

## **National Museums Liverpool**

An award-winning network of regional museums has been helping refugees and asylum seekers to improve community interaction, confidence and combat isolation through arts activities, community outreach projects and English language learning activities.

Since 2003 around more than 15,000 participants have been involved in activities by a consortium of four museums, led by National Museums Liverpool and involving Sunderland Museum and Winter garden, Salford Museum and Art Gallery and Leicester City Museums. They developed around 600 activities with adults and children to support community integration and English language learning – both inside and outside the museums - for which the project won a Learning and Skills Council award.

*Engaging Refugees and Asylum Seekers* evolved from a series of summer activities and fun days for refugee families in Liverpool and went on to secure support as a national initiative from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education and Skills.

The four museums have run a wide range of activities including family days and visits for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) learners, arts, crafts, photography and digital media workshops, International Days and film, music and visual arts exhibitions, as well as annual events around Refugee Week.

A group of asylum seeking women in Sunderland made a community quilt and a group of teenagers made a DVD to support refugee integration; an Iranian refugee in Salford produced a film on his and five other people's lives in the city; a booklet of international poetry has evolved from ESOL workshops to improve literacy. The museums have also produced bilingual leaflets and guides to increase access to refugees and asylum seekers and help with ESOL learning.

Evaluation of the project has shown that activities do more than just increase visitor numbers: they have had a wider impact on community integration, helping to develop refugees and asylum seekers understanding of local history; stimulate their social interaction and community involvement; generate a greater sense of health and wellbeing and increased confidence.

The museums are also contributing to skills for employment: Salford Museum is pioneering a volunteering programme for refugees and asylum seekers and Sunderland has helped refugees gain work experience.

Now in its fourth year, the project has been extended throughout 2007 as a

result of a grant from the Baring Foundation. The scale of its success has surprised project partners from social services, refugee support agencies and community groups, who have seen their perceptions of the museums as “dark, boring” places transformed to an acknowledgement that museums are “a place for integration” - a cultural hub where refugees and asylum seekers can “find out where they live and meet other people.”

The museums are now being seen by refugee agencies as a neutral space for debate and discussion about integration, where cultures can be shared and explored, and as a ‘safe space’ for refugees and asylum seekers to meet, take their families and engage with others. One agency partner commented: “I didn’t realise they did so much with the community. There’s a lot they do towards community development and social wellbeing.”

The project has also taken the museums and their staff on a learning curve about the needs of refugees and asylum seekers, and the challenges of serving diverse communities and cultures. This has helped them adapt and simplify activities and information at the museums to make them more accessible.

Claire Duffy, the project coordinator at National Museums Liverpool, says: “We are becoming more visitor focused. This project has become a lot more integral to what the museums do. At the same time, it has sent the message out that museums are places that welcome refugees and asylum seekers and their families; that they are places that they can come and participate and learn, and hopefully through that interaction with other people, to stop them feeling so isolated. We are here for everyone and we want refugees and asylum seekers to be integrated into our core programmes.”

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