



Association of
Independent
Museums

The AIM Guide to Tackling Chronic Loneliness

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Introduction

Since the 2010s, loneliness has become a rapidly growing problem in the UK, with serious impacts on individual and collective health and wellbeing.

In 2023, the government announced the launch of a new fund that aimed to tackle the issue of chronic loneliness, and to encourage the growth of high-quality volunteering across England. The Know Your Neighbourhood Fund focused up to £30million in 27 disadvantaged areas, £5million of which was earmarked for arts, culture and heritage activities.

AIM, as one of the grant delivery partners (alongside Libraries Connected and Creative Lives), launched the Connected Communities Fund that same year. The objectives of the fund were to help heritage organisations tackle chronic loneliness; develop and deliver high-quality volunteering opportunities; and improve organisational relationships with local institutions and other partners engaged in similar work.

This Success Guide explores the objective of tackling chronic loneliness through museum and heritage-based programmes, delivering quality outputs that have a lasting impact.

We will:

- Look at what defines chronic loneliness
- Help you select the partner organisations best placed to support your work
- Explore how to maintain those initiatives long-term
- Demonstrate the benefit to your own organisational resilience
- Provide case studies to demonstrate best practice
- Help you plan an evaluation of your activities.

With all programme planning, we recommend working with your wider team to develop any initiative to tackle chronic loneliness. Use this guide as a starting point and work through the activities that are included to help you at this planning stage. Working this way facilitates team cohesion, bringing different lived experiences to the fore that can help support the planning, and ensures the entire organisation is operating towards achieving this objective.

“Chronic loneliness affects people of all ages and backgrounds and touches the lives of millions. It causes real emotional pain and can impact our physical and mental health. It also has an economic cost in the additional health and care services that are needed by people who are lonely, and the missed contributions that people who are unable to connect could make in their communities.”

The Campaign to End Loneliness ¹

¹ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org>





Understanding Chronic Loneliness

Image credit: Signal Film & Media

Understanding Chronic Loneliness

Loneliness is 'a subjective unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have and those that we want'

²

In other words, loneliness is the negative feeling we experience when the relationships we have do not match up to those we would like to have. This may be because we would like more people to spend time with, or because our relationships are not as meaningful as we would like.

Although the concepts are related, social isolation is not the same as loneliness. Isolation is about the number and type of social connections we have, not about how we feel about them. Someone can be isolated without being lonely, or can feel lonely while surrounded by other people.

Feeling lonely occasionally is a normal human emotion which we all experience at some point in life. Most people experience 'transient loneliness', a feeling that comes and goes, often as a result of a life change. Others experience 'situational loneliness' at specific times or settings, such as feeling lonely at Christmas, or at work or school. These are distressing emotions in themselves, but generally resolve themselves with time or are limited to just one part of people's lives.

The problems arise when this occasional feeling intensifies and people feel lonely often or all the time. We call this chronic loneliness, and it is associated with ill physical and mental health, cognitive impairment, reduced immunity and frailty, among other things.³ People who are chronically lonely have lower self-esteem and find it harder to cope with life.

Understanding the following three aspects of chronic loneliness will help you support individuals and partner organisations effectively:

1. Loneliness often follows common transition points in life, such as moving schools, leaving home, family breakdown, ill health diagnosis, retirement or bereavement. By targeting activities to people who are undergoing these transitions we can help prevent them becoming chronically lonely.

For example: can you aim some of your museum activities to people who have been bereaved, or target volunteer recruitment to people who have recently moved into the area? Ushaw House and Gardens in County Durham aimed their Connected Communities activities at people who lived alone in their hyper-local community, connecting them with a network and volunteer community, using their established volunteering programme as a starting point.

2. Not everyone is at equal risk of chronic loneliness. Around 8% of adults experience chronic loneliness⁴, but this figure is higher for some groups. For example,

- Disabled people are almost four times more likely to experience chronic loneliness than non-disabled people⁵.
- Children and young people are more likely to feel lonely often than any other age group, with children who receive free school meals being four times more likely to feel often lonely than their peers⁶.
- Older people who are widowed are five times more likely to feel often lonely than those who are married, and almost four times more likely to feel often lonely if they are in ill health⁷.
- Carers are seven times more likely to be feel lonely often or always⁸, as are more than four in 10 young mothers⁹.

3. Loneliness can lead to negative thoughts and behaviours which create a vicious cycle.

Feeling lonely often leads to feeling sadness, emptiness, helplessness, despair or shame. In turn, this can influence people's behaviour, causing them to withdraw further from others and leading to even more intense loneliness. Understanding this downward cycle of loneliness is key to breaking it¹⁰.

By understanding these three aspects, you will be better able to create a programme that effectively tackles chronic loneliness and bring positive change into people's lives.

Ingrid Abreu-Scherer

² Perlman, D. & Peplau, L. A. (1981) Toward a Social Psychology of Loneliness. In R.Gilmour & S. Duck (Eds.), Personal Relationships: 3. Relationships in Disorder (pp. 31-56). London: Academic Press https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936725/6.4882_DCMS_Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update_V2.pdf

³ [Health impact | Campaign to End Loneliness](#)

⁴ [UK Measures of National Well-being Dashboard - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

⁵ [Disability, well-being and loneliness, UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ [loneliness_in_childhood.pdf \(childrensociety.org.uk\)](#)

⁷ [loneliness-report_final_2409.pdf \(ageuk.org.uk\)](#)

⁸ [facts-about-carers-2019.pdf \(carersuk.org\)](#)

⁹ [Shocking extent of loneliness faced by young mothers revealed - Co-op \(co-operative.coop\)](#)

¹⁰ [Psychology of Loneliness \(campaigntoendloneliness.org\)](#)



Building a Culture That Tackles Loneliness

Image credit: Peckover House and Garden



Building a Culture That Tackles Loneliness

There are a number of ways you can embed good practice across your activities.

1. Reduce the stigma of loneliness

There is still a widespread social stigma around loneliness, which can lead to feelings of shame and helplessness. Here are some things you can do to help break this stigma:

- **Loneliness is an emotion, not a state of being.** So, avoid using terms like 'lonely people' since it gives the impression that feeling lonely is inevitable and ingrained.
- **Being open about loneliness.** When staff share their experience of loneliness, or when loneliness is discussed with volunteers or participants, it can reduce the taboos that surround it.
- **Everyone's journey out of loneliness is different.** Expecting people to 'recover' from loneliness at the same speed isn't going to work and can increase stigma. Understanding this can help you tailor your activities and approach.

2. Create environments that alleviate loneliness

It's not enough to bring people together. As stated previously, people can still feel lonely when surrounded by others. Making your space inviting can start to build those meaningful connections that ease loneliness:

- **Create spaces that are inviting and welcoming.** Remember that loneliness can cause people to lose confidence. Encourage staff and volunteers to welcome participants personally, help them find their way, and introduce them to one or two others so they don't have to approach strangers themselves.
- **Build opportunities for connection outside the activity.** The tea break or the conversations in the corridor are just as important as the main event. Some people may find it easier to talk in these informal settings, and they are opportunities for people to share other interests and experiences.
- **Welcoming spaces are a shared responsibility.** Staff and volunteers can create an open and friendly environment, but participants also have a role to play. Modelling warmth, positivity and empathy can set the tone and should start with senior staff.

3. Understand your role and working with partners

Since the causes and experience of loneliness are so varied, no single organisation can solve loneliness alone.

- **Understand your piece of the puzzle.** When developing new activities, it's important to think about what you bring to the table to alleviate loneliness. Maybe it's providing fun activities that distract people for a time, or a connection to a local heritage that encourages feelings of belonging or learning new skills to improve confidence. Being clear about your strengths will help you identify gaps and find the right partners.
- **Trusted and experienced partners can make all the difference.** Loneliness can make people fearful or uncertain. Working with organisations who are already connected and trusted can help people feel more confident about coming to a new activity or venue.
- **Your activity may not be enough.** Some people will need longer term or specialist support that you can't give. Think about how you will handle this before you begin your activity. Building referral relationships – with social prescribing teams, specialist or acute services, helplines, and other community groups – means you have partners to draw on over time.

Chronic loneliness is complex but thoughtful planning can help create programmes that have positive and lasting impacts.

Ingrid Abreu-Scherer



Things to Consider

Image credit: Powell-Cotton Trust



Things to Consider

Before beginning any project, particularly one that involves vulnerable communities, there are things you need to consider at the early planning stage.

Skills and expertise

Within your own direct and wider teams, you will have a vast range of skills, expertise and lived experiences relating to living with chronic loneliness that you may not be aware of. It would be a worthwhile exercise to open up your planning period to the wider team and ask for contributions. Some members of the team may already be an integrated part of the community you want to reach. Their responses will establish why your organisation is the right one to be delivering this project.

It does not stand that if you do not have anyone with skills, expertise or lived experience in these communities, that you cannot go ahead with the project, but you will need to consider partnering with another organisation. This will enable you to be involved with the work without centring yourself as the lead delivery organisation.

Money

In plain terms, does your organisation have the funds or unrestricted reserves to carry out this work properly? If not, are there partner or stakeholder organisations who would be willing to fund it? Would a local business or trust sponsor the work? Which funder does this project most align with in terms of criteria and outcomes?

Most of us will have to apply for funding from an external source. Be aware of their timescales for outcomes and add approximately four weeks for the final paperwork to be completed, press releases signed off, and loose ends tidied up, before you can begin. Factor in reporting and other funder requirements into your planning.

Safeguarding

The planning process is a good time to make sure all of those policies and procedures are up to date, particularly this. In tackling chronic loneliness, you could very well be supporting people who are extremely vulnerable. Use this time to check the policy, run through the procedures and refresh everyone's training to make sure both the participants and the team are supported and safe throughout.

Take a look at [The AIM Guide to Improving Access to High Quality Volunteering](#) for more on safeguarding.

Capacity

Before beginning any new project, we urge people to take a moment to consider their own, and their organisation's capacity. Do you or your team truly have time available to dedicate in supporting participants? Is another project or programme coming to an end and you're looking for something to replace it? Have you just taken on another member of staff or increased volunteer team size, and reclaimed some time?

If the answer to those questions is no, then you may need to consider using resources or external funding to bring in a new member of staff (always check funder guidelines before applying – not all grants support staff costs) or carrying out a targeted volunteer recruitment campaign.

Building a culture of alleviating loneliness

When you start talking about loneliness you may realise that some of your staff and volunteers are feeling lonely themselves. Learning about workplace loneliness will help you feel confident about supporting people¹¹. By reducing the stigma of loneliness (referred to in the previous section), you will enable your team to speak openly, without fear of judgment, about their own experiences and the emotions surrounding it.

Create safe spaces and/or times when people can come to you to discuss how they are feeling and how the project is impacting on their own chronic loneliness.

And don't forget to support your own mental health and wellbeing. Take regular breaks, get out of the building, don't check emails out of hours... These are just three of the simple steps you can take to look after yourself. If you are feeling vulnerable, overwhelmed or worried about your own wellbeing, speak to another member of the team and ask for support. Demonstrate the culture you want to embed in your organisation.

¹¹ [Training resources for workplace loneliness | Campaign to End Loneliness](#)



Planning Activity

Image credit: Sunderland Culture



Planning Activity

The following activity is designed to help you in this planning stage, using carefully chosen questions as prompts to guide you. You can adapt the questions to better suit your organisation (this has been developed with a small-medium sized museum in mind, with a small team of staff, supported by a larger team of volunteers), or work through them as they are.

Always do activities like this with your team. The most successful projects are the ones where the whole team has been invested in its success and that only happens when they've been involved in the planning.

Planning Activity

Start here What's is your project idea?	Lay the groundwork	Touchstone The essence of the work	Methods/tools/environment	Implementation	Future view What's your end goal?
	<p>Internal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do the team (board, staff, volunteers) understand and support this project? Do the team have a good understanding of loneliness, and do they feel confident in the topic? How will this affect the organisation? Do you have the capacity (mental, time, physical, etc)? Do you have the funds? 	<p>Explore the 'Why' of the project. Why have you chosen to do it? Why is your organisation the right one to deliver?</p>	<p>SENSE CHECK: Think about environment, tools, goals and the nature of the primary / secondary target audience. What training will the team need to support the project?</p>	<p>Internal needs: Identify your critical path, how are you going to address the internal and external needs you have identified?</p>	<p>Make sure your objectives are SMART- Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timebound.</p>
	<p>External (communities, experts, contractors)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have you carried out any consultation? Can you identify the communities you want to reach? Which local organisations would be the best partners for this? What do you know about their risk of chronic loneliness? 			<p>External needs:</p>	



Case Study: Wolverhampton Arts and Culture

Image credit: Wolverhampton Arts and Culture



Case Study: Wolverhampton Arts and Culture

In 2023, Wolverhampton Arts Centre (WAC) were successful in their application to AIM for the first round of Connected Communities funding. Their project was aimed at alleviating the chronic loneliness new parents in the city can experience, and they worked with Strengthening Families hubs as their delivery partner. We interviewed Hshaana Caisley, Creative Connections Producer to find out more about how their project went.

What is the focus of your project and why is this important to your organisation?

Since COVID there has been an increase of individuals in Wolverhampton who are feeling the impact of loneliness due to social isolation, mental health, poverty and more. Given this, we created artist-led workshops to be delivered at the newly built family hubs in Wolverhampton. These are spaces where the participants can socialise with other parents, create artwork, and be introduced to the universal services which are available to them.

The Wolverhampton Art and Culture Learning Team worked with various artists who facilitated workshops for both young people and adults who have all highlighted the importance of creating to help with mental health. The workshops were also a space for participants to engage in conversation with each other.

Instead of being an organisation that wants people to come to us, we want to provide a service where we go out into the community, that way we can meet the community where they are and meet their needs, such as.

- Reducing loneliness in the communities of Wolverhampton
- Focusing on the more deprived areas of Wolverhampton
- Giving parents the ability to access additional services through arts and craft activities by linking up with our newly opened family hubs run by the council.
- Give parents the ability to work with an experienced artist to learn new artistic skills
- Providing volunteering opportunities
- Providing consistent work for freelance artists.

Why did you choose to work this/these audiences?

Simply because there are a lot of parents within Wolverhampton who suffer from loneliness, and this was an opportunity to reduce the stigma about loneliness. That is why we partnered with the Family Hubs where there are other services that can help the parents with improving health (mental or physical), education and support for babies and children.

Being aware of some parents being socially isolated and knowing some do not have the means to get involved in activities they may enjoy, we wanted to create a class where they did not have to worry about money for travel. By bringing the art classes to their local area and providing free art classes for them whilst allowing them to bring along their children, they do not have to worry about childcare.

What have you learnt by running this programme?

I have never been able to run such a massive programme before, so there was quite a lot that I managed to learn. For example, general project management, keeping in contact with the organisations involved within the project as well as the artists, ambassadors and parents, making sure all individuals are aware of their responsibilities and the overall vision of the project.

Flexibility is another important aspect that I have learned. For example, if an artist or ambassador was unable to make it to a session, I would have to provide cover, so the session is able to continue. Even changing the venue and making sure that there is staff present at the new venue as well as making the participants and the wider community aware of these changes.

The only thing that I would have done differently is to make more use of social media, as social media is a big platform where we are able to update and let people know about what is happening within the community. Whether through progress videos or photographs so the community can see what we were doing throughout.

Has this informed your approach to working with different communities, and if so, how?

I think a lot of the time we create projects for the community to get involved in and give them a place where they can meet, which is usually at the gallery. However, since working on this project it has given me a better insight of working with other venues so we can meet the participants where they are at. This is more of a flexible approach to working with people.

Also, I think providing reasonable additional opportunities for the participants on the programme that we may not have originally thought of. For example, one of the participants enjoyed the programme so much that she now volunteers at the art gallery once a week for four hours, which gives her the opportunity to be around a creative space and gain more knowledge and experience within our gallery.



Choosing the Right Delivery Partner

Image credit: Signal Film & Media



Choosing the right delivery partner

Choosing the right partner to support the work you want to undertake is vital. As mentioned earlier, trusted and experienced partners can make all the difference. They will have a deep understanding and practical experience of working with the audience you want to reach, they will be open to collaborative working and supportive of what it is you want to achieve.

For the partner organisation, working this way brings numerous benefits including extended reach of their activities, wider community advocacy and new experiences for their participants.

The Partnership Mapping activity below is designed to help you plan this aspect of your project, from initial consultation to post-delivery conversation. Again, work with your team for the first draft before revisiting it once the identified partner organisation(s) is on board.

For successful partnership working, we recommend:

- Having conversations early
- Being clear about what it is you want to achieve
- Establishing timescales and costs at the start
- Not underestimating how long it can take to get a partner organisation on board
- Establishing boundaries and role requirements at the start
- Setting up a partnership agreement so both parties understand the extent of their involvement and terms of reference
- Meeting regularly throughout the planning and delivery
- Approaching delivery in a flexible and adaptive manner for the best results.

Remember that working in this equitable collaborative way means that you are both approaching the project as equal partners, with skills, experience and knowledge that can benefit participants.



Choosing the right delivery partner

<p>1. Scoping Understand the challenge; gather information; consult with stakeholders and with potential external resource providers; build a vision of / for the partnership</p>	<p>2. Identifying Identify potential partners and secure their involvement; motivate and encourage them to work together</p>	<p>3. Building Build the relationship through agreeing the goals, objectives and core principles that will underpin the partnership</p>	<p>4. Planning Plan the programme of activities and begin to outline a coherent project</p>	<p>5. Managing Explore structure and management of the partnership - medium to long-term</p>	<p>6. Resourcing Together identify and mobilise cash and non-cash resource</p>
<p>12. Sustaining or Terminating Build sustainability or agreeing on an appropriate conclusion</p>	<p>11. Institutionalising Build appropriate structures and mechanisms for the partnership to ensure longer-term commitment and continuity</p>	<p>10. Revising Revise the partnership, programme(s) or project(s) in the light of experience and review results</p>	<p>9. Reviewing Regularly review the partnership: what is its impact on the organisations? Is it time for some partners to leave or new partners to join?</p>	<p>8. Measuring Measure and report on impact, outputs and outcomes throughout. Is the partnership achieving its goals?</p>	<p>7. Implementing Start to implement the process by working to a pre-agreed timetable and (ideally) to specific deliverables</p>



Thinking Long-Term

Image credit: Sunderland Culture



Thinking Long-Term

Traditionally projects have a necessarily short life, delivered within a timeframe set by constraints around staff capacity and funding. However, when working with vulnerable communities, this approach can be actively detrimental. At best, participants feel the gap and the loss of connection when the project ends. At worst, they feel abandoned, used for a short time to acquire funding, and can suffer the exacerbation of some of the negative effects they were experiencing before the programme.

If you are aiming to alleviate chronic loneliness within your community, it is important that this is not seen as a one-off activity but, much like your volunteering or learning programmes, here for the long-term.

During this planning stage, it's important to address the question of sustainability by asking:

A. Can this be factored into our regular programming?

Consider here if you have the physical space to accommodate it, the staff and/or volunteers. How does it fit within the matrix of your existing programming?

B. Who will have responsibility for maintaining the programme?

Will this fall under your remit, the learning officer's, someone else's? Will you need to extend someone's hours or create a job share role?

C. How will this be funded in the long-term?

It can be difficult to get continuation funding from a grant provider, so you will need to consider how this programme can be supported in the future. By using the evaluation as an advocacy tool, you can approach local businesses for sponsorship or hold fundraising drives. It may be worth considering a one-off annual event where all the money raised goes directly to supporting the programme.

When fundraising, always be clear on how the money will be used and the benefit to participants. For further fundraising advice, see the AIM Successful Fundraising at Museums Success Guide¹².

D. What will the programme look like in 12-months' time?

All successful programmes shift and adapt in response to feedback from participants and partner organisations. You may not be able to sustain the programme at its initial level but could it be scaled back to continue? Use your evaluation to establish what worked and what didn't, where you are best to focus your energies and resources in sustaining it and what can be put to one side until you have more funding to support it.

¹² <https://aim-museums.co.uk/resources/successful-fundraising-at-museums>



Case Study: Powell-Cotton Trust

Image credit: Powell-Cotton Trust



Case Study: Powell-Cotton Trust

The Powell Cotton Museum (run by PCT), in Thanet, was successful in applying for £56,960 from the Connected Communities fund in August 2023. With an active volunteering programme that gave opportunities to adults with learning disabilities and mental health issues, the team were looking to consolidate and build on that work, named the Sunshine Project, by developing a new model of partnership working with service level providers to meet the needs and expectations of an increased number of people who were socially isolated. We interviewed Helen Shaw, Interim Sunshine Project Community Partnership and Engagement Officer to find out more.

What is the focus of your project and why is this important to your organisation?

‘A Ray of Sunshine,’ The Sunshine Project, presents a powerful model for inclusive Therapeutic Horticulture, emphasising mental, physical, and social well-being through nature-based activities.

Creating a legacy of Therapeutic Horticulture within an 8-acre historic garden, the programme prioritises inclusivity, particularly for individuals facing social or mobility challenges. This aligns with the organisation’s mission to foster well-being, connection, and the restorative power of nature.

Key benefits [of Therapeutic Horticulture] include:

- **Social bonds:** Reducing loneliness and building community.
- **Mindfulness and relaxation:** Promoting mental clarity and peace.
- **Physical activity:** Offering accessible ways to stay active.

Why did you choose to work with these particular audiences?

The project targeted individuals with social or mobility challenges, particularly in the Isle of Thanet, a deprived area with limited green spaces. The garden served as:

- **A social hub:** Reducing isolation through shared activities.
- **A growth platform:** Encouraging confidence, skill-building, and purpose.
- **A community resource:** Addressing local needs for restorative spaces and biodiversity.

What have you learnt by running this programme?

While the programme successfully fostered connections through activities like Tai Chi and pottery, it revealed challenges related to accessibility:

- **Accessibility issues:** Basic facilities and pathways require upgrades. To accommodate a variety of mobility issues, the Thrive consultation highlighted poor access to some of our garden buildings.
- **Adaptation to needs:** Feedback underscores the importance of flexible and inclusive infrastructure. The commitment moving forward includes improving pathways, facilities, and overall accessibility.

Has this informed your approach to working with different communities, and if so, how?

The project has redefined its strategy to prioritise adaptability and inclusivity:

- **Indoor options:** Introducing year-round arts, crafts, and mindfulness workshops.
- **Infrastructure upgrades:** Enhancing facilities for greater accessibility and comfort. Continuous feedback ensures the program evolves to meet diverse community needs.

The garden is a biodiversity-rich sanctuary that promotes healing and connection:

- **Nature as therapy:** Multisensory experiences with flora and fauna aid mental and physical restoration.
- **Interactive learning:** Activities like wildlife observation, plant propagation, and composting teach resilience and renewal.
- **Animal interactions:** Opportunities to engage with garden animals bring joy and connection.

The initiative reflected a holistic approach to fostering well-being through inclusive, nature-based therapies. By addressing feedback and refining accessibility, the project sets a strong foundation for a sustainable legacy of healing and connection for all.



Community Activity

Image credit: Bowes Museum



Community Activity

When we create an activity or a programme that we want to engage our communities in, we need to approach the development from the perspective of a potential participant. It is not enough to employ the “if we build it, they will come” methodology!

There can be numerous barriers to a person taking part in something, not all of them visible and some will be more easily reconciled than others. Additionally, loneliness can cause people to lose confidence, feel mistrustful, and withdraw into themselves. Trying something new or even starting conversations will be harder for people who are feeling lonely. This is where pre-project consultation becomes invaluable, and the efforts you've made building that partner relationship will pay off.

Use that relationship now to carry out a consultation with the audience they support. This should be done in a setting the participants are comfortable in and familiar with (i.e. not the museum). Plan a fun activity, a talk, a workshop, whatever the partner organisation recommends, and include an opportunity for feedback during the session.

Example 1: a city-centre museum, free entry and long-established, wanted better engagement with people living in an area of the city where the housing was largely social housing and supported living. Working in partnership with the local women's support group, they held a session that included making Tudor-style sweets and trying on costumes. At the end of the session, they had informal conversations with the participants over tea and biscuits that helped the museum understand:

- Why people from that area didn't visit the museum,
- When to schedule activities that didn't clash with other community activities for example, food bank opening hours, or breakfast clubs
- What the participants' perception of the museum was
- Where participants found information about city centre activities.

Example 2: a rural museum wanted to work with their local dementia support network and, whilst the interest had been encouraging, few people attended the events, despite the fact transport (via minibus) had been provided, free of charge. Working with the dementia support network, they turned the mini-bus into a travelling mini museum, with a schedule of stops at all the villages within their area – seven in total. Once a week, they stopped at each village for a morning or afternoon, and held drop-in reminiscence sessions with music, images and objects. It was during these sessions that they were able to:

- Build that relationship with the participants,
- Help participants to understand what the sessions at the museum would involve
- Help participants feel comfortable in a 'museum' setting
- Understand how to structure the larger sessions to benefit the participants
- When to schedule sessions so that more people could attend.

In both examples, those informal conversations yielded valuable information that helped the museum structure their programming around participant needs, to build those non-existent relationships with these new audiences and determine how best to market their activities to reach those audiences.

Things to consider when planning community activity:

Get outside

In the initial stages, think outside of the four walls of your museum. If this is a new audience with no previous contact with the museum or limited engagement with museums in general, they will be unlikely to leap at the opportunity to get involved. You will need to go to them. Good quality outreach takes time but pays dividends.

Listen informally

Always build in time to sit with the participants over a cup of tea and talk to them about their lives, how they've enjoyed the experience, what would they like more of, etc. This should always be done informally – the more relaxed they feel about the museum, the more they will engage with it. There's time for formal evaluation later.

Partner benefits

Working collaboratively can be time consuming, but it will bring enormous rewards, not least additional expertise and support. Your partner organisation will have the trust and confidence of the audience you want to reach, let them guide you during the initial stages and adapt your programming to reflect their advice.

Adaptation

Don't set your activity plan in stone, even if you have developed it collaboratively with your partner organisation. Continue to listen to the participants over informal chats, start to gather some more formal evaluation, analyse the results and the conversations. Use that knowledge to regularly review the programming to make sure it is still meeting participant needs. Feeling lonely can be very distressing. Have a plan for when you notice that someone needs additional support.

You can use the Experience Map below to help you during the Adaptation Process.



Community activity

OBSERVATIONS	Awareness How did this person hear about you? What encouraged them to come along? Had they had previous contact with you? How could feeling lonely affect how they perceive or interact with you?	Key Usage What were the critical moments, the good or bad experiences?	Outcome What was the feedback from this person/group? What worked/didn't? Any points to adapt?
LEARNINGS			



Successful Evaluation for Vulnerable Participants

Image credit: Wolverhampton Arts and Culture



Successful Evaluation for Vulnerable Participants

Evaluation is how we monitor and review project progress, allowing us to flex and adapt programming according to participant needs. It tracks the process of change that your project will have started and ultimately provides reporting that can be used in future advocacy and fundraising.

What are you planning to measure?

Your project plan should include a set of outputs and outcomes which indicate what success will look like. These help you plan the evaluation by providing the criteria against which you are providing the evidence for.

- **Outputs are quantitative** – things you can count. For example, you deliver one restored building, two exhibitions, three events, 100 volunteer hours, % increase in visitor numbers, or % change in your visitor demographic.
- **Outcomes are qualitative** – the cumulative impact on individuals, partners and your own organisation. For example, a project might aim to increase participants' enjoyment, knowledge, confidence, skills, or sense of belonging. It might introduce new partners. Or the change might be internal, affecting your organisation's development or governance.

Tip! Don't try to set too many outcomes, you and your team will not only struggle to deliver against them but also struggle to gather the evidence to support the evaluation. Focus on achieving fewer outcomes with higher quality programming.

Make sure that the outputs and outcomes can be created and measured within the lifetime of the project and that they are changes you can directly affect or contribute to. For example, your work won't cure dementia, but it could contribute to a person's better quality of life.

Asking for evidence

At the outset of your project, write a Question Bank: a list of questions that will test whether the work is hitting the mark. Only ask for the information you need and cut out the irrelevancies.

For each outcome, think of a simple question that will indicate whether that outcome is being achieved or not. With careful planning, you will find that you do not need to overwhelm people with a lot of questions.

Use a mix of closed and open questions, to allow for richer feedback. For example, if you said that participants were going to learn new skills as a part of the project, asking:

- "Have you learned new skills" gives a Yes/No answer, a quantitative result
- "What new skills have you learned?" will result in a list of new skills they have learned, a qualitative response

The more frequently you gather answers to the same question, the greater your evidence base.

Vary the ways you ask the questions

Paper and online surveys are two of the many ways to gather data, but for those who struggle with the written word, these can be intimidating. There are other effective ways to gather the data you want:

Example 1: during a Family Open Day, rather than asking the parents to complete a paper survey which could exclude their children, put a couple of questions on a poster and invite participants to put a sticker or write a comment against the answer that relates to their experience.

Example 2: at a children’s workshop, gather the data by creating a physical game: “run to the flag if you learned something today!” You can record the resulting movement by counting heads or take a photograph as evidence to support the evaluation.

Example 3: when working with vulnerable people, particularly those with cognitive disabilities, consider asking the group leaders and carers about the impact they see the project is having on the people they care for. With their permission, record their answers on your phone and transcribe the answers anonymously after the event.

The three methods – ‘voting’, movement and triangulation – bring spontaneity, interactivity and considered responses to the evaluation process and prevent the dreaded clipboard and survey from making an appearance.

Share the results

As mentioned, evaluation reports are excellent advocacy tools but before you reach that stage, how can it repay the time put in?

- Share the results across the team – does it ring true to their experience; how can the learning be used to adapt the project or the organisation?
- Share it with partners – factor a conversation about the results into the next meeting, is there anything surprising to them, what would they adapt in response?
- Share it with the funder – no need to wait for the final report, funders like to be kept updated on progress and findings throughout, particularly if those results influence the project’s direction/
- Share with stakeholders – this includes members, donors, subscribers, etc., keeping the project in people’s minds and demonstrating impact as it happens/

Jenni Waugh, Evaluation Consultant



Useful Resources

Evaluation of Interventions to Tackle Loneliness – DCMS:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/exploring-interventions-to-tackle-loneliness/evaluation-of-interventions-to-tackle-loneliness#executive-summary>

AIM Fundraising at Museums Success Guide by Judy Niner:

<https://aim-museums.co.uk/resources/successful-fundraising-at-museums>

Centre for Cultural Value, online evaluation course (2023):

<https://bit.ly/CulturalValueEvaluationCourse>

Monitoring and Evaluation Tips by Ann-Murray Brown (LinkedIn):

<https://bit.ly/MandENewsletter>

Generic Learning Outcomes framework:

<https://bit.ly/generic-learning-outcomes>

UCL Wellbeing Measures Toolkit:

<https://bit.ly/UCL-Wellbeing-Measures>

Warm Welcome:

<https://www.warmwelcome.uk>

Age UK Camden: Outreach Learning Report:

[Connecting Older Men to their Communities \(PDF\)](#)

What Works for Wellbeing Centre:

[A Brief Guide to Measuring Loneliness](#)

Wellbeing Measures Bank:

[Evaluating Wellbeing](#)



About the Author

Tonia Collett worked on the Connected Communities programme as project support officer and legacy manager. She has been on management teams of museums in the West Midlands, including the Coffin Works and, latterly, Tudor House Museum in Worcester. There she increased visitor numbers and income diversity before developing and delivering a joint capital works and site-wide reinterpretation project, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

A freelance consultant since 2021, she specialises in organisational health - offering practical guidance to support boards and museums - interpretation development, fundraising, 'greening' your museum and volunteer programme development. A certified Carbon Literacy for Museums trainer, her clients have included AIM, Museum Development Midlands, the National Football Museum, Wolverhampton Arts and Culture and Hundred Heroines.

Tonia's focus is on practical, holistic support that is tailored to the size of your museum and the capacity of your team.

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