Museums & Galleries Edinburgh Case Study

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I'm Gwen. I'm the Collections Care Officer for Museums & Galleries Edinburgh. So that means that I'm responsible for all of the conservation work that happens across all of our museum sites. The conservation for wellbeing project came about because a couple of years ago, I attended a conservation conference. And there was a library in London that talked about a project similar project that they had done, where they had worked with people that had lived experience of mental health issues, to rehouse a mental health archive. It really struck a chord with me, because I find the rehousing of collections and cleaning of museum objects a really mindful part of my job, and it really helps me with with my mental health. So I was keen to sort of find a way to make that experience accessible to other people that might really benefit from it. So I took the idea of what this previous project had done. And I went to my colleagues in Outreach and Access and explained what I was sort of thinking, and they were really, really positive.

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My name is Ria, I'm Outreach and Access Manager with Museums & Galleries Edinburgh. As Outreach and Access Manager, My job is to work in partnership with community groups who face barriers to accessing our venues and our collections and our programs. So my role on this project was to help identify groups who we thought might benefit from sessions around well being and engaging with our collections.

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So we worked with three different groups that had different experiences, some had experience of addiction, some had experience of homelessness, and some had mental health issues. The point of the project, as it was, was to gather experiences, and see what worked and what didn't work. I was definitely keen for participants to get a positive experience, to feel comfortable in behind the scenes areas of museums, to feel a sense of ownership with the collections with which they were working. But also to go away with a sense of well being. There were some challenges that came up within the project. There were some logistical ones in terms of identifying collections that were ready to be rehoused because I didn't want the groups to have to do any of the documentation work that went around just to work on physically handling, cleaning, and repacking the collections.

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What the participants were doing was something practically useful for the museum service. So we ended up with lots of lovely repacked objects. And that was a nice impact as well. So it was kind of a two way project and the fact that we were hopefully providing an experience for the participants, but they were also helping us to repack our collections. What I think we are trying to do with all of our outreach and engagement work is to provide people with an opportunity to feel welcome in our venues and comfortable around our collections and welcomed by us so that in the future, they might feel more confident to go to other cultural venues and take part in other opportunities that they might not otherwise have had the confidence to do.

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My favorite part of being involved with the project really was the response of the participants to collections, it was the sense of pride that they so clearly took when a box was completed. I certainly feel the same way. And it was nice to see others who have a different experience to working with collections than I do still have that same sense of pride in a box that has been well packed in an accessible way.

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My favorite part of being involved in the project was the fact that the the first session, we worked with a group who I've worked with a lot over the last year they're a group called Edinburgh Recovery Activities, and they support people who are in recovery from alcohol addiction or illicit substances. And they're a great bunch that are really engaged. And on this particular session, Gwen did a tour of the collection center and one of the group members offered to donate a badge that they were wearing on their jacket to the collection. And I think moments like that are really nice, because it shows that when we open up our collections and our museums to people and show them what we're about they realize that the are part of the local history of the area. And I think it's actually important for people's self confidence and sense of place. And it also helps us to make our museum collections more representative of the communities that we're working in. Holding sessions like this gives people the opportunity to have a social connection with one another. And I think that's really important for well being and the fact that we observed you know, kind of camaraderie between them and a chance to kind of you know, have a conversation and a laugh with other people is something that's really important too. We're planning to continue this work. So actually one of the last sessions in the summer was cancelled because some of the people couldn't make it. So we're going to repeat that session this week. And we're also speaking to one of the other groups next week about running a session for more, more people that they support in the spring. And Gwen I have also spoken about how we might widen this out with other groups to include not only sessions here at our collection center, but also visits to our museum and gallery venues across Edinburgh to make it more of our kind of wider programme around engaging with Museums & Galleries Edinburgh's collections.