



Museum Development East Midlands  
**2016-17 Mystery Shopper Programme**  
Objectives, delivery and outcomes

## **Overview**

The Mystery Shopper Programme is a part of the wider 'Engaging Children and Young People' programme of work being undertaken by MDEM.

The programme aimed to give museums in the region direct, authentic and independent feedback on their offer to children, young people and families; highlighting what they do well and where there may be areas for development.

From March 2016, fully trained 'family teams' and 'teen teams' of Mystery Shoppers visited 11 participating museums to assess their offer for families and younger visitors.

The teams used a secure facebook page to make their comments during the visits and to take pictures of what they saw and did. Following their 'undercover' visit, the teams also provided a written report to the programme facilitator, which was turned into the report sent to the participating museum.

Following receipt of their report, museums were able to ask for clarifications from the mystery shopper teams – via the programme facilitator – and were able to apply for funding up to £300 to address any development opportunities highlighted in the report.

The 2016-17 programme came to an end in March 2017, behind schedule.

## **Initial planning and consultation**

From the outset, the MDEM team was keen to ensure that the Mystery Shopper programme provided positive outcomes for both participating museums and the young people and families involved. The aim was also to provide the wider sector in the East Midlands with some reliable research with which to supplement their own offer to young people.

In order to make sure that the 2016-17 programme met the needs of museums in our region, MDEM undertook consultation with colleagues attending the programme launch at Wollaton Hall on 6th October 2015 - at this workshop delegates were asked to undertake a SWOT analysis of the project, highlighting the benefits and challenges for participants.

The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats identified by delegates are available from the Mystery Shopper pages on the MDEM website ([mdem.org.uk](http://mdem.org.uk)), and provided the programme facilitator with insight into the key issues involved in developing a successful programme.

The programme met with different levels of success in achieving all our goals.

## SWOT ANALYSIS

### Overview



<b>S</b> Strengths	<b>W</b> Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Engagement of young people and families</li><li>• Feedback and evidence</li><li>• Link to accreditation</li><li>• Independent and objective</li><li>• Funded</li><li>• Sharing good practice</li><li>• Young volunteers</li><li>• Skills development</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Challenging timescales?</li><li>• Working with young people already engaged?</li><li>• Incentives for young people</li><li>• Appropriate age groups</li></ul>
<b>O</b> Opportunities	<b>T</b> Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ongoing engagement with CYP</li><li>• Links to funding applications and other strategies</li><li>• Marketing and social media</li><li>• Links to school coursework and curriculum</li><li>• Action planning</li><li>• Networking</li><li>• Collection development</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Possible negative attitude of staff / volunteers</li><li>• Ability to implement change</li><li>• Non-recruitment of mystery shopper teams</li><li>• No / low take up by museums</li><li>• Safeguarding</li></ul>

## Building the programme

In this first year of the programme, the MDEM team took the decision to recruit the Mystery Shopper teams from young people and families already engaged with museums and heritage, and reachable through our existing networks. This was felt to be necessary in order to ensure that the pilot programme was more likely to succeed, while also giving the team the benefit of experience in delivering this type of activity. In short, the team felt that the strengths and opportunities outweighed the weaknesses and threats (see above).

Our ambition was that wider cohorts, particularly of young people not regularly engaged with museums (non-users), would be central to following years' programmes.

## Recruitment

Recruitment of participating museums and of Mystery Shopper teams was conducted in parallel. Promotional materials and application forms were distributed via Heritage Forums, networks of museum professionals and volunteers, youth groups and the MDEM website.

Specific recruitment resources for our different target participants were also produced, particularly for use on



**Children, Young People & Families**

## Become a Mystery Shopper...

...a new opportunity for young people to make a difference:

- Gain new skills, experience and knowledge.
- Work together with young people and adults.
- Be recognised for your work.

We are looking for teams of young people and family groups to help us make sure that museums are providing the best possible experience for younger visitors.

As a Mystery Shopper, you will visit museums across the East Midlands and give them feedback on every aspect of their offer to children, young people and families.

Email Davey at [davey.ivens@gmail.com](mailto:davey.ivens@gmail.com) to find out how to get involved.

**Who can be involved?**  
We're looking for 'teen teams' aged 16-19 as well as 'family teams' of two adults and two young people aged 5-15.

**How will it work?**  
Team members will get full training on how to be a Mystery Shopper – what research to do before your visit, what to look for in museums, what questions to ask and how to present your feedback to the museum.

Training and visits to museums will take place at evenings, weekends and during school holidays – all training and resources are free and all travel costs will be met by MDEM (that's us).

The first round of training will take place in January and February 2016. Mystery Shopper visits will start in March 2016.

**What difference will it make?**  
For young people it's a chance to be involved in something new and interesting that also helps our museums to develop and grow. The knowledge and skills you pick up will also help with school work and look great on your CV.

For families it's a chance to work together and have fun – making a real difference at the same time.

**How can I get involved?**  
Email Davey at [davey.ivens@gmail.com](mailto:davey.ivens@gmail.com) or Sarah at [sarah.spurrier@leics.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.spurrier@leics.gov.uk) for more details and to register your interest. All Mystery Shoppers under the age of 18 will need parent / carer consent to take part.



All MDEM facilitators working in regulated activity with children and young people are subject to enhanced DBS checks.

Following an application process - that included informed consent and safeguarding measures for those participants under the age of 18 - we were able to engage three family teams and one 'teen team' as our Mystery Shoppers.

Our different teams were brought together in March 2016 at Newark Town Hall Museum to take part in collective training.



social media.

## Training

Training was facilitated by Sarah Hartshorne and Davey Ivens from the MDEM team. There were three key objectives to the day:

- To collaborate with the team members to mutually agree a set of family and young people's priorities for a museum visit, that would form the basis of their 'undercover' visits
- To give the teams some practice at mystery shopping
- To allocate the teams their museums to visit

Our initial session focussed on introducing the four teams to each other and to the programme's targets and objectives, moving on to an active session in which the teams discussed and agreed their priorities.

The mystery shoppers worked in teams to prioritise their 'Top 10' elements of a museum visit. To do this the teams diamond ranked a series of headings proposed by the facilitators and added their own headings as appropriate.

During the reporting back it became clear that the younger members of the family team often disagreed with the adults on priorities – where this was the



case, the young people were given the casting vote.

After a process of negotiation, it was agreed between the teams and the facilitators that the key priorities for a family visit, or a visit from independent young people was as follows:

- **Cost** How much to get in / discounts / family offers etc.
- **Activities** Availability and quality of family and CYP activities
- **Labels & stories** How are the collections interpreted for this audience
- **Staff** Welcoming, helpful and interested?
- **Website** Pre-visit information, images, accessibility
- **Location** Easy to get to / signposted / public transport etc.
- **Shop** Range and cost
- **Café** Cost, choice and cleanliness
- **Facilities** Toilets, parking etc.

Once headings had been agreed, the afternoon session allowed the Mystery Shopper teams to have a trial run at the National Civil War Centre in Newark. Teams were able to experiment at looking at the museum through the optic of the priorities they developed earlier, as well as using tablets to record their initial thoughts and images via the project's secure facebook page.

Younger members of the team were also given £5 each to spend in the museum shop during their trial run, and during subsequent visits.

## **The visits**

Visits to participating museums took place between May 2016 and February 2017. This was a much longer timescale than anticipated by the MDEM team and resulted in some museums waiting some time for their visit and their report. Museums were given up to one month's notice of their visit.

This delay was due in the main part to the capacity of the Mystery Shopper teams to conclude their visits and their feedback to the facilitator, balancing other family and school / college commitments, as well as the need for the programme to recruit a further family team at short notice. We're hopeful that we have learnt lessons, particularly in terms of what we can expect from volunteer teams and managing facilitator capacity (see below).

## **The reports**

The Mystery Shopper reports were compiled by the Programme Facilitator, Davey Ivens, based entirely on the feedback presented by the mystery shopper teams and with no editorial content included.

This approach was adopted in order that the participating museums and the shopper teams felt that the process was authentic and independent. Content for the reports was generated from the 'live' feedback provided via the facebook site as well as follow-up reports in which the teams gave more detailed comment and provide indicative scores out of 10 against each of the priority headings they had agreed at the training day.

Some family teams also included video 'interviews' with their younger members, filmed immediately after their visit, to give more personalised feedback to the programme facilitator.

11 reports were produced for participating museums:

- Galleries of Justice
- Newark Town Hall Museum
- Belton House
- Harborough Museum
- Melton Carnegie
- Great Central Railway
- Charnwood Museum
- National Civil War Centre
- Chesterfield Museum
- Sudbury Hall
- Princess Royal Class Locomotive Trust (West Shed)

## Headlines

Key feedback from the reports included:

- Mystery Shopper teams were keen to be supportive of museums and generally enjoyed their visits. Scoring for museums came in between 63.75% and 87.5%.
- The richest and most detailed feedback – and generally the highest score – was given against the headings 'Labels and Stories' and 'Activities'. This demonstrates that for these audiences, museums' 'core business' is still paramount and on the whole successfully delivered.
- The attitude and actions of museum staff is essential to the experience had by visitors. Where staff are helpful and engaging it is really appreciated; conversely, museums scored relatively lowly when staff were not present / visible or distracted (particularly at reception).
- Free entrance is universally popular with families and teenagers (often on tight budgets). Where charges are made, museums should offer loyalty schemes, BOGOF offers and family tickets etc.
- Museum websites scored relatively lowly, often for being part of a council site, lack of information, lack of images and few activities for young people introducing them to the collections and stories
- Museum shops also attracted some criticism, usually for lack of range for younger visitors and price.

Following receipt of their reports, several museums took the opportunity of applying for a grant of £300 to address issues raised by Mystery Shoppers: funding was used for a range of improvements, including upgrades to café and toilet facilities as well as going towards website redevelopment.



## Key Quotes from Mystery Shoppers

*"The actor-lead part of the tour was really, really good! Both tour guides were informative and entertaining while staying in character which made the visit really stand out from other museums I have visited."* Teen Team.

*"There was lots of information cards and interpretation boards which were simple to read. There are quite a lot of timelines for different aspects of the collection, and that was really useful and helped to put everything into context effectively."* Family Team (Young children)

*"The only real drawback I had was the overall interactivity, especially in the self-guided tour. It was more reading than actually doing but there was still the*



*odd thing you could try."* Teen Team

*"I felt complete relief at not having to spend any money in a shop! It's refreshing to visit a heritage site without having to spend any money on either refreshments or retail to be honest!"* Family Team (Young children)

*"...but I found the receptionist not as friendly. It was almost like we'd interrupted the conversation which she was having with her colleague... so hurried us along as quickly as she could."* Teen Team.

*"Immaculately clean, this is a gallery you could visit again and again... I like small museums, but boy does this one pack a punch!"* Family Team (Older children)

*"Staff were really good and friendly... a very warm welcome entering, but not much of a hint which way round to view the museum".* Family Team (Older children)

*"I used (the website) on the morning to look up ticket prices, and it took me about half a minute. Lots of information, easily accessible and easy to find the information. Lots about the exhibits to satisfy the curious and plenty of contact details, I can't find anything wrong with it!"* Teen Team.

*"It was quite costly for a family, and I'm not sure that we would normally go at that price, but we did have a good time which came near to justifying the cost".* Family Team (Older children)

*"Excellent from the moment we entered. The staff at reception were very friendly and informative. The best thing was that they talked to the children and made them feel welcome rather than speaking to the adults only. Found out lots about what was going on and when... we were given access to a short-cut to save time. Felt well cared for. Throughout the museum we felt the staff were approachable and friendly but not intrusive or over bearing at any point."* Family Team (Older children)

*"The best bit probably was the things to do and stuff... the worst was having to read loads".* (9 yr. old team member)

## **Conclusions**

The MDEM team have learnt a lot from the pilot year of the programme, and is confident that subsequent programmes will provide participating museums with even more valuable information, as well as giving young people more opportunities to express themselves and help regional museums. MDEM is keen that the organisational challenges of the pilot year are addressed to make the programme even more accessible and useful for museums.

Planning and consultation:

- Working with families and young people already engaged with museums enabled the programme to establish itself in its pilot phase. MDEM is keen to focus on different, harder to reach audiences in future programmes, increasing the usefulness of reports for accreditation and funding applications.
- Mystery Shopper teams were grateful for the opportunity to take part in the programme and felt as if they were "making a positive difference".
- Consulting with museum colleagues on the parameters of the programme gave the MDEM team a valuable insight to the benefits of the programme.

## Training:

- Collaboration between the Mystery Shopper and MDEM teams gave us a shared ownership of the visit priorities and balanced well the priorities of 'sector professionals' and visitors. This approach is likely to be retained by the MDEM team.
- Additional, external facilitation may be beneficial in future programmes that seek to engage 'harder to reach' audiences

## Visits:

- Using facebook to make comments allowed the MDEM team to collect 'live' feedback from the teams and enabled Mystery Shoppers to remain more undercover than using a clip board – it was also more engaging for the younger team members.
- Visits took longer to complete than had been planned, which resulted in delays in producing reports. Future programmes will include tighter timescales for museum visits and producing reports as visits are completed rather than in one chunk.

## Reports:

- Reports were widely welcomed by participating museums; comments received about format have been taken on board by the programme facilitator.



