

New Expressions 2

Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

New Expressions is a partnership programme for museums based in South West England. It sets out to build a culture of collaboration between museums and contemporary artists, to unlock the creative potential of collections and generate powerful visitor experiences.

New Expressions 2 was the second phase of the programme and ran between 2010 and 2012. It delivered contemporary artists' commissions in six regional museums together with a central series of capacity building and professional development opportunities for museum staff.

An evaluation plan was implemented to measure how well New Expressions 2 performed against its business objectives and the goals of the Arts Council's *Achieving Great Art for Everyone*.

A range of methods was used to collect quantitative and qualitative evidence. Baseline surveys and exit interviews were carried out with participating museum staff and artists. A survey of audiences and participants was undertaken. Quantitative outputs were collected in relation to the six projects and the central programme.

There is considerable evidence that the New Expressions projects enabled museum collections to be 'worked harder', revealing new meanings and enabling museum curators, artists and audiences to refresh perspectives and engage with historical cultural or scientific material in new ways.

The majority of museum staff said that their collaborations with artists would affect their organisation's interpretation of collections in the future, while artists reported new critical insights into historical material and collecting. Almost half of audience members said that experiencing the contemporary art commissions made them feel differently about the museum and its collection.

All of the artists embarked upon their commissions with a high level of confidence about working with museums. Whilst there was a further growth in artists' confidence in relation to some aspects of working with museums, fewer artists felt fully confident about collaboration at the end of the project than had done at the start. It is suggested that the New Expressions 2 artists gained a

new understanding of working in a museum setting in a formal and structured way and a fresh appreciation of the complexities and challenges involved.

All of the museum staff involved in New Expressions 2 reported a rise in confidence about working with artists at the end of the programme – in some cases a dramatic rise. In particular, more museum staff felt confident about approaching artists, running selection processes and approaches to learning and education in an artist commission. Meanwhile, at the end of the programme, just over half of museum staff felt that they still did not have sufficient knowledge of contemporary art and artists to identify strong artists and proposals – although most now felt they knew where to access such expertise.

At the start of the programme, most museum staff felt that being part of a central programme of support would be one of the most useful benefits of participation. Evidence from interviews suggests that 'central programme of support' was perceived as practical support, co-ordination and promotion rather than the developmental and strategic support that New Expressions provides. It is recommended that New Expressions 3 further clarifies this.

Whilst at the start of New Expressions 2, there had been some ambivalence among museum staff about the usefulness of taking part in field visits, at the end of the programme, museum staff reported finding these visits one of the most useful parts of the central activity in practice.

There is clear evidence that the opportunity to work with museums and their rich collections inspired some of the UK's leading artists to push artistic boundaries and stretch practice. Eight out of the nine artists taking part said that their projects had challenged them artistically. In addition to engaging critically with historic collections, artists were stimulated by the museum context in general and the relationship between museum and audience. Most of the artists anticipated their experience would have a wider impact on their creative practice, beyond the commission itself.

New Expressions 2 was one of the first collaborative programmes of its kind to survey audiences and participants in a structured way. 247 responses to a general audience survey were secured, in addition to responses from 64 adults and 41 children taking part in related activities. While this in no way constitutes a census, it does offer useful insights into the profile and experiences of audience members encountering the New Expressions commissions.

There is good evidence that the New Expressions commissions were an important draw in leading contemporary arts audiences to visit the museums and engage with their historic collections for the first time. When compared to audiences at the region's former Renaissance hub museums or dedicated visual art venues, a relatively low percentage of New Expressions audiences – 22% - were first-time visitors to the venue. However, almost half of these first-time visitors – 43% – visited the museum specifically to experience the contemporary art commission. A further 29% of first-time visitors said it was one of the reasons for their visit.

There is also good evidence that New Expressions 2 successfully introduced 'traditional' museum audiences to high quality contemporary art. When compared to audiences at dedicated visual art venues, a high percentage of New Expressions audiences – 32% - had little or no previous experience of contemporary art. Most were regular museum visitors and half had not expected to encounter the contemporary art work at the museum.

Audience development, public engagement and participation were central to New Expressions 2. Each museum received dedicated investment to develop participation programmes as part of their commissions. 4,700 adults, children and young people took part in the specially developed activities. 88% of adult participants said that they enjoyed the activity, as did 98% of children.

Both audience and participant surveys indicate high levels of positive engagement with the art works. Analysis of the terms used by audience members and participants, to describe the experience of engaging with the art, highlight responses of intrigue, enjoyment, provocation and captivation.

Analysis of the geographical profile of New Expressions 2 audiences offers no evidence of impact on improving perceptions of South West England as a destination for cultural tourism.

The objectives of New Expressions 2 were closely aligned with the goals of Arts Council's *Achieving Great Art for Everyone*. With the exception of diversifying the arts workforce – which is a regional issue – there is clear evidence in the programme's performance against its business objectives that New Expressions 2 has delivered strongly against the *Achieving Great Art for Everyone* goals.

Guided by the findings of the evaluation, a number of recommendations are made for the development of a third phase of New Expressions. Included among these are recommendations that New Expressions continues to invest in a

strong, fully resourced central team, that it continues to develop a high quality capacity building programme, that it refines its 'offer' to both museums and contemporary artists and continues to make dedicated investment into audience development and community participation programmes, as part of its funded projects.

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