



# Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here

Community Engagement Programme and Exhibition



End of project report

Nicholas L. Wright  
August 2015

Causeway Coast and Glens  
District Council



# Contents

Executive summary.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Background.....	4
The Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here project.....	5
Project aims.....	5
Project Outcomes.....	5
Outputs.....	5
Community engagement programme outline.....	7
Programme approach.....	7
Programme recruitment.....	7
1) Introduction (August/September 2014).....	8
2) Prehistoric object handling (October 2014).....	10
3) Pottery workshop (November 2014).....	12
4) Historic object handling (December 2014).....	13
5) Maritime object handling (January 2015).....	14
6) Basketry workshop (February 2015).....	15
7) Blind bards social history session (March 2015).....	16
8) Bronze Age breads and plantation pottage (April 2015).....	17
Programme evaluation.....	18
Exhibition outline.....	20
Information panels.....	20
Audio descriptions.....	22
Case objects.....	24
Handling objects.....	25
Exhibition guide booklets.....	26
Exhibition evaluation.....	27
Digital presence.....	29
School workshop.....	30
Legacy.....	32
Conclusions.....	33
Recommendations.....	35
Appendix 1 – Programme participant questionnaire and responses.....	37
Appendix 2 – Exhibition visitor questionnaire and responses.....	45

## Executive Summary

The report describes Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here, a community engagement project carried out by Coleraine Museum over a ten month period spanning September 2014 – June 2015.

The project developed as a response to the RNIB NI Museums in Focus project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Museums in Focus supports museums around Northern Ireland to fully engage with their blind or partially sighted visitors by providing staff training and a travelling exhibition. Each host museum was also provided with a set of Penfriend audio labelling devices to make future exhibitions accessible.

Sensing the Past consisted of a series of eight engagement sessions and workshops with a core group of six community members with visual impairment which led to the creation of a museum exhibition. The synonymous exhibition ran 1<sup>st</sup> May – 30<sup>th</sup> June 2015 and was designed to be accessible and informative for sighted and visually impaired audiences alike.

Both the programme and the exhibition proved instructive for the creation of future accessible exhibitions. They demonstrated that even limited amendments to existing practices can have a significant impact on levels of accessibility. If intelligently used, the RNIB Penfriends presents a low cost, low impact, solution to the lack of accessibility traditionally perceived by visitors with visual impairment.

However, all levels within the museum service need to be aware that Penfriends are not a complete solution in and of themselves, and need to be used in combination with other access policies including the face-to-face contact between visually impaired visitors and museum staff, and physical access to the collection where possible.

## Introduction

This report describes a community engagement project carried out by Coleraine Museum over the period September 2014 – June 2015. The programme, Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here, sought to work with local people with visual impairment to facilitate their engagement with the museum service and with their own local history.

The project was part of the Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC) Community Engagement Initiative (CEI), funded by Heritage Lottery Fund, and was led by NIMC CEI trainee Dr Nic Wright. The stakeholder focus group consisted of six regular visually impaired (VI) participants although the numbers for each session fluctuated with a maximum of 11 (sighted and VI) guests in one session.

The programme explored Irish history from the earliest known Mesolithic settlement through to the early nineteenth century. Within this broad sweep, the group selected five key stories from the local history of Coleraine to be reflected in the exhibition which was produced as the final stage of the defined project.

The conclusions and recommendations outlined in this report are based solely on the accumulated experience of the Sensing the Past project and the feedback received from the programme participants and other exhibition visitors.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my thanks to all of those who have been involved in the project, especially the core stakeholder group, Julie Graham, Wilma Moulden, Elizabeth Chestnut, Stephanie Stewart, Michael Boyd and Marlene Purdy.

I would like to thank NIMC and the funders, Northern Ireland Museums Council and Heritage Lottery Fund. Thanks are also due to the staff and volunteers at Coleraine Museum, Helen Perry, Sarah Carson, Sally Cupples, Barbara Harding and Joanne Deering; to Clora Gallagher from NIMC, my fellow NIMC CEIs who assisted with various workshops: Ronan McConnell, Clare Ablett and Catherine Boyle; Rev. Roger Cooke and Alice McAlary from St Patrick's Church of Ireland, Coleraine; Lucy and Clare Millar from Garvagh Harp School; and to the wonderful volunteer voices who brought the exhibition audio descriptions to life: Jim Allen, Jean Clayton, Ronan McConnell, Barbara Harding and Maureen McClean.

Special thanks are due to the RNIB NI (especially Jonathan Adams, Kirsty Stewart, Jackie Witherow, Barry MacAuley and Thomas Quigley) and to Guide Dogs NI. Both organisations encouraged and supported the project from its inception.

This has been a collaborative process and the project would not have been a success without everybody's help and support.

## Background

Coleraine Museum, is a constituent part of the local authority Causeway Museum Service (CMS). CMS operates over an extensive and largely rural mandate taking in the old council areas of Ballymoney, Coleraine, Limavady and Moyle – as of April 2015 these council areas were merged to form the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council. There are several local authority museums situated within the area, Ballycastle, Ballymoney, and Limavady, but no permanent museum building able to be utilised for Coleraine Museum. As such, learning and engagement programmes form an essential part of the strategic planning of both CMS and Coleraine Museum.

Coleraine Museum, was keen to develop participation by, and increase audiences from Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act<sup>1</sup> who had not received prioritisation as part of the PEACE III initiative.<sup>2</sup> The RNIB Museums in Focus project provided the stimulus to develop a programme to improve accessibility to the museum and its collections for audiences with visual impairment.

The RNIB Museums in Focus project provides the first social history of blindness in Northern Ireland, presented through a book (available in text, audio book and Braille formats), together with an exhibition which employs audio descriptions and associated handling objects relating to sight loss within Northern Ireland throughout the past 200 years.

CMS was very aware that its past programmes, as with many in the sector, were heavily reliant on textual panels accompanied by images and objects in cases. The scheduled Museums in Focus touring exhibition provided an opportunity for Coleraine Museum to develop new interpretive methods, new partners and new relationships.

With that aim in mind, the museum service submitted an application to the NIMC CEI training scheme to receive an HLF funded trainee who would take the lead on developing a community engagement programme targeted towards community members with visual impairment. Dr Nicholas Wright, was appointed as the NIMC CEI trainee for an 18 month placement starting in April 2014.

The Museums in Focus travelling exhibition was scheduled to be hosted at Coleraine Town Hall in May and June 2015. The co-curated exhibition developed out of the Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here project was to be shown along side the it. The total budget for the placement was restricted to £2,500.00.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nine key groups are identified as requiring consideration prior to decisions being made: people with different religious belief; people of political opinion; people of different racial groups; people of different ages; people of different marital status; people of different sexual orientation; men and women generally; people with a disability and people without; people with dependants and people without. Furthermore, Section 75 also promotes “equality of opportunity” which means that everyone in society should be able to compete on equal terms. All government departments, agencies and councils must also give the nine key groups ‘due regard’ when creating a policy.

<sup>2</sup> The EU Programme for Peace & Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland is a distinctive European Structural Funds Programme aimed at reinforcing progress towards a peaceful and stable society and promoting reconciliation.

## The Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here project

### Project aims

1. To improve public accessibility to Coleraine Museum collections and curatorial expertise, especially with regard to community members with visual impairments (link to GLO attitudes and values)
2. To highlight the significant achievements for our area throughout the pre-historic and early historic periods (link to GLO knowledge and understanding)

### Project Outcomes

1. People with visual impairment gained an improved understanding of their own heritage through direct engagement with material culture and curatorial expertise.
2. An exhibition was created which was accessible to people with visual impairment.
3. A programme and exhibition were designed and delivered which highlighted key stories in the history of Coleraine and the northeast of Ireland.

Additional benefits for the museum service:

- a. A new audience was engaged by Coleraine Museum.
- b. A new relationship was established with RNIB to promote ongoing engagement between Coleraine Museum and VI community members.
- c. Guidelines were created to allow Coleraine Museum to maintain a sustainable approach to VI accessibility.

### Outputs

Total no. of sessions facilitated	12
No. of unique sessions facilitated	8
No. of VI participants	8
No. of VI participants based on attendees in each session	44
No. of attendees to museum exhibition launch	55
No. of attendees to museum exhibition pilot school workshop	24
Total estimated no. of visitors to museum exhibition excluding the launch and school workshop	621*

\* Following established Coleraine Museum procedures, the Sensing the Past exhibition was unmanned for the majority of its opening hours. Although the caretaker of Coleraine Town Hall started collecting numbers of visitors to the exhibition that he was aware of, (by no means an exact number), inconsistencies with staffing meant that collection of attendance numbers ceased after the first two weeks.

However, due to the nature of the project, the exhibition was manned by the project lead/exhibition curator for a three hour block, once a week (Thursdays 13:00-16:00). The total estimated number of visitors has been based on the average number of visitors per hour during the periods in which the curator was present.

Manned periods and visitor numbers:

<b>Dates manned</b>	<b>No. of visitors</b>
Thurs 7 <sup>th</sup> May	5
Thurs 14 <sup>th</sup> May	3
Thurs 21 <sup>st</sup> May	1
Thurs 28 <sup>th</sup> May	6
Thurs 18 <sup>th</sup> June	11
Thurs 25 <sup>th</sup> June	26
<b>Total visitors during manned hours</b>	<b>52</b>

- Average number of visitors per hour: total visitors (52) / total hours (18) = **2.89 visitors/hour**.
- Total no. of days exhibition open (43) X no. open hours per day (5) = **215 open hours**.
- Total no. open hours X average visitors per hour = **621.35 total estimated visitors**.

It is clear that the total estimated visitor numbers need to be used with caution as the number provided pays no account to any inherent difference in visitor numbers between different days of the week or time of the day. Even within the existing sample, if either the 21<sup>st</sup> of May or 25<sup>th</sup> June were excluded, the calculation would produce drastically different visitor totals (731 visitors or 372.67 visitors respectively).

## Community engagement programme outline

### Programme approach

The Sensing the Past programme was designed to involve as many different senses as feasible within the fixed period and limited budget. Although it was pre-determined that the programme would run for multiple sessions, the content of each session was not finalised until after the start of the programme.

Ahead of the programme, the project lead received RNIB visual awareness training and also Council for British Archaeology/Wilberforce trust training in widening access to cultural heritage for VI visitors.

A digital audio recording was taken of each session so that there would be a permanent record of the conversations and responses that could be archived on the Coleraine Museum computer system. Release forms in which the participants consented to Coleraine Museum's use of the discussions conducted during the sessions were distributed to each of the participants for their own records. The content of the form was read about and discussed with the group and verbal consent – captured by the digital recorder – received. The same approach was taken with photographic release forms.

### Programme recruitment

As the museum service had no existing relationship with VI groups or individuals, the initial phase of the project was committed to recruiting a core focus group of community members with VI who were willing to engage with the museum over a period of several months.

Direct contact was made with RNIB Coleraine, Guide Dogs NI, Coleraine Talking Newspaper, and Riding for the Disabled Coleraine and District. Online calls for interest were made through the Coleraine Museum pages on the Northern Ireland Community Archive<sup>3</sup> and on social media (Facebook). A press release was put out through Coleraine Borough Council which was picked up by two local online news services and the local newspaper the *Coleraine Times*.

A total of eight VI community members signed up to engage with the museum for the programme. It became apparent that the reluctance to engage among people with VI stemmed from a pervasive sense of disenfranchisement felt by the VI community towards museums. All eight members of the group participated in the first session of the programme but there after, transport issues prevented two of the group (sisters) from continuing their involvement.

---

<sup>3</sup> [www.niarchive.org](http://www.niarchive.org)

## **1) Introduction (August/September 2014)**

The initial two hour session took place at the Roe Valley Arts and Cultural Centre, Limavady, where the Museums in Focus exhibition was already on display. The aims of the session were to begin the process of engagement with a new audience for Coleraine Museum by introducing the group to each other and to the facilitator, and to review the Museums in Focus exhibition as an example of an existing 'accessible' exhibition. The session was run three times with different members of the group in each visit.

A pre-programme questionnaire using a Likert scale (1-5) was taken to identify existing levels of engagement with heritage and history within the group.

The general consensus was that nobody within the group had any post-secondary formal education which related to history and only two felt that they had even a moderate understanding of Irish history in general. Regarding the history of the Causeway Coast and Glens area in particular, only one member of the group rated their knowledge as 3 (moderate), while the others were all 1 or 2.

While two of the group stated that they had visited many museums and other heritage sites while in England, none had previously engaged with their local museums or sites. All stated that they were not aware of which heritage sites were able to offer accessible access sites and locations. All also expressed an opinion that the traditional "No touching" approach and a reliance on panels of text meant that lack of access to information created little impetus for them to engage.

The concepts behind the programme, a series of interrelated sessions and workshops themed around local heritage, was discussed. The programme lead compiled a list of twelve different topics linked to five core historical themes – prehistory, medieval history, the plantation, modern history and social history. The topics were discussed with each of the groups and a list of the most sought after topics compiled. These were to form the basis on which the rest of the programme would be constructed.

A useful tool employed at this early stage in the programme was a physical timeline created to illustrate relative timespans. The history of the Irish north coast goes back to the Mountsandel, the earliest known settlement in Ireland dating to the Mesolithic period (7,700 BC). However, for most people, a timespan of almost 10,000 years ceases to be a tangible concept. Lengths of thin rope (7mm diameter) were cut to spans of 400cm. A knot was tied at one end to represent the present day. Every 0.4mm of the rope represented one year. 40mm from the starting point, the second knot was tied marking the period of the Home Rule crisis and the outbreak of the First World War. Having established a tangible reference point (40mm = 100 years), successive knots were tied to mark the settlement of Plantation Coleraine (1613), The Norman sack of Coleraine (1177), St Patrick (c.460), The Middle Bronze Age (c.1500 BC) and back to Mesolithic Mountsandel. The use of the physical timeline was very effective at demonstrating the extent of the local history that we could explore, especially with a focus group with little historical background.

Responses to the Museums in Focus exhibition appeared to be split. The exhibition was themed around the social history of blindness in Northern Ireland over the past

200 years. Six members of the group felt that it was fantastic that a travelling exhibition was going around Northern Ireland which included audio descriptions (delivered via Penfriends), and objects that visitors were encouraged to touch.

"I thought it was brilliant, the way they had the panels and the penfriends. That was great because you were able to read them yourselves so to speak; and um, the objects like the, back in the day, the Brailleurs and that sort of thing, I haven't seen any of that before..."

"It was very informative. It was informative and it was interesting to listen. One of the thoughts I had in my head was 'Oh I'm glad I didn't live at that time'... even though I have maybe complained today, there is a lot more accessibility and more, a lot less ignorance... I mean I am glad I am living in today's world rather than back then."

"It's a bit off putting for, if you take a person round a museum, everything's behind glass and, oh, you're unable to touch this and touch that, so I think, um the ... exhibition was absolutely brilliant in terms of description and what was on the panels, and things like that you know."

However this positive response was moderated slightly by a disconnect between the audio descriptions and the layout of the information panels that they were describing. This was not an issue for the blind participants, but those with partial sight found it disorientating.

"It was excellent, but because I was partially sighted I had difficulty identifying the photographs in line with the one that they were actually talking about. I think maybe the display wasn't actually in order."

"It would have helped if the precise location [of pictures] on the chart had been referred to in the script. It quite often wasn't clear to which picture the script was referring... You would have needed more sight than perhaps some of us have to be sure that you were looking at the right one."

Furthermore, two members of the group reacted very strongly that the exhibition had a role to play, but not as an exhibition for VI audiences:

"It might be unfortunate, but it was a very dry topic...and we probably aren't the best people to assess that exhibit... we know about blindness... a lot of blind people would... That should be promoted as an awareness raising exercise for people who are not blind."

The same two group members also considered that the handling objects were too limited in scope. It was felt that the objects improved the experience but that more tactile objects would be beneficial. As one of the participants put it, without the handling objects:

"I may as well be sitting listening to a talking book... the objects just make the whole thing tangible".

## 2) Prehistoric object handling (October 2014)

The second session took place in two different venues, Coleraine Town Hall and in Cushendall. Two of the participants, both based in Cushendall, had transport issues at the last moment but were happy for the session to be held at one of their houses. Transport was a recurring issue with the group, all of who necessarily relied on driving family members, public transport or taxis to transport them to each venue. Two of the group members stopped being able to attend following the initial session due to transport restraints in rural County Antrim. Session two lasted for two hours.

The aims of session two were to foster continued engagement between the museum and VI stakeholders, to allow the group to interact directly with their prehistoric heritage and to discuss potential content of the material covered for inclusion in the Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here exhibition.





Seventeen different prehistoric objects – both originals and replicas – from the Coleraine Museum collection were passed around, handled, discussed and contextualised. These ranged from a nodule of unworked flint and a boar skin, to Bronze Age moulds for casting, flint arrowheads and even a ball of wool. All the objects were used to tell the story of how people lived and what resources and technology were available to them during the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age.

Risks to participants from the objects were minimal, but any flints with points or sharp edges were mentioned before the objects were handed out. Risks to objects were moderated by holding a discussion about the necessity of washing hands before handling artefacts, ensuring that artefacts were only handled while seated at a table, and maintaining a surface covering of pH neutral paper.

All participants who took part in the prehistoric object handling reflected that the session was very enjoyable and that they were delighted to be able to handle actual objects and have their importance explained.

### 3) Pottery workshop (November 2014)

Session three was a three hour practical workshop held at Flowerfield Art Centre in Portstewart. The aims of the session were to allow the participants to connect with their prehistoric heritage in a different way, to reinforce the potential benefits of engagement between the VI community and the museum, and to potentially create content for inclusion in the exhibition.

The concept behind the session was to vary the learning approach by allowing the group members to create their own pottery objects inspired by the ancient forms handled in the previous session. A professional potter was brought in to facilitate the workshop. He instructed the participants in the basics of traditional manufacturing forms before allowing them to create as they wished.



The four VI group members who were able to participate in the pottery workshop all made between two and four ceramic vessels as part of the workshop. All the vessels were left with the potter who had them fired in a kiln. They were then able to be handed back during at the start of the next session. Three of the participants loaned their creations back to the museum to be shown as part of the final exhibition.

#### 4) Historic object handling (December 2014)

Session four lasted for two hours and aimed to continue the historic narrative of Coleraine and the northeast coast of Ireland starting with the arrival of St Patrick and tracking the changes in social and religious demographics in the area up to and including the Irish Confederate Wars (1641-1652). The focus of the discussion was themed around the creation of modern Coleraine, explaining when some of the different leading cultural identities in the area arrived in the town. The session was run twice to accommodate the needs of different members in the group.

The session was held inside St Patrick's Church of Ireland in Coleraine. The venue was chosen because of its historical links to the origins of Coleraine in the fifth century, its later importance in the Norman and Plantation towns, and its current form with architectural sculpture linking directly to its foundations. The group members were encouraged to touch and feel the sculptural decoration as part of the discussion around the exploits of St Patrick.



Inside the church, 15 artefacts relating to the period in question were passed around in a narrative order. These ranged from Medieval ceramics and net weights, through to a seventeenth century chamber pot and cannon ball. The session entailed similar risks to participants and objects as those experienced in session 2 and these were moderated in the same way.

The session also made use of scratch and sniff cards to engage a different sense. These had been previously designed for Coleraine Museum and depict show a reconstruction of the town as it might have looked in 1615, with three zones infused with scents linked to the land use – horse and stable, pig manure and acrid rubbish.

The historic object handling sessions was received well, although there were several comments relating to the temperature of the venue and the church heating operated on a timer and could not be controlled.

### 5) Maritime object handling (January 2015)

The fifth session in the programme stepped a little away from the narrative sequence which had been followed to that point. The session was held at the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council offices (at that stage, still just Coleraine Council) and was joint facilitated by Ronan McConnell, a NIMC CEI trainee placed with Derry Museum and Visitor Services. Session five lasted for two hours.



The session looked at the heritage of the north coast in parallel to the histories explored in sessions two and four, utilising three handling boxes from the Derry Tower Museum collection which focused on maritime history, ranging from replica Stone Age fishing spears, to personal possessions of World War II U-boat commanders.

Two of the VI participants felt that there was too much overlap, thematically, with the previous sessions and wondered if the period covered by this session should have been made more distinct. However, all appreciated the maritime slant of the session.

## 6) Basketry workshop (February 2015)

The sixth meeting was another three hour practical workshop held at Flowerfield Art Centre, Portstewart. The workshop aimed to facilitate a creative session linked to local heritage and to allow the VI stakeholders to be physically engaged by the programme.



An artisan basket-weaver was brought in to run the workshop, instructing the participants on the basics of her craft and guiding them through the processes involved in constructing a sciathóg, a traditional potato strainer and serving dish made from willow.

All six regular VI participants were able to join in this workshop and all completed their sciathóg with varying amounts of assistance. Four were loaned back to the museum to be shown at part of the final exhibition.

### 7) Blind bards social history session (March 2015)

Session seven was again hosted in the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council Offices. It lasted for two hours and included a short reception with Cllr George Duddy, Mayor of Coleraine. All six of the regular VI participants were able to attend the session and were joined by family members, staff from Coleraine Museum and NIMC, as well as a student from Garvagh Harp School.



The aim of the session was to employ a novel approach to exploring the social history of blindness by focusing on the history of blind musicians from the local area, following the lives of four individuals ranging from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.

Two musicians were engaged to play during the session, Julie Graham, one of the VI group members, who played selected airs on the tin whistle during the course of the social history session, and a young harp student who played during the reception. Music was used to aurally illustrate the various stories which linked back, contextually, to the historic objects handled in sessions four and five.

Music recorded during session seven was utilised in the final exhibition as part of two of the audio descriptions.

## 8) Bronze Age breads and plantation pottage (April 2015)

The final session of the programme lasted for two hours and again took place in the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council Offices. The concept behind this session was a revision of the entire programme, following a historical narrative themed around the availability and cooking of food.

In practice, this reinforced the historical content of the programme while stimulating senses of smell and taste. Due to budgetary constraints, all cooking and food preparation was conducted in-house using hygiene guidelines provided by Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council health and safety staff.



The menu followed the course of the previous sessions starting with hazelnuts to represent the Mesolithic period, progressing to hearth-cakes using only ingredients available during the Bronze Age and fresh butter made by the group during the session, progressing to seventeenth century pottage accompanied by tea, and finishing with bainne clábair infused with cinnamon as a desert.

The food history session successfully ended the community engagement programme and finished with further discussion of the themes tackled by the exhibition and how these were to be dealt with.

## Programme evaluation

Outside of the pre-programme questionnaire given in the introductory session, evaluation was collected informally during, and following, each meeting. The VI participants were asked to respond to each activity and aspect of the programme as it progressed to let the museum service know which elements worked well, and which could be improved.

A formal end of programme evaluation was given out at the end of session eight. Two members of NIMC (a NIMC staff member, an NIMC CEI trainee) were present during that session to run through the evaluation form with each of the six regular VI participants with the project lead out of the room. Due to their visual impairment, participants responded verbally to the NIMC staff who recorded their answers. The evaluation questionnaire and full tabulated responses are provided in Appendix 1.

- The ages of the group were split evenly with two respondents (33.3%) in each of the age brackets 26-40, 41-60, 60+.
- One respondent (16.7%) was male, the remaining five (83.3%) were female.
- All six respondents (100%) strongly agreed with the statement that they enjoyed participating in the Sensing the Past programme.
- Likewise, all (100%) respondents strongly agreed that they felt welcome to express their own thoughts or opinions within the sessions.
- One respondent (16.7%) agreed that they had learned something new over the course of the programme while the other five respondents (83.3%) strongly agreed with the same statement.
- Five respondents (16.7%) felt that their understanding of Irish history was improved by the programme with one respondent (16.7%) strongly agreeing.
- One respondent (16.7%) agreed that they would be interested in participating in future community engagement programmes with Coleraine Museum while the other five respondents (83.3%) strongly agreed.
- Two respondents (33.3%) agreed that as a result of the programme, they were more likely to visit Coleraine Museum exhibitions in future with the remaining four respondents (66.7%) strongly agreeing with the same statement.
- Two respondents (33.3%) agreed that as a result of the programme, they were more likely to visit other museums or heritage sites in future. Three respondents (50%) strongly agreed with the same statement. One respondent (16.7%) neither agreed, nor disagreed with the statement.

Six respondents represent 75% of the total number of VI participants in the programme and represent all of the regular attendees. Although a small dataset, the overwhelming impression given by the evaluations is of the success of the programme in promoting the stated aims of the project, namely to improve public accessibility to Coleraine Museum collections and curatorial expertise, especially with regard to community members with visual impairments and to highlight the significant achievements for our area throughout the pre-historic and early historic

periods. Certainly, among the VI focus group, the programme has gone some way towards re-engaging community members with VI with the museum service.

When asked to give their favourite aspects of the programme, the respondents gave a wide spread of answers including the handling objects (sessions two, four and five), the pottery and basketry workshops (sessions three and six), the music (session seven) and food (session eight).

However, perhaps a key response to the question was “Enjoyed meeting new people and sharing the experience with them”. As already stated, transport poses one of the biggest obstacles to community members with VI. Social isolation poses a real and constant challenge, especially among residents of rural parts of Northern Ireland

When asked to provide suggestions on what could be improved for future programmes, several respondents indicated that they would like to go into more detail with the various topics, one suggested the provision of transport to provide access to sessions. One indicated that the church (session four) was too cold and that future visits to that venue should be conducted at a different time of year.

One respondent stated that they would have liked the option of receiving large print notes after each session to allow them to go back over the information later. This facility had been offered for the programme and was taken up by other participants who commented that while their memory was not so good, the back up information provided after the sessions was appreciated.

When asked for any other comments, two more respondents mentioned concerns about transportation, while others reiterated how much they enjoyed the programme: “A positive good experience and I’m sorry its finished”.

## Exhibition outline

The Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here exhibition was designed to fulfil and compliment the core project aims: to create an exhibition which was accessible to visually impaired visitors and to highlight the significant historical achievements of Coleraine and the northeast of Ireland throughout the pre-historic and early historic periods.

The key narrative of the exhibition was therefore the significance of our local stories to Irish history – there was also an underlying message that the local stories are the result of contact between local people and newcomers. They are shared and do not belong to any single group.

The exhibition was open 1<sup>st</sup> May – 30<sup>th</sup> June 2015, Tuesdays to Saturdays from 11.00-16.00. Entry to the exhibition was free of charge.

The initial design concept of the exhibition was to have the VI focus group directly involved in the curation process. However, when invited to co-curate the exhibition, all six of the regular participants declined citing their lack of background knowledge and the difficulty that they would face in conducting research. It was therefore agreed that the project lead would liaise with the group members at each step of the process, seeking their input regarding both content and delivery strategies.

It was decided for budgetary reasons to restrict the contextual information for the exhibition to six panels of text. These were divided up into an introductory panel and five themes. The themes identified through a dialogue between the VI group members and the museum were:

1. Stone Age Life in Coleraine: Irish History Starts Here
2. The Causeway Coast during the Bronze Age
3. St Patrick's Legacy: Medieval Churches and Monasteries
4. 17<sup>th</sup> Century Coleraine: First Town of the Londonderry Plantation
5. The Blind Bards of the Causeway Coast

The first four themes combined to give a narrative that, while broken in places, presented the history of Coleraine and the surrounding area from earliest man up to the early seventeenth century. The fifth theme provided a segue between the Coleraine Museum exhibition, and the social history focus of the touring RNIB Museums in Focus exhibition that would be displayed along side it.

### Information panels

In consultation with the VI focus group, it was decided that the information panels would make use of large, white, sans serif font against a dark background, with other contrasting colours used to distinguish between themes.

A graphic designer was engaged to develop a simple, clear template following these guidelines. Each panel measures 1200x800mm and made use of Arial font, size 45 for the main text, and font size 25 for captions. The text was left aligned and the main content restricted to a single column consisting of no more than 200 words. These practices were followed to ensure maximum readability by sighted visitors with visual impairment.

## St Patrick's Legacy: Medieval Churches and Monasteries

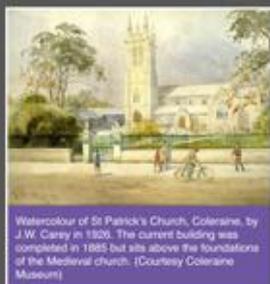
Ireland's patron saint was also the founder of Coleraine – or so the story goes. According to a ninth century biography of the saint, Patrick was granted a plot of land on a bend of the River Bann around AD 450. The land, on which he built a church, was covered with ferns. It was known in Irish as Cúil Rathain which may mean the Nook of Ferns, the Ferny Corner, or perhaps Little Rath (fort) at the Bend in the River. Either way, the settlement of Coleraine was born.

Throughout the Medieval period Coleraine continued to be home to a number of churches and religious settlements. In 1244, St Mary's Priory was established on the east bank of the Bann while Killowen, on the west bank, already had its own abbey founded by St Colirpre in AD 540. St Patrick's church was rebuilt in stone in the 14th century – remains of the medieval building are still visible inside the modern church.

The local impact of Patrick's mission can also be seen at Tubberpatrick – St Patrick's well – Portstewart, where the saint is said to have blessed the waters. In medieval Portrossce (Portrush), a prosperous monastery located on Ramore Head supported thriving fishing and pottery industries.



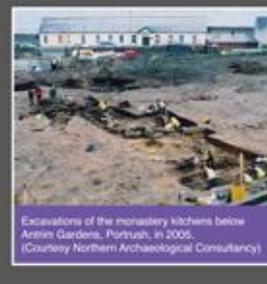
Nineteenth century statue of St Patrick from the Braid Valley. Patrick was among the first missionaries to bring Christianity to Ireland. (Courtesy Sam Henry Collection, Coleraine Museum)



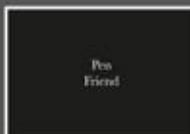
Watercolour of St Patrick's Church, Coleraine, by J.W. Carey in 1826. The current building was completed in 1885 but sits above the foundations of the Medieval church. (Courtesy Coleraine Museum)



Tubberpatrick – St Patrick's Well – above Portstewart Strand was supposedly visited by Patrick during his travels. It was probably already a pre-Christian religious site before it became a source of holy water. Portstewart locals were still selling the waters of Tubberpatrick to pilgrims as late as the 1940s. (Courtesy Coleraine Museum)



Excavations of the monastery kitchens below Antrim Gardens, Portrush, in 2005. (Courtesy Northern Archaeological Consultancy)



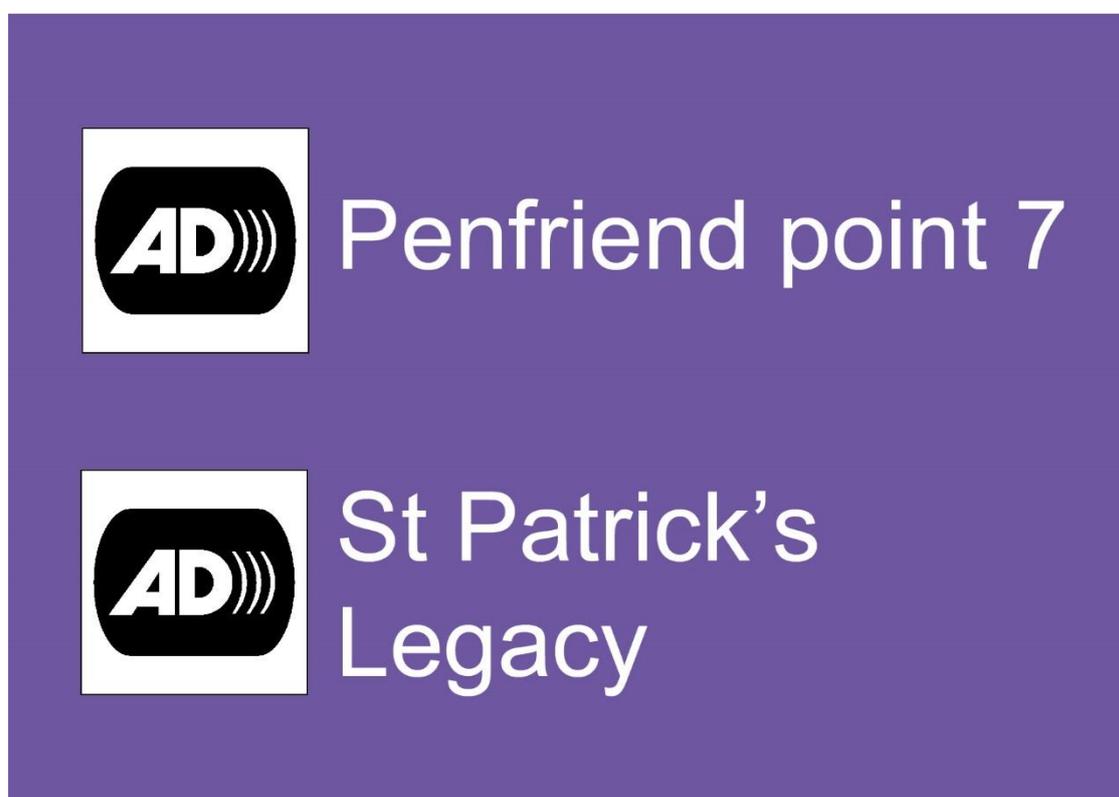
The background of all six panels was a matt charcoal, intended to reduce glare. The colours used to distinguish between themes were employed as a register behind the title of each panel and behind the caption text for images. Images were limited the four per panel, ensuring that each would be produced at a reasonable size.

### Audio descriptions

A landscape, A6 rectangle (105x148mm) in the lower left corner of each panel was left blank (indicated by the black rectangle on the example image on p.21). This was the location of the Penfriend point – the chosen mechanism for audio descriptions.

Penfriends are audio devices developed by Mantra Lingua and distributed through RNIB. First released in 2009, a version 2 had just been released at the time of writing this report. Shaped like a fat marker with a speaker at one end and a scanner at the other, Penfriends record, store and playback audio files when the scanner is touched to a digital barcode.

Each Penfriend point consisted of an acrylic sleeve with a printed label inside and a 30mm square penfriend barcode stuck to the outside in a fixed location. The barcodes on the information panels were consistently located in the upper left corner of each point (over the upper AD symbol in the illustrated example).



By using acrylic sleeves, the Penfriend points were raised up from the surface of information panel to aid VI visitors in locating the point. The texture of the barcode itself was sufficiently distinct from the surrounding acrylic that most visitors were able to distinguish between the two.

However, as diabetes, a common cause of sight loss, can also result in neuropathy (a numbness of peripheral nerves), a further step was taken to distinguish the barcodes from the surrounding acrylic. A 3mm thick, 30mm square of MDF was glued to the acrylic and the barcode was then stuck onto that. This effectively created a physically tiered Penfriend point with the acrylic raised above the panel, and the barcode raised above the acrylic.

Another reason for using acrylic sleeves as the basis of Penfriend points was the concept of sustainability. The coloured insert could be removed and replaced by fresh labels when required. By maintaining the same template, the points should be able to be applied to any future exhibitions. The barcodes themselves can be re-recorded over and over again.

The audio descriptions for each information panel consisted of the theme title, the text from the panel, verbal descriptions of each image on the panel, providing its location, the medium of the image (line drawing, watercolour, photograph), a physical description of the image followed by the caption. For example,

The image to the lower right is a colour photograph showing 14 archaeologists excavating a trench which runs through a park. The grass has been removed from the park and remains of stone walls are visible within the trench. The caption reads: Excavations of the monastery kitchens below Antrim Gardens, Portrush, in 2005.

Each recording (text and descriptions of the four images) lasted for approximately four minutes. In retrospect, it might have been better to divide each recording between two barcodes as Penfriends do not have a pause button.

One of the observations made during the review of the Museums in Focus exhibition was that all of the descriptions for that exhibition were read by the same voice. Depending on the acoustics within a venue, this could render the audio descriptions near impossible to follow if more than one Penfriend was playing a recording at the same time. To counter this, the Sensing the Past exhibition engaged different people to voice the different themes. The use of multiple voices not only made it easier to follow each audio description during busy periods, but also provided variety to the listening experience.



## Case objects

Each of the six information panels were accompanied by a case of objects (two cases for the Blind Bards panel). Although the emphasis of the exhibition was on VI accessibility which should emphasise a tactile approach of engagement, necessity dictated the need for some objects to remain behind glass.

The decision of which items to display in glass cases was informed by health and safety considerations (sharp flints and glass shards etc), collections care concerns (minimising physical contact with fragile objects), and security. With the exhibition unmanned for 72% of its opening hours, artefacts, some of them almost 10,000 years old, could not be left unattended.

Pottery and willow sciathógs produced by the participants of the programme were loaned back to the museum and displayed alongside the introductory information panel. The other cases contained objects from the Coleraine Museum collection and other artefacts loaned to the museum by community members for the purpose of the exhibition.



Each case was given a composite label and Penfriend point, employing a register of the theme colour behind the case title, and a short, large print description of the objects inside. The printed label was put inside an A4 (210x297mm) acrylic sleeve and a Penfriend barcode was located in the top right hand corner. The audio descriptions read out the text of the labels, as well as giving general descriptions of the size, colour and texture of each object.

## Handling objects

The exhibition did include a large table of tactile objects collated from each of the themes, alongside the handling collection from the Museums in Focus exhibition. The tactile objects were largely replicas or other appropriately themed objects (e.g. the Stone Age objects were a nodule of unworked flint, a boar skin and a replica Neolithic pot; the Medieval object was a large, robust, piece of worked stone from an excavation in Portrush).

It was considered that the value gained by providing this sort of limited tactile experience outweighed the security risk of having any of the objects broken or stolen. As it transpired, 94.4% of respondents to the exhibition evaluations agreed or strongly agreed that the museum's use of handling objects improved their visit.



Each object, or set of objects, on the handling table was provided with a large print label in an acrylic sleeve in the same manner as the case objects and an audio description which read out the text of the labels, but without describing the physical appearance of the objects.

After visiting the exhibition, one visitor with VI was so impressed with the use of tactile displays that he returned three times. Each visit he brought further objects related to visual impairment (a pocket Braille writer and three Braille books) to be added to the handling table.

### Exhibition guide booklets

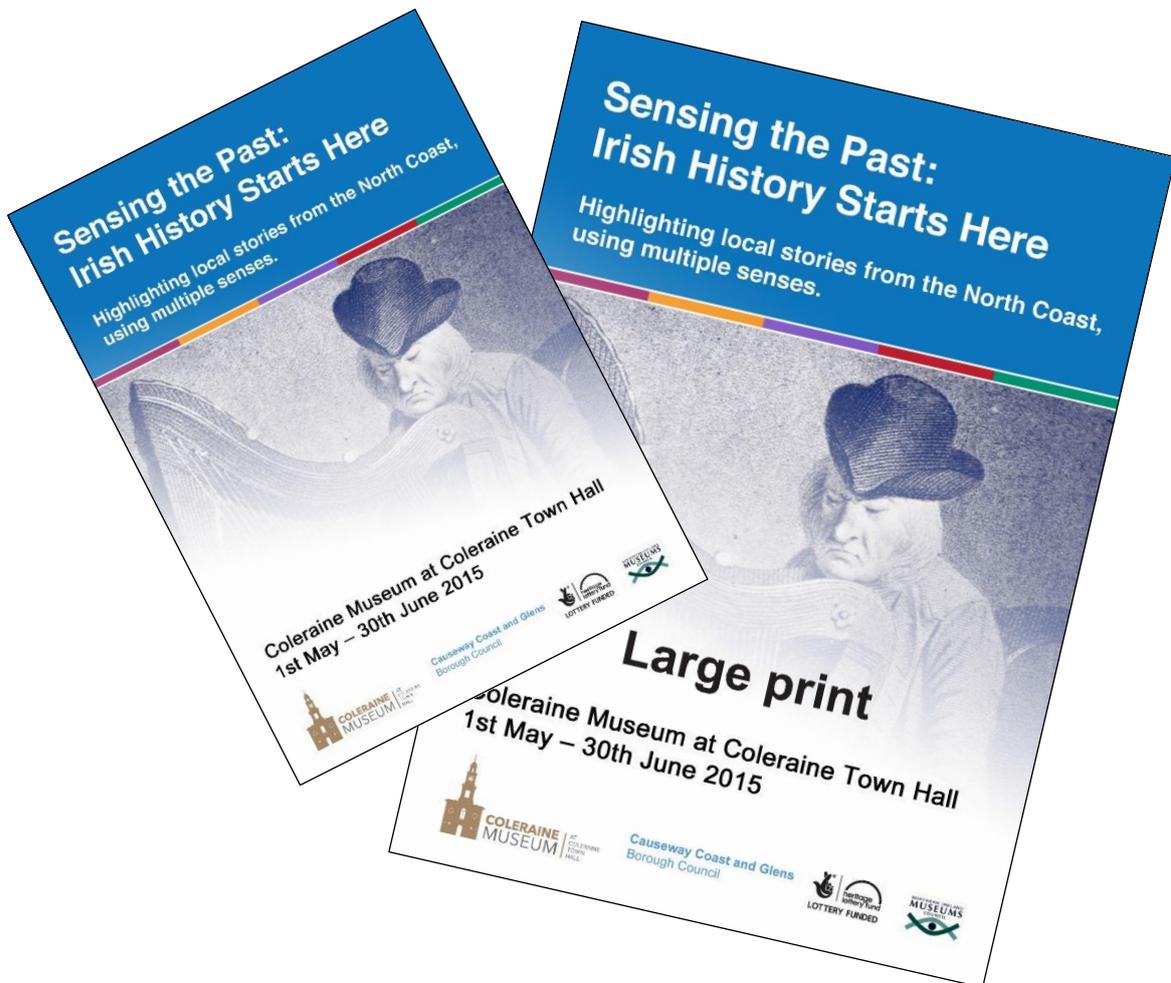
A total of 124, 16 page exhibition booklets were printed for the exhibition. The booklets contained copies of the text from the information panels and a limited number of images from the panels and were available at the door of the venue.

The booklets were broken down into A5 booklets and A4 large print booklets in the following way:

A5 booklets	84
A4 large print booklets	40

Booklets of both sizes were left into the exhibition each week to ensure that both sizes were always available each day. At the end of the exhibition, only four of the A5 booklets remained.

Therefore, 120 exhibition booklets were taken by visitors. Working on the basic premise that each visitor only took one booklet, 19.32% of visitors chose to take a booklet away with them as a memento of their visit.



## Exhibition evaluation

An exhibition visitor questionnaire was left in the venue for the duration of the exhibition, on the same table as the booklets and box of Penfriends. A copy of the questionnaire and full tabulated responses are provided in Appendix 2.

A total of 37 visitors filled out the evaluation forms, reflecting 6% of the total estimated number of visitors over the two month period. Not all respondents answered all questions on the evaluation.

### Demographics

- The respondents reflected four of the five age bands: 16-25 year olds (6%), 26-40 (17%), 41-60 (17%), 60+ (60%). There were no responses from the 0-15 age band.
- 42% of respondents identified as male, 58% identified as female.
- 24% of respondents had some degree of visual impairment while 76% did not.

### Staffing and publicity

- 77% of the evaluations were filled out during the periods when the exhibition was manned. Only 23% were filled out when there was no staff member in attendance.
- 7% of respondents had read about the exhibition in the Council's free events guide and an equal number of respondents had seen the museum flyers which were left at Coleraine Library, Coleraine Tourist Information Centre, Coleraine train station and distributed around the towns department stores and coffee shops.
- A total of 7% of respondents had heard about the exhibition online. A mere 2% on Facebook, and 5% through other online forums.
- 22% of respondents had been told about the exhibition by other people.
- The majority of respondents (54%) ticked 'Other'. Of those, almost a third of the total number of respondents (31.7%) had not seen or heard any publicity about the exhibition, but found out about it by passing the front door of the Town Hall and seeing the poster outside.

### Likert scale questions

- Almost all respondents strongly agreed (61.1%) or agreed (36.1%) with the statement that they enjoyed visiting the Sensing the Past exhibition. A single respondent (2.7%) was not sure.
- A similar overwhelming number of respondents felt that they had learned something new in the exhibition (51.4% strongly agreed, 45.9% agreed), while a single respondent (2.7%) disagreed.
- 86.5% of respondents thought that their understanding of Irish History was improved as a result of the exhibition (37.8% strongly agreed, 48.7% agreed). 10.8% of respondents were not sure and one respondent (2.7%) disagreed.

- Most respondents agreed (32.1%) or strongly agreed (46.4%) that the use of audio descriptions improved their visit. 14.3% of respondents were not sure, while 7.1% disagreed with the statement.
- The use of handling objects received slightly better feedback with 50% agreeing and 46.4% strongly agreeing that the tactile display improved their visit. 3.6% were unsure.

### **Open questions**

The responses to the questions about the visitors' favourite aspect of Sensing the Past can be broken down into five broad sub-categories. For some, the attention they were given by the project lead (when he was in attendance) was highlighted. This feeling was especially prominent among visitors with VI.

Some liked the breadth of history relating to Coleraine and the surrounding area, while others found the social history of blindness (Sensing the Past's fifth theme and the dominant theme of the Museums on Focus exhibition) most interesting.

Between them, the artefacts on display and available for handling, together with the use of the Penfriends were highlighted as principal factors in the visitors' enjoyment.

When asked to state what could be improved for future exhibits, the dominating responses were calls of 'more'. "Tad more stuff", "More please", "more exhibits", "more handling". More and better advertising was suggested as was a clearer indication on where to start when visiting the exhibition. One respondent asked for "Someone about to talk to."

Respondents were also asked if they had any other comments. Most were positive and indicated that the exhibition was taking steps in the right directions. These included: "I brought 2 friends who are visually impaired and they loved it", "Interacting was a good thing", "Really enjoyable. The audio is great and very engaging ideas in the exhibition" and "An excellent exhibition for both sighted and partially sighted people." However, two respondents suggested that the museum run occasional handling sessions or demonstrations for visitors to the exhibition, and one respondent visited during a debriefing meeting after a school workshop and commented that the staff discussion made it difficult to concentrate on reading the panels.

Ninety additional comments were written in the museum's visitors book which was also left open at the table at the entrance to the exhibition space. These were predominantly one or two word entries such as "very instructive", "Very interesting. More please" and "lovely" with two longer comments related to the material from the plantation aspects of the exhibition which were not investigated. The first requested information on the 1641 siege while the second made a strangely belligerent declarations about the Papacy's involvement in the Williamite War.

## Digital presence

A permanent digital presence was maintained throughout the Sensing the Past project on Coleraine Museum's page of the Northern Ireland Archive website.<sup>4</sup> The website grew over the course of the programme and exhibition, and in its final form consists of five pages:

1. Home page introducing the project.
2. Background information about the project and its funders.
3. Programme updates including text and photos documenting the progress of the programme.
4. Exhibition details providing information on opening dates and times, along with the time that the exhibition would be manned by the curator/project lead.
5. Links to abridged versions of the exhibition audio descriptions. These audio files included the information panel texts, but did not include descriptions of the associated images.

The Sensing the Past programme's home page address is the difficult to use [http://www.niarchive.org/coleraine/Exhibitions\\_Collections.aspx?lc=1&id=5adaf489-c1cb-4b93-b422-6c34e09a3ae0](http://www.niarchive.org/coleraine/Exhibitions_Collections.aspx?lc=1&id=5adaf489-c1cb-4b93-b422-6c34e09a3ae0). As a result, most written links to the site, including the exhibition flyer and the back of the exhibition booklet, were given as the more generic <http://www.niarchive.org/coleraine>.

As the diagnostic tools in place appear to only provide gross data of site visits (i.e. to <http://www.niarchive.org/coleraine> but not to any of the constituent pages), it is difficult to ascertain the impact of the Sensing the Past web presence. Only 7% of exhibition evaluation respondents cited online platforms as their way of finding out about the exhibition, and of those respondents, 2% cited Facebook as their source of information.

In an attempt to mitigate the issues caused by the lengthy web address, the exhibition promotional material and booklet made use of a QR code to allow visitors or potential visitors with electronic tablets or smart phones to link directly to the website through their inbuilt scanner/camera.

Although by no means universally used, the introduction of a QR code facilitates fast and easy access to the website without the need to type out the full web address.

Social media, in the form of the Coleraine Museum Facebook account,<sup>5</sup> was also used to disseminate monthly updates during the course of the programme, and promotional information during the course of the exhibition.



---

<sup>4</sup> [www.niarchive.org](http://www.niarchive.org)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/colerainemuseum>

## School workshop

A pilot workshop for Key Stage 3 history students was organised to coincide with the exhibition. An invitation was put out to local Coleraine secondary schools to send a class to take part in the workshop alongside a class of their visually impaired peers from Jordanstown School for a single three hour workshop broken down into the following sessions plus breaks:<sup>6</sup>

1. Introduction to the programme and exhibition including challenges faced by the project lead.
2. 'Active descriptions' activity in which each pupil was given an object from the museum's handling collection (mostly 20<sup>th</sup> century in date ranging from a butter paddle and a mink stole, to carbolic soap and a bedpan). They were given a few minutes to discuss their objects with the other students on their table to try to determine what they thought the objects were. The entire group were asked to close their eyes and each student then had one minute to describe their object in a way that would allow the other students to guess what it was. Chocolate incentives were provided for correct guesses and for good descriptions.
3. 'Group learning session.' The two classes were intermixed and formed into five small groups. Each group was assigned one of the key themes explored by the Sensing the Past exhibition which they researched using the resources available (panels, exhibition guide, audio descriptions, handling objects and a small set of notes).

The groups were asked to decide how best to interpret the information on their topic in such a way that that it could be understood by a mixed audience of their sighted and visually impaired peers.

4. 'Group presentations.' Each group was granted five minutes to give a poster and/or presentation which showed their interpretation of the assigned theme in any way they liked so long as it allowed them to tell the story of their theme in a coherent way.

The groups were also asked to make suggestions about how they would display their theme to the public in a way which is accessible to sighted and visually impaired audiences alike.

The workshop was very successful with all students participating in the activities. A particularly poignant moment occurred during the introductory talk when the students from Coleraine Integrated College were asked to raise their hand if they had ever spoken to somebody with a visual impairment: not a single hand was raised. By the end of the active descriptions session, the students from both classes were freely intermixing. By the end of the workshop, students were not only friendly, but were beginning to show a mutual understanding of each other's needs.

From a facilitation point of view, a repeat workshop might amend the active descriptions activity so that the students of each table elect only two of their number

---

<sup>6</sup> Jordanstown is the Northern Ireland school and centre of excellence for children who are deaf or visually impaired. The local school who became involved with the project was Coleraine Integrated College. A total of 19 students took part, accompanied by five teachers and teaching assistants.

to describe their objects for the rest of the group. As it was, several students appeared to grow restless towards the end of the activity.

Students were asked to write informal feedback on the backs of their posters, stating what they liked and did not like about the workshop. Positive responses included: “Funny”, “Helped us learn about the past”, “Would come again”, “I like the way that he let us do activities instead of sitting down and listening to him talk about Coleraine” and “It was fun meeting new people and doing the presentations.” There was only a single negative comment, “More time to finish posters” relating to the group learning session.

The exhibition was also used as the venue for 12 primary school workshops facilitated by an external presenter. The workshops were themed around Mesolithic Mountsandel and made extensive use of the space with limited interaction with the Sensing the Past handling objects.

## Legacy

As a result of the Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here project, a new relationship was established with RNIB to promote ongoing engagement between Coleraine Museum and VI community members and guidelines were created to allow Coleraine Museum to maintain a sustainable approach to VI accessibility.

RNIB visual awareness training was provided for staff and volunteers as part of the Museums in Focus project, and five Penfriends were left for Coleraine Museum to incorporate into future exhibitions.

The project lead facilitated a training workshop for Causeway Museum Service staff from Coleraine, Limavady and Ballycastle that ran through the uses of the Penfriend technology and the procedures required to employ it successfully.

Initial results of this training and some of the experience gained throughout the project impacted on Coleraine Museum's next temporary exhibition, Rites of Passage (July–August 2015) which employed Penfriend technology to widen accessibility to the panel texts that introduced the exhibition.

At the request of RNIB, the social history session from the Sensing the Past programme themed around blind musicians (Blind Bards of the Causeway Coast) was adapted and delivered as a free public talk at Derry Tower Museum to accompany the launch of the Museums in Focus project at that venue.

RNIB have also booked further stand-alone object handling sessions to be run for other pre-existing VI groups in Ballymoney and Ballycastle.

## Conclusions

It is clear from the results outlined above that the Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here project was successful in its aims to 1) improve public accessibility to the Coleraine Museum collections and curatorial expertise for community members with visual impairment, and 2) to highlight the significant achievements for our area throughout the pre-historic and early historic periods.

A focus group of VI stakeholders were created who have provided excellent feedback to the museum service on ways in which to engage with community members with VI. With their guidance and feedback, Coleraine Museum ran a much appreciated community engagement programme for the group, and curated an exhibition which took the first steps towards creating a fully accessible experience for VI visitors.

Transport limitations within the VI community was raised several times by group members as a subject of concern. The potential availability and cost of transport meant that two of the original group members felt the need to pull out after the first session and sporadically resulted in other stakeholders missing sessions. In some situations, the programmes sessions could be repeated in different venues (e.g. a repeat of session two was held in a participant's home in Cushendall), but this was not always feasible.

The feedback from both aspects of the project was overwhelmingly positive with the opportunity to take a hands-on approach to heritage highlighted as an audience pleaser for sighted and VI visitors alike. Among the programme focus group, the practical workshops also provided the participants with an insight into the past that they would not have received through tactile handling sessions alone.

Furthermore the provision of Penfriends gave VI visitors to the exhibition considerable access to information which would otherwise have been, and was previously, unavailable to them. They found the Penfriends easy to use and appreciated the sense of independence it gave them to choose their own path through the exhibition rather than being forced to follow a linear narrative.

With regards to the audio descriptions themselves, it was found that it was easy to create recordings of a decent exhibition quality using a digital recorder and free audio editing software.<sup>7</sup> However, depending on the level of background noise at the time of recording, the files could take a long time to edit into their final form, and the internal file structure of the Penfriends was found to be quite convoluted and therefore time consuming to navigate.

By creating the files manually (rather than recording directly into the Penfriend itself), more control was maintained over the quality of the recording and it's file size, meaning that versions of the recordings were able to be made available through the project website.

---

<sup>7</sup> For Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here, the free-to-download editing programme, Audacity, was used, <http://audacityteam.org/>.

Feedback from both the programme and exhibition evaluations indicated that participants and visitors left the project having learned something new about the local heritage.

However, the importance of having a manned exhibition was reiterated numerous times during the course of the project. Time and again it was stated by the programme participants that visitors with VI will be very hesitant to enter any venue if they know that there will not be an attendant or other staff member present. The concession that was agreed for the purposes of the Sensing the Past exhibition only, was for the project lead to man the exhibition for a set period each week. This was appreciated by focus group, one member of which stated:

"...as long as you can get in contact with people with disabilities somehow, to promote that event [he refers here to the 'manned' days], you're not exactly changing the museum, you're just making it more accessible for certain times... That's important, I think, for any museum. I mean for somebody who is not a visually impaired person, being able to ask supplementary questions is really important, especially for children because they have questions."

In this he could not, of course, have been more correct. An essential part of a museum's contact with the community is conducted through its exhibitions. The presence of a knowledgeable staff member who is able to introduce an exhibition and field questions on a one-to-one basis is an important aspect of community engagement.

In regards to the collection of feedback from the public, the presence of an attendant also impacted on the likelihood that visitors would complete evaluation forms. This is clearly illustrated in the case of the Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here exhibition where 77% of the evaluations were filled out during the periods when the exhibition was manned, even though those periods only made up 8.37% of the total exhibition opening hours.

## Recommendations

### 1) That an *ongoing* relationship is maintained with the RNIB and/or VI community groups.

Following on from the Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here project, the local VI community are more willing to engage with Coleraine Museum than they have been in the past. Complacency on the part of the museum service would mitigate the benefits of the project.

An ongoing relationship could easily be maintained by the running of semi-regular object handling and/or reminiscence sessions (as appropriate) with VI groups co-ordinated through RNIB.

If sessions were run in conjunction with the Museum's exhibition programme, then the facilitator could be expected to have sufficient curatorial knowledge and access to handling objects and stories to conduct a session. Sessions run in conjunction with exhibition programmes would also provide a viable link between the museum service and the VI community to continue to encourage exhibition visits.

### 2) That a thoughtful approach is taken towards VI accessibility for future exhibitions.

Penfriends have the potential to be a real linchpin in the VI accessibility policy for the museum. However, they must not be viewed as a tick box exercise. The inclusion of Penfriends without due consideration will not automatically make an exhibition accessible to VI visitors.

Museum staff need to be given the support required within the museum/local authority organisational structure to devote time to creating audio content for exhibitions.

A degree of consistency should be maintained in the presentation and positioning of Penfriend points to encourage repeat visits by community members with VI (e.g. consistently locating Penfriend points in lower left corners of panels etc).

Wherever possible, tactile exhibitions or handling tables should be made available within exhibitions.

The prepared VI accessibility guidance should be considered when designing information panels regarding fonts, text size, alignment and contrast issues.

### 3) That exhibitions be manned for set hours each week by a knowledgeable staff member or attendant.

Having an informed attendant within the exhibition space has benefits for sighted and visually impaired visitors alike. All visitors appreciate somebody who can provide a background to exhibitions and themes and who is available to answer questions and impart knowledge beyond the information written on the panels.

Furthermore, an attendant provides the perception of greater security to an exhibition and can increase the data received through evaluation, either by asking visitors to fill out evaluation forms or by recording informal comments.

If staffing costs do not permit an attendant to be present at all times, by maintaining a consistent presence (e.g. always on a Thursday afternoon), a pattern can be established to allow visitors to make an informed decision on when they wish to attend an exhibition.



# **Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here**

## Appendix 1

Programme participant questionnaire and responses

**Sensing the Past – end of programme stakeholder evaluation questionnaire**

Age range            0-15            16-25            26-40            41-60            60+

Gender                Female            Male

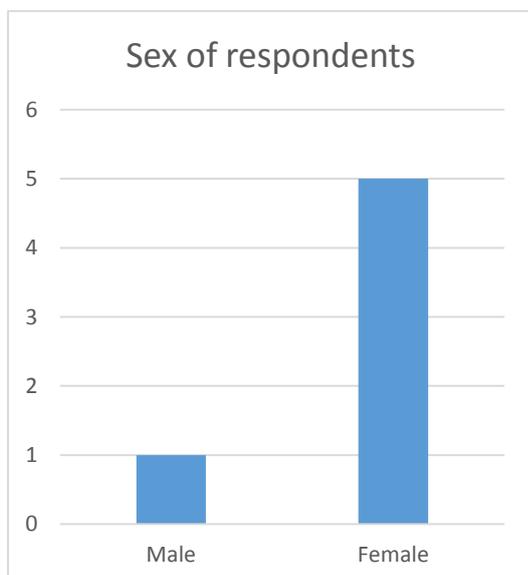
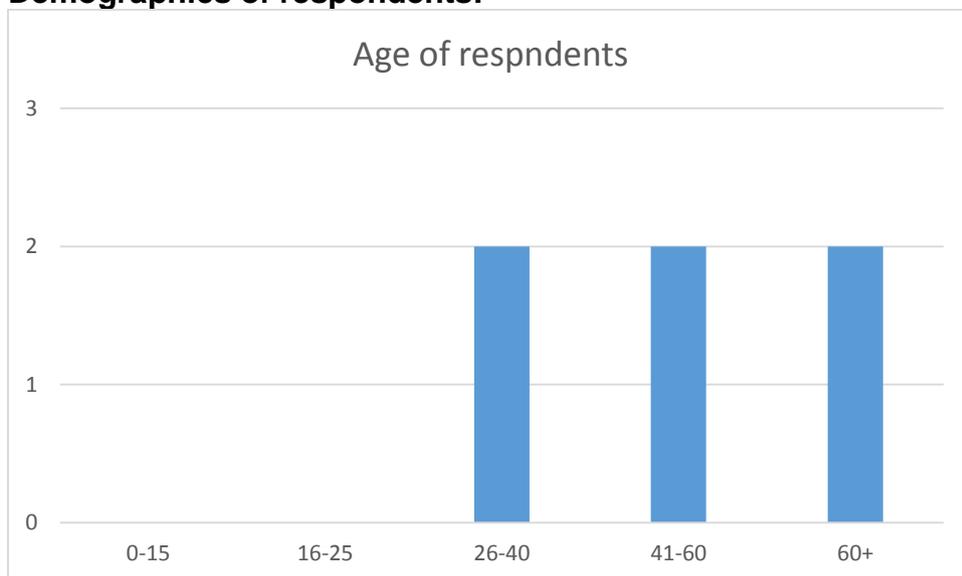
	strongly disagree	disagree	neither agree nor disagree	agree	strongly agree
I enjoyed participating in the Sensing the Past programme					
I felt welcome to express my own thoughts or opinions					
I learned new things					
My understanding of Irish history is better now than before I participated in the programme					
I would be interested in participating in future community engagement programmes with Coleraine Museum					
As a result of the programme I am more likely to visit Coleraine Museum exhibitions in future					
As a result of the programme I am more likely to visit other museums and heritage sites in future					
What was your favourite aspect of the Sensing the Past programme?					
What do you think could be improved for future programmes?					
Do have any other comments?					

## Responses to end of programme evaluations

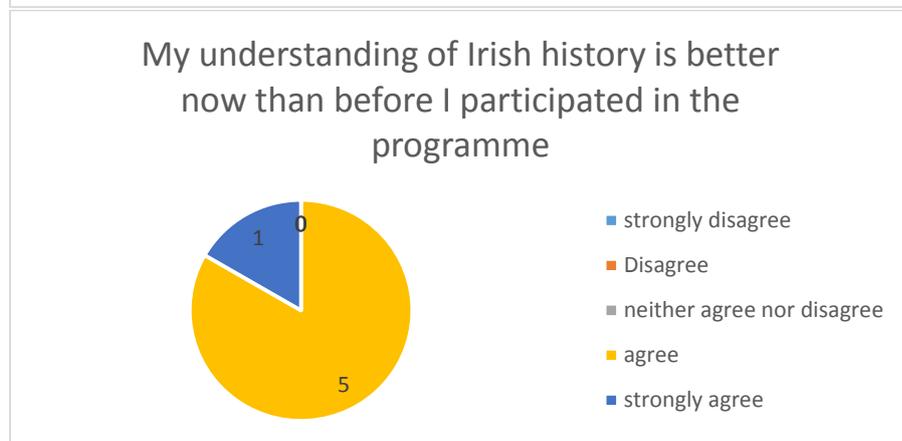
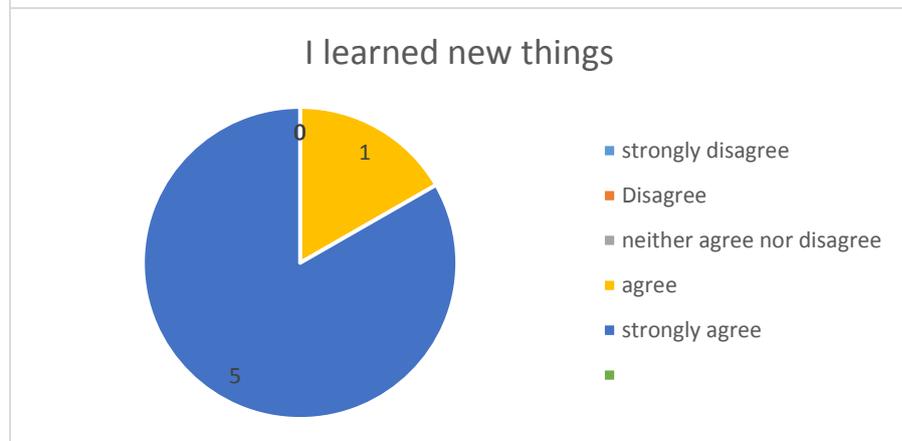
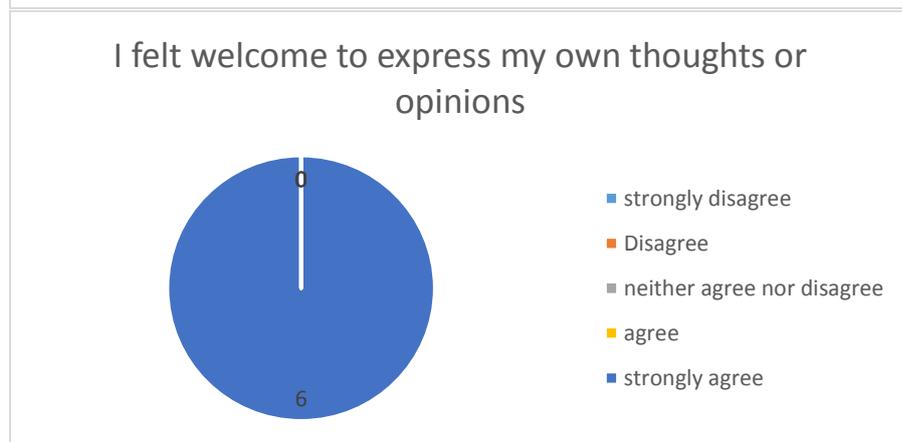
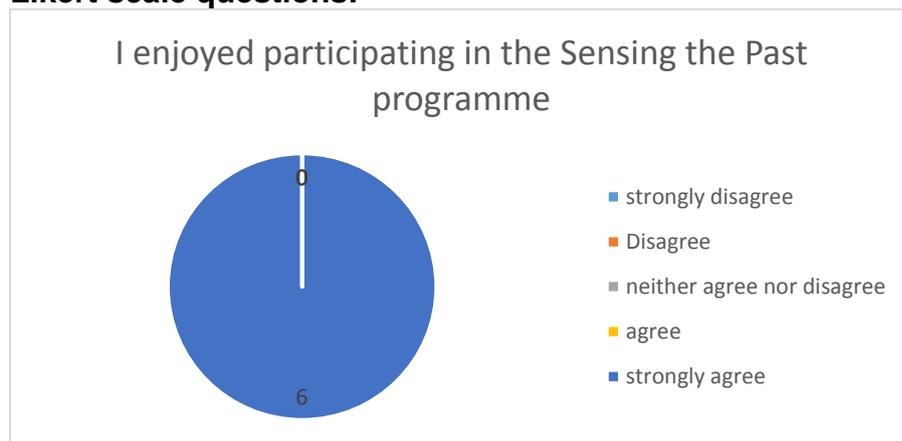
**Total number of participants surveyed: 6**

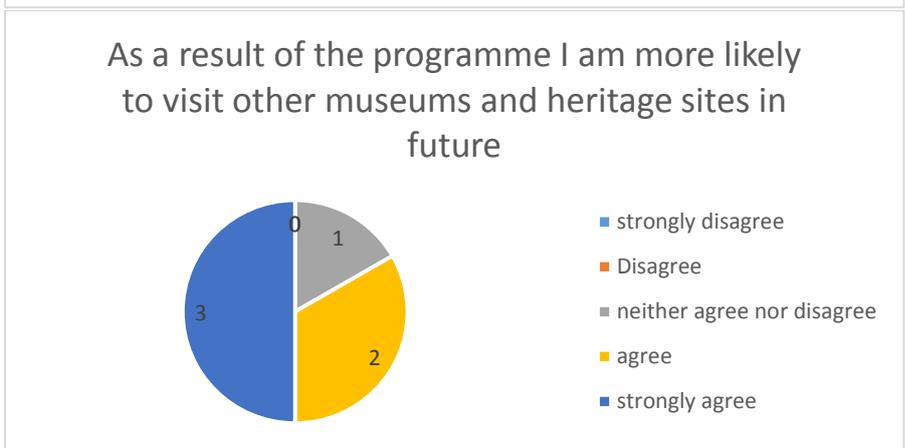
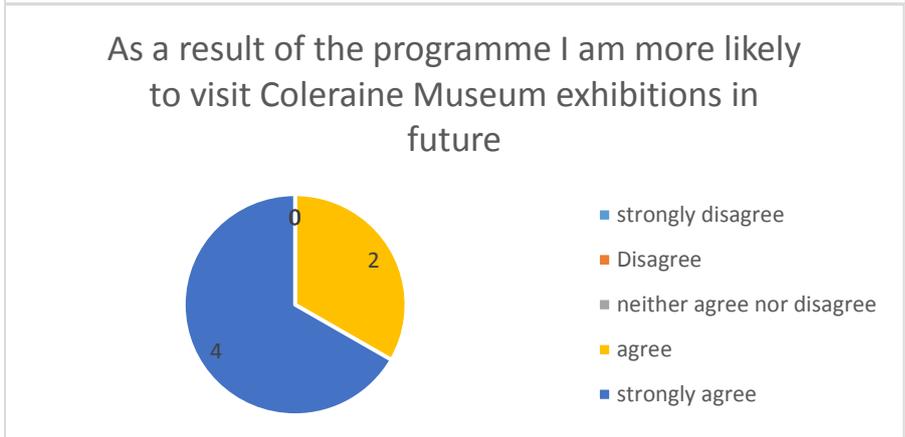
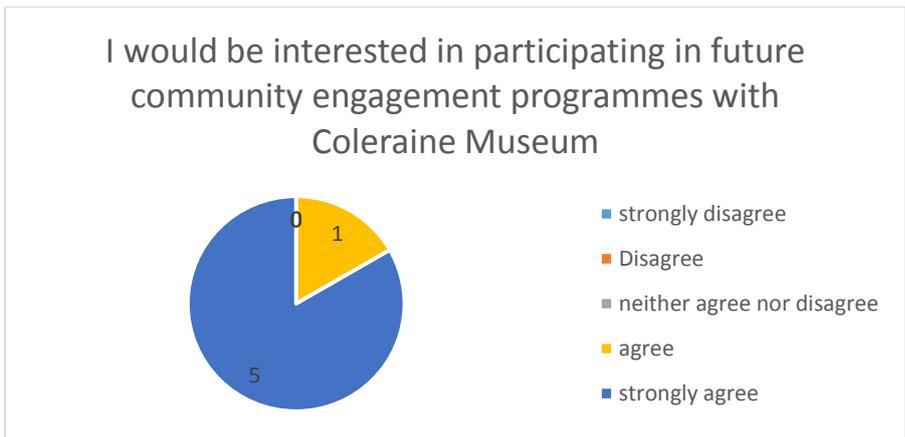
**Percentage of participants surveyed: 75%**

**Demographics of respondents:**



**Likert scale questions:**





**Open question responses:**

- What was your favourite aspect of the Sensing the Past programme?
  - “I enjoyed the whole programme – had no expectations at beginning”
  - “Enjoyed meeting new people and sharing the experience with them”
  - “Enjoyed all aspects of the programme”
  - “Learned a lot about Coleraine History”
  - “Interesting”
  - “Handling objects”
  - “Feeling marine[?] and sea stuff because of new”
  - “Pottery one best because things to take home and doing things”
  - “Basketry. Just love making baskets”
  - “Really enjoyed the food session”
  - “Music – nice to ear pleasant to listen”
  - “Using senses – music and food”
  - “Tasting – sampling foods”
  
- What do you think could be improved for future programmes?
  - “Everybody gets a chance to talk but would prefer more talking with others during session”
  - “Be nice to have information (large print) to go back to”
  - “Programme spot on – ticked all boxes Nic asked to fulfil”
  - “Depends on programmes”
  - “Sign posts for sources of additional information for those who want to learn more about particular topics/sessions”
  - “In exhibition – more resources for accessing more info”
  - “Wider community based museum service more links with historical associations i.e. rural outposts of the museum”
  - “More detail on some aspects”
  - “Transport access to the sessions”
  - “Extra detail on animal skins”
  - “More sessions”
  - “Actually some more details”
  - “Church was cold. So different time of year for church visit”
  - “Was contented with how things worked”
  
- Do you have any other comments?
  - “Memory is an issue when age 74 good back up after session”
  - “Nic’s hard work appreciated”
  - “A positive good experience and I’m sorry its finished, local one[?] good.”

- “Great knowledge demonstrated by Nic”
- “Good consideration for partially sighted people by facilitator[?]”
- “2 hours enough, venues need to be local”
- “Retaining information is hard”
- “I would recommend to others”
- “Transport can be an issue – funding for example for transport provision”
- “Food session should have been beer and chips”
- “Nic did a very good job with the group and the sessions”
- “Bigger groups are enjoyable”
- “Nic did really well with the sessions and the group”
- “Time 2 hours OK, location OK, catering OK, Nov. townhall chilly.
- “Would recommend”
- “Enjoyed all the sessions that she attended”



# **Sensing the Past: Irish History Starts Here**

## Appendix 2

Exhibition visitor questionnaire and responses

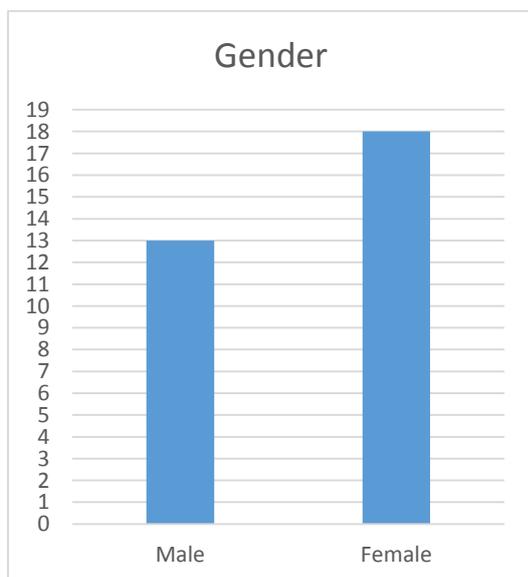
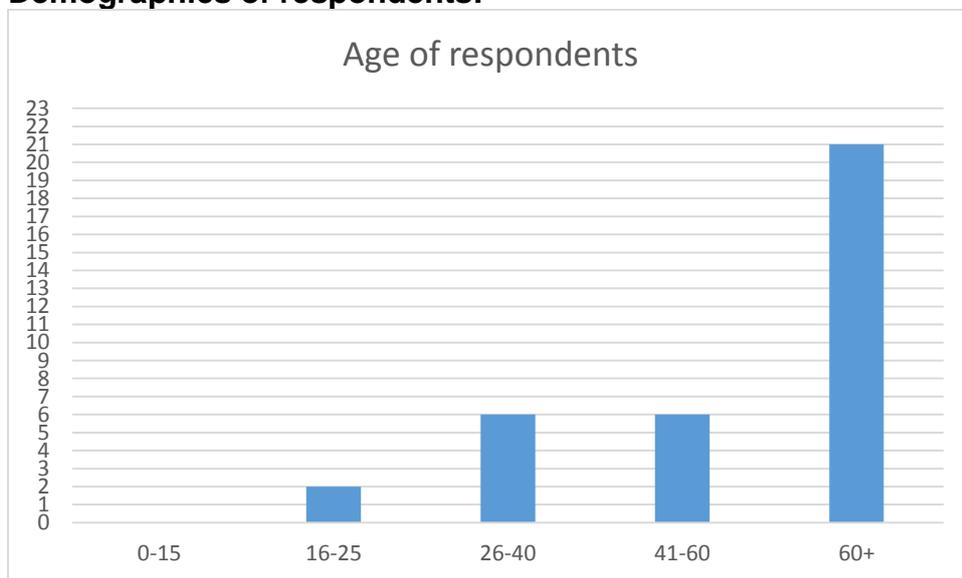


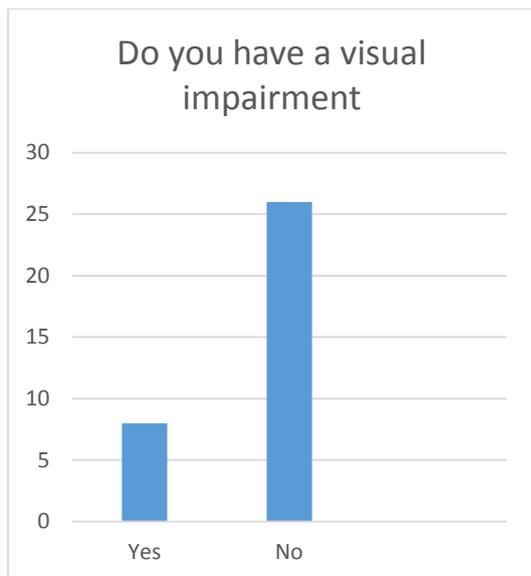
## Responses to exhibition visitor evaluations

**Total number of exhibition visitors surveyed: 37**

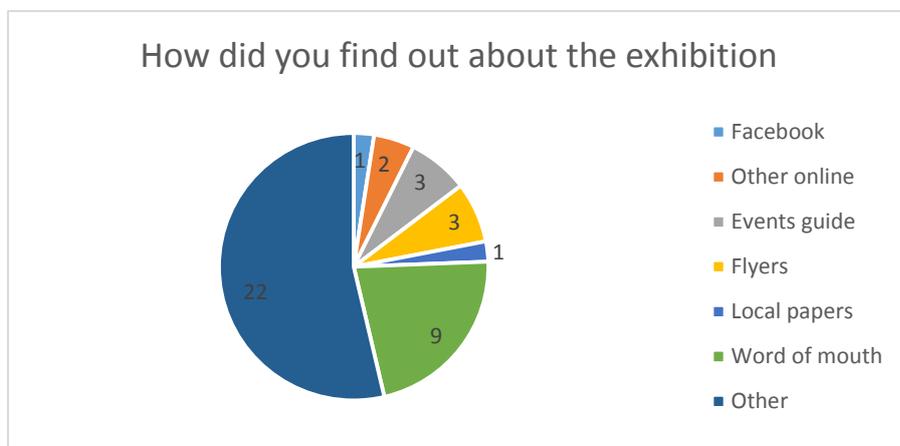
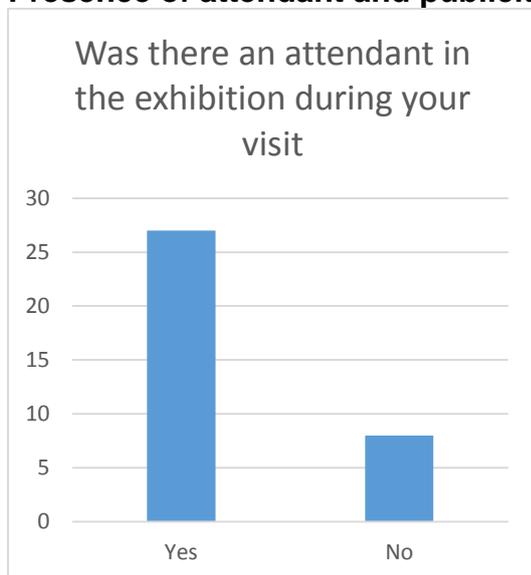
**Approximate percentage of visitors surveyed: 6%**

### Demographics of respondents:





**Presence of attendant and publicity:**



Where 'Other' was ticked and further information provided:

“RNIB notified me”

“Through Blind Centre [RNIB]”

“Email”

“Nic”

“Radio”

“Passing Town Hall”

“Seen it at front door”

“Outside town hall”

“Passing by the town hall”

“Walking past”

“Was visiting Coleraine”

“Saw it advertised just outside!”

“Found out by coming to the front door (visiting Coleraine)!”

“Visiting Coleraine”

“Saw it while in town”

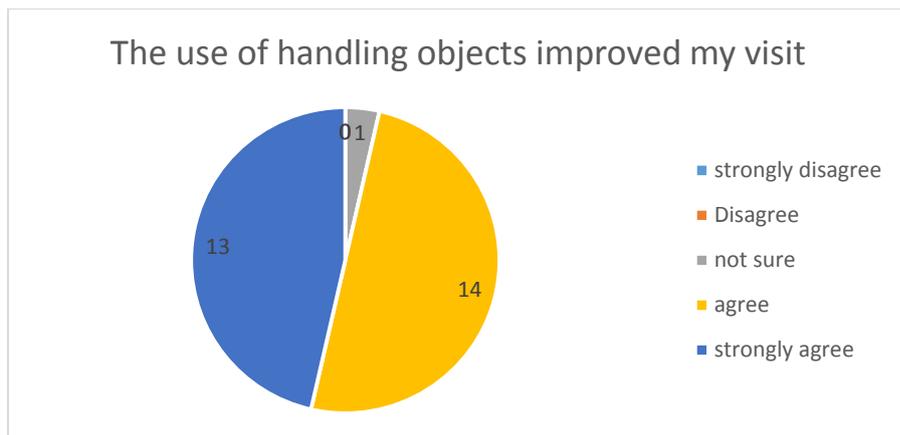
“Passing-by”

“Saw advert outside Townhall”

“Saw board @ Townhall.”

**Likert scale questions:**





Open question responses:

- What was your favourite aspect of the Sensing the Past exhibition?

“Staff/RNIB very very helpful.”

“Warm hospitality”

“Personal attention”

“All of it.”

“Enjoyed all the displays & reading material.”

“Irish History.”

“Irish History”

“Pictures of old Coleraine”

“Old photographs from archives I haven’t seen before.”

“Learning more about Coleraine”

“Pottery and sciathogs”

“The visual evidence of very early Ireland”

“Information about Stone Age.”

“Learning about earliest settlement.”

“Coorstown [sic]/Dooney’s Cairn and much more were new to me!”

“St Patricks [sic] legacy.”

“Improving my understanding of the past and the contribution of the blind/visually impaired to history.”

“Learning something of the social history of blind folk.”

“Photographs and personal stories of blind people”

“Learning more about sight impairment”

“All about blind”

“Very encouraged to see/read the development in blind persons welfare.”

“The history of blind people.”

“Sense of the Past’ section on experiences of Blind people in NI.”

“Viewing artifacts.”

“Bronze Age artifacts”

“Availability of objects to handle”

“Being able to handle different objects.”

“The equipment on display”

“Handling objects”

“Handling objects!”

“Pen friends are excellent.”

“Fantastic use of Penfriends!”

“The audio pen is an excellent tool”

“Audio description”

“Using the pen friend”

“Trying out the Penfriend for first time”

“Black pen [Penfriend]”

- What do you think could be improved for future exhibitions?

“Mic for speeches [at launch]”

“Tad more stuff”

“More please!”

“More exhibits”

“More handling”

“More initial publicity”

“More advertising”

“How visitors will use the penfriends when RNIB are not here”

“A more defined start & finish”

“Clearer signs indicating where to start/flav of exhibit.

“Someone about to talk to.”

“Penfriend support to future exhibitions would be greatly appreciated. Always put them in for VI people.

“Nothing”

“Non applicable”

“Exhibition was very well presented”

“The whole exhibition was very professional and interesting”

“Very interesting.”

“Very good texts and not too much to saturate the mind”

- Do you have any other comments?

“I brought 2 friends who are visually impaired and they loved it.”

“Interacting was a good thing”

“Very well presented.”

“Well presented and good contribution to social history”

“Well designed and displayed”

“Really enjoyable. The audio is great and very engaging ideas in the exhibition”

“A really excellent exhibition – the tourist board should come as a matter of urgency.”

“The accompanying book is a great publication which we will use regularly on the Coleraine Talking News.”

“It was very interesting.”

“A very pleasant morning.”

“Super”

“Excellent”

“An excellent exhibition for both sighted and partially sighted people.”

“Good cooperation between RNIB and museum experts.”

“Very clear and interesting information really enjoyed my time here today”

“Thank you for personal attention from curator.”

“Perhaps temporary/occasional teaching/demonstrating by staff.”

“Exhibitions just get better each time. Especially the Sense of the Past (Health) informative, also educational to me my mum suffers partial blindness”

“Great to see a new topic being discussed.”

“Very good”

“Clearly displayed though not always in expected order!”

“None”

“Stimulating introduction from Nick which made the exhibition live to me.”

“Helpful commentary.”

“More info on events for VI visitors.”

“Putting on handling sessions/days for VI people.”

“Please give Penfriends to the Titanic exhibition.”

“Attendants sat at back talking throughout – made it difficult to concentrate of reading displays.”

“Enjoyable ☺x.”