



RAMM's Wellbeing Programme Royal Albert Memorial Museum

Arts & Health South West Prize 2016 **Shortlisted Case Study**



Name of organisation: Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery (RAMM)

Title of project/programme: RAMM's wellbeing programme (Living Each Season; Collections & Identity; and English at the Museum)

Dates of project/programme: Throughout 2015

Summary

The wellbeing programme at Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery (RAMM) was designed to help people make the most of life, regardless of the challenges they were facing. During 2015, RAMM worked with people with dementia and their carers; people with mental health issues; and people learning English or improving their literacy skills.

RAMM's collections range from stuffed birds to 150-year-old costumes, artefacts from around the world to local landscape paintings and archaeological finds. For some people, objects provide a starting point for a journey of self-discovery, a way to tell their own story and build self-esteem. For others, exploring objects is a shared experience in the moment which stimulates the mind and liberates people to be themselves.

The museum itself is a safe, welcoming, non-institutional space where visitors are free of the labels they might experience in the rest of life.

RAMM provided courses in Collections and Identity, co-created and co-delivered with Devon Recovery Learning Community. RAMM offered a nature sound walk through Ubuntu multicultural counselling services.

RAMM and Exeter College taught an English at the Museum course, aimed at students improving their literacy as well as others with English as a foreign language.

RAMM completed a second pilot phase of its dementia-friendly programme in 2015, and began offering monthly sessions to the public. These alternated between object-handling on a seasonal theme, hands-on art-making, and gallery tours. The museum adapted activities to suit external day care providers, an NHS dementia assessment ward, and local memory cafes.

Overview

The aim of the wellbeing programme was to use the museum and its collections as a flexible resource to help people feel connected, express their identity, build confidence and find their own place in the world. RAMM built on successful pilot projects the previous year to extend its provision for people with dementia, carers, people with mental health issues and students improving their English language skills. Across the wellbeing programme, people define themselves by their willingness to explore the museum, not their illness or role in society.

The initial idea of the Collections and Identity course was to help people with mental health issues reach a stage where disability and symptoms would no longer define an individual's identity or prevent people from achieving important

life goals. With funding for mental health care under extreme pressure and thresholds for statutory treatment rising, people with mild to moderate mental health problems in Devon can find it increasingly difficult to access support from the NHS as an early intervention. Non-medical interventions at an early stage can help people manage their own mental health and develop resilience. As well as offering students an opportunity to meet others who can empathise with their situation, RAMM aimed to open up avenues for learning.

Devon is home to large numbers of older people, and an estimated 13,847 people in the county were living with the illness in 2013, according to the Alheimers Society. There is a gathering body of evidence for the benefits of cognitive stimulation in the early stages of dementia. RAMM has developed activities that are especially appropriate for people in the months following early diagnosis – when there is very little provision – and enjoyable for people of all ages and backgrounds.

Poor adult literacy is a serious obstacle to both employment and wellbeing in England. Around 16 percent of the nation's adults – 5.2 million people – do not have the reading or writing skills expected of an 11-year-old. This closes off many areas of work and can make it a painful struggle to do everyday tasks or help children with their schooling. Not everyone thrives in a traditional classroom, and RAMM provides a very different environment for learning.

Each strand on the wellbeing programme used the museum and its collections in similar ways. These methods represent the ethos of RAMM, which is Home to a Million Thoughts. The museum aims to inspire reflection. Visitors of all ages are encouraged to experience the wonder of exploring with your mind, and maybe with your fingers.

The dementia-friendly programme took its name – Living Each Season – from 19th-century U.S. philosopher Henry Thoreau, who wrote: *"Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of the each"*. Sessions used the combination of museum objects and the loose theme of the seasons to spark conversations.

Sessions began with setting the scene in the current season through photographs or audio recordings. Everyone present was invited to contribute to a shared verbal pinboard of sights, sounds and smells.

RAMM developed three types of activity: object-handling on a seasonal theme; an artist-led art-making session combined with a museum experience such as a visit to a gallery or store area; and dementia-friendly gallery tours of either permanent displays or temporary exhibitions.

So a winter-themed session might look at objects from the icy Arctic, Roman heating tiles or a Nigerian woollen blanket. A spring session might be a chance to hold tiny pale blue eggs, stroke a stuffed cuckoo, look at objects with flower motifs from around the world; in summer we might look at pickled sea creatures, hold shells from the Indian Ocean, try on a boater hat; and in Autumn

we focused on trees in art, barkcloth from West Africa and the South Pacific, and richly coloured yarns from the Middle East.

The range of objects meant there was no right answer, no pressure, creating a relaxed atmosphere. Trained staff followed methodology developed at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), first looking together and describing objects, before providing information and inviting participants to make their own personal connections. Objects sometimes triggered memories, but the emphasis was on the moment.

People with dementia and carers were treated on the same level -as valued, respected adults. We almost never talked about dementia.

Hands-on art-making on the dementia-friendly programme – facilitated by an artist - provided a creative opportunity for people who are often too overwhelmed by day-to-day pressures to embark on additional activities which could be messy. The group also experienced a presentation and lunch with sound artist Chris Watson, who was commissioned by the Arts Council to create a seasonal composition for RAMM from nature recordings.

Courses at RAMM for people with mental health issues and students learning English included creative self-expression in visual media and writing inspired by the museum collections. Students developed a portfolio of creative responses, guided through activities from poetry to storytelling to photography, drawing and painting.

Partners are vital to RAMM and included Devon Recovery Learning Community, Exeter College, Exeter Dementia Action Alliance, Franklyn NHS Hospital, The Mede respite care centre, Ubuntu multicultural counselling services, the University of Exeter (for a mindfulness masterclass at the museum as part of the Being Human Festival) and West Bank memory cafes. Partner organisations were chosen for promoting the spirit of living well.

The dementia-friendly programme during 2015 comprised of seven sessions at the museum and seven outreach sessions in hospitals and day care settings. Participants varied from eight to 30. The six-week mental health course was offered twice, and each time 12 to 15 students were enrolled, but one or two invariably dropped out before the end. The six-week English at the Museum course involved eight people in 2015.

RAMM published case studies (<https://www.rammuseum.org.uk/about-ramm/participation>) and a blog (<https://rammlivingeachseason.wordpress.com/category/the-programme/>) to share its experiences with others.

Innovation

RAMM's dementia-friendly programme built on best national and international practice, adapting acclaimed methodology from New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), in innovative combination with museum objects and the theme of the seasons.

It is unusual in the dementia care world to support carers without focusing on people's daily challenges. Dementia was almost never mentioned. RAMM aimed for the kind of experience described by a MOMA visitor in its evaluation: "It's like a date, after 42 years of marriage."

RAMM's unique dementia-friendly programme was enjoyable for people of all ages and backgrounds. RAMM developed materials for participants to take home and continue the conversation, extending impact beyond the visit itself.

The use of audio – nature sounds in particular – was also groundbreaking in this field. Dementia-friendly tours of high-profile temporary exhibitions added to the museum's public programme and provided a means for people with dementia to participate in topical discussions. Again, opportunities for older people and people with dementia to feel like valued, active citizens are very rare.

Participation

The museum is a public space where people experience being active citizens, engaging with topical debates such as animal welfare or climate change. Participants with dementia and mental health issues helped to co-create activities. The mental health courses were co-taught by tutors with lived experience of mental health issues.

All participants in RAMM's dementia-friendly activities were encouraged to influence the programme's development. Staff and volunteers held detailed debriefings after each session, in a continuous process of learning and improvement. Participants and carers shaped the format and length of dementia-friendly sessions, and fed back on objects they found particularly evocative. They taught staff about the importance of providing a range of objects and sensations, because you can never predict what someone might want to see.

Each person and each dementia is unique, but the range of participants helped to devise activities to suit everyone. Participants with particular kinds of dementia, and younger participants, were able to express what they would like from the museum. For example, RAMM devised audio tools in response to requests from participants who could no longer read. RAMM increased the information on illustrated information sheets, answering feedback from hospital patients. During an art activity responding to music, one gentleman asked for Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody, while another requested Johann Sebastian Bach.

Participants called for activities that were fun, regardless of long-term impact. One said, "People ask me why enjoy myself [at the museum] if I'm only going to forget it. I say, why not? I've loved every minute."

Outcomes

RAMM used the New Economics Foundation's five ways to wellbeing as a checklist, and gathered qualitative evidence from participants, carers and health

professionals. Testimonials for the dementia programme described happier, less confused and more communicative participants, with improved memory afterwards; happier, more relaxed carers enjoying creativity in their lives; couples talking to each other more and with increased pride and dignity; participants feeling connected to people around the world and across time through objects; participants feeling connected to others in the group; participants feeling less isolated.

RAMM introduced a feedback form designed by Franklyn Hospital, for all participants. Over 90 percent ticked the most smiley face, and none ticked lower than neutral. More rigorous evaluation of sessions at Franklyn Hospital is ongoing. An occupational therapist said the museum was a great resource for assessment and stimulation of patients.

Students from both the Collections and Identity and the English at the Museum courses gained the confidence to enrol on mainstream classes at the museum and/or in formal Further Education. Participants in the English classes said they felt more part of the community.

An evaluation of Collection and Identity courses using University College London's Museums Wellbeing Measures Toolkit showed an improvement in participants' mental health and anxiety levels. One participant said: "Depression is about losing touch with your true self.... But if you are given stuff that is worth handling, and then maybe drawing or writing about it is therapeutic in itself.... I become me, not the label someone has given me."

Learning

RAMM staff designed the dementia-friendly programme with couples in mind, and envisaged friends and partners accompanying people with dementia. However, once visitors were asked to make a financial contribution, they perceived it more as an opportunity for respite, and provided professional carers for their relatives instead of coming themselves. RAMM has included the professional carers in activities on an equal level, and found that in situations where the professional carer lacked confidence, it seemed to improve their relationship. At the same time, RAMM began developing connections with West Bank memory cafes, introducing carers to the idea of a shared experience at the museum through experiencing objects and making art together. RAMM adapted object-handling sessions for memory cafes and hospitals. In large, bustling settings, the team guided clusters of two or three people rather than encompassing the whole group. On the ward, staff discovered that nature sounds and art reproductions were a good way to maintain continuity during enforced tea breaks.

Museum staff across teams and sites expressed commitment to becoming more dementia-friendly but some said they still lacked confidence. RAMM is planning more training for staff and volunteers.

Participants on the Collections and Identity courses hated it coming to an end,

and attendance was very poor for the final sessions. RAMM is planning to pilot a new format so that the last session of each course will become an alumni meeting – an opportunity for students to stay connected with the museum and with each other.

Critical success factors

The critical success factors for RAMM's wellbeing activities lay in the versatility and potential within the museum and collections themselves. The way that people are drawn (or not) to particular objects reveals aspects of who we are and our place in the world. For activities inside the museum, it is a safe, welcoming, non-institutional space where people are free to define themselves.

The Exeter Dementia Action Alliance held its launch at the museum, and RAMM's reputation is spreading among dementia activists and providers of services for people with dementia. RAMM plans to offer dementia-friendly tours of key temporary exhibitions as part of its regular public programme, as a way of increasing access to people whose social and cultural worlds are often shrinking.

RAMM continues to build on the strengths of its wellbeing activities in each of these strands – dementia-friendly and carers through a monthly programme as well as outreach to day care and hospital settings; mental health issues through six-week courses at least twice a year; and improving English through at least one course per year.

The team is keen to develop resources for self-led museum visits, which would be a way to reach wider numbers of local people with dementia and with mental health issues.

Funding and Resources

The wellbeing programme received an annual budget of around £4,000, primarily from a combination of Arts Council England, Exeter City Council, and the Norman Family Charitable Trust. Partners gave significant contributions in kind – providing tutors and marketing – as well as small grants to cover the transport costs of outreach work. The most significant cost was paying freelance artists at professional rates for delivery and planning. Other costs include art materials, refreshments, printed marketing, reproductions of artworks for outreach visits, and storage boxes for handling materials. RAMM's Audience Development team spent considerable hours on the programme. RAMM is seeking external funding to expand its wellbeing programme at the museum and in local venues, and to cover the costs of creating resources for self-museum visits.

Images

Title: RAMM's Living Each Season programme included dementia-friendly gallery tours.

Date: Throughout 2015

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Title: People feel connections across time and geography when they handle museum objects.

Date: Throughout 2015

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Title: An Egyptian tapestry inspired a dementia-friendly group to create Autumn leaves using textiles.

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