CASE STUDY

Understanding the impact of museum practice when engaging the Syrian refugee community in Milton Keynes

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ABSTRACT

Milton Keynes Museum is currently reviewing the extent of its reach within its wider community to determine which communities are not engaging with the museum’s collections, exhibits and programmes. The first non-engaging community identified by the museum is the recently resettled Syrian refugee community in Milton Keynes. This article investigates the motivations for museums to engage communities and the benefits of engaging refugee communities for the museum and the community. Research for the article was conducted by reviewing current cultural policies, museum literature, current movements in the sector and best practice, and by reviewing policies and engagement of Syrian refugees at Milton Keynes Museum. The results outline the significant impact of engaging refugees in museums on integration, improving employability, democratizing museums, challenging stereotypes and increasing participation. Based on the research, the article provides recommendations for an engagement programme to be applied at Milton Keynes Museum for the museum to best engage Syrian refugees. It concludes that museums can have a significant impact on their community, particularly the refugee community, and that museums have a social role to fulfil that should not be dictated solely by current policies and trends.

Keywords: HEALTH, WELL-BEING, SYRIAN REFUGEES, ENGAGEMENT, MUSEUMS

INTRODUCTION

Socially engaged practice is not a new notion in the museum sector. Jocelyn Dodd (1) noted nearly 25 years ago that museums were becoming more community-oriented and that education programmes were evolving to meet this agenda. Golding and Walklate (2) argue that “museums and communities exist within wider political and philosophical contexts and within intersecting networks that are influenced by contested histories, politics, economics and value systems.” As the idea of museums having the ability to create a positive social impact continues to take precedence, more museums are looking to reach out to their communities. Recognizing this, Milton Keynes Museum in the United Kingdom is currently taking steps to engage audiences that could be positively influenced through engagement with culture and heritage. The first group to be identified by the museum is the Syrian refugee community in Milton Keynes, as the Syrian refugee families have expressed an interest in learning about the culture and history of Milton Keynes. The museum has undertaken work to identify the best practice for engaging Syrian refugees and giving them the confidence to be regular museum visitors and to participate in the museum community as volunteers.

This article uses the case study of Milton Keynes Museum and its plan to engage Syrian refugees to examine the current practices in the sector for enhancing social impact on communities. It looks at the reasons behind museums engaging with different communities, and aims to study the effect museums can have on the various communities with whom they engage. The article then further evaluates current practices within the sector to engage the refugee community. Findings have then been applied to the case study of Milton Keynes Museum, to assess why it has chosen to prioritize the refugee community over others; discuss the best methods to maximize refugee community participation in the museum; and provide recommendations for a refugee engagement programme.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a review of the current literature and practices in the museum sector. Two examples in particular, Wakefield Museum and Pitt Rivers Museum, are reviewed in detail and the outcomes and impacts of different projects in relation to different communities are analysed. In the context of Milton Keynes Museum, due to barriers such as language
and that the process of establishing relationships with the Syrian refugees is still in the initial stages, no formal interviews were conducted with potential participants. Information to assess the keenness of participants and success/failure of the engagement was gathered through discussions and deliberations with representatives of the British Red Cross in Milton Keynes. These representatives have been involved with the refugee community from the beginning and have a sound understanding of its needs.

**MILTON KEYNES MUSEUM**

Milton Keynes Museum is an independent museum located in the town of Milton Keynes in Buckinghamshire, England. It was founded in 1973, when a group of local residents began a collection of industry and rural life artefacts to preserve the history of the area before it developed into one of the largest new towns in the United Kingdom. The volunteers came together to form the Stacey Hill Society with the goal of creating a museum. With support from the community, the collection grew rapidly and the museum came to be known as Milton Keynes Museum. Since the 1980s, the museum has been a popular local attraction. In 2014 the museum announced plans for an expansion, which involved development of two new galleries: Ancient Milton Keynes (showcasing the archaeology of the local area) and New Milton Keynes (dedicated to the founding of the new town).

The mission of the museum is to “inspire and encourage people to learn about and enjoy the heritage of Milton Keynes and to foster pride in the community, by engaging people actively with the museum’s collections, buildings and grounds” (3). The museum hopes to achieve this through five strategic objectives:

- Tell the full story of Milton Keynes;
- Achieve higher standards in operation, presentation and collaboration;
- Become better known and reach more people;
- Retain volunteers at the heart of operations;
- Further secure sustainability.

Museum Director Bill Griffiths strongly believes that the museum’s most important role is a community role, particularly in providing roots and in placemaking. Since its inception, Milton Keynes Museum has had a strong community focus; the museum was set up by members of the community and has been run by members of the community since, who continue to volunteer their time and talent. The museum is now looking to ensure that the community remains at its core. It intends to represent the growing and diverse population of Milton Keynes through a policy of contemporary collecting, which would allow it to successfully tell the stories of a changing town by; effectively communicating stories of individuals that contribute to Milton Keynes through a guidebook and the New Town gallery, which will have a People’s Story section; playing a social role in the community and responding to the needs of the community; being more reflective of the community in its trustees, staff and volunteer recruitment policies; and by being more accessible to all audiences.

It is in this context that the museum is trying to identify and prioritize new audiences and sustain engagement with and through its collections, volunteer opportunities and learning programmes. This attempt is also in keeping with other broader trends in the museum sector. In 2019 the International Council of Museums (ICOM) proposed a new definition of the term “museum”¹. The new definition, which has been put forward to reflect the changing nature of museums, describes museums as “participatory and transparent” and as working “with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing” (4). There is also an argument for the potential of museums to influence positive social change. David Fleming (5) argues that a museum’s social role should be audience-focused, educational and community-oriented, diverse and socially responsible. The 2017 Museums Change Lives campaign run by the Museums Association is based on this very premise and posits that museums are able to enhance health and well-being, create better places to live and work, and inspire engagement, debate and reflection (6). According to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, museums can have a great impact on health, education and social inclusion through community engagement (7). The National Health Service and local social care services are using schemes such as Museums on Prescription to connect socially vulnerable groups to museums in Central London to combat anxiety and depression through increased sociability.

¹ ICOM currently defines “museum” as a “non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purpose of education, study and enjoyment” (http://archives.icom.museum/definition.html).
Museums such as Poole Museum have been successful in engaging their communities to improve the well-being of the people (6). Poole Museum works with community members who may be having mental health issues or experiencing social isolation through its volunteer programme. The programme aims to provide volunteers with the skills and confidence to move on to full-time employment, while helping them improve their well-being. Richard Sandell (9) argues that the social impact of museums can be linked to creation of cultural identity and a place of belonging. In 2016 the Department for Culture, Media and Sport published the Culture White Paper, which highlighted the role of culture as a vehicle to help improve social skills, professional development, well-being and self-esteem and overcome social challenges among communities that are at risk of isolation. The two main funding bodies of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport – the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Arts Council England – have also committed to fund projects aimed at addressing inclusion of people from minority, ethnic, LGBTQ+, and disabled communities; projects that make heritage accessible to community groups; and projects that promote well-being, help develop skills, or boost economic conditions of people belonging to a community (10). The Hatton Gallery worked with refugees in North East England to help them feel a sense of belonging in the United Kingdom (11). Seventeen refugees from different countries participated in the project and preserved their stories and experiences in the new country in the form of audio and video recordings, textile works, poetry and collages. Such projects demonstrate that broadening accessibility and participation in museums can greatly benefit those who are vulnerable and at risk of being isolated.

Since 2017 Milton Keynes Museum has made several attempts to approach, engage and encourage participation among several local communities. Local women were invited to share their stories through a temporary exhibition titled HERstory; partnerships have been initiated with local care homes and the Macular Society to improve access for dementia patients and individuals with visual impairments; Quiet Hours are being organized to provide a more relaxed visit for adults and children with special needs. Approaching the Syrian refugee community in Milton Keynes was part of an effort to effectively address issues of social importance such as justice, cultural integration, social and mental health through museum programming and collections.

The most commonly accepted definition of the term “refugees” was first stipulated in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. It defined a refugee as a person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” Legally, refugees are residents of the state to which they have moved and where they have been granted asylum, which gives them access to welfare benefits and they can enjoy most of the rights of the citizens of that state (12). Refugees find themselves separated from social ties and connections that normally underlie membership in a community (13). The process of finding an affiliation to a community is further complicated when they arrive in a new country. They then share a narrow characteristic that defines a community, in their case being displaced, uprooted and finding themselves in a new environment. This can cause refugee and migrant groups to face several common issues, such as difficult histories, isolation, and economic deprivation, that unify them as a community.

Since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, millions of Syrians have fled the country and took refuge in neighbouring countries like Jordan and Lebanon or countries in Europe. In the United Kingdom, Syrian refugees are resettled under the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme and the British government has pledged to resettle as many as 20 000 Syrian refugees by 2020. Nearly 15 000 Syrian refugees have been resettled in the United Kingdom to date (14). Once resettled in the United Kingdom, refugees can face numerous challenges, including communication problems due to cultural and language barriers, mental health problems due to loss and sense of displacement, social isolation and difficulty navigating social customs (15). Several organizations such as the British Red Cross, World Jewish Relief and Refugee Council are committed to supporting resettled refugees in rebuilding their lives and they often do so in partnership with local communities and public services (16).

Museums have made several attempts to engage refugees with the arts. These have included exhibitions, events and celebrations like Refugee Week, which was first hosted in 1998; the 2003 exhibition titled Sanctuary, developed at the Gallery
of Modern Art in Glasgow; and the 2006 project Belonging: Voices of London’s Refugees at the Museum of London. Early research exploring the effect of engaging refugees in museums demonstrated that museums can have a very positive social impact on the participants (17). In fact, engagement with refugees can have a significant social impact for both the museum and the refugees (12). Museums can use their collections, exhibitions and public programmes to showcase the transitions and transformations that take place in society over time, thus inspiring an interest in the history of migration and cultural diversity. This gives refugees, as newcomers to a community, an opportunity to meet and socialize not only with members of their own community but also with people of other cultural backgrounds.

The Cardiff Story Museum showcases the influence of migration on the city of Cardiff (6). It follows the history of the city through the stories of people who have moved there, and all exhibits and programmes are driven by a sense of community. This ensures that the museum is a representation of those who move to the city. In line with this ideology, the museum partnered with charities and other relevant organizations to ensure that the newly arrived Syrian refugee families feel that they can relate to Cardiff’s past and present and are able to use the museum as a community space. It also gave the Syrian families an opportunity to come into contact with other families in the city, providing a space for participants to forge new identities and find a sense of belonging, and acting as a place of integration and a cultural meeting point. In doing so, however, museums must be thoughtful in their approach. Imposing or even introducing the idea of a new cultural identity and ignoring the refugees’ cultural histories and interests can alienate refugee groups. Furthermore, Syrian refugees (and other refugee communities) are not a homogenous group and will have different circumstances and histories. It is important that museums encourage continued discussion with participants to ensure that any attempts to engage the refugee community are mindful of their needs.

Museums can provide refugees with an environment that improves general well-being, boosts self-esteem and helps counter social isolation. They can be a place where refugees gather to learn, socialize and develop new skills. This can help instil a sense of competence in the refugees, empower them and provide them with new opportunities for the future. All these positive efforts can in turn increase refugee participation in museums. Two particularly inspiring refugee engagement projects are the Multaka-Oxford project and the Wakefield Museum project. The Multaka-Oxford project was launched by the Oxford University Museums, particularly the Pitt Rivers and the History of Science Museum. The project is run in collaboration with organizations such as Asylum Welcome and Refugee Resource, and funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund. Inspired by the Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point project in Berlin, the Multaka-Oxford project is a two-year initiative that aims to create inclusive volunteer opportunities for refugees in Oxford and support positive social impact. The project uses the museums’ collections of Islamic scientific instruments at the History of Science Museum and an Islamic textile collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum. It engages volunteers in several aspects of museum activity such as accessioning and documenting the collection, planning and delivering museum lates, writing blogs and tweets for the project, speaking about the project at public events, planning and co-curating, leading family activities and giving tours in English and Arabic (18). Refugees have been empowered with the skills to intervene within displays and provide intercultural interpretation and multilingual labels. These displays were produced by five volunteers and allowed them to share their stories and interests. The project has not only helped Oxford museums become more inclusive and diverse, activate their collections and bring new voices into their displays, but it has also helped the participants build confidence, improve language proficiency and gain transferable skills. Crucially, it also has provided structure and training for those participants who are not yet ready for paid employment. It has helped raise awareness of the Islamic world’s contribution to science and education. Participants like Hussein Ahmed became involved with the project as they saw it as a chance to learn more about history and culture. However, after eight months of volunteering, Ahmed felt confident enough to apply for the paid position of Visitor Services Assistant at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (19). Project Coordinator Rachel Harrison has said that the Multaka-Oxford project has provided participants with several transferable skills and the confidence to access new places (19).

The second project was set up by the World Jewish Relief’s Specialist Training and Employment Programme, Wakefield Museum2 and Horton Housing Association. This project aimed to “support integration and wellbeing, and improve employment” (20). The project was designed to work with 25 refugees who had been resettled under the United Kingdom Government’s Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme to help them learn about the working culture of the local area, past and present; encourage them to share

2 Wakefield Museum includes Wakefield, Pontefract and Castleford Museums.
their experiences; give them confidence to visit museums, and inform them about opportunities available to them at the local museums, such as volunteering (20). Five weekly workshops were organized between January and February 2019. A core group of 12 participants attended all five workshops while others attended as often as they could. A team consisting of a collections officer, a learning and participation consultant, a specialist training and employment manager, a translator and an MA student decided to adopt the methodology of object-based learning to explore the theme of local industry. The handling collection was used to encourage participants to explore how Wakefield operates and the workshops helped the participants improve their English language skills (20). Objects were selected so that the refugees could make connections with the lives of local people. The workshops began with exploring a photograph from the museum collection depicting liquorice production in Syrian Arab Republic3. This inspired associations with food, work, tools, family ties, memories, and emotions. The workshops gave participants a venue to share their knowledge and experiences. At the close of the five weeks, the group was offered a display case at Wakefield Museum to present the connections that came up during the object handling workshops. The case is placed within the galleries of Wakefield Museum, in the part of the museum that centres on the theme of communities. The museum is also looking at the possibility of producing a digital exhibition and photographic display. According to Learning and Participation Consultant Tali Krikler (20), it is difficult to measure the full impact of the workshops, but evaluation of the feedback from the workshops reveals that the participants greatly valued the experience and gained an insight into the working history of Wakefield (20). The group also appreciated the opportunity to improve their language skills and agreed that they would like to remain involved with the museums.

The Multaka project and the Wakefield Museum project have proven effective in promoting engagement and cultural integration of refugees. They have also had a significant long-term impact on the participants. The two projects empower the participants by helping them develop life skills that they can use to gain employment and build confidence, in turn improving their health and well-being.

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Milton Keynes Museum first connected with three refugee families in December 2018. The families were given free admission to the Victorian Christmas experience. This was the first time the refugee families engaged with the museum and it was their first introduction to the history of the region. The women from the three families were then encouraged by a museum volunteer to participate in a temporary exhibition titled HERstory4. This exhibition was being developed to mark the 100th anniversary of the suffrage movement and celebrate the stories of women through their objects. The Syrian women were encouraged to lend any personal objects for exhibition that were meaningful to them and defined their lives or identities. One of the women who worked as a hairdresser in Syrian Arab Republic lent her hairdryer that represented her hope and dream of returning to hairdressing and regaining independence; another lent a Syrian board game called Barjees, which represented her childhood in Syrian Arab Republic. This gave the women an opportunity to meet and have conversations with other participants and museum staff and volunteers. They were invited to the launch of the exhibition, which enabled them to interact with other people from the local community. The women greatly valued this learning experience and the opportunity to be part of a significant event at the museum (Gill Kirkup, personal communication, July 2019). Museum Director Bill Griffiths and HERstory project coordinator Emily Levick both noted that participating in the temporary exhibition had immense benefits for the Syrian women. It helped with their confidence, language skills and gave them an opportunity to see themselves represented in the museum. This inspired the museum staff to try to extend the benefits and opportunities to the other Syrian refugee families resettled in Milton Keynes (Bill Griffiths, personal communication, August 2019). There was genuine intention and interest in engaging the Syrian refugee community with the museum and its collection. The museum also already had access to the community and its members, and the staff

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3 At the turn of the 20th century liquorice root was being imported into the United Kingdom as it was cheaper to do so than to grow it locally. One of the places from which liquorice root was imported was Alexandretta, a port in Syria.

4 A few of the museum’s volunteers also volunteer their time to act as ‘buddies’ for Syrian refugee families. They help families, particularly women, integrate into the lifestyle in Milton Keynes. They guide them in performing tasks such as grocery shopping, taking public transport etc. (Gill Kirkup, personal communication, July 2019).
believed that it would be easy to build upon and continue this relationship. The museum also contacted the British Red Cross in Milton Keynes, who were interested in using the museum as a resource to resettle the refugees. Linda Aradi, Resettlement Coordinator for the British Red Cross, informed us that the Syrians were not engaging with the cultural offerings available in Milton Keynes and that the Red Cross wanted to do something about it (personal communication, July 2019). The Red Cross representatives also wanted to equip the adults with the necessary skills and confidence to apply for jobs. Furthermore, according to Linda Aradi, the men were finding it harder than the women to adjust to their new lives in the United Kingdom (personal communication, July 2019). The women adapted faster as they had their children and domestic priorities to focus on but the men, who had lost their livelihoods and sources of income, were becoming reclusive and struggling to acclimatize.

The museum wanted to launch a project based on the Multaka-Oxford and Wakefield Museum projects, which would aim to work with Syrian refugee families, particularly the adults, who have been resettled in Milton Keynes, helping them to:

- learn about the past and present culture of the local area through the museum collection;
- feel more confident to visit the museum and use it as a social space;
- become more familiar with the volunteer opportunities at the museum and find a volunteer role that suits them;
- improve their English language skills and feel more confident when interacting with museum staff and visitors;
- feel more comfortable about sharing their experiences and culture.

The museum then contacted Linda Aradi, who helped us organize a visit to the museum for the Syrian families. Even though 13 families had RSVPed, only seven families came on the day. The families were given the opportunity to explore the museum, which has several hands-on displays, at their own pace. After lunch they participated in an object-handling session, where they explored Victorian kitchen implements such as a toaster and a bean cutter, a box Brownie camera, and a Victorian tin opener. All the objects were household items, chosen based on the assumption that the Syrians would be familiar with them in some shape or form. The families were also informed about the various volunteer opportunities available at the museum. The purpose of organizing the family visit was to help the participants feel comfortable in the museum environment and enable them to visualize it as a social space for their families. While no formal evaluation of the day was given, the verbal feedback from the families was extremely positive. The museum galleries were popular with the children. The object-handling session was received well by the children and adults alike – they recognized some of the objects and worked together as a group to understand any new English vocabulary. By the end of the day, they all appeared relaxed in the new environment and were able to comfortably navigate the museum. The families did not express an interest in purchasing discounted annual passes to the museum. They also seemed reluctant to participate in “coffee mornings” or English language classes offered at the museum or even to engage in a project with the museum’s collection. They cited family and childcare commitments as the main reasons for not being able to participate. The option of volunteering, however, did appeal to some. Abdullah, who had worked as a gardener in Syrian Arab Republic, expressed an interest in volunteering in the museum’s Victorian garden, while Duaa expressed a wish to work at the Granary tearoom. They were inducted into our volunteer programme and volunteered at the museum between September and November 2019.

Both Abdullah and Duaa were encouraged to volunteer at the museum. Volunteering is known to have a positive effect on mental health and to reduce social isolation (particularly for those in marginalized communities), improve physical health and motivate people (22). During that time, they had the opportunity not only to hone their existing skills but also to learn new ones. Their respective team leaders noted that they gained confidence in the tasks assigned to them and eventually reached a stage where they could take initiative and not have to wait to be assigned a task. While initially they gravitated to their team leaders, eventually they became confident enough to speak to and socialize with other volunteers in their team. One of the biggest challenges that they overcame involved communication and the language barrier. Abdullah, who spoke very little to no English and relied on his translation device, gained the confidence not to depend on the device. He also learned to sign his name in English in the volunteer sign-in book. Duaa gained the confidence to apply for other volunteer opportunities such as A Festival of Creative Urban Living. This is indicative of the positive effect museums can have on mental

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5 Milton Keynes Museum is largely a volunteer-run organization. With only nine paid members of staff, volunteers take on important roles within the museum, including as team leaders of various departments.
and physical well-being of refugees. While it is difficult to judge the exact impact of volunteering on the two participants, there were definite signs of enhanced skill, improved social connectedness, a sense of purpose and overall happiness. A recent study conducted at the Helen Bamber Foundation looked at the impact of the arts on health and well-being of refugees and asylum seekers, and found that creative activities benefited participants by enhancing and improving skills, by making them feel included and providing a sense of belonging, and by boosting their self-esteem. Learning the skills gave refugees and asylum seekers a sense of self-improvement and the opportunity to develop a social network, while also providing structure and routine. All these factors positively contributed to the participants’ health and well-being (23).

Providing volunteer opportunities to Syrian refugees was a small step in engaging them with the museum. Milton Keynes Museum was unable to run a Multaka-Oxford style project using its collection to establish a connection with the refugees⁶. However, volunteering in different parts of the museum has had an equally positive impact. The museum hopes to extend the volunteer opportunities to more Syrian refugees in 2020, with two new potential volunteers starting in March and Abdullah returning as well. These steps are being taken to develop the confidence among the Syrian refugees to eventually become regular museum visitors. Once the participants become comfortable with the museum and a stronger relationship is established within the community, the museum would like to organize workshops similar to those organized by Wakefield Museum. These workshops could result in a community exhibition that represents the lives of Syrian refugees in Milton Keynes or a chance for the refugees to provide new interpretations for its collections highlighting similarities and differences between Syrian Arab Republic and Milton Keynes. For the museum, it will provide the opportunity to reassess decisions or policies of the World Health Organization.

In conclusion, refugees are and will remain an important part of modern society. Museums can, among other things, elevate the standing of refugees, equip them with skills and improve employability, boost their self-esteem, increase their representation within society and help tackle stereotypes and negative perceptions surrounding them. Keeping in mind the limitations of Milton Keynes Museum in terms of resources and collections, and after assessing the pros and cons of current museum practices, a recommendation for a public engagement programme based on the Multaka-Oxford and Wakefield Museum project has been made. The arguments set forth in this article demonstrated that museums can have an extremely favourable effect on their communities. With the recent migration crisis, museums can significantly help refugee communities. While there are challenges that will accompany any programme that engages refugees, it is important that museums contribute to improving refugee health and well-being. For such efforts to be successful, the initiatives need to be long-term and embedded within museum programming. However, this does not mean that social responsibility towards communities should lie solely with museums. Museums should not be expected to handle issues of health and well-being and social isolation by themselves as their staff are not equipped or trained to do so. However, with the right partnerships, museums have been proven to successfully alleviate some of these issues.

Conflicts of interest:

None declared.

Disclaimer:

The authors alone are responsible for the views expressed in this publication and they do not necessarily represent the decisions or policies of the World Health Organization.

REFERENCES⁷


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⁶ This was due to a lack of staff, resources and funds as well as a lack of interest on the part of the Syrians in learning about the collection.

⁷ All references were accessed 20 March 2020.


