

Cailín Lynn, Programming Development Manager, Museums of Northern Ireland

CAILLÍN LYNN has worked in the community, arts and heritage sectors for over ten years, currently working with National Museums Northern Ireland as Programming Development Manager overseeing the development and delivery of audience engagement in the organisation. During the pandemic she has worked closely with a range of partners including SPRING SP and Healthy Living Centre Alliance (HLCA) to design and deliver accessible programming to museum audiences. Cailin previously managed the engagement and interpretation programme for the award-winning Tropical Ravine Restoration Project at Belfast Botanic Gardens; she was Growing Communities Coordinator for Belfast City Council Parks Department and held developmental roles in Belfast City Council's Community Engagement Department and the Ulster Hall Belfast.

'Access for All at National Museums Northern Ireland.'

I want to talk to you today about our National Museums of NI Access for All initiative and some of the work we've done within it. Our Access for All initiative was actually developed in first lockdown last year. At this time, we could see through news articles, national statistics, testimonials and through the media how the pandemic was impacting people's mental and physical health. What stood out most was that people with disabilities were being disproportionately affected by this situation. In a time when meeting the needs of these people was most difficult, we decided to rethink how we would put disability access needs on the top of our organisation's agenda, to engage with disabled audiences with a sustained approach, not just as a pandemic project.

However, we cannot claim to be experts in disability access, rather than make assumptions, our first steps were to reach out, and begin conversations with other organisations who had the expertise and existing relationships with service users. We reached out to a broad range of partners, Leanne from SPRING SP spoke earlier, we also reached out to the Healthy Living Centre Alliance, the Alzheimer's Society, Guide Dogs NI, RNIB, the University of Atypical, Age NI, just to name a few. We were open, honest and transparent with these partners from the get-go, that this was the beginning of our journey of understanding broader access needs, and that we really needed their guidance. We collaborated with our partners to facilitate focus groups with service users with museum visits whilst it was still closed so that we had a better understanding of the change in environment. So much had changed as we all know, signage had changed, movement around the physical museum had changes, there were no physical maps to hand

out. These are the small things a nondisabled person may be able to find mildly annoying but is something that could have a detrimental effect on the experience of a disabled person coming to site, possible even for the first time.

In collaboration with our partners, we actually designed a suite of access platforms that we began to prototype from September last year. They were Slow Down Afternoons and positive aging programming aimed at older people and their families, relaxed mornings which were exclusive early access openings to the museum for those with learning difficulties. SP is a broader initiative that we have been developing in partnership with SPRING SP, and I'll talk about that a little bit later on. We collaborated with the [Northern Ireland Science Festival](#) to deliver a first for all of us, sensory science, a programme designed for disability access as a starting point.

Today I am going to focus on remote sessions, these were designed for audiences with sight impairment. Our remote sessions were developed in partnership with RNIB and the Guide Dogs NI, and their service users. Conversations with the organisations and service users were really interesting. Things that were identified were identified as collections of interest were pieces that were on permanent display in the Ulster Museum. Participants explained that the inaccessibility of the museum has meant that they don't get to see or access these permanent displays. Items that we take for granted, that I've seen since I was a child, some of these people hadn't seen at all, and had only heard about or read about.

The [Access for All](#) sessions focused on certain collections, including Takabuti, our mummy, and the Girona in the Spanish Armada that sank off the coast of Northern Ireland near the Giants Causeway in 1588. The sessions took place weekly, and were facilitated on Zoom by our engagement team, and when restrictions allowed, on site visits took place. For the online sessions, participants received sensory packages in the post, these packages contained a range of different items that engaged the participants wider senses. The Takabuti pack for example contained scraps of linen that emulated bandages, smooth beads to represent the beetles that were engraved on the coffin, and even baklava to give a sense of Middle Eastern deserts and engage taste. Our site visits also included handling collections, each family or friend bubble, which is how we facilitated the visits, were given their own items to engage with as part of the visit, so there were no worries with sharing and cross contamination. These items enhanced the participants overall engagement with the collections and stories being explored.

The sessions were really popular, over 95% participants felt that they learnt something new and felt they were valuable for people with access needs. A few quotes from the programmes were that,

The information was excellent, and the way the presenters described the paintings helped me visualise them in my mind, and, I really enjoyed it, if you couldn't see it on your screen, you had it in your hand. As a visually impaired person, the use of the tactile goodie bag was excellent.

Over 60% said that they were unlikely to attend a physical session without having attended the Zoom session before hand. This demonstrates value in digital engagement, not just as pandemic engagement, but as long-term gateway engagement when considering outreach to audiences with additional needs. It builds confidence and encouragement to visiting in person, however we do need to acknowledge digital poverty issues, as outlined by Alison.

We worked across internal multidisciplinary teams to deliver our access prototypes, because our intention from the beginning with this access work is that it would be owned by the organisation, not by an individual or team. The long-term ambition is that thinking about access and disability needs becomes part of the fabric of the cultural working of the organisation. The great news is, that I have never worked in an organisation where an initiative has been grasped so quickly, and so completely organisation wide. The initiative has been championed from the get-go by our executive and senior management team. In fact, the reopening of our museums last year was used as a platform to launch the [Access for All](#) initiative, and our Chief Executive invited all our participants to the lunch to launch the initiative and celebrate the work that we are doing together, and it got really good press coverage, particularly across partner websites and social media. This is great because there is an awareness there then.

Access is now embedded in our new [Corporate Strategy 2021–25](#). The strategy has four aims, the first is that we champion inclusion, diversity, and accessibility. Our business plan has specific activities that will drive forward our initiative. I have mentioned SP work, and we will be looking to roll this out with SPRING SP and the HLCA later this year and look forward to furthering initiatives. There is always more to do, always. But I do feel that we have taken the opportunity presented to us in the first lockdown to take our first steps in this work, and with the incredible partnerships that we have developed, we can continually improve and have fun testing new ways with and for people with additional access needs.

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