

Barnsley Museums

Evaluation of Community Groups

Introduction

As a freelance Creative Producer, I have worked with Barnsley Museums on a number of Heritage and Arts based projects. Many of these projects have given me the opportunity to witness the power of community engagement, and the positive impact it can have for the individuals that participate.

For the purpose of this evaluation I visited Feels Like Home, Culture Companions and Butterflies Dementia Support sessions. I had the opportunity to observe activities, talk with the group leaders and support workers, and gather reflections from the participants. I developed an accessible evaluation game as a device for gathering participant views and used this during my visits. Additionally, as Project Manager for Action for Autism Barnsley, I attended three bespoke sessions delivered by Steven Skelley and supported by Saba Saddiqui. These sessions formed a mini-project that introduced the group to Experience Barnsley and the Archives.

The report gives a brief overview of each session, feedback from participants, and a summary of my observations. In Appendix 1 there is a list of all feedback comments gathered from the visits. Appendix 2 lists engagement figures.

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Feels Like Home

Feels Like Home is a group for people who have English as a second language, and is open to ESOL learners, asylum seekers and international students.

The aim of the group is to provide a setting where people can improve their English conversational skills, make friends, share culture, and dream big dreams! The group learns about Barnsley's history and culture and takes part in various museum activities and trips throughout the year.

The sessions are held on a weekly basis and are attended by individuals and family groups that include children. The group is led by Joanna Newman and supported by two children's support workers.

Session Context

The Feels Like Home session was held in the Community Space by the front entrance of The Civic. The group have traditionally met in the Learning Lab in the Town Hall but are trialling new spaces due to capacity and practical and capacity related issues'. This was the groups first session at The Civic.

The theme of the session was 'Welcome'. Group and partner activities were set up to explore what it means to be welcoming and feel welcomed. Participants also had an opportunity to view and share thoughts on 'The Welcome Mat', an artwork that has been created to communicate a heartfelt welcome. The final part of the session was given over to the participants working on their own creative response to the welcome theme, making some welcome bunting.

There were 11 adult participants and 6 children at the session.

In addition to myself, the group was attended by three professionals from related support organisations.

Observation of the session in action

The group participants enjoy welcoming one another to the session. They go out of their way to go up to each other, say 'hello', and catch-up. They check in with one another and appear relaxed, enjoying the social interaction the session provides. These interactions suggest a strong sense of community and belonging. It is evident that those present feel connected and offer one another friendship, empathy and support.

My interaction with the participants

Once the group was settled into the bunting making activity, I spoke to six individuals - five adults and one child - about their experiences and reflections of the weekly sessions.

Comments from the participants

Why do you come to the sessions:

- Stops me from feeling lonely
- The communication that happens here distracts from life's problems
- I practice my English here
- I've been coming for three years. I come so I can meet new people and learn new things. It keeps me busy.

What have learnt at the sessions:

- I have learnt lots about British culture and celebrations
- I feel more connected to society because Feels Like Home has helped me understand it more

Everyone I spoke with was keen to share their views. They wanted me to know how much the group meant to them. Many of them had been attending on a regular basis for a number of years, with the sessions providing an anchor in their otherwise challenging lives.

One participant used Google translate to respond to my questions. She was keen to make sure I understood and captured her positive reflections about the sessions and Joanna (session leader).

One of the key themes that emerged from the Feels Like Home observation was how the sessions have enabled participants to learn about, and experience, British culture, and how this makes it easier for them to understand and fit in with the local community. Additionally, everyone mentioned the fantastic support they get from Joanna, how she guides individuals with their problems and issues, and signposts them to alternative services and support. I observed many of the participants make a bee line for Joanna on arrival with issues they wanted to discuss with her. She listened and acknowledged their need for input, and, following her introduction to the session activities, she returned to them to talk in a more focused way about their concerns. It was clear from this one visit that the members respect Joanna a great deal and make good use of her extensive knowledge and ability to provide them with information that enables them to go on to resolve things for themselves.

“It’s magical. I feel wanted when I’m here”

Culture Companions

The **Culture Companions** group has evolved out of a group that was originally run by Age UK. It is open to senior members of the community.

Culture Companions is led by Sally Philburn, a freelance co-ordinator, and supported by John Blandamour, a learning assistant at Barnsley Museums.

The sessions are held on a weekly basis in the Learning Lab in the Town Hall.

Session context

The group were having an 80s themed session inspired by the 40th anniversary of the Live Aid concert. The table which everyone was sat around was decorated in a party style with 1980s themed snacks and games. There were also photocopies of pages full of adverts from 1980s copies of the Barnsley Chronicle. An 80s music video quiz had also took place.

My interactions with the participants

I met with three groups, each with three participants, to capture their views and reflections on the sessions. Each group played the evaluation game as a way of sharing and gathering thoughts about the Culture Companions session.

Observation of the session in action

Everyone appeared happy and upbeat. There was a lot of chatter in the room and people were engaging in banter, making humorous comments, and gently teasing one another. It seemed people knew each other well and were at ease in each other's company.

The 80s themed props and the photocopied newspaper extracts were the focus of much of the chatter. The props provided an excellent way of giving everyone something to do and talk about on arrival.

Comments from the group members gathered during the evaluation game

Why do you come to the sessions:

- It's magical. I feel wanted when I'm here.
- The activities are fun and interesting.
- It's different from everyday life.

Thoughts about the session leader:

- Sally tries to cater for everyone's interests; she thinks about each person.
- She adapts the activities and thinks about male and female needs and interests.

Do you visit the museum:

- I've learnt a lot about things in the museum.
- I brought my granddaughter to look around when she was visiting me.
- I brought my daughter and family to look around the museum. I am proud of it.
- I took my granddaughter to the Cooper gallery too. She liked the dressing up.

There was some very honest and heartfelt sharing during the evaluation game and related discussions. There were tears, laughter, hugs, and supportive hand-holding as people shared their reflections on the importance of the group for some individuals.

It is clear that being part of the group means a great deal to the participants, and for some it is central to their emotional well-being and sense of purpose. Some participants shared that they are lonely and isolated, and that their lives sometimes lack meaning and focus. They explained that being part of the Culture Companions brings about a sense of belonging, purpose, and connection. It was clear that Culture Companions is a lifeline for some participants.

Everyone spoke highly of Sally, the session leader, highlighting how welcoming she is and how she tailors activities to the interests of the participants. They value her commitment and approach, and enjoy the heritage themes and activities she shares at the sessions.

“I brought my daughter and family to look around the museum. I am proud of it.”

Butterflies Dementia Support Group

This group meets on a weekly basis and is attended by people that are members of Butterflies Dementia Support and Activities Group.

Butterflies Dementia Support and Activities Group supports people living with a diverse range of illnesses and learning difficulties, and people who are lonely and isolated. The charity provides a range of social and support activities that brings people together to build strong relationships, improve physical health and wellbeing, and reduce loneliness.

Session context

The group is led by Sally Philburn and supported by Julie Brown, founder of Butterflies, Carol Hinsworth staff member at Butterflies, and a volunteer from Butterflies.

The weekly sessions are held in the Learning Lab in Barnsley Town Hall.

I led the evaluation game which we played as a whole group, providing everyone with an opportunity to take it in turns to contribute feedback, support one another with answers, and listen to each other's comments. Following this, Carol Hinsworth led a tea-towel decorating activity.

There were 10 participants at the session.

Observations

There was a friendly and warm vibe in the room, with people chatting away to those they were sat close to. Everyone listened respectfully to one another during the evaluation game and there was some laughter as people shared humorous ideas and comments.

Comments from the participants

Why do you come to the sessions:

- This group has kept me going. It was very difficult for me when my wife passed away.
- It's a good place to share memories.
- I've enjoyed sharing memories about things that happened in the past.
- Sharing memories brings my childhood back to life. It brings my Dad back to life too.

The participants reflections were glowing in terms of the impact of the sessions on their lives. People shared information about challenges in their lives and talked about how attending the sessions gave them a positive focus in their week. One participant suggested that sharing memories of times gone by helps bond the group together. The reflection discussions that regularly occur during the session take participants back to happy times and are a means for members to make connections with one another. There was also mention that for those with dementia, reminiscing can take them back to a happier place. Participants with dementia attend the session with a family member to support them. Family members commented that having an opportunity to share memories and participate in the making activities together is beneficial to often challenging relationships.

**“If this session wasn’t happening, I’d be at home in my pyjamas.
I’d have nothing to get dressed for.”**

Action for Autism Barnsley

Action for Autism Barnsley (AfAB) is a small charity that provides weekly social activities for adults on the autistic spectrum/who are neurodiverse. AfAB provides a range of weekly activities that strive to reduce social isolation and encourage the development of interests and hobbies as a means of creating meaning and purpose for individuals.

Steven Skelley, along with support from Saba Siddiqui (Barnsley Museums), led a series of bespoke sessions at Experience Barnsley that included a visit into the museum store and to Barnsley Archives and Local Studies area. The group also followed up these sessions with interviews with Steven and Saba.

Session breakdown:

- Tour and take-over of Experience Barnsley, including visit to the museum store
- Handling collection
- Sharing own precious objects
- Archive and local studies visit
- Interview with Steven Skelley
- Interview with Saba Sadiqqi

This series of sessions gave the AfAB members a unique insight into Experience Barnsley, the collections, and staff. Importantly the sessions gave the AfAB members an opportunity to learn and engage in their own unique way that encouraged and embraced their individuality and particular interests.

The sessions led by Steven and Saba formed a catalyst for the group to continue with further museum focused activity back in their regular sessions. As part of these activities they interviewed one another to gather some evaluative feedback on the Barnsley Museum sessions.

Observations

The group members clearly enjoyed the sessions. There was a high level of engagement and chatter amongst the members, (this is not always the case as communication can be challenging) and plenty of questions asked. Steven was excellent at tuning into individual interests; he highlighted exhibits that related to these interests and thus increased the levels of engagement and relevance for individuals. His warm, fun and informative approach meant that group members felt comfortable joining in activities and sharing thoughts, ideas and opinions.

The ease of communication from the members within these sessions was a joy to seen.

Comments from Participants collected from peer evaluation activities

The group members carried out some micro-interviews with one another to collect feedback on the sessions. The feedback is listed below.

What did you think about the sessions:

- I'd like to do more sessions at the museum
- I really liked looking around the exhibition
- My favourite part was looking at the old artefacts
- It was fun as well as being informative and interesting

Thoughts about the session leader:

- They were fun, lively and knowledgeable
- Interesting, relatable and good communicators

**“They were fun, lively
and knowledgeable”**

In conclusion

In all the sessions visited there was an uplifting atmosphere. Chatter ebbed and flowed between participants, with people calling out to one another in a jovial way. Laughter, smiles and warm greetings were present in all sessions. Session leaders were involved in conversation too, with group members approaching them to ask questions and share news.

It was clear that people were at ease in these session and were enjoying being present and taking part in the activity.

Participants were generous and open in sharing their reflection on how attending the group impacted on them. Many shared that their lives were lonely and felt empty and that attending the sessions gave them a sense of purpose and belonging. The sessions give people some structure to their week and provide a setting for them to make social connections. This interaction is reducing isolation and providing some participants with an opportunity to step out of their otherwise isolated existence.

It is also apparent that people value the experiences that they are having within the sessions; they enjoy the activities, gaining skills and knowledge that connect them to and inform them about local heritage. At Feels Like Home, participants share, 'I have learnt a lot about British culture and celebrations' and 'I feel more connected to society because Feels Like Home has helped me understand it more'. At Culture Companions and the Butterflies, participants shared, 'I've learnt a lot about objects in the museum' and 'I've learnt more about Barnsley's history'. This exploring and celebrating shared heritage has proved to be a way for participants to build friendships with one another. Participants also shared, 'I feel connected to people when we talk about common childhood experiences' and 'It's magical. I feel wanted when I'm here'.

I believe it is fair to say all group members enjoy connecting with and learning about heritage through session activities and that for some people attending the group, this is life affirming. Participation is helping some individuals find meaning and much needed social interaction in their lives, and that in turn is helping them deal with crippling loneliness, isolation and sadness. These group projects may be relatively small in someways but there is no denying they are mighty in the way they are making such a positive impact on individual lives.

Appendix 1 - Feedback comments

Feels Like Home - comments from participants

Why people come to the sessions:

- Stops me from feeling lonely
- So I can share in people's positive emotions
- It's good for my mental health
- The communication that happens here distracts from life's problems
- There's a very friendly atmosphere
- There is always lots of laughter here
- It's good for the children to come here
- Having the children here is joyful
- I can get help with problems
- It's a good place to get to know people
- People share their common experiences and that makes me feel less alone
- The sessions give people a voice
- I practice my English here
- The atmosphere is friendly - I don't need anything more than that
- It's a good place to find friends
- I get treated really well here
- I've been coming for three years. I come so I can meet new people and learn new things. It keeps me busy.

What people have learnt in the sessions:

- I have learnt a lot about British culture and celebrations
- I feel more connected to society because Feels Like Home has helped me understand it more
- We get a lot of useful information from Joanna
- On the group's WhatsApp, like finding out about visitor passes for National Trust properties
- We learn about each other's cultures
- We've shared food at Christmas and had picnics

Thoughts about the session leader:

- Joanna always pays everyone attention
- She takes time to get to know everyone
- Joanna is really hard working
- Joanna is nice, she is nice to everyone here
- She is happy and helpful

“We learn about each other's cultures”

Suggestions from group members:

- More trips
- 5 days a week of Feel Like Home, please!
- Coming to Feels Like Home is my best habit
- Maybe a separate room for the children so we can have kid's stuff in one room and children's stuff in another

Things I have enjoyed the most:

- Singing and dancing
- Doing things together
- The trips. I love going on trips
- Sharing in each other's cultures
- Learning about culture in Barnsley
- I love the trips. We've been to Filey, Whitby, Liverpool, Wentworth Castle.
- Sharing food at Christmas and picnics

Culture Companions - comments from participants

Why people come to the sessions/what people like about it:

- I like the ambience, the atmosphere
- Being with people who are like minded
- Coming to the group is a lifeline to me
- Sitting and laughing
- Not being at home alone, that's the main thing for me
- There is a welcoming atmosphere
- I like being with people. I'd be stuck in the house if I didn't come here
- It's magical. I feel wanted when I'm here
- The activities are fun and interesting
- I always look forward to coming to the session. I come every week
- It gets me out of the house. I look forwards to Thursdays

- Some of us go for lunch together after the session. Everyone is welcome.
- If the session is cancelled, we would still get together. We have become friends
- People you are with. Having a laugh.
- It's different from everyday life

What people have learnt at the sessions:

- Since Sally took over leading the group, I have learnt lots of crafts
- I like it when we share personal interests. You learn a lot that way

What has been your Golden Moment from the sessions:

- I don't have one moment; it's the continuity that's my Golden Moment
- Meeting so many lovely people - the finest thing was meeting Judy, she has become my special friend
- I like all of it. I just enjoy coming and the crafts

Thoughts about the session leader:

- Sally is really patient
- She's competent, interesting and caring
- Sally tries to cater for everyone's interests. She thinks about each person.
- Sally adapts the activities and thinks about male and female needs and interests
- She's kind, friendly, helpful and has great ideas
- John is always there to help out. He's thoughtful and kind
- The session is better with Sally leading it. She really cares.
- Sally's got lots of ideas and asks people what they want to do. Her ideas are brilliant.

- Sally is fantastic, knowledgeable and creative
- John is funny. He has lots of banter. He's helpful and creative too.

Do you visit the museum:

- I've learnt a lot about things in the museum.
- I brought my granddaughter to look around when she was visiting me.
- I bring my granddaughter and family to look around the museum. I am proud of it.
- I took my granddaughter to the Cooper gallery too; she liked the dressing up.

Things I have enjoyed the most:

- Visiting the Town Hall; I learnt a lot when we visited the museum
- I liked making the lavender bags. We made lavender scones too.
- The Sports Day we did was great. It was very funny.

What have you learnt:

- Finding out about the history of the town
- I've learnt a lot about the history of Barnsley
- About Slazenger. I knew the factory was there, but I didn't really know much about it.
- I've learnt more about the history of mining
- Old games
- Lots of crafts - French knitting, Christmas wreathes
- I've learnt lots about different generations and how other people lived. I really enjoy listening to their stories.

What makes a good session:

- Teamwork
- It's good that Sally gives us a schedule of what is happening, so we know what we'll be doing each time
- I like the craft activities best
- Having a good chat with someone
- Lots of people have different skills
- I like it when people share memories. Someone writes and reads poems. They are great.

If the session had been cancelled today:

- I'd be at home wishing I have something interesting to do
- Maybe I'd have listened to some music or taken the dog for a walk. I've got to get out!
- I'd have stopped at home. I'd probably have got bored.
- Stayed at home. I might have done some gardening
- I might have gone to visit some of my family
- I'd be sat in my house alone
- I'd be in my pyjamas, no reason to get dressed, just alone the whole day.

Suggestions from group members:

- Nothing. I like it the way it is
- Maybe we could have a session based on TV theme tunes
- They are perfect as they are!

Butterflies - comments from participants

Why people come to the sessions:

- It's a happy group. I get a lot out of it
- The highlight of my week is coming to the Butterflies sessions
- This group has kept me going. It was very difficult for me when my wife passed away.
- It's like a family
- I get a lot out of coming to this group
- I like meeting people with similar life experiences
- It's a good place to share memories
- There's always lots of laughter and chat
- I feel I have support from the people here
- I feel connected to people when we talk about common childhood experiences
- If this session wasn't happening, I'd be at home in my pyjamas. I'd have nothing to get dressed for
- I'd just be at home doing chores if the session wasn't happening. It's good to get out of the house

What people have learnt at the sessions:

- I've learnt a lot from the museum visits
- I've learnt more about Barnsley's history
- We've done new crafts, glass bottle painting and making necklaces
- It was good when we visited Elsecar; we learnt a lot there
- Making wreathes and doing jigsaws



Thoughts about the session leader:

- She is full of good ideas and really talented
- Down to Earth
- Friendly
- Kind and thoughtful - the all-round package!
- Lovely
- Fantastic

Things I have enjoyed the most:

- I've made friends here
- It's a good session - I get a lot out of it
- We've had some music entertainers; they were excellent
- I've enjoyed sharing memories about things that happened in the past
- Sharing memories brings my childhood back to life. It brings my Dad back to life too

Suggestions from group members:

- It's nice to have some chat time at the beginning of the session but not everyone can join in or hear.
- I think we need to have chat time and then activity time as everyone gets something out of it.
- I'm happy with the way things are. Its relaxing. You can be who you are.

Action for Autism Barnsley

What did you think about the sessions:

- The sessions were relaxed, fun and motivating
- I'd like to do more sessions at the museum
- The sessions were very interesting. I liked the train model the best.
- I really liked looking around the exhibition
- My favourite part was looking at the old artefacts
- It was informative and interesting
- It was fun as well as being informative and interesting
- There were some good topics each week
- It was informative and entertaining and sometimes shocking!
- I can't think of any ways that the sessions could have been improved.

Do you visit museums and galleries (other than part of group activity):

- Yes, especially if they are free
- Yes, I went to the museum where I used to live before I moved to Barnsley
- Yes, but there has to be something I am interested in on display

Thoughts about the session leader:

- They were fun, lively and knowledgeable
- Interesting, relatable and good communicators.

Appendix 2 - Attendance figures

Feels Like Home

Main group

Average session attendance 22

Sessions per year 48

Annual engagements 1056

Feels Like Home Choir

Average session attendance 10

Sessions per year 10

Annual engagements 300

Feels Like Home trips and outings

Average trip attendance 100

Outings per year 10

Annual engagements 1000

Culture Companions

Average session attendance 21

Sessions per year 48

Annual engagements 1008

Butterflies

Average session attendance 6

Sessions per year 48

Annual engagements 288