uses sensory ethnography and walking interviews to explore what it feels like to be 'in' the Museum. Launched in March 2024, the project entered phase 3 in September 2025.

Challenge

20% of the global population lives with a disability, 80% of which are non-visible. People with non-visible disabilities face significant barriers, including twice the unemployment rate of people with visible disabilities. Museums, as civic spaces for learning and community dialogue, must broaden their approach to accessibility beyond physical access. In a city like Cambridge – ranked the most unequal in the UK – addressing health inequalities and access to cultural spaces is urgent.

Approach

Five transitional spaces were studied through observations, sketches and photographs. Walking interviews enabled participants to reflect

on sensory experience, e.g. light, sound, smell etc, while actively moving through the space. To reduce participation barriers, focus groups and a co-created online questionnaire were introduced.

Intended outcomes

The project aimed to inform inclusive practice and support the Museum's strategic goals around health and wellbeing.

Intended outputs

- Sensory ethnography observations;
- 10–16 walking interviews;
- Questionnaire for circulation to the wider community;
- Blog post, academic publication and knowledge sharing session(s) with University of Cambridge Museums.

Obstacles and issues

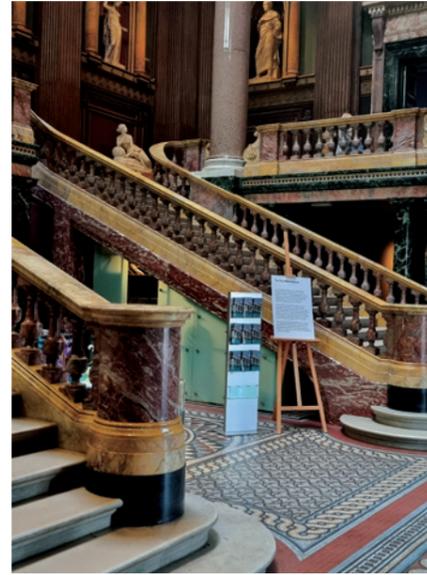
The research initially aimed to conduct 16 walking interviews with adults living with non-visible disabilities. Unfortunately, five participants withdrew due to health-related concerns, highlighting the very barriers the project aimed to explore and reinforcing the need for flexible, accessible research methods.

One walking interview was affected by a technical failure with the audio recording. However, with the participant's agreement, we re-visited the interview a few weeks later. The second interaction offered deeper reflection and strengthened shared insight into the multi-sensorial experience, highlighting the value of relational, trust-based research.

A key limitation was the researcher's fixed-term contract, which constrained long-term planning and continuity.



© Lewis Ronald



“ Museums, as civic spaces for learning and community dialogue, must broaden their approach to accessibility beyond physical access.

This impacted the ability to build sustained relationships and embed institutional change over time.

Despite these challenges, the project adapted effectively and has achieved some meaningful outcomes that continue to inform and improve visitor experience and sector practice.

Actual outcomes

Insights from the research have started to shape how the Museum understands and supports visitors with non-visible disabilities.

Findings have contributed to updates on the Museum's accessibility webpage and are informing more inclusive design thinking across physical and digital spaces. Postcards, including 'top tips for first time visitors', are available, enhancing public engagement with the research.

Workshops and staff training sessions have shared research findings, raising awareness of how living with non-visible disabilities can impact people's museum experience. These sessions have sparked wider institutional conversations around inclusion, participation and wellbeing.

Actual outputs

- Five sensory ethnography observations;
- 11 walking interviews (staff and community);
- Two community focus groups, three co-researcher discussions;
- Co-produced online questionnaire (14 responses);
- Reflective and postcard blog series;
- Concertina postcard books for visitors and training;
- Accessibility webpage updates.

This research continues to influence inclusive, sensory-aware museum practice both locally and across the wider sector.

Lessons learned

Building trust and meaningful relationships with participants takes time. Longer-term funding is essential – not only to support the continuity of research, but to demonstrate sustained commitment to participants and to inclusive practice.

It is critical to consider the specific needs of participants and make reasonable accommodations to enable full participation. This may include providing British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters, offering alternative formats for communication, and allowing participants to engage in ways that suit their individual access needs.

Not all participants will want to take part in every aspect of a participatory research project. However, offering a range of engagement opportunities gives individuals agency and flexibility, creating a more inclusive and empowering research process.

Walking interviews proved particularly effective, offering an informal, embodied, and multi-sensory method of understanding experiences.

Creative outputs, such as blogs and postcards, offered additional ways to share findings and engage a wider range of audiences, from museum staff to visitors and sector professionals.

Next steps

Following a short extension to the researcher's contract, co-researchers are planning the next phase of the research. Further outputs will include academic publications and practice-based resources to inform sector-wide approaches to inclusive, sensory-aware museum experiences.

Bottom left Oil paintings in gilded frames hang on a dark green museum wall. In front of them is a glass case containing sculptures. A visitor in a black and white checked coat stands facing the paintings.

Left A grand double staircase with visitor information signs at its base.

Find out more

Contact: erb71@cam.ac.uk

About the project: fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/take-a-walk-in-my-shoes

Reflective Research Blog: medium.com/@erb71

Postcard Blog Series:

- **Reflections to Myself:** ccc.cam.ac.uk/blog/take-a-walk-in-my-shoes-reflections-to-myself
- **Reflections on space:** ccc.cam.ac.uk/blog/take-a-walk-in-my-shoes-reflections-on-space
- **Reflections on the senses:** ccc.cam.ac.uk/blog/take-a-walk-in-my-shoes-reflections-on-the-senses
- **Top tips for first time visitors:** ccc.cam.ac.uk/blog/take-a-walk-in-my-shoes-top-tips-for-first-time-visitors

The Community Garden



Summary

The Community Garden is an inclusive, multisensory garden developed by the Garden Museum in Old Paradise Gardens, Lambeth which supports wellbeing, education and creativity. The space was designed in collaboration with Dan Pearson Studios and has opened new opportunities for sensory engagement – through touch, smell, taste, sight and sound – to create meaningful experiences across the Garden Museum’s programmes.

Background

Located in Old Paradise Gardens, around the corner from the museum, the Community Garden is wheelchair accessible, includes native, medicinal and wildlife-friendly planting, a hand-woven hazel fence, food-growing areas, a bug hotel, dye beds and a wormery. The Community Garden was created in 2023 and has now had a full programme running in it for over a year where it has become a valuable resource for staff to integrate hands-on activities with nature into the Garden Museum’s programme.

“The Community Garden allows for the sensory rich experience of gardening to inspire the approach of how the space is used with a variety of audiences.”

The project aligns with The Sensational Museum’s vision of Sensory Gain, moving beyond traditional accessibility to embed sensory-rich experiences that benefit all. It is a living space for experimentation, education and empowerment – used by families, schools, carers, community groups, the cafe, volunteers and locals.

Challenge

How might the Community Garden be integrated across multiple museum programmes?

Approach

The Community Garden allows for the sensory rich experience of gardening to inspire the approach of how the space is used with a variety of audiences.

Intended outcomes

To promote sensory enrichment, community connection and engagement with the outdoor space.

Intended outputs

Workshops, educational sessions and an accessible sensory outdoor environment where people feel welcome.

Obstacles and issues

As an outdoor space in a public park, programming was impacted by seasonal changes and weather, requiring earlier programme timings in winter and backup plans for rain. The location and space constraints prompted material transportation across the road and a need for more seating. The drop-in nature of sessions also meant attendee numbers varied, impacting planning.

Actual outcomes

In addition to the outcomes of sensory enrichment, community connection, and outdoor engagement, the project fostered intergenerational learning, improved confidence in outdoor spaces and memory recall.

Actual outputs

Clay for Dementia: Participants stimulate memory and the senses by rolling herbs like sage and rosemary into clay. The project encourages tactile engagement and will be shared through a legacy project and publication.

Families:

Families explore the garden through herb picking, clay, bug hunts and leaf printmaking activating touch, smell and sight.

SEND, Neurodiverse, and Mental Health Groups:

These groups engage in calming sensory activities like making hand creams and scented products with herbs to support wellbeing.

Schools:

Students learn through hands-on sessions like worm handling, exploring scented plants, and interacting with the bug hotel.



Food Learning:

In cooking classes, attendees roll pastry, harvest herbs and cook with garden-grown produce. Through the “Sew, Grow, Eat” programme, teens garden from seed to plate, building skills and confidence.

Branch Out Workshops:

Free public workshops include hazel fence weaving, planting, and a botanical ink and poetry evening inspired by dye beds.

Paths to Paradise:

Led by Sisterhood Supperclub Collective, these Saturday drop-in sessions support healing through writing, meditative drawing, herbal treat making and mending.

Community Gardening Club and Volunteers:

Weekly sessions allow locals and volunteers to grow plants and to learn how to tend the space.

Café:

Cut flowers are used for café tables, bringing seasonal colour and scent into the museum, alongside herbs used in cooking.

Lessons learned

- Outdoor sensory spaces require flexibility due to environmental factors like seasonal changes and weather. Activities were adapted to natural cycles and light levels, with contingency plans for indoor options.
- The garden’s location across the road posed logistical challenges in transporting materials and making people aware of the space. Extra prep time and wayfinding helped address this.

- Adding seating allowed visitors to stay longer, and station-based activities improved flow when space was limited.
- The drop-in format in a public space encouraged openness but also led to varied attendance and planning challenges.
- Sensory activities like working with clay, herbs and food created memorable, emotionally resonant experiences.
- The initial name “Healing Garden” led some visitors to believe it was only for healing, so “Community Garden” is now being trialled to make everyone feel welcome.
- Multiple activities ran simultaneously in the garden during our Neighbours Day festival. This activation drew in local residents who hadn’t encountered the space before.

Next steps

A pond is being planned to increase wildlife and enable aquatic nature activities.

Plans include further integrating the garden into programming and raising awareness that it’s part of the Garden Museum and open to all.

Left Three figures take cuttings from plants in an urban garden.

Above In a garden, a table is spread with paints, coloured pens, water pots, brushes, books and paper of various sizes and colours.

Find out more

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Creating a Sensory Invitation



Summary

Over the last two decades, The Sensory Projects has worked with a variety of heritage settings to create “sensory invitations” for people with profound and multiple learning disabilities, and other populations who benefit from sensory access to a space.

Background

The Sensory Projects works to share the knowledge and creativity required to use inexpensive items as effective sensory tools for inclusion. This work moves beyond the five conscious senses into subconscious senses. Some of the people invited live their whole lives in the early stages of sensory development whilst others live through degenerative conditions that take their sensory capacities from them in the order in which they were gained. The most inclusive invitations are often rich in early development sensory offerings.

Challenge

Settings are often at a loss to know how to include people without intellectual capacity. How can a museum share stories with people whose disabilities are such that they do not have access to standardised forms of communication and cannot access sign language, easy read, symbol or pictorial communication.

Approach

By creating sensory invitations in the form of sensory stories or curated sensory moments, settings can offer an opportunity for visitors with

complex disabilities to engage in the experiences and narratives. A sensory invitation can include everyone, enriching the experience of visiting a setting for everyone.

Intended outcomes

I hope that people with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities will gain access and get to take part in the kinds of activities many culturally engaged families take for granted.

Intended outputs

My aim is to work with settings to create a sensory offer that works for their site. These include sensory stories, tours, trails and experiences.

Obstacles and issues

People with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities are often marginalised or misunderstood by the museum and heritage sectors because settings do not know how to recognise capacity in ways other than cognitive skills. When engaged via the senses, people with profound and multiple learning disabilities may display an emotional maturity linked to their age and be able to learn in embodied ways.

Many museum and heritage settings do not yet have the practical facilities to welcome People with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities: disabled toilets are only accessible to people who can shift themselves from chair to toilet. Within the UK over 250,000 people need Changing Places toilets. There is little point

in creating inclusive content if consideration isn't given to the most basic of practical needs.

Actual outcomes

At Kensington Palace, a member of staff exploring Sensory Story Telling with me commented that the sensory story created would enable access to the palace for her autistic child who would have struggled with sensory barriers to access. The unfamiliarity of the sensory environment within the palace would have caused them anxiety but by being able to meet the sensations ahead of the visit, at home in a place where they felt safe, they could prepare for the visit in a way that could give them access to an otherwise overwhelming experience.

At Hampton Court Palace, the sensory tour we created of the King's State Apartments was used with people with dementia and people experiencing mental illness as well as people with learning disabilities.

At London Transport Museum, creating the sensory tour involved “sensory screening”, in that we chose places where people could focus on a particular sensation without being overwhelmed by the multitude of sensations on offer. Staff involved in creating this tour commented that many of the mainstream school groups they show around struggle with the amount of sensation on offer and that this sort of curated route could be useful to all of their school groups.



At Heligan Gardens, staff told me that families of children of all ages and abilities had enjoyed the sensory adventure of the honeybee trail we laid out through the gardens.

At King Edward Mine, the sensory story was accessed by families of children with disabilities, who commented that it was good to have something they could bring all their children to: not one offering for the disabled child and another for their sibling.

And the Blue Water Sensory Access Story created in conjunction with Exeter University led beyond our initial ambitions of creating access for those who face sensory barriers to kayaking and providing a kayaking-like experience for those whose medical care needs mean that actual kayaking is not an option. As a result of that story, many people were supported by inclusive watersports centres in Plymouth and on the Lizard to go kayaking and the story itself has been downloaded and used around the world to take people sensory kayaking.

Actual outputs

Sensory Moments

A Sensory Moment uses the sights, smells, tastes, touches and sounds that are significant to your setting and the stories told within it. Once you have a few key sensory offers in mind think about how you could present these. Think about the background to that experience. Is the sensory presentation free of distractions and other sense impressions? Considering the quality of the sensory experience itself is also key.

Is the object sensorially interesting? By thinking in a sensory way, we can curate sensory moments that offer points of connection to people across the barriers presented by disability.

Sensory Stories

Sensory stories are concise texts – usually around 8-10 sentences long – in which each sentence is partnered with rich and relevant sensory information targeting a single sensory system. The story should offer stimulation to multiple sensory systems. The richness of the sensation is defined by how interesting it is to the sensory system without recourse to intellectual understanding, and its relevance is defined by how related it is to the part of the story it represents.

In a perfect sensory story, the sensory experiences would convey the meaning of the words as much, if not more, than the words themselves. For example, the sensory story about how stars are formed in stellar nurseries begins with the words: “Before a star is born it is a huge cloud of hydrogen gas.” The sensory experience illustrating this sentence is a great handful of confetti thrown aloft, filling a person's visual field with fluttering colours; the effect is akin to a firework going off. For a sighted person, this is a rich sensory experience. It is also relevant to the story as the dispersal of the particles in the confetti cloud mirrors the dispersal of the particles of the hydrogen cloud. The meaning is evident at the point of perception, rather than being an abstract reference to something far away. Narratives which convey information in words and sensation as equals offer an engaging invitation to everyone.

Lessons learned

Allow Processing Time

Time is critical in order to make the most of a sensory invitation: taking the time to feel, touch, smell and look can be hugely beneficial. A sensory invitation should never be rushed. Take account of people who have significantly different processing speeds and allow the invitation to take the time it takes.

Declutter the Sensory Environment

The uninterrupted nature of processing time is critical to the ability of many people with profound and multiple learning disabilities to engage, as well as to neurodivergent people who may process sensory information differently and to people with later stage dementia who can experience confused sensory landscapes. Simple props like a swathe of matt black fabric that can be used to create a plain visual backdrop, or pillows or padded display boards that can take out some of the auditory clutter from a space can be valuable tools for creating access.

Hold your tongue

Words are important to people who use words, but to people who do not, experiencing a stream of words can be overwhelming. Words can inadvertently clutter up an auditory backdrop or distract people.

Next steps

The Sensory Projects continues to work with varied heritage settings to create sensory invitations. We also deliver training.

Above In a classroom a group watches as confetti fills the air. Jo smiles as she holds her confetti canon.

Find out more

A course on sensory accessibility [youtube.com/@TheSensoryProjects](https://www.youtube.com/@TheSensoryProjects)

Creating Sensory Accessibility: [youtube.com/playlist?list=PLi1RQR58BHnVk21ObnODf_sFLB84LgE8DZ&si=Hz8yfeDBknYJdR2m](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLi1RQR58BHnVk21ObnODf_sFLB84LgE8DZ&si=Hz8yfeDBknYJdR2m)

Sensory kayaking and other free resources: [TheSensoryProjects.co.uk/resources/free-educational-resources](https://www.TheSensoryProjects.co.uk/resources/free-educational-resources)

[TheSensoryProjects.co.uk/contact](https://www.TheSensoryProjects.co.uk/contact)



Beyond Sight:

Sensory Learning in the Walled Garden at Fulham Palace Trust

Summary

Funded by John Lyon's Charity, our project reimagined Fulham Palace Trust's engagement with special schools, responding to a need for bespoke, sensory engagement. Partnering with a special school, we developed and piloted workshops grounded in the concept of Sensory Gain.

Background

Fulham Palace Trust is a historic house and garden by the river Thames. Recently we have been prioritising outdoor learning and after launching our school membership scheme, we were keen to form partnerships with local schools. Jack Tizard School, who work with learners who have severe learning disabilities (SLD) and profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD), was one of our first members.

Challenge

Our current school sessions rely on visual prompts and are difficult to adapt for SEND groups. The absence of a dedicated workshop for special schools meant that they simply did not visit.

Approach

Centring the school's needs, we made repeat visits to their site and hosted teachers at the Palace. With their guidance, we prioritised learning in our green space, which they do not have at their site. We developed a storytelling hook with multiple



sensory entry points, allowing the workshop to be adaptable for different learners. We prioritised interoception and proprioception as well as the classic senses.

Intended outcomes

- Deepen our relationship with a local special school;
- Give learners an enriching sensory experience in a new environment;
- Produce a replicable example of inclusive practice.

Intended outputs

- Strengthened partnership with a local special school;
- A series of outreach workshops;
- An adaptable, on-site workshop for learners with SLD and PMLD.

Obstacles and issues

Co-creating with our partner school necessitated flexibility with our schedule and deadlines. The workshop had to align with their developmental outcomes rather than traditional learning objectives and



“ We developed a storytelling hook with multiple sensory entry points, allowing the workshop to be adaptable for different learners.

we had to ensure there were enough entry points for all learners to access. We struggled to find educational resources that were both sustainable and reliable. Delivering outside, we faced changeable weather and the noise pollution levels were high. We also had to find alternative ways of capturing impact from non-verbal participants.

Actual outcomes

Working with our partner school over the academic year allowed us to form a much closer relationship with them, making multiple visits to the school and vice versa. During the pilot sessions, we witnessed moments of curiosity, joy and independence. The learners who took part in the outreach workshops engaged with sensory activities they might typically avoid. As we were planting seeds with a learner in the classroom, one teacher exclaimed, 'she never gets her hands dirty!' Learners who visited the site felt safe exploring our garden using sensory activities as an entry point.

For example, one learner chased bubbles through our orchard, and another happily splashed around in our water zone next to the pond.

Actual outputs

After piloting the workshop as outreach as well as on-site, we now have a model for different types of engagement with special schools. We hope that being able to offer outreach activities will give special schools the confidence to then book an on-site visit.

Lessons learned

- Early collaboration with the school was important, letting their needs lead the planning and the development.
- Sourcing resources from reputable education suppliers was essential.
- Flexibility was crucial due to school availability, sickness and weather.
- Being in a new space and doing new things was overwhelming for some learners. Introducing activities as outreach first could reduce this unfamiliarity.
- Keeping language minimal and story based was more effective than descriptive explanation.
- Offering multiple entry points meant learners could engage on their own terms and at their own pace.
- Observing behaviours, not verbal feedback, was key to recording impact.

- Using the Sensational Thinking toolkit helped us to develop the language and confidence to move beyond visual first workshop planning. It helped to validate our instinct to focus on interoception and proprioception.

Next steps

- Finalise and refine the workshop before offering it as part of our core programme.
- Deliver freelance facilitator training.
- Deliver targeted marketing to special schools as well as schools with specialist resource provision.

Left A figure wearing a backpack runs across a lawn in a walled garden. They hold a yellow butterfly net up in the air and a translucent ball flies high above them.

Top left A pair of gardening gloves lie on a table next to several small pots of soil. The pots have wooden stick labels in them.

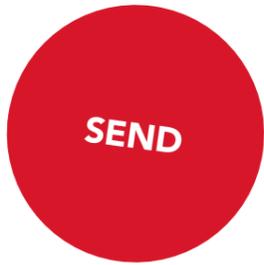
Above A figure in a wheelchair explores long coloured strips of net-like fabric.

Find out more

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Alex Rankin:
alex.rankin@fulhampalace.org

Sensational Thinking Toolkit:
sensationalmuseum.org/tools/
sensational-thinking
fulhampalace.org



Embedding Sensory Engagement at The Beaneys

Sam Bowen (SB)—Hi Leanne and Murray, great to catch up with you both to chat about how you're using sensory engagement at The Beaneys. What are the collection themes and atmosphere in the museum?

Murray O'Grady (MO)—The Beaneys holds an eclectic collection ranging from archaeological finds from Canterbury and Kent to artefacts collected from ancient Greece, Egypt and around the world. We have a colourful natural history collection and the most important pieces of Canterbury's art collection too. The museum is also home to the Smallfilms Gallery where Bagpuss and The Clangers live!

Leanne Macdonald (LM)—The atmosphere of the museum is friendly, engaging and inclusive, we try to foster a sense of belonging. Recent evaluation from our health and wellbeing work indicates that visitors feel comfortable and safe in the galleries.



Can you give some examples of how The Beaneys works with communities in a particularly sensory way?

LM—The Beaneys works closely with community partners via our Be Connected Network, made up of organisations linked to those with protected characteristics. One of the members, Ethnic Minorities in Canterbury, are working with us to develop a new handling tray themed around tactiles and techniques linked to the ethnographic collection. The group chose objects like the smooth seeds used in a game of 'Oware' through to the soft bristles of a fly whisk (chowrie). This forms part of the museum's exploration in the wider impact of presenting objects with a sensory engagement approach.

Where appropriate, we use the [Creative Health Quality Framework](#) to ensure we consider planning to good practice. We have also tested the refreshed Generic Learning Outcomes with GEM and it's been a useful reminder to plan for a variety of sensory experiences within The Beaneys's practice. For example, 'Sensing Culture' is an artist-led creative group for adults with sight loss conditions at The Beaneys. The long-term working partnership with the group over many years has allowed us to push for innovative practice, most recently recording creative audio descriptions with the group for 'Lives in Motion' a touring exhibition of artwork from the National Portrait Gallery.



What positive impacts have you noticed on other visitors, either support companions in these community groups or other visitors who may be observing the activity from outside of the group?

MO—Visitor feedback shows the SEND Family Backpacks make a real impact. One family told us that the backpacks made the family regular visitors, "this is now my severely autistic son's favourite place to visit".

It's interesting how often visitors respond to the accessible resources when they are not directly using them, like there's a positive knock-on effect to other people, observing they're in a space and sharing in an experience that's inclusive.

LM—We've seen positive responses to activity occurring in the galleries



too, 'Sounds Beaneys' is a monthly singing group to support people living with dementia and their companions (and more widely for people to live well through musical activities), led by a therapeutic musician. We regularly speak to members of the public who pass through the galleries, hearing the music and being visibly moved about how beautiful and inclusive the sessions are. Many of these visitors tell us of their own lived experience of supporting friends and family members with dementia and how the mix of the activity in the gallery space is very powerful.

Has there been an uplift in staff wellbeing since welcoming different needs groups and working in a more sensory based approach?

LM—Staff report that having the right tools to support visitors boosted their confidence. We consulted with staff

for accessible visitor engagement ideas and over 20 suggestions were put forward!

And finally, The Sensational Museum sets the challenge: how can museums create inclusive interventions (interventions accessible to everyone) without having to spend time and money on also creating 'accessible' programming for minority audiences. What are your suggestions?

MO—Embed accessibility into the team's practice and consider inclusivity at an early stage of every project. This can help inclusive interventions feel like a cohesive part of the museum experience rather than something separate. If you do this from the start, then it's also more cost effective.

LM—The Beaneys also really values the voice of those with lived experience,

being able to consider the needs of a variety of stakeholders, however, this takes time, building trust and relationships with local individuals and communities, listening to key priorities.

Far left Leanne gestures animatedly to the camera.

Left Sam and Lucy smile at the camera.

Above Murray explores a tactile board with a small child.

Find out more

canterburymuseums.co.uk/the-beaneys/accessibility/send-at-the-beaneys

Creative Health Quality Framework:
www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/resources/creative-health-quality-framework

Smelly Science

Community



Summary

Catalyst Science Discovery Centre and Museum utilised our heritage to work collaboratively with both the community and Unilever in Port Sunlight, with the aim of refreshing an audience workshop favourite – making soap.

Background

Catalyst is the only science centre in the UK dedicated to chemistry. We tell the story of the birth of the chemical industry, an area infamously known for its unpleasant smells. Our audiences engage with smells in a variety of ways.

Our building started its journey as Gossages Soap Factory, and visitors are invited to create soap as part of our school, public and sleepover education programmes. Our vision at Catalyst is to give our audience the opportunity to “step” into the role of scientists, chemists and engineers, to foster learning beyond the traditional museum. Our Soap workshop enables its participants to enact the same craft, drawing on an acknowledgement of our local history. Participants personalise their soap with colour and fragrance before being able to take their finished product home.

Challenge

Our soap-making workshop has been a staple, continuous offer for over 30 years. Over this period, it has undergone branding changes but physical elements, such as the colours and fragrances, have remained. Recent observations from staff revealed a lack of attachment to the existing smells – one never appeared as popular – and the smells were unrecognisable.

Approach

Currently, we draw parallels with the past versus the present in our workshop by allowing participants to touch and smell a bar of Gossages Soap, which is fragrance free, and comparing it to modern variations that are more fragrant.

Unilever in Port Sunlight, who specialise in personal care products, are a local and modern equivalent of our historic trade. At their recommendation, we purchased several products belonging to their portfolio (e.g. Lynx, Radox, Tresemme) and we simply had to inform them of which ones appealed to us the most. Given the workshop’s prominence in what we do, it was important for us to seek the opinions of our community. Therefore, we created an activity that invited participants to smell and vote for their preference, with the understanding that the top two would be utilised in future versions of the workshop. This was conducted at Widnes Market, facilitated by two of our volunteers. Products were



displayed so that the community could participate nose-blind, to remove any potential bias towards products that may have been personal favourites.

Intended outcomes

The primary aim of the project was to revise and refresh our current fragrance offer, incorporating audience feedback and allowing this to shape our decisions. It was the desire of staff to use something recognisable and enjoyable, both now and in the future, particularly with younger audiences.

Intended outputs

- Refreshed smells and content – more appealing to audiences;
- Bolster community collaboration and improve social impact;
- A developed relationship with Unilever, a local industry with a similar background to our own heritage.

Obstacles and issues

Having spent only one day at Widnes Market, our collaborative audience was small and of a limited demographic.

A review post-task observed that with more staff availability, and a greater reach, this could have developed into a significant community project that, in turn, could have resulted in higher footfall and engagement with our museum.

Actual outcomes

Feedback from visitors and staff has been overwhelmingly positive. Both fragrances are used in equal measure, whilst teachers and young people have displayed recognition during the activity, noting how they know the smell to be something that they “might have at home”.

Actual outputs

This project gave staff the opportunity to engage with local audiences and engage for a second time with Widnes Market. Staff were able to build new connections with current staff at Unilever.

Lessons learned

Staff felt that we could have incorporated more of our workshop audience into the project. This would have allowed us to target schools and a variety of age groups, and factor in a wider opinion.

Next steps

Looking to the future, we are hoping to build on and continue our relationship with Unilever, as a sponsor of our materials.

Following a successful application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund, we will redevelop our traditional gallery spaces to represent our smelly, soapy heritage in a multi-sensory way. This will include telling the story of the chemical industry and our soap factory through textures, colours, audio, visual and olfactory elements. This action will also look to develop additional heritage activities surrounding our past.

Left Museum staff stand holding large white buckets in front of museum exhibits

Above Staff stand behind a table decorated with the Catalyst logo. They have various soap samples in front of them.

“Currently, we draw parallels with the past versus the present in our workshop by allowing participants to touch and smell a bar of Gossages Soap, which is fragrance free, and comparing it to modern variations that are more fragrant.”

Find out more

For further information, please contact:

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www.catalyst.org.uk

Disability Audio-described Trail

Summary

Thanks to Arts Council's National Portfolio funding supporting the museums programming and cultural activities, Hastings Museum and Art Gallery has been working annually with a local disability community group, In-Sight. Established in 2021 as part of the Curating for Change project, the group aims to improve representation and inclusivity within the museum. This year, in partnership with The Sensational Museum, they reimagined the museum's displays by creating a sensory-focused audio descriptive trail.

Background

Following the Curating for Change exhibition, *Stored Out of Sight*, in 2021, the group and museum recognised the importance of continuing the conversation on underrepresentation and inclusion. We decided that these messages should not be confined to a temporary exhibition but instead be reimagined in an accessible way and woven into the museum's permanent displays.

Challenge

The main challenge of this project was that every aspect was new to both the group and the museum curator, who had never created an audio guide or reimagined displays with sensory elements like scent and touch. The project required effective communication and technical expertise, which proved particularly challenging due to the museum being

thinly staffed and the increase in external costs during the year.

The lack of historical information regarding disability history, particularly in our collection database, also presented a challenge. Although the team was knowledgeable in researching this hidden history, it required additional time to gather information and ultimately extending the project.

Approach

Our objective was to embed a sensory-focused approach into museum displays. I structured my approach around two key aspects – audio descriptive guides and sensory displays. I consulted with industry professionals to understand the distinctions between standard audio guides and descriptive ones. Through these discussions, I learned that effective descriptions should focus on how an object feels, smells and evokes emotion, ensuring a more immersive experience.

As a group, to better understand the practicalities of both audio guides and physical elements, we visited Battle Abbey. This experience highlighted the importance of making the guides engaging and user-friendly, ensuring they provide clear instructions and are easy to navigate.

The Sensational Museum's workshops offered valuable support and tools for understanding Sensory Gain, encouraging the reimagining of objects beyond their mere

appearance. Additionally, the workshops connected our project with experts who assisted in transforming the sensory display, incorporating elements such as scent to enhance the trail.

Intended outcomes

The intended outcomes of this project were to:

- Integrate disability history throughout the museum's exhibits;
- Increase awareness of disabled individuals' role in history;
- Develop an accessible trail for engaging with disability history;
- Create an enjoyable and inclusive experience for participants;
- Ensure group members felt welcomed and supported.



“ We integrated disability awareness into existing displays, offering both audio and written labels, along with tactile guidance and audio to locate each display.

Obstacles and issues

The project had three main structures:

- Object research;
- Script writing;
- Recording.

These steps required a lot of time and energy. Some additionally found certain tasks more challenging, which often extended the project timeline and necessitated adjustments to the delivery.

Actual outcomes

Through co-production sessions, the group researched, wrote and recorded 11 disability-related objects. These were displayed in galleries, offering insight into figures like John Logie Baird and historical periods like the Stone Age. The group worked with a scent specialist to design three scents for the trail, reimagining history with smells such as laudanum

for Lizzie Siddal, dinosaurs for Philip James Rufford, and posset for ceramic posset pot. We integrated disability awareness into existing displays, offering both audio and written labels, along with tactile guidance and audio to locate each display. The trail encourages alternative engagement methods, helping visitors understand disability history in new ways. The group members felt supported and particularly enjoyed working with scents in a museum setting.

Actual outputs

The trail has been a highly successful addition to the museum, with visitors of all ages regularly engaging with the displays. The scented plinths have proven especially popular across all age groups. However, the audio guides have seen only limited use, likely due to the current requirement to request them from behind the reception desk. We plan to revise this in the coming year to improve accessibility and uptake.

Lessons learned

We learned that effective time management and communication are essential for large-scale projects, particularly within small museums. Throughout the course of the project, I gained a deeper understanding of the group's needs and preferences, highlighting the necessity for flexibility in project design. For instance, we adapted by recording individuals who preferred not to write, transcribing their texts, and collaborating to

produce a script, which ultimately became the label for the object. While this process was more time-intensive, it produced recordings that were more engaging and impactful.

Next steps

The museum's partnership with In-Sight continues, supported by our NPO funding, which will allow us to collaborate on yearly projects that promote awareness and inclusivity. Future initiatives, as discussed as a group, will focus on highlighting members as individuals, rather than solely emphasising their lived experiences as disabled people. We hope this will challenge stereotypes and offer alternative ways for people to engage with disability and inclusion.

Left A hand explores an intricately painted ceramic jug.

Top left A visitor in a museum gallery smiles whilst wearing headphones and holding an audio player.

Top centre A museum display entitled 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Lizzie Siddal' includes text, an image and a tactile perfume bottle.

Above A visitor explores a museum display whilst wearing headphones.

Find out more

Jack.guy@hastings.gov.uk

Hastings Museum and Art Gallery
www.hmag.org.uk

Disability Audio Tour
hmag.org.uk/event/disability-audio-tour



You are Sense-sational!

Summary

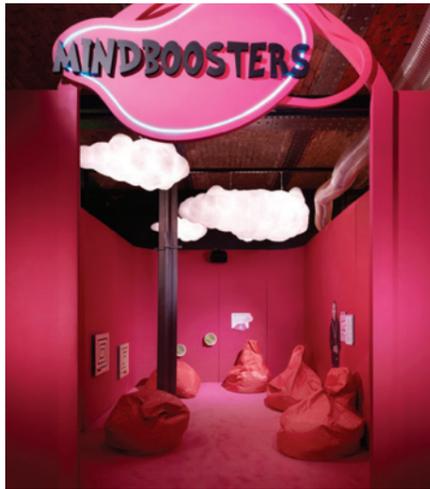
In 2025, the Science and Industry Museum in Manchester opened *Operation Ouch! Brains, Bogies and You*, a major new exhibition for children and families that invites visitors on a delightfully gross, high-energy adventure through the incredible world of our senses. Inspired by the hit CBBC series *Operation Ouch!*, the exhibition encourages hands-on exploration and playful experimentation, giving children the chance to test their own senses while learning how our brains interpret the world.

Background

Building on the success of the previous exhibition: *Operation Ouch! Food, Poo and You*, the topic of senses pushed us to take our approach further for this exhibition, could we make the exhibition accessible to as many visitors' senses as possible?

Challenge

We tackled the challenge of this creatively and with knowledgeable advice. Collaborating with designers Drinkall Dean and Manchester-based Access Consultant, Kate Fox, from the start ensured that accessibility was embedded. This partnership enabled innovations that enhance the experience for all visitors, from a tactile wall of textures and a giant replica of Dr Chris' foot that you can tickle to a pink-carpeted space for early years' engagement. Accessibility



was central throughout, reflecting the museum's Open For All values and guided by the principle of Sensory Gain, which emphasises that engaging multiple senses benefits everyone, not just those with specific access needs.

Approach

At the heart of the exhibition are the 'Ouchers' with personal reflections on their sensory experiences. These stories in their own voices highlight how the young people engage with the world and use senses to engage with the world on their own terms. Associate Curator Andrea Lathrop collaborated with local partners to ensure authentic representation. Visitors can access these stories visually and through BSL videos or audio descriptions throughout the gallery. For example, Alfie, a young blind visitor, is featured in the Hearing zone, demonstrating how he uses



the sound of his cane to navigate the world through echolocation. Representing children's voices authentically helps all visitors feel the museum is 'for them'.

For interactives, we followed a 'two ways in' approach, ensuring everyone could explore each exhibit through at least two senses combining visual, tactile and auditory experiences. An audio quiz provides answers in sound as well as writing. A vibration pad plays remixed versions of the theme tune. Select objects, such as a large 3D coin alongside Henry VIII's coins, are available to touch, making history tangible for young hands. Visitors can experience scents from a vinaigrette diffuser just like the original object and manipulate optical illusion replicas from the Science Museum Group Collection.

Obstacles and issues

Due to a short development period and limited budget, not all ideas came to fruition. For example, tactile flooring throughout the exhibition to compliment the audio description was considered but ultimately not implemented. Communication cards for visitors (e.g., 'I need a break') were planned but didn't make it into the final exhibition. While we weren't able to deliver every concept, the process offered valuable insights into balancing ambition with resources and exploring creative solutions for accessibility in future projects.

Actual outputs

A standout feature is the audio description guide, co-curated with young people with visual impairments in collaboration with Henshaws and Hideout Youth Zone, and audio describer Vicky Ackroyd. Two groups added their own descriptions and were recorded for the guide. This meant that the authentic perspectives of young people were conveyed and that all visitors were able to experience the exhibition in a rich and more meaningful way. The audio description can be accessed via QR codes and NaviLens, an app widely used by people with visual impairments. The audio description guide acted as a test bed for future work. The guide doesn't cover the whole exhibition, we focused on a few key moments in each zone due to time and resource, but this approach has provided valuable insights into the process, which will directly inform and improve our future accessibility work.

Mindboosters, a paired back, relaxing space is integrated into the exhibition narrative and reflects audience feedback on the value of quiet areas in what can otherwise be quite an overwhelming environment. Visitors can enjoy bean bags, light-up clouds and a guided meditation from Dr Chris himself, offering a break from overstimulation. Scheduled BSL, relaxed and tactile tours further enhance inclusivity, allowing families to engage fully with the content.



“Accessibility was central throughout, reflecting the museum's Open For All values and guided by the principle of Sensory Gain, which emphasises that engaging multiple senses benefits everyone, not just those with specific access needs.”

Lessons learned

Operation Ouch! Brains, Bogies and You gave us the gift of a topic with senses, it challenged us to think in new ways about engagement in exhibitions. We balanced our creativity with practical thinking about budget, resource and time. The audio guide was launched after opening, but we prioritised meaningful content rather than rushing.

Next steps

By embedding sensory gain principles and prioritising children's voices, the exhibition creates an accessible, inclusive, playful experience and we're taking these lessons into our future exhibitions and galleries.

Far left A sign reading 'Mindboosters' introduces a cosy pink space filled with beanbags. White clouds float above and there are text labels and buttons on the walls.

Left A coin is mounted on a purple wall next to a large black shape. Three smaller coins are displayed next to the big one.

Above A child smiles as she places her hand on one of several large tactile disks in a vibrant pink room.

Find out more

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Hannah Clapham-Clark Public Programmes Manager

www.scienceandindustrymuseum.org.uk/whats-on/operation-ouch-brains-bogies-and-you



Sensing Digital Exhibitions:

Sensational Thinking in the National Paralympic Heritage Trust's Global Virtual Museum

Summary

In 2024, the National Paralympic Heritage Trust (NPHT) launched the Global Virtual Museum (GVM), a digital space to celebrate national and international disability sport history.

Three new galleries launched in Summer 2025, exploring the histories of CP Sport, Inclusive activity in Hampshire, and Paralympic Games held in Italy – totalling in seven virtual galleries for public viewership.

We incorporated sensational thinking in the creation of the three new galleries to enhance digital accessibility and inclusion.

“We have also explored other methods of access to our virtual museum for blind and partially blind audiences, such as keyboard controls for easier navigation, screen readable versions of content external to the gallery and guided tour videos.”

Background

The NPHT was established in 2015 to preserve, celebrate and share local and national Paralympic heritage. The GVM is a key part of our 2023-2028 'Becoming Seamlessly Inclusive' strategy, as we seek to bring these histories to diverse audiences globally.

Each gallery in the GVM features 3D models of collections objects, text interpretation, oral testimony, and images and videos. The virtual setting of these galleries allows the NPHT to disseminate unique histories of disability sport beyond our physical exhibition spaces in Stoke Mandeville.

This project was funded by Arts Council England, the Museums Association Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, the National Lottery Heritage fund, Rothschild Foundation, Wolfson Foundation and Mitsubishi Corporation London Branch, alongside Royal Holloway University of London's Civic University research scheme.

Challenge

The challenge was to give all visitors to our digital platform an engaging and sensorially rich experience. As a primarily visual platform, the GVM is particularly inaccessible to blind and partially blind visitors.

Approach

Our approach was shaped by The Sensational Museum's principle of Sensory Gain. We have embedded engagement with multiple senses into each visitor's museum experience. This included:

- Using the Workshop for Inclusive Co-created Audio Description (W-ICAD) to co-create sensorially rich descriptions of our 3D models with blind and partially blind people;
- Applying sensational thinking to image and video audio description to create descriptions that move beyond the traditional emphasis on sight;
- Exploring sensory object cataloguing, expanding sensational thinking toward collections records through participation as a TSM pilot museum.

Intended outcomes

To create more inclusive digital experiences for all audiences, challenge/change NPHT curatorial practices and promote sensational thinking.

Intended outputs

Incorporate co-created audio descriptions of museum objects into three new virtual galleries, and add sensory descriptions to image audio descriptions.

Obstacles and issues

The GVM is a visual experience, with no opportunity for sensory engagement. To solve this, we added Inclusive Co-created Audio Descriptions to provide sensory information about 3D models of objects. Audio descriptions record evaluative sensory information (the perception of sensory stimuli – such as smell, texture, or weight) and evocative information (the affect of sensory stimuli – such as recalling a childhood memory of a similar object).

Example of Co-curated audio description for a small plush toy of Aster, the Torino 2006 Winter Paralympics mascot:

"It is a star-shaped cushion, about eight centimetres in diameter. If you hold it up, it feels like the shape of an asterisk on a page. It's soft and slightly felty and invites touch. It has six points that have blunt ends, sort-of squared off. It has a firm centre that's a little unexpected and it smells of fabric. It's powder blue, or ice blue, with a slight yellowy tinge to it as if it's been handled a lot.

One of the arms of the snowflake, the one in the top right, is slightly shorter than the others and ends at an angle. Is this meant to symbolise disability or is it a well-intentioned attempt to celebrate the diversity of the Paralympics? We reflect that all snowflakes are unique and think perhaps the difference in the arm is supposed to remind us that all humans are unique."



Following the creation of object audio descriptions in W-ICAD sessions, we later recognised that our previous image and video descriptions lacked sensory content. We addressed this by applying the principles of evaluative and evocative sensory descriptions developed by The Sensational Museum to the images within the new galleries.

Moreover, the programme used for the GVM is not screen reader compatible. We explored the work of others in the sector to address this issue, however, there is a lack of accessible XR experiences. In the short term, we have provided screen readable versions of the gallery content on our website below the GVM and have developed guided tour videos of each gallery.

Actual outcomes

Feedback received from blind and partially blind individuals or groups has shaped our approach to content creation. This has encouraged us to draw on the principles of W-ICAD and participatory exhibition design in subsequent projects.

We have also explored other methods of access to our virtual museum for blind and partially blind audiences, such as keyboard controls for easier navigation, screen readable versions of content external to the gallery and guided tour videos.

Actual outputs

Across the three new galleries for 2025:

- Ten 3D models of collections objects with inclusively created audio descriptions;
- More than thirty images with sensory audio descriptions;
- Guided tours and screen readable content for improved access to GVM content.

Lessons learned

Our work inspired by The Sensational Museum has:

- Enabled co-creation and inclusive design approaches, developing our network of blind and partially sighted supporters;
- Developed staff confidence to explore new approaches to audio description;
- Raised awareness of continued barriers to inclusivity in digital spaces.

Next steps

We are actively evaluating the benefits of the sensory approaches included in the GVM. Feedback will help us evaluate the comparative experience of a 'less sensory' exhibition and improve inclusive design across our work.

We would also like to evaluate this within a virtual space in comparison to a physical space.

Another development area was creating more tactile experiences for blind and partially blind audiences within our in-person exhibition space.

Left A plush toy in the shape of a smiling 6-pointed star.

Find out more

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Our website:

www.paralympicheritage.org.uk

Visit the Global Virtual Museum:

www.paralympicheritage.org.uk/global-virtual-museum

W-ICAD website:

https://w-icad.org



Nothing Without Us:

Disability Equity, Co-Production and The Sensational Museum



Courtesy of Screen South & Accentuate

Summary

Nothing Without Us: Experiences of Disability is a co-produced gallery trail at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, that was curated as part of my Curating for Change Fellowship project and run between November 2023 and March 2025.

Background

As part of the 18-month Curating for Change fellowship, I was invited to curate a display or set of displays about disability history in the museum collections. The aim was to work with a group of local disabled people to draw out those stories and amplify their voices within the museum.

Challenge

Pitt Rivers Museum has a typological collection, which means that it is arranged by type of object rather than focusing on a certain geography or period. Some of my co-producers, particularly those who are neurodivergent, described it as both

a “sensory pleasure” and “nightmare” at the same time because everything is arranged by type, which is pleasing, but the sheer quantity could feel overwhelming.

Approach

We had to think carefully about how to tell disability stories within that environment. We couldn't bring in many new objects without them getting “lost” among the other items on display, so our approach was to create a dialogue with the existing themes of the cases rather than a complete reinstatement.

We developed three themes:

- Form and Function;
- Precarity and Violence;
- Care.

These themes guided our decisions on which cases to use and the stories the co-producers wanted to tell in relation to the objects.

Intended outcomes

- A trail that encouraged visitors to follow a discourse between contemporary understandings of disability and how those are reflected in the collections. We wanted to highlight that disability history exists across all histories, it isn't limited to one category or object. Creating a single ‘disability’ case would miss that point.
- Give space for disability within the museum and foster inclusivity. We wanted to demonstrate accessibility and equity, in the spirit of The Sensational Museum project, showing the benefits of including disabled perspectives in interpretation.

Intended outputs

- A trail with in-case interventions in the form of labels written by the co-producers and art pieces created in response to the objects;
- An audio-described and BSL-interpreted version of the trail;
- A printed booklet as a keepsake for visitors, summarising the trail with selected stories;
- A sensory touch tour as part of the University of Oxford's GLAM offering;
- NaviLens codes in the displays so visitors could access digital content through their own devices.

Obstacles and issues

Eight co-production sessions were held between May and July 2023. Due to the collaborative nature of the process, it was challenging to decide which cases to use until participants had explored the museum themselves. Once they chose cases, the challenge became how to fit in the labels and art pieces created in response to the objects. Space and storage were limited, so we had to make careful choices about what could realistically be displayed.

Another key challenge was about balance. Co-producers often looked to me for guidance, seeing me as the expert, while I was trying to give them more space to share their vision. We learned that co-producers value structure and support, and being decisive at times gave them freedom to focus on creative expression.

For example, some co-producers wanted to create artworks, so we needed space for that. We chose the Clubs and Maces case on the top floor because it had vertical space for hanging pieces. This tied neatly to our theme of Precarity and Violence, as both the case objects and the artworks explored authority and trauma.

Another obstacle was time and resources. Although Curating for Change provided funding, much of the development still required additional work from staff beyond their paid hours. The project demanded significant physical and emotional energy, which led to some burnout.

One challenge we recognised was the limitation of working solely with local co-producers, which meant the project reflected largely white British experiences. We acknowledged this in our materials, noting that the trail represented specific lived experiences, not the totality of disability or human experience. Ideally, we would like to have had the time and resources to include Indigenous or international perspectives, especially given the colonial legacy of the Pitt Rivers collections.

Actual outcomes

The trail was completed on time and was a success. We used bright pink panels that caught visitors' attention. The booklet and website, including

NaviLens integration, launched with the exhibition. The audio description and BSL interpretation were released in early 2024, due to the workload.

One unexpected but rewarding development came from working with Lucy, a co-producer with Down Syndrome. We created Easy Read materials for her, which later became the foundation of our Easy Read visitor guide. Lucy's approach, exploring freely and choosing objects that resonated with her, inspired us to encourage visitors to do the same. When we hosted Down Syndrome Oxford, families responded very positively to this.

The project also brought new community engagement: MyVision Oxfordshire, a charity supporting people with visual impairments, visited and took part in touch tours with 3D-printed tactile replicas of objects and artworks.

The trail attracted strong visitor interest. During a late-night event coinciding with the exhibition's launch, the museum received around 1,600 visitors, nearly double the usual number. Feedback from visitors was deeply moving: comments like “I've never considered this before” or “As a disabled person who's never felt welcome in museum spaces, I finally feel seen.”

It fostered the idea of inclusivity not just as a single action but also as something that can benefit other strands of museum work.

Lessons learned

The project clearly demonstrated that disability histories are of strong interest to audiences. The trail was initially planned to run from November 2023 to May 2024 but was extended until March 2025 due to its success and continued public engagement.

A key learning was the need to develop accessibility materials, like BSL interpretation, Easy Read guides and touch tours, alongside the main interpretation, not as an afterthought. When these are planned together from the start, it reduces burnout and ensures accessibility is embedded, not added on later.

The project prompted internal discussions about what can and can't

be changed within a listed building. We discovered there is often more flexibility than assumed and hope this encourages the museum to take bolder steps in future iterations.

Ultimately, even with limited time and resources, the project made a significant impact. The key takeaway is that it's better to do something small well and make space for inclusion than to do nothing out of fear of imperfection. Even partial success can create visibility and create genuine inclusion.

Next steps

In future, projects like this should aim to create space for disabled people to learn from each other as well as to educate others. Ideally, this could include dialogue between disabled people in the UK and abroad, though our funding restrictions prevented that at the time.

In terms of my own curatorial work and expertise, the trail and co-production experience has taught me more about the value of lived experience and fictive narrative in telling stories from both the past and present. I utilised this in my next co-produced exhibition at the Verulamium Museum in St. Albans.

Left In the foreground a visitor looks into a wooden and glass museum display case. In the background, a figure in a wheelchair, carrying a yellow balloon, leads a group of visitors around the space.

Find out more

E-mail:

kyle.jordan.14@alumni.ucl.ac.uk

Website Link(s):

360 digital capture of the Trail (which also includes relevant videos and multimedia)
www.360studioradar.com/360/PittRiversVT

Pitt Rivers webpage for the Trail
www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/nothing-without-us

Report:

<https://prm.web.ox.ac.uk/sitefiles/prm-ar-23-24-final-web.pdf>

PRM Annual Report 2023/24, which covers Curating for Change at the Museum (pgs. 20-21)



The Sensational Museum: Planning Accessible Events



Summary

The Sensational Museum (TSM) arranged a series of educational and collaborative events during the two-year project, including launch events, workshops and retreats, and showcase celebrations.

Background

The TSM is an AHRC-funded research project created to rethink the role of the senses in museums. The project uses what we know about disability to change how museums work; using multisensory to increase equitable engagement for everyone.

Challenge

While all events should be planned to enable equitable access for D/deaf, disabled and neurodiverse presenters and attendees, excellent access was the most important single factor for any TSM event.

TSM wanted to facilitate equitable input, where every attendee could engage in their preferred way, and provide important critical feedback about the project's work.

The TSM team came together for a two-year period. We didn't have a fixed venue or established resources on which to base our events. The team and event attendees had a diverse range of access needs. We had a wide range of intended audience members, including academic and heritage professionals at every stage of their career.

Approach

Our approach was collaborative and transparent. We asked all event attendees for information about their access needs and provided detailed event information in several formats in advance. We sought feedback

from attendees, and we tried different methods to improve equitable engagement.

Intended Outcomes

A series of accessible events which would support the development and dissemination of The Sensational Museum's research.

Intended Outputs

- Open access resources for collections and curation staff to work multi-sensorily;
- Academic publications, including articles and a book sharing TSM's research.

Obstacles and Issues

- Asking for information from event attendees presumes they are comfortable with disclosure of their support needs, that their support needs don't fluctuate too widely, and that they have the time and capacity to complete this work.
- Providing a large amount of information to attendees before an event in several formats can feel overwhelming, and this needs to be carefully managed.
- Access friction can occur, when the differing access needs of attendees are in direct opposition to each other. Adapting workshop contents based on some feedback can cause access friction for future attendees.

- For one-off events, it can be difficult to establish venue and technical support needed to facilitate the equipment or manage the environment as planned. These teams need to be part of the accessible planning early in the process.
- There are many learned or traditional behaviours that people do automatically and it can be hard to ask people to behave in a different way. For example, self-description, self-identification (e.g. 'It's Lucy speaking'), or summarising an upcoming session so attendees can opt out, can all take a long time to become habitualised. Speakers, whether presenting or attending, are often under pressure at events, and so may be less likely to remember these habits.
- Providing material in several formats, and in advance, is time-consuming and relies on speakers being organised and responsive.
- Access provision such as BSL or live captions can be expensive.

Actual Outcomes

Attendees reported feeling taken care of, and noted the care taken to meet their needs.



“The Sensational Museum arranged a series of educational and collaborative events during the two-year project, including launch events, workshops and retreats, and showcase celebrations.”

Actual Outputs

TSM has shared the sample event questionnaires it developed:

A recording of our end-of-project showcase shows how various access initiatives such as integrated AD, self-description and corrected captions work in practice.

TSM's Charlotte Slark and Sophie Vohra have been published about descriptive transcripts, developed to create equity in the experience of reading audio transcripts.

Lessons Learned

- Optionality is key. Provide as many ways as you can to engage. Can you offer a standalone online event that provides an experience equitable to the live event? How many ways can an attendee engage with the workshop materials?
- The more access support and information you can provide, the less information you will need to ask of your attendees.
- Providing detailed information about the event and venue in advance will help you meet access needs you haven't thought about. Providing detailed information gives each attendee the power to make their own decisions about what they do and do not need.
- Asking if something is 'accessible' or not is not a simple question. Accessibility may vary from day to day, and inaccessibility could range from 'not-ideal' to 'actively harmful or painful'. This is why optionality and clear advance information are vital. Attendees should know broadly what to expect from every session, so they are able to judge if they should opt out at any point.



- Decide deadlines well in advance in order to compile resources to share with attendees. Adapting resources to multiple formats and sizes will need to be done before sharing.
- Detailed information sources such as AccessAble.com are invaluable, especially for compiling detailed venue information succinctly.

Next Steps

Encouraging museums to use all our open access materials (see 'Further information') and launching a special GEM Case Studies edition featuring examples of rethinking the role of the senses in museum and heritage engagement.

Far left Two museum visitors in conversation in a gallery full of modern art.

Left A red banner hanging between two large pillars reads: 'Eich Stori Chi Yw Ein Stori Ni' ('Your story is our story' in Welsh)

Above A collection of sensory props: multi-coloured soft tactile keyrings in a wooden bowl; small tubs of playdoh; striped paper bags bearing The Sensational Museum logo.

Find out more

[Sensationalmuseum.org](https://sensationalmuseum.org)

sensationalmuseum.org/resources/showcase-recording

sensationalmuseum.org/resources/accessible-events

sensationalmuseum.org/resources/article-art-of-multisensory-storytelling

Accessable.com

About GEM

GEM, the Group for Education in Museums, has been helping anyone who delivers learning in museums to connect and learn together for over 75 years. GEM is an Arts Council Investment Principles Support Organisation. We support sector colleagues in a variety of ways, including training courses, mentoring, publications like the GEM Case Studies, and other professional development opportunities.

GEM's **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.

Our **MISSION** is to support and empower our community of colleagues to connect and develop their knowledge and skills to deliver learning.

GEM membership is available for individuals and institutions, with discounts available for students, volunteers, job-seekers and small sector organisations.

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