

**Wessex
Museums**

Impact Report

2020-2021

Introduction to Wessex Museums

Wessex Museums is a thriving partnership of museums across Dorset and Wiltshire – Dorset Museum, Poole Museums, The Salisbury Museum and Wiltshire Museum.

We believe that by working together we can...

- Strengthen the cultural offer of our museums and our region.
- Push out of our comfort zones to do things in new ways.
- Share important stories from across our region from a range of perspectives.
- Share and learn from successes and mistakes, build relationships, and enhance our reputation with partners and stakeholders.
- Increase our organisational resilience.

Our charity, the Wessex Museums Trust (WMT), exists to build the resilience and relevance of the museums in our partnership and across the region.

Our mission is...

to support museums to **connect**, **inspire** and **add value**
to people's lives.

A Message from our Chair

Julia Findlater

Despite a year of unprecedented turmoil Wessex Museums Trust has continued to grow and extend its reach to new audiences.

With the closure of museums, WMT and its partner museums were quick to review how they deliver programming so that audiences could still participate in our work.

WMT quickly identified that digital content could offer new ways of delivering content and cultural experiences while the museums' doors were closed. During lockdown we took advantage of digital and social platforms to continue telling the stories of our region. *Wildlife in the Red*, our first digital exhibition, is an example of the rapid expansion of our digital presence, reaching into homes and enabling audiences to engage with collections and participate in debate with wildlife experts.

They say it takes a crisis to accelerate change and, whilst the challenges of the pandemic have not been easy for the museum sector, we have successfully explored new ways of engaging with visitors that without the pandemic may have taken many years. As well as developing the digital access to collections, we have an ambitious programme, outlined in this document, to support the rebuilding of community structures and engagement lost during the pandemic.

In this next phase we acknowledge the vital role museums will play in a world going through major change. We will be exploring new partnerships, bringing fresh thinking and a renewed commitment to ensure that all communities, particularly underserved ones, can engage, celebrate, and share in the history of our region.

Reflections from our Partnership Manager

Kristina Broughton

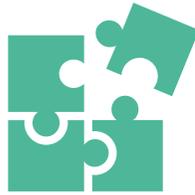
This year has been a time of disruption, challenge and change.

But despite the shockwaves caused by the pandemic and global events during the year, such as Black Lives Matter, Brexit and the Climate Emergency, these extraordinary times have reaffirmed the value of community. They have also emphasised the crucial role that culture, heritage and our museums play in sharing the collective story of our humanity, supporting community cohesion, health and well-being.

Throughout a tumultuous 2020/21, Wessex Museums continued to deliver our collaborative programme, but with a renewed mission and a refreshed focus on collaboration with our underserved audiences and our local communities. We were able to create a new role, Wessex Engagement Lead, to support us to connect with underserved communities and amplify their voices through our museums. We supported young people starting out in the heritage sector through digital work placements. We found new audiences by reconnecting people to the magnificent Wessex landscape to encourage physical and mental health. And despite the closure of our partner museums for a large part of the year, we continued to engage audiences with our stories and collections online. Through it all, we have become more agile, more innovative. We have gained new skills and taken new risks.

It is the positive, sensitive and ambitious way that we have responded to these extraordinary times and what we've learned along the way, that is defining the course for Wessex Museums into the future.

2020/21 Key Achievements



**Appointment of Wessex
Engagement Lead**



**253% growth in
social media
engagement**



**Launch of the Wessex
Museums website**



**First virtual exhibition
and online talks
programme**



**40% increase in income
from fundraising**



**3 digital work placements
delivered during lockdown**

Our Funding & Income

Wessex Museums continues to operate a mixed financial management structure at present, whereby the partnership's funding and income is managed across two organisations:

Bournemouth Christchurch & Poole (BCP) Council holds the funding agreement with Arts Council England (ACE) for the partnership's National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) grant. Wessex Museums Trust (WMT) holds the partnership's reserves and funding raised by the charity.

In 2020/21, the partnership's turnover (excluding match funding and in-kind support) across both sources was:

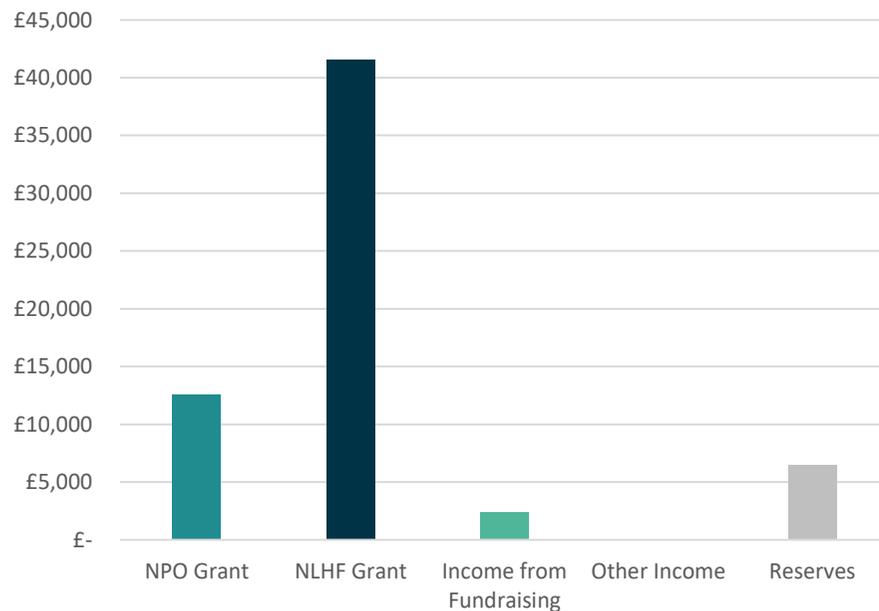
£380,910

This is a **6% increase from the previous financial year**, despite the reduction in financial contributions from the partner museums and the impact of the pandemic on our programme delivery.

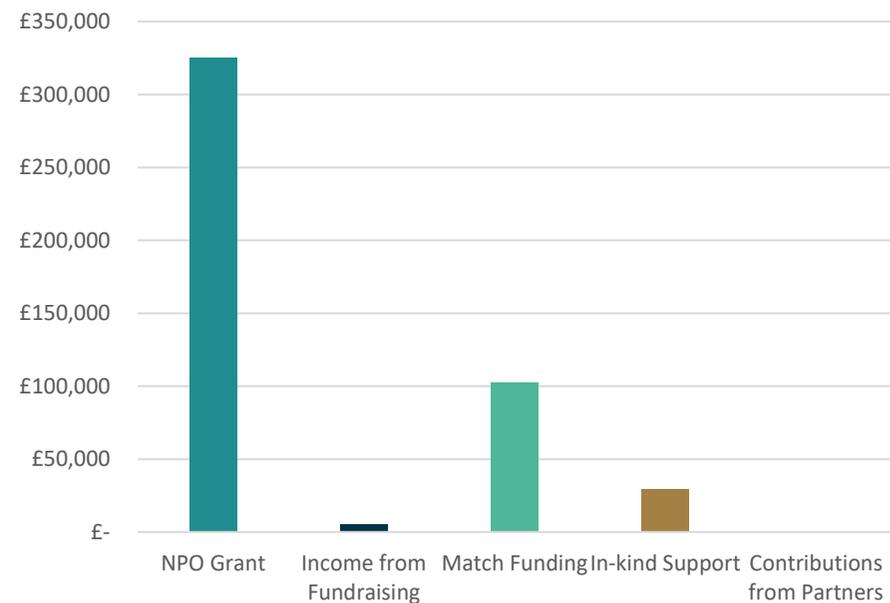


The **NPO grant made up around 87% of the partnership's income**, demonstrating the on-going need to diversify the partnership's fundraising and income sources. However, in 2020/21, Wessex Museums Trust achieved its first major fundraising success beyond Arts Council England by **securing a grant for £83.1k from the National Lottery Heritage Fund**. This demonstrates the partnership's ability to attract funding support from other major funders, despite being a young charity with a limited financial track record. WMT hopes to build on this success during 2021/22 with major fundraising underway for the Thomas Hardy exhibition.

**Wessex Museums Trust Funding Profile
2020/21**



**Wessex Museums NPO Funding Profile
2020/21**



Summary of fundraising & income generation for the year

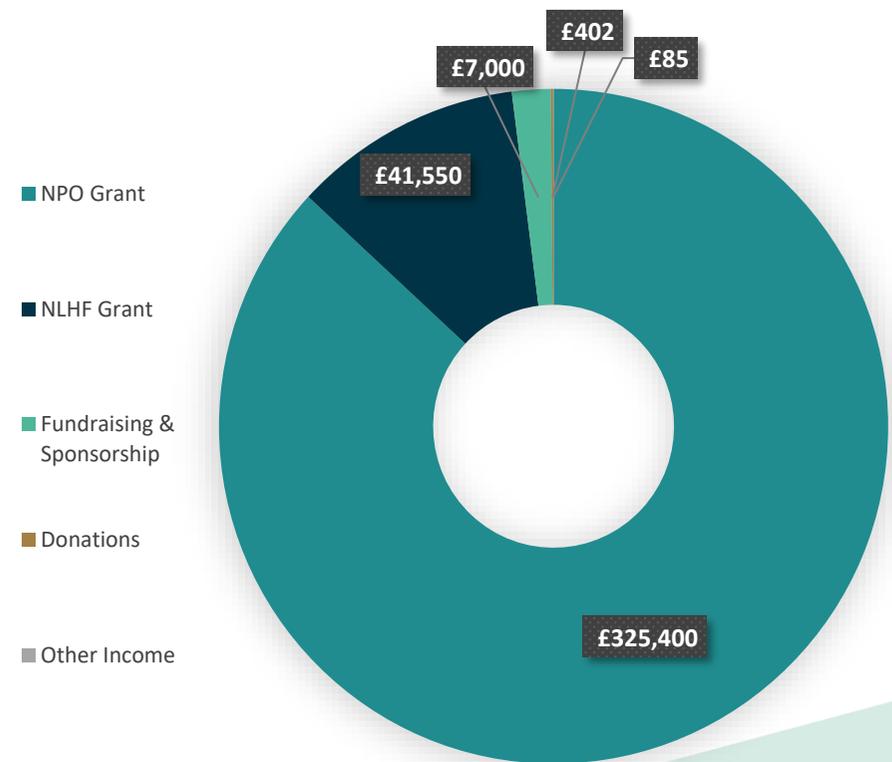
During 2020/21, Wessex Museums achieved a **40% increase in income from fundraising** from a variety of new sources, including sponsorship and public donations.

Key to this was a grant of £83,100 from The National Lottery Heritage Fund for the *Bridging the Gap* Project. The grant award will span two financial years and £41,550 was received by WMT in 2021/22.

Other sources of income from fundraising have included:

- **Over £400 in public donations** from our *Wildlife in the Red* online lectures.
- **£2000 in corporate sponsorship** in support of the *Wildlife in the Red* online exhibition and lecture series.
- **Almost £7000** was raised from multiple sources **to support our community curator programmes** with underserved audiences.
- **First earned income for WMT** through the sale of greeting cards for *Alchemy* exhibition.

Wessex Museums Income 2020-21



Delivering our Strategic Plan

2020 was a year of enormous challenge for Wessex Museums and our partners. With the museums closed to the public for much of 2020, and again in 2021, coupled with the social, political and economic impact of the pandemic and other global events on our organisations and society as a whole, much of our strategic plan simply had to change.

The events of 2020 led WMT to reconsider our partnership, starting with our mission and values, through to the activity we deliver our collaborative programme. Alongside this, Arts Council England published its new 10-year strategy, *Let's Create*, which aligned with our emerging strategic thinking. In response, WMT undertook a complete overhaul of our strategic plan in recognition of the crucial role of museums in collecting, interpreting and engaging people in these extraordinary times, as well as rebuilding the cultural fabric of society in our region as we emerge into a post-pandemic world.

Our new strategic plan for the period 2021-23 has a sharper focus on:

- Engaging underserved audiences in our local areas.
- Improving access to our world-class collections.
- Delivering excellence through our partnership programming.
- Developing digital content that supports different models of engagement and income generation.
- Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and environmental sustainability.
- Workforce development.
- Building an evidence base for the impact of our work as a partnership.



Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

Wessex Museums first put in place a partnership equality, diversity & inclusion (EDI) policy in 2018. Throughout 2020/21 the partner museums have continued to deliver their EDI action plans in their own organisations, to address diversity of their governance, workforce and audiences in accordance with the policy.

Wessex Museums was proud to achieve a rating of ‘strong’ for the Creative Case for Diversity from ACE in 2019.

The events of 2020 including the murder of George Floyd, the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and the Climate Emergency provoked greater discussion on the inequalities and social disparities of all peoples from marginalised groups, but particularly those peoples from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups, those with disabilities, and those living in the poorest communities.

Wessex Museums responded by committing to a new intersectional EDI framework which will move us and our partners to take stronger, practical action **to dismantle prejudice and discrimination in our organisations.**

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION FRAMEWORK

OUR OVERARCHING AIM

To **dismantle** prejudice and discrimination in our organisations

OUR COMMITMENTS



Digital

Wessex Museums website

Wessex Museums launched its website in July 2020, giving us a platform to promote the partner museums and their collections, host virtual exhibitions, share best practice, and publish documents and news stories. It has also given us credibility and a presence in the museums sector. **Website users had grown to 8.6k by April 2021.**

Digital initiatives during lockdown

The lockdown led to an increase in digital activity across the partner museums, as colleagues worked to engage with their audiences remotely. It also resulted in increased skills sharing across the partnership, which in turn fed into Digital Knowledge Exchange sessions after the lockdown.

Wessex Museums created a series of Hardy themed videos based around daily walks in the Wessex landscape accompanied by Hardy poetry or prose. **30 videos were produced and uploaded to YouTube, resulting in 888 views.**

The Community Curator in Lockdown series also created during lockdown, provided a platform for one of our Community Curators to share her learning about connecting with communities remotely. **9 videos were produced with 170 views.**

4 Digital Knowledge Exchange sessions were delivered with more than **25 staff** across the partnership covering topics such as video, digital work placements, live digital delivery and digital volunteering.

Digital work placements

In the summer of 2020, three students from the Heritage Management MA course at Bath Spa University worked with Wessex Museums on digital placements. Two students did research projects - on podcasting and virtual exhibitions - while the third helped Wiltshire Museum to create a new website featuring objects from across museums in Wiltshire. The latter student has since gained a fulltime job in the museum sector.

Connecting with Communities

During 2020, the global pandemic transformed the way in which our museums engaged with their audiences.

Our learning and engagement teams embraced the digital space creating engaging and accessible content that educated and entertained families at home. The valuable knowledge gained will now feed into a broader digital offering as we create content that stretches our storytelling into STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) areas for schools.

In September 2020, the *Bridging the Gap* project kicked off with the appointment of our **Wessex Engagement Lead**. The initial consultation revealed the need to build confidence, trust and skills in both our museums' culture and the community organisations we wished to engage with. Our flagship project, *Create and Collect for Climate Change*, embodies these principles and was devised to empower children and young people to lead their own learning journeys. Guided by our Community Curators, participants will be inspired by experts, experiences and museum collections to create responses that will support our contemporary collecting action plan and form the next partnership-wide virtual exhibition and talks programme.

Wessex Museums continues to champion inclusive organisational practice. In 2020/21 we appointed a freelance access consultant to support us to create **pathways for disabled young people to access work experience opportunities in our museums in 2022**.

All this work is underpinned by the **Learning and Engagement Exchange** which was created to provide a space for our colleagues to connect, share ideas and be trained in inclusive thought leadership and practice.

Key Achievements:

- **45 videos** created by the Wiltshire Community Curator generated **over 3000 interactions on YouTube, 2000 of which were specifically related to content designed for children**.
- **Over 40 children and young people** who have been historically excluded from museum engagement, recruited to *Create and Collect for Climate Change*. They include young people from Visible Minority Ethnic backgrounds, young people over the age of 16 and children from families living in social deprivation.
- Pioneered **new methods to recruit and engage audiences in digital spaces** through connecting with experts, influencers, artists and Facebook groups, actively seeking to amplify and platform diverse voices.

Building Resilience

Novation

During 2019/20, the WMT agreed to explore novation of the NPO grant to the Trust to resolve the current complexities around the governance and financial management of the partnership. Novation will support the resilience of the partnership long term by securing the charity's financial profile and thus facilitating more opportunities for fundraising and income diversification. WMT undertook an options analysis for novation to better understand the risks and financial implications of the transfer of grant funding and the staff team to the charity. Novation remains a key priority for WMT and negotiations are underway with BCP Council, with a view to novating the funding agreement with ACE for the NPO by the end of 2021.

Environmental Sustainability

Wessex Museums recognises that we face a Climate Emergency. We work collaboratively to reduce the environmental impact of our museums and our work, as well as to raise awareness of climate change.

The partner museums have a unique role as stewards of the cultural heritage of our beautiful region, to use their collections to explore and evidence climate change. In 2020/21, partnership programming platformed the Climate Emergency through two specific projects:

- ***Wildlife in the Red*** - our first digital exhibition and online talks programme focussed on the loss of species and biodiversity in our region and beyond.
- ***Create & Collect for Climate Change*** - the launch of a contemporary collecting project led by underserved young people to explore and creatively respond to the theme of climate change, supported by the museums' collections.

Wessex Museums has been monitoring our environmental impact since 2018 with a view to setting baselines for carbon reduction. We use Pilio in each of our museums to monitor our energy usage. We also monitor the environmental impact of our business travel, waste and procurement practices. In 2020, there was a significant change in the way the partnership works, resulting in a sharp decrease in energy usage, business travel and waste. The changes have provided the opportunity to review our environmental sustainability action plan to incorporate new ways of working, but also to take faster, practical action to reduce carbon usage and promote sustainability in our organisations.

Programming

Thomas Hardy Exhibition

This year marked the start of the development of our partnership-wide exhibition on the life and work of Thomas Hardy.

Key Achievements:

- Collaboration with Arts University Bournemouth to engage young people in co-creation of exhibition elements.
- Procurement of the exhibition design & build contractors.
- Marketing itineraries to the travel trade.
- Development of exhibition events and engagement programme.
- Assessment and conservation of exhibition objects.
- Creation of 10 Hardy Walks with the Thomas Hardy Society, Ramblers UK and local youth groups.

Wildlife in the Red Online Exhibition

The *Wildlife in the Red* exhibition was launched in October 2020 - **Wessex Museums' first purely virtual exhibition**. It features objects from our four museums which tell the story of species and biodiversity loss. To support *Wildlife in the Red*, our partner museums offered a range of virtual family activities.

The exhibition provided a platform to link to conservation bodies and individuals nationally, which in turn led to increased awareness of Wessex Museums and a considerable increase in social media engagement. We devised a programme of nine online talks linked to *Wildlife in the Red*, beginning with a keynote by evolutionary biologist and TV broadcaster, Professor Ben Garrod. The talks enabled us to reach out to new and global audiences.

Key Achievements:

- **4 online talks** between January and the end of March 2021, **attended by 362 people**
- **585% increase in unique views** on the *Wildlife in the Red* webpages, from 343 for Oct-Dec 2020, to **2,350** for Jan-March 2021.
- Social media activity around the exhibition and talks led to a **253% growth in engagement**.

Collections & Interpretation

Contemporary Collecting

In response to the pandemic, our partner museums undertook contemporary collecting initiatives for Covid-19. A variety of approaches were employed by the museums including call outs on social media, direct approaches to NHS staff and the local community, and working through museum volunteers to collect objects. This resulted in the collection of objects, artwork and oral histories related to the pandemic, some of which have now been included in the permanent displays of the partner museums.

Linked to our *Connecting with Communities* workstream, the museums have begun a contemporary collecting project on the theme of climate change through the *Create and Collect for Climate Change* project (see p.11). Working with young people from underserved communities, the museums aim to accession a minimum of three items into their collection that relate to climate change.

Virtual Collections

Across our museums, we have almost **500,000 objects catalogued** and have **exceeded our target of 100,000 digital images**. We are working on getting more of our collections online, creating a Virtual Wessex Museums Collection, enabling us to share our collections, promote research and develop innovative exhibition programming.

Wiltshire Museum is working with the Collections Trust on the FAIR project, finding ways to share the latest archaeological research with new online audiences. It is also the starting point for contributing to the £15m AHRC 'Towards a National Collection' project, creating a national database of museum collections.

Looking Ahead

Our collaborative programme for 2021/22 reflects the journey travelled during 2020, our renewed mission and focus on our underserved audiences, and building back the resilience of our museums.

Driven by our partnership values, a commitment to a new equality, diversity, and inclusion framework, *Let's Create* and our *Bridging the Gap* project objectives, Wessex Museums will progress systemic change in how our museums engage with underserved audiences. We will achieve this through both organisational culture change and direct engagement, including:

- **Equality, diversity & inclusion training** and development for trustees, senior leaders, staff and volunteers.
- **Create & Collect for Climate Change** - engaging underserved groups of young people in each museum locality to define their own learning and creativity around the theme of climate change and our museums' collections.
- **Planet in the Red exhibition** - digital exhibition and online talks programme on the theme of climate change, co-curated by the young people engaged with the Create & Collect for Climate Change project.
- **Work placements for disabled young people** - addressing access issues for disabled young people in each museum and facilitating six-month work placements.
- **Hardy Digital** - co-creation projects with young people aged 18-25 for elements of the Thomas Hardy exhibition, in partnership with Arts University Bournemouth.

In 2021/22, Wessex Museums will seek to become a fully-fledged organisation in its own right, to secure the partnership and the resilience of our charity and the partner museums. We will do this by:

- **Novating the NPO** grant funding to WMT.
- Developing succession plans and **sustainable governance** for WMT.
- Programme development for **NPO2**.
- **Fundraising and income diversification**, specifically around our collaborative programme.
- Developing **digital content** to encourage museum visits and engagement.
- Creation of a new **environmental responsibility working group** to renew our **environmental sustainability policy & action plan**.
- **Extending our network through advocacy** and **including smaller museums** in our region with our programme.

Wessex Museums

Sharing • Collaborating • Enhancing



[wessexmuseums.org.uk](https://www.wessexmuseums.org.uk)



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