

Review of West Midlands Museum Development, 2021-2023: Key Points

“Always a pleasure to work with, very collaborative”

Durnin Research Ltd, with Jenni Waugh Consulting Ltd and The Collett Consultancy were appointed in March 2023 to conduct a Review of the West Midlands Museum Development Programme (2021-23).

This review captures the achievements of the programme from 2021 to 2023 and will be published and shared with stakeholders and funders. It will inform future delivery in the context of Arts Council England’s (ACE) plans for the delivery of museum development from 2024 onwards.



Since 2012, ACE has invested in three rounds (2012-15, 2015-18 and 2018-22) of the national **Museum Development Programme**. The Museum Development programme focuses on building the resilience and ambition of non-national and, largely, non-NPO museums across England, prioritising the development of museums which do not receive direct investment from central government or any associated Non-Departmental Public Bodies.

Ironbridge Gorge Museums Trust (IGMT) was appointed to deliver the Museum Development Programme for the West Midlands in 2015. Through grants, free training and projects, the West Midlands Museum Development (WMMD) Programme supports museums, both Accredited and Working Towards Accreditation, across the wider West Midlands region to develop, thrive and reflect the rich diversity and cultural heritage of the region. The programme received £307,595 in 2021/22 and £313,255 in 2022/23 from ACE.

WMMD stimulates and facilitates discussions on new and innovative ways of providing access to collections, increasing equality and diversity, engaging younger audiences, and improving excellence. The Programme harnesses experience and examples of best practice from both within and outside the sector, working in partnership with the national MDUK steering group, National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) and Sector Support Organisations (SSOs).

“They know their museums really well”

The Table overleaf summarises the Programme in numbers, highlighting the breadth and depth of engagement with museums in the region. Engagement with museums, both Accredited and Working Towards Accreditation, is over 90%. Museums feel in touch and well informed, and value a programme that is approachable, responsive and *“always has something to offer.”*

Table 1: West Midlands Museum Development Programme in numbers		
	2021/22	2022/23
Museums participating in the programme (Accredited and WTA ¹)	125	128
Non-Accredited museums participating in the programme	24	19
Events	73 events 475 museums (& freelancers) 580 individual attendees ²	57 events 361 museums (& freelancers) 428 individual attendees
Projects	13 projects, 72 participating museums	8 projects, 33 participating museums
Grants	16 grants awarded £40,273.61 ³	25 grants awarded £58,520 ⁴
Museums undergoing organisational health checks	3	6
1 to 1 support	8 Accreditation surgeries, 4 Bid writing support, 3 Project grant surgeries	9 Accreditation surgeries, 4 Bid writing, 3 Energy management surgeries, 11 Project grant surgeries
Number of museums not participating in any MD activities	12 (9.6%)	11 (8.6%)
Source: WMMD, April 2023		

The social and economic after-effects following the pandemic presented a range of challenges for all museums in the West Midlands. The pivoting of the WMMD offer online in 2020-21 has been widely praised and presented greater opportunity for engagement, helping to overcome barriers such as capacity and cost.

The pandemic accelerated both the West Midlands's transition to thematic delivery, blending digital and in-person delivery, and pan-regional collaboration.

The 2022-23 WMMD programme built on the pandemic response developed in 2021-22 supporting museums with the following priority areas to help them recover and reset:

- ④ **Reopening the museum** – rebuilding audiences, continuing to adapt programmes and measures to navigate the ongoing unknown Covid-19 environment, staff training.
- ④ **Volunteer recruitment, succession, training and development** – in particular rebuilding the volunteer base post lockdown.
- ④ **Restoring income generation.**

2022/23 also saw WMMD support museums with management training and governance, responding to museums reporting loss of confidence in these areas during the pandemic.

In person delivery took place where it had significant benefit for participants and WMMD keep delivery models under review.

¹ Working Towards Accreditation

² Excludes MDN EDI training events

³ 9 x Recovery Grants £35,182; 2 x Revealing Hidden Histories linked grants £1482.02, 5 x Benchmarks linked grants £3609.59

⁴ 7 x Reset grants £23,528; 4 x Benchmarks linked grants £3031; 5 x Bright Future linked grants £4379; 4 x Educations Action Research linked grants £13,998; 5 x The Wild Escape grant £13,580

Delivering Museum Development

The last two years have seen significant changes to the WMMD delivery team, both in terms of leadership and overall approach. The current joint programme managers stepped up during the review period and are very well regarded. WMMD has evolved to take a more thematic approach to delivery, becoming better aligned with the East Midlands' delivery approach. Increasingly, combined delivery has highlighted a sense of shared vision between the two programme teams.

The joint leadership approach that has characterised WMMD during much of the time it has been hosted by IGMT, is well regarded by museums and by partners. It allows for initiatives and programmes to be internally well developed, and complementary in terms of specialisms, and for the programme overall to be agile and adaptive. For example, the current programme leadership has refined the programme's EDI offer and developed its approach to supporting museums in addressing the emerging challenges of the cost of living crisis and providing energy management advice and support.

WMMD has been able to work more collaboratively across the national **Museum Development Network** during 2021/22 to strategically support national needs; pilot programmes include National EDI programme, Volunteer Development programme and Carbon Literacy. The programme has strengthened and extended existing partnerships with NPOs and SSOs to broker support for identified needs, including continuing to share skills and knowledge from IGMT. Previous sessions have included audience development and fundraising.

During 2021/22 and 2022/23 WMMD has benefited from the strengthened national role that Arts Council England has played in the coordination and delivery of museum development, supporting improved regional coordination and collaboration.

The programme has developed strong delivery partnerships over the past couple of years, and in particular its relationships with the Collections Trust and Museum Development East Midlands (MDEM) have deepened and flourished.

Despite these changes, the programme has maintained its level of activities for regional museums, with one commenting "*...the volume of activity is wonderful – there is always something going on*".

The **WMMD website** is well regarded for its quality and content, and the programme is seen as a leader in the way it communicates with museums. Museums use the website as a reference point for news, events, courses, and funding opportunities.

"Evidenced informed programming."

WMMD has developed a reputation for **clear and effective data management** that is thorough, comprehensive, and well presented. This covers all levels of participation, with a highlight being the 'statement of participation' being produced on an individual museum level.

It will be important that this approach is maintained in the 'Midlands' programme from 2024 onwards.

Coffee and Chatter, introduced during the pandemic, provided a network and opportunities to connect during a challenging time. Since reopening, session frequency was reduced as attendance declined. Focussed Coffee and Chatter continues to offer informal sessions on specific topics such as Accreditation, Arts Council England Investment Principles or to draw together peer groups (non-Accredited, hosted organisations etc).

Collections care is now being delivered by consultant partners. The Collections Trust highlighted that those museums that participated in '**Banish the Backlog**' sessions worked well in a cohort setting in the West Midlands and participation has not dropped off to the same extent as other regions. This gives

the impression that participating museums in the West Midlands were particularly committed, supported by good networking and peer support.

The WMMD approach to **EDI** is very well regarded both by partners and museums and has been a priority since the programme was taken on by IGMT. The team are keen to improve the collection and quality of EDI data collected by museums in the region.

The West Midlands has recently delivered a joint EDI programme with South East Museum Development and is beginning to find a reduction in cohort size, and reluctance from some museums to participate (due to lower capacity and fewer volunteers). Once signed up however, participants are seeking more depth in terms of content. Future delivery may take the form of hybrid EDI programmes, working with museums facing capacity constraints. This could entail training and mentoring alongside open access sessions and extending provision to museums that have previously participated ('how are you getting on?').

Adapting support to meet changing museum needs

"Very fleet of foot, flexible"

WMMD continues to respond to requests for help and advice, from helping with governance disputes to troubleshooting, or supporting museums with applications for a range of funding opportunities, including MEND, Arts Council England grants and CRF. Consultees report that the programme is good at reaching out to museums, with one highlighting that the programme was quick to get in touch and offer support following changes to governance.

WMMD have developed their approach to identifying and **supporting museums at risk**. As shown in Table 1, the programme has excellent reach, with only 12 Accredited or Working Towards Accreditation museums not participating in 2021/22, and 11 in 2022/23. Given this, the team can know what is going on with most museums, and respond when participation drops off, or issues are raised.

"You do need to continue to have museum chats"

WMMD anticipated the impacts of the fuel and cost of living crisis would hit museums hard and have designed packages of support, with other programmes following suit. This demonstrates the ability of WMMD to be agile, and quickly adapt to the emerging opportunities and challenges facing its museums. Most recently the team are developing approaches to support **carbon literacy** advice for industrial heritage organisations, working closely with colleagues at IGMT.

Launched in March 2023, WMMD's **Strategic Intervention Fund (SIF)**, is another example of the team supporting museums. Whilst the programme cannot fund core costs, SIF supports museums to find strategic solutions and a sustainable way forward in difficult times. The fund can support museums in seeking external expertise; exploring new ways of working or new opportunities; reviewing practices that are no longer fit for purpose; exploring alternative business or governance models; and providing advice on the best way for your organisation to respond to an emerging challenge.

WMMD evidencing its key characteristics as an effective regional Museum Development programme/provider

The recent [national museum development evaluation](#) (delivered by Durnin Research in partnership with DC Research and Pomegranate) determined the key characteristics of an effective regional Museum Development programme/provider.

This Review highlights that WMMD meets many, if not all, of these characteristics:

- ④ **WMMD works collaboratively at the national level and brings regional perspective to the design and delivery of its programme.** The programme seems well regarded by all, and as well as the deepening relationship between WMMD and MDEM during the past 12 months, the West Midlands team has also effectively collaborated nationally and with other programmes.
- ④ **WMMD's programme is clear, well communicated and promoted online,** through local networks and face-to-face. Arts Council England and other sector bodies promote, support, and roll out new ideas and initiatives through WMMD.
- ④ **There are good relationships and connections between museums and the WMMD team.** Whilst the programme has moved from geographic to thematic based working, relationships with museums have been maintained.
- ④ **Evaluation and review of delivery is 'baked in' to the WMMD Programme.** This report, and its predecessors, highlight how the programme has reflected and changed over its lifetime.
- ④ **WMMD adapts support to meet developing needs and priorities, including but not limited to EDI, energy, and cost of living.** Being adaptive and agile has meant that the programme has been able to flex when necessary.
- ④ **WMMD works well with partners and Sector Support Organisations,** notably MDEM and the Collections Trust, and has a good relationship with Arts Council England. Partners feel WMMD respects partner priorities and is able to work collaboratively.
- ④ **WMMD extensively uses cohort approaches to delivering support and learning to museums.** This activity now tends to mix online and in-person inputs, and flexes to account for variances in capacity and availability across museums.
- ④ **WMMD collaborates effectively as a team,** with comparative skillsets and expertise, supported by partners and collaborators. The team is very supportive: each team member feels empowered to develop areas of specialism, with colleagues 'critical friending' ideas and initiatives to make sure they are well developed ahead of being rolled out.
- ④ **WMMD has well regarded processes to collect,** share, and use performance management information and regional intelligence. Data and evidence produced by the programme is both comprehensive and accessible.

Preparing for a 'Midlands' programme

This Review has highlighted the transition WMMD has undergone in 2021/22 and 2022/23 from a geographic to a thematic based programme. This process, which had begun prior to this period, accelerated during the pandemic and is agile, adaptive, and aligned in terms of values, style, and approach to the MDEM.

In March 2023, Arts Council England announced that the new Museum Development Programme would be delivered by five partners from 2024 onwards, with geographies aligned to Arts Council England's area structures. One of these five will be a 'Museum Development Midlands' programme, combining the programmes currently delivered by WMMD and MDEM.

The alignment in approach that has occurred during the review period between WMMD and MDEM has been noted, and there has been a deepening of the relationship during the past 12 months in particular, with collaboration across both teams.

There is significant complementarity between the programmes, who are approaching new arrangements as a willing partnership of equals. It is likely that Arts Council England will receive a strong Midlands offer that combines the focus from the West Midlands on EDI and cost of living, excellent communications and data/evidence gathering and management, with MDEM's highly respected track record on governance development and support and collections care.