

Digital Innovation and Engagement

Learning from Applications



Overview

In December 2020, the Museums Association, UKRI and AHRC issued a funding call, Digital Innovation and Engagement. We offered grants between £25,000-£50,000, for one-year projects that support museums to explore digital innovation and to evaluate, refine, and build on their recent digital engagement. The funding call was designed to enable museums and galleries to kick-start, scale up, and evaluate the innovations they had designed to connect collections to audiences through the Covid-19 pandemic.

We were looking for projects that used digital innovation to either engage new audiences or to embed their digital practice to connect their audiences to collections. We expected to see applications from museums who had had to adapt their audience engagement during lockdown, could see the benefits of this work and therefore wanted to build upon it. Through these projects we hoped to see how innovations to facilitate digital engagement could affect longer term change in the sector and asked for applicants to detail their approach to research and evaluation; sharing learning through partnerships; and other forms of dissemination.

The Digital Innovation and Engagement funding call was a short-term response to need in the museum sector during the Covid-19 pandemic, that nevertheless embeds the social and community values of [Museums Change Lives](#) and the [Mindsets for the Museum of the Future](#).

Applications and their strengths

The fund was incredibly popular. From 100 applications with a total value of £4,204,695, 16 projects were shortlisted. Generally, the quality of applications was high, with many applicants describing projects that built on their learning during lockdown and contributed to long-term aims. 32 of the applications scored in our top tier of assessment and had a combination of the features below.

Several of the shortlisted projects offer genuine and leading digital innovation. These projects will develop new technologies to reach clearly defined underrepresented audiences. They include robust testing, evaluation and dissemination that means that the sector will learn from leading practice on the application of digital innovations in a museum context. Importantly, while these applications often work with a creative or digital partner to stimulate innovation, the museum's understanding of who it wants to

engage, and why, is central to the project. In these cases, the creative use of digital technology stands out, but it is underpinned by targeted audience engagement.

As with all our funding at the MA, we looked at the context of the applying organisation. Therefore, several projects on our shortlist focus more on innovation and engagement that is a step change for the individual museum. For example, an applicant may cite technology that has been used by museums before, but they also make a compelling case for how they will use it, how it will engage people and how it is an achievable and sustainable approach. It is often easier to see how these projects contribute to long term development as an evolution of how the museum works. And these projects are more likely to have community partners. We might characterise these applications as having a values-led approach to widening participation and supporting communities, that is delivered using digital technologies.

A feature that ran through all our high-scoring applications was that they empowered audiences to be researchers and innovators. By a variety of means, projects will use digital technologies to facilitate people to discover knowledge, opinion and creativity for themselves. They will also research and innovate with defined underrepresented audiences; using digital platforms to share varied perspectives for the benefit of wide audiences.

Common flaws in applications

MA staff fielded 115 serious enquiries to the fund and saw some distinct themes in those who were discouraged to apply and those who applied but were unsuccessful. These were:

- Applicants who didn't meet the fund's essential criteria. Enquiries of this nature were discouraged, but several still did apply, feeling that it was worth "having a go" with a new fund or that the application process would be useful in developing their idea. Of these, several had included costs that were ineligible such as hardware costs of over 10% of the overall budget or a largely outsourced project to, for example, develop a new museum website.
- Applicants who didn't define their underrepresented audience well enough. This was the most common reason for projects to lose out on funding and included those who defined their audience too broadly (for example "digital audiences"). In comparison to those that have been shortlisted, projects that lacked a defined audience felt less focused, especially for a grant of this size and relatively short duration. Where applicants named an audience but failed to make a case for need or demand, the link between audience, collections and activity was weaker than for projects that scored well.

While the funding call received applications from all four nations of the UK and the shortlist includes three nations of the UK, we received proportionately few applications from Scotland and Wales (relative to the spread of museums across the UK). As a Covid-

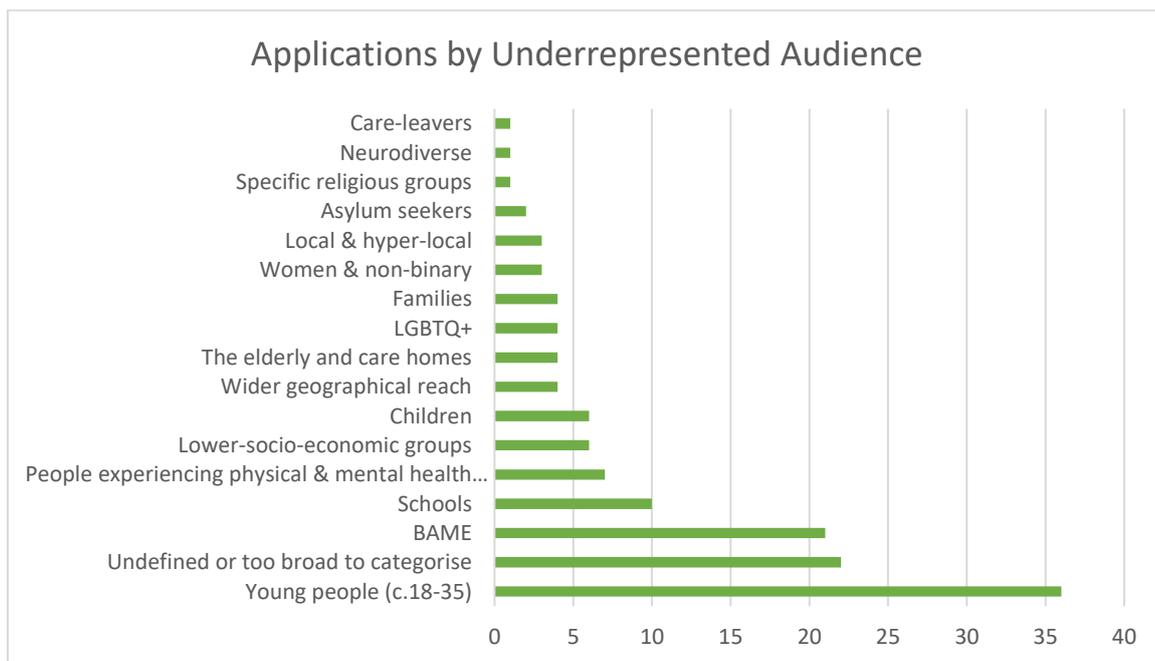
response fund, the application window was quite short, so capacity issues will have been a significant factor. Most of the museum sector in the UK is made up of smaller, often volunteer-run museums and many of these will have seen a complete loss of capacity from redeployment, furlough and shielding.

In light of this, for future funding calls we will review our marketing and application support with our funding partners to ensure all our members across the UK are given the time and opportunity to apply.

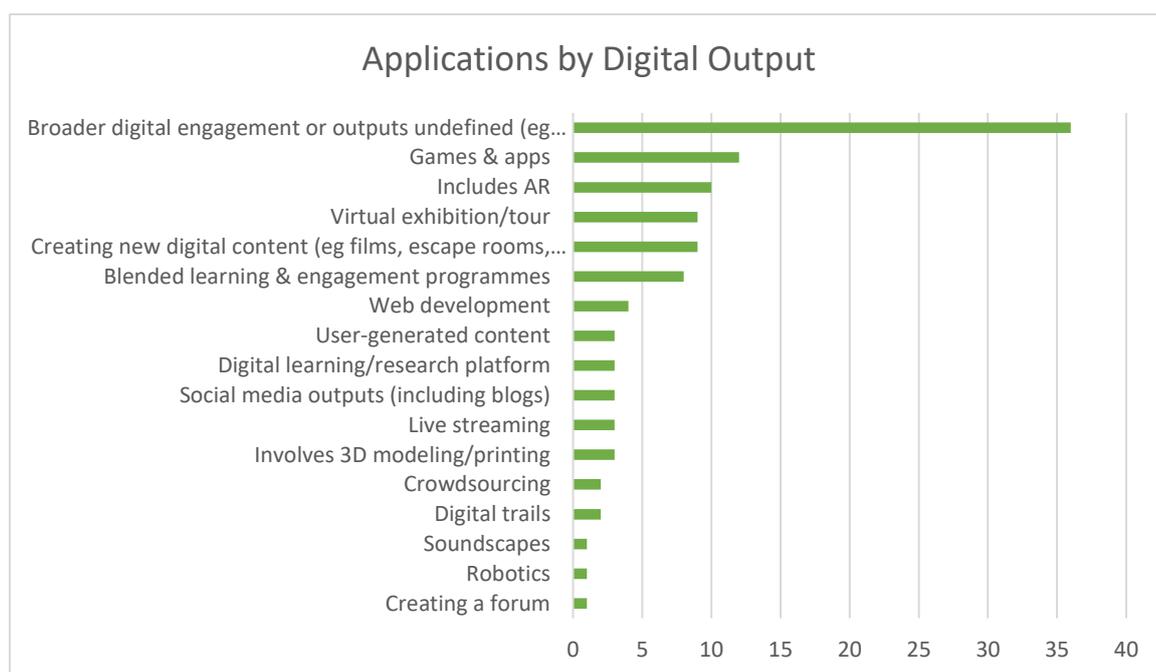
Trends in audience and delivery methods

We profiled the audience groups and means of delivery in projects to look for any patterns or trends in the ways that museums think about their development, what they think appeals to funders, and how they interpret what “digital innovation” means. Note that classifications are quite broad and only represent what was explicitly mentioned in applications; and one project may have multiple categories.

In terms of audience groups, the most common audience was young people (c.18-30), which may be expected from a fund seeking digital engagement. Many applications also wanted to work with more diverse audiences, such as black or Asian communities and people from lower socio-economic groups. There was also a large representation of projects wanting to work with schools, often these met other audience criteria too, for example working with schools in areas of multiple deprivation. 10% of applications were aimed at reaching these audiences through formal education settings. Applications to work specifically with audiences who cannot easily access physical museum spaces, such as those with mobility issues, were lower than expected at 7%.



Delivery methods varied widely across applications with the most popular being development of games and apps, learning programmes or platforms, AR and virtual exhibitions and tours. A large proportion of applications defined their delivery methods too broadly to categorise, although in many cases this was a positive point that came from a desire for genuine co-production within projects that meant outputs could not be defined. Within our categories a huge array of digital technologies and engagements were proposed from QR code digital trails, podcasts and soundscapes; to escape rooms, coproduced videogames, and robotics; to crowdsourcing, mining big data and online forums.



Summary

This funding call was developed to complement other Covid-response funding and to harness the potential of digital innovation. Many high-quality applications reflected this by offering digital alternatives to in-person engagement inspired by quick response work undertaken in the first lockdown. This captures a point in time in the development of museums as they begin to think about reopening and the start of their recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. It also contributes to our collective understanding in the museum sector of the skills and needs involved in such rapid digital growth.

Some applicants have taken their digital innovation much further than replacing physical visits. They will deliver experiences for people that are only possible because of digital innovation. More museums will need to think and work this way as the sector begins to reopen. They will need to consider how to create digital experiences that are meaningful and worthwhile, either reaching audiences who cannot visit or offering something that is appealing enough to rival in person engagement and stand out in a world of digital offers. Museums that have a strong audience development plan and community relationships to

help them understand demand are in a good position to do this. The projects in this funding call will provide useful case studies and evaluation to inform sector thinking and the MA will disseminate learning through our website, events and networks.

Uncertainty around opening and social distancing means that museums will likely suffer reduced visitor numbers and financial instability for some time. Reopening will take capacity from digital engagement work undertaken over the last 12 months and the sector has already lost a proportion of its workforce through redundancy. These factors mean there is a risk that momentum on digital innovation will be lost and so the role of funders will be vital to support digital to widen participation.