

Islington Museum Redesign, 2022-23

Introduction

Islington Museum brings the story of the borough to life through a collection of fascinating objects. Previously a volunteer led project at the Town Hall, the museum has been at the current site at St John Street since 2008. Unaltered since opening, the museum is getting a full redesign in 2022.

Closing in spring 2022, the Heritage team is reimagining the space with the help of our local community. In spring 2023, the refreshed museum will reopen, featuring a vibrant welcome area, new displays celebrating local heritage, and exciting opportunities to play, learn, and interact in the gallery.

In autumn 2021, Islington Heritage Service delivered the first stage of this project's consultation work, with an audit of Islington Museum's current permanent exhibition, layout, and facilities with their drop-in audiences, key council services, and local community groups. This document includes an overview of team recommendations and the key findings. For detailed findings please have a look at our longer Islington Museum: Audience Consultation Report.

Making sure we get it right

The purpose of this redesign is to ensure the future museum better meets visitor needs and expectations. Before we begin developing detailed ideas for the museum redesign, it is crucial that we listen to the thoughts and insights of our key stakeholders and museum users, who can give us a better idea of what the future museum should look like, feel like, and include.

In this stage of the consultation process we wanted to discover:

- How visitors feel about the museum as it currently is
- How we can make the museum easier to find, use, and enjoy
- How the gallery can better represent the people of Islington and their stories
- How the new permanent gallery can be made more relevant, accessible, and interesting to residents and local services

Who did we talk to?

In over 185 individual instances of engagement, we undertook consultation with:

- 18 staff members from council services and local groups including Bright Futures, Schools Improvement, Disability Action in Islington, and Adult Social Care
- 135 general visitors
- 3 Islington teachers
- 8 Islington families
- 14 young people
- 7 Museum volunteers

Demographic data was gathered from 82 consultees, but not everyone answered every demographic question. Of those who provided data, two-thirds of consultees described themselves as female and a third as male. The majority described themselves as heterosexual. There was a wide age range

from 18 to 76+. Approximately two-thirds described themselves as White and a third described themselves as Asian (Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani Chinese, Japanese, Korean), Black and of mixed ethnicity. Just over 10% of consultees said they had a disability. Approximately two-thirds of consultees lived in Islington and just under half worked/went to school in the Borough.

What did we find out?

The Museum is really enjoyed as it is and described as being a manageable size, informative, with *'wonderful and interesting'* objects, play opportunities, a community room, and changing exhibitions. Families and children love the *'child's corner'* and kitchen play. However, many visitors see the potential for making it even better (it was often described as a bit *'dated'*).

There are considerable issues with finding the Museum – in the area generally and on location from street-level. The signage in the area and at street level needs to be better, bigger, and more inviting. Many people say they don't see marketing/press about the Museum: *'more marketing and signage from the street—you don't know what place is or that it is there.'* There are four key problems with the entrance to the Museum: not very attractive/appealing (street level and museum entrance), confusing doors, the wall visitors are faced with on entering, and the location of the welcome desk.

The public see a lot of potential for improvements in the following key areas:

- Improve welcome space/orientation
- Better use of the space
- Clearer overarching narrative: *'is it the history of Islington or the heritage of the people?'*
- Better represent the diversity of Islington, celebrate people's stories and reflect Islington as a 'home' and a 'community'
- Clearer layout (orientation, coding, themes, flow, internal signage)
- Content:
 - more objects
 - more in-depth information in different formats
 - more people's stories
 - more about changing Islington over the years, with stronger links from the past to present day life
- Integrate family and school engagement activities into the displays. Teachers and their representatives see many possibilities for increasing opportunities for schools
- Increase accessibility, removing barriers for all target audiences
- Update interpretation methods
 - more to do, touch, explore, listen to, and experience
 - use of digital where appropriate
 - alternative ways of telling the stories, beyond paragraphs of text

What does the team suggest?

The findings from this consultation reveal much to be celebrated about the current museum, while also identifying a number of key challenges to user enjoyment and access. Based on these findings, the Heritage team are developing early recommendations for the future museum, including the following:

- Audiences are keen to leave the museum with a stronger sense of place. The redesign will involve a rethink of the story we tell, and how. At this stage, residents' feedback emphasises Islington as 'home' or a 'community,' suggesting a potential lens through which to explore Islington's history
- Islington is a diverse borough. The future museum will better reflect and celebrate this. More flexible display methods will allow us to accommodate new collections, community projects and resident responses, while co-production throughout the redevelopment will allow us to embed community voices into the redisplay
- People are excited about the museum collection and want a more interactive and hands on experience. The new gallery will feature more opportunities for visitors to interact with objects via questions, prompts, handling stations, talks and tours with experts, and imaginative interactives
- While some visitors are happy with the levels of information on display, the current interpretation panels proved an access barrier for others. More objects, interactives, larger text, more images and clearer lighting will be central to our rethink of the gallery displays
- Finding, entering, and navigating the museum can be confusing for visitors. The future museum will be more welcoming and accessible. The team proposes:
 - improving our online presence, establishing a clearer visitor journey, and allowing audiences to plan their visit
 - creating a vibrant and inviting street level entranceway to better attract and welcome visitors
 - improving internal and external signage
 - the removal of the rotating doors and highlighting of accessible automatic doors
 - a more prominent welcome desk, clearer sightlines, and better signposted facilities, events, and exhibits
 - inclusion of an interactive orientation area, featuring maps of Islington, timelines and prompts to help visitors navigate the space and contextualise the heritage on display
 - the provision of suitable access, wayfinding and learning tools, in keeping with the newly curated gallery

What is next?

In February 2022, we will run three focus groups with local adults, teachers and families. At these sessions we will share very early visuals and concepts informed by the recommendations above. In March 2022 we will hold further consultation with the general public, gathering feedback on these early ideas. This stage of the consultation will include

- online information and digital survey
- a consultation open day on 19th March 2022

This process will guide the team in identifying priorities for the future museum, which will inform the physical redesign of the space, the curation of the new gallery, and the museum's future programming. Residents will join us for co-curation sessions at key stages throughout the project.