

Museums changing lives in Northern Ireland



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Foreword

01

The events of the past few years have impacted wider society and the communities we serve. The fall-out from Brexit and the Covid pandemic, and more recently the impact of the cost of living crisis, have put additional pressure on us all.

This report captures how museums have responded to those challenges and supported and continued to connect with their communities. The findings show that a majority of museums in Northern Ireland are undertaking at least one type of social impact work and making a positive difference to people's lives.

Our survey found that more than 70% of respondents are engaged in work related to health and wellbeing, placemaking and acting as a space for engagement, reflection and debate.

Museums are also beginning the important work of addressing the legacy of colonial collections and unpicking the layers of colonial history in our museums. This much needed work is centering the voices of community organisations at the heart of our institutions, unlocking new narratives and uncovering new stories.

The report also highlights the need for core funding for this of work. Lack of funding and time constraints are the main challenges to embedding the work. Funders, politicians and sector leaders now need to commit long-term investment so that museums can continue to connect with local communities and support them to enjoy and explore the richness of our collections.

With thanks to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for funding this report and to colleagues across Northern Ireland for their input.

Sharon Heal
Director, Museums Association
September 2023



Introduction

02

The Museums Association's mission is inspiring museums to change lives. For the past decade, we have encouraged museums to place social impact at the core of their work through our flagship campaign, Museums Change Lives.

We define social impact – also known as social value or socially engaged practice – as work that purposely benefits people and communities. Across the UK, museums are influencing positive changes and fostering rich and meaningful relationships between staff, volunteers and participants, enhancing the lives of everyone involved.

We believe that, just as museums report on their economic and environmental impact, social impact can and should be articulated to provide a wider picture of the work that museums do and their value to society.

We know that many museums in Northern Ireland are pioneering innovative and impactful socially engaged practice. However, minimal data exists showing the scale and breadth of this work and as a result there is a gap in our understanding of the social impact activity that museums in Northern Ireland are undertaking.

In 2023, the Museums Association (MA) secured funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to undertake targeted research to capture data about museums and social impact in Northern Ireland.

The research looked at four areas of social impact practice: health and wellbeing; placemaking; acting as a space for engagement, reflection and debate; and addressing the legacy of colonial collections.

Key findings

03

70%

A majority of museums in Northern Ireland are undertaking at least one type of social impact work. Our survey found that **70%** or more of respondents are engaged in work related to health and wellbeing, placemaking and acting as a space for engagement, reflection and debate.

80%

Placemaking is the most common area of social impact work for museums in Northern Ireland, with **80%** of respondents undertaking in work in this area.

75%

Health and wellbeing is the second most common area of social impact work for museums, with **75%** of respondents involved in this area. Within this area of practice, dementia-related museum activity is particularly prevalent, with **20%** of all respondents undertaking work in this area.

70%

70% of respondents are undertaking work to act as a space for engagement, reflection and debate. However there is hesitancy in this area due to the perceived potentially divisive nature of the work.

30%

Addressing the legacy of colonial collections is a less common but growing area of focus, with **30%** of respondents involved in this activity. Although programmes in this area are being led at national level, museum work on this subject at local level remains in its infancy.

88%

Out of the four areas of social impact work, placemaking was most likely to be a time-limited project, with **88%** of respondents undertaking placemaking work reporting that their work in this area was time limited.

- The majority of respondents reported that the social impact work their museum undertook was funded by external grant funding.
- Lack of funding and time constraints were cited as the main challenges by respondents when doing social impact work.
- The majority of respondents said that more funding and more guidance/resources would support them to do more socially impactful work.

Methodology

04

Between April and June 2023, the MA carried out qualitative and quantitative research on museums and social impact in Northern Ireland. The project included site visits to museums in Belfast, Derry-Londonderry, Lisburn, Enniskillen and Armagh, as well as video interviews.

We also created an online survey that was sent out to every Accredited museum in Northern Ireland.

The scope of our research looked at the work museums undertook in the years 2021-22 and 2022-23 in four key areas:

- Enhancing health and wellbeing
- Creating better places to live and work
- Acting as a space for engagement, reflection and debate
- Addressing the legacy of colonial collections.

In addition to capturing qualitative data from interviews, we received survey responses from 20 organisations representing 24 Accredited museums. This accounts for 57% of all Accredited museums in Northern Ireland and is a strong representative sample.

Breakdown of responses by museum type:

Local authority	11
Independent	6
National	4
National Trust	2
Military	1

Context of the report

05

The past few years have been difficult for Northern Ireland's museums as the sector has navigated the complex challenges of the pandemic, Brexit and the cost-of-living crisis.

Northern Ireland's political deadlock has compounded these challenges: the Assembly has not been in session and a new Executive has not been formed since the General Election of May 2022.

This absence of democratic scrutiny and ministerial leadership has led to a sense of paralysis and a lack of strategic direction in the sector, according to a number of the research participants we spoke to. Meanwhile, funding cuts at central and local government level are leaving many museums facing an uncertain future.

In spite of – and sometimes in response to – these challenges, cultural and heritage institutions are delivering innovative social impact work.

Museums played a pivotal role in the Decade of Centenaries (2012-22), which left an enduring legacy of cross-border connections and new practice for addressing sensitive and contested histories.

Many institutions developed creative and accessible new ways of engaging with audiences during the Covid pandemic, contributing to community wellbeing and resilience at a time of crisis¹.

Government strategies for culture, tourism and education are also in development. Although the outlook remains uncertain, respondents expressed hope that the next few years will bring greater stability for the sector with the expected formation of a new Executive.

¹ [Museums, Crisis and Covid19, Ulster University](#)

How common is social impact work among museums in Northern Ireland?

06

“

Placemaking and health and wellbeing are definitely embedded in all the work that we do.”

Interviewee

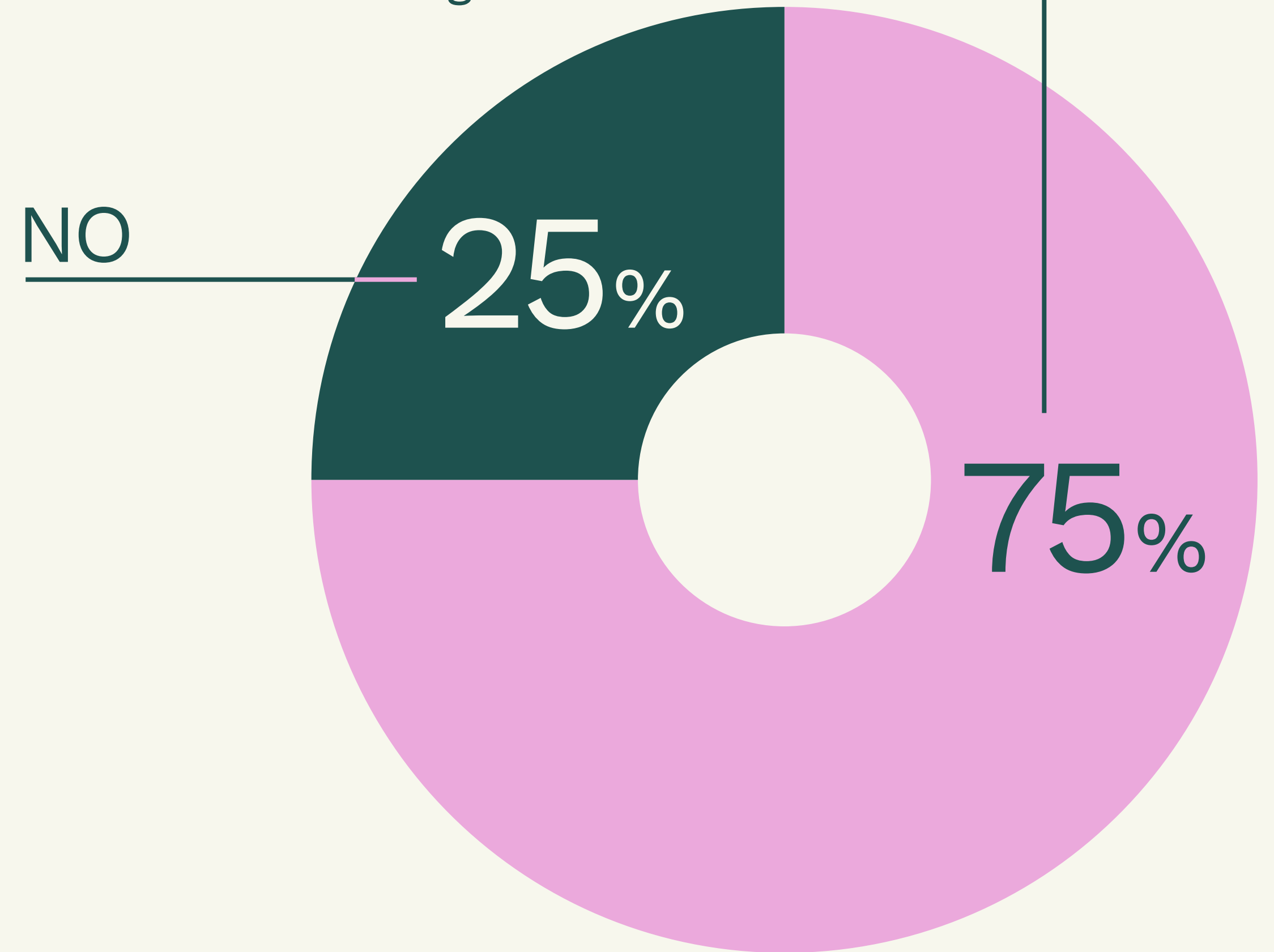
Our research showed that the majority of museums in Northern Ireland are involved in at least one area of social impact work.

We found that at least 70% of respondents are undertaking in work in the first three areas outlined in our survey: health and wellbeing (75%), placemaking (80%) and acting as a space for engagement, reflection and debate (70%).

The survey showed that museum work to address the legacy of colonial collections is a growing area of interest but remains in its infancy. 30% of respondents reported engaging in this area of work, and of those that did, the projects they cited tended to be led at national rather than local level.

Health and wellbeing

Did your museum undertake work around health and wellbeing?



“

Giving people ownership over something they've discovered and allowing them to share it with people in the way they want to share it is a really good healing factor for depression and anxiety.”

Interviewee

Health and wellbeing →

Our research found that health and wellbeing is a strong area of practice for museums in Northern Ireland, with 75% engaged in this type of work.

Examples cited by respondents ranged from small programmes for local community groups to formal partnerships with large healthcare providers, along with participation in health initiatives such as social prescribing.

Dementia-related work was a particular area of focus for many organisations, with a fifth of all respondents reporting activity in this area. The benefits of reminiscence for people's wellbeing are well-established and our research shows that museum collections are well suited to this area of work.

In addition to targeted health and wellbeing activity, respondents reported that engaging audiences in, and giving them ownership over, regular aspects of museum work has a therapeutic effect for people living with depression, anxiety and PTSD.

Respondents also reported that museum volunteering programmes – which cover diverse areas such as gardening, visitor engagement and archival research – play an important role in mental wellbeing, particularly for vulnerable groups.

“

The difference we've seen in volunteers on site – it's just a whole different dynamic.”

Interviewee

A number of respondents identified health and wellbeing-related work as a particular priority given the multi-generational trauma that exists within communities in Northern Ireland.

Partnerships are important in this area of work. Building relationships with health and social care organisations enables museums to connect with existing infrastructures, knowledge and audiences.

CASE STUDY

Florence Court House, National Trust: Collections Care and Conservation Volunteer Programme, 2022-23

Although Florence Court has previously had volunteers helping with its collections care and winter deep clean conservation, there has never been a regular group. Emily Cronin joined Florence Court in May 2022, and with her prior experience of working with and developing regular volunteering teams at organisations such as the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, plus the working knowledge that these groups can be invaluable and mutually beneficial for all parties involved, she felt that Florence Court was the perfect place to develop something similar.

Emily says: “As the age-old quote says ‘many hands make light work’, but if we can give something back to those ‘hands’, to thank them, to support them, to help them feel part of something, that is what makes it so worthwhile.

It was in September, during the process of planning in the winter deep clean, that we set in place the preparation for an annual volunteering programme. Working closely with our senior volunteering and community officer, we advertised for collections care and conservation volunteers. As a team we were able to offer two morning volunteering sessions a week, which lined up with existing staff responsibilities.

Initial meetings were set up with each applicant to get to know the individuals, their needs and what they wished to gain from volunteering. We then organised inductions and training sessions to align with the National Trust volunteering procedures and policies.



the nature of the site and how this would prevent us from doing our usual collections care.

However, this was met with mixed views, as to some it was the social aspect that meant the most to them and it would be missed. We completely understood, and as a compromise we decided we would keep one group going as an optional meet. Those who wanted to attend were to let us know weekly, and we carried out work away from the main show rooms.

Starting from the end of September, we had our two groups of five to six volunteers visit weekly. Each session we worked closely with them on large and small projects and offered training, support, and hands-on experience. We found most of our volunteers were there for the social aspect, but additionally interested in the house and collections. Moving forward this has been identified as a great opportunity for university and school leavers to dip their toes into the world of collections care, so we may expand our advertising to cover this too.

By the time we got to spring and our open season was getting into full flow, we initially suggested the volunteers have a ‘summer holiday’ from May to August, purely due to

We aim to follow the same procedure each year for our programme of deep cleans, assessing if a summer ‘break’ suits the teams in the spring. We will also be adding to our groups as we have had lots of interest from others who have seen them in action.

This truly is the ultimate accolade; the volunteers want to return week on week and others want to join. Of course, seasonal lunch outings, property visits and keeping them well stocked with hot drinks and biscuits always helps too!

Above all, top focuses are clear organisation and planning, good communication and care and support.”

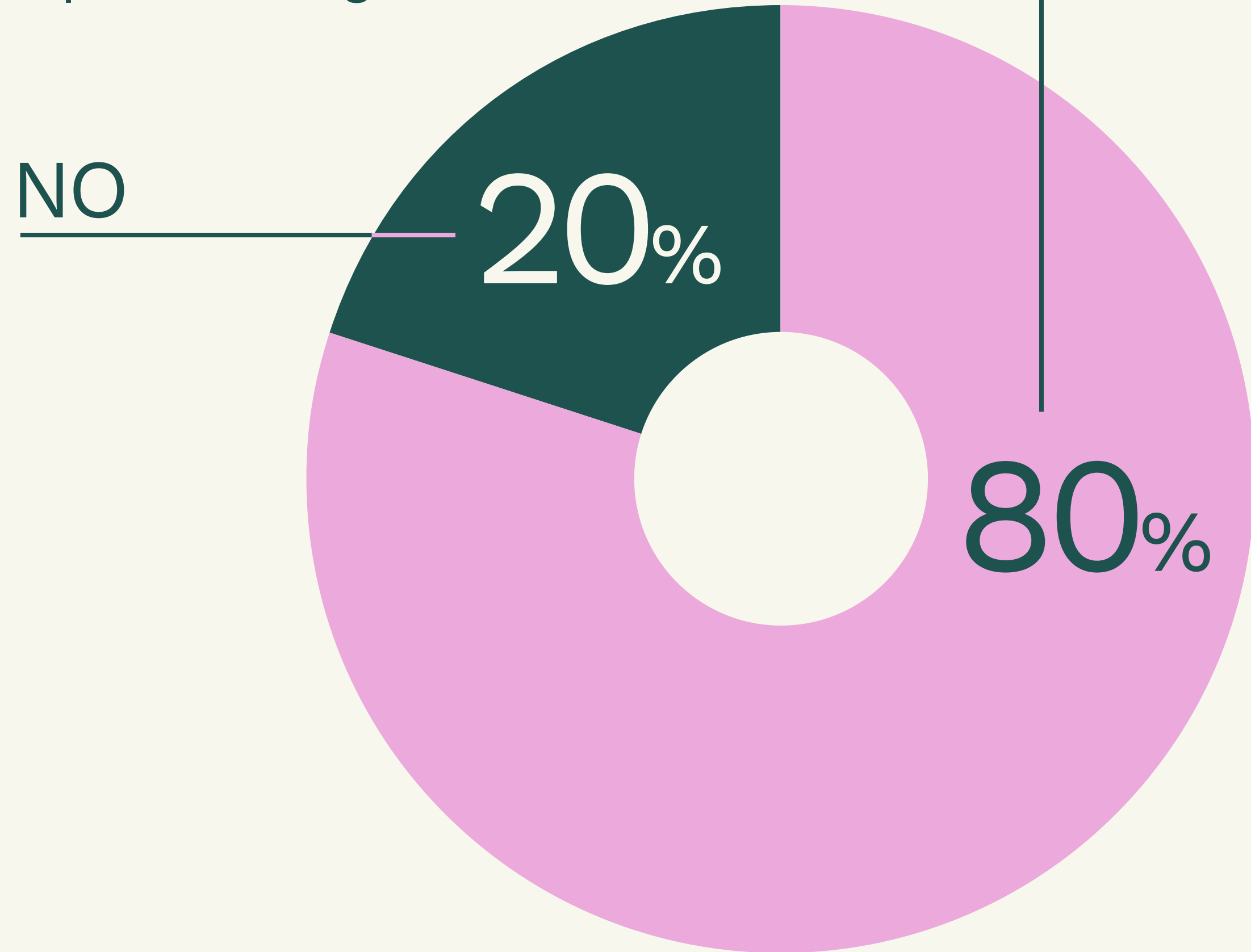
“

[This area] only appeared in the news when somebody was shot or bombs were going off - it had a very bad image. And the way the media represent it, there's no attempt at an analysis of why this all happened. We provide some of that analysis. And one of the outcomes is that there are people who had that negative view of the place and say, 'I've realised these were not inherently violent places, not inherently violent people'.”

Interviewee

Placemaking

Did your museum undertake work in relation to place-making?



Placemaking was identified as the most common area of social impact work undertaken by museums in Northern Ireland.

The dual role of the museum as both a visitor attraction and service for public good was acknowledged by several respondents, with placemaking work spanning both of these remits.

In the context of a post-conflict society, respondents reported that their organisations play a significant role in economic and cultural regeneration and have contributed to transforming perceptions of Northern Ireland and to the success of the tourism industry.

Beyond these benefits, museums also have a significant impact on overcoming division and forging local pride and identity.

Respondents reported that museum activity had helped to reclaim public spaces affected by antisocial behaviour and uplift areas of social deprivation. A number described how regular museum work, such as local history and reminiscence programmes, is a natural fit for creating a sense of community and shared identity.

Museums are also an important space for Northern Ireland's growing migrant communities. In addition to practical support and assistance through services such as language classes, respondents described how their organisations provide a space to welcome migrant communities, promote understanding and representation of diverse cultures, and assist with integration and community cohesion.

“

Northern Ireland in the last 20 years has been a very changed place than it would have been previously, with a lot of different cultures living here. We're very much about making people who have come here feel a sense of ownership, that they belong here.”

Interviewee

CASE STUDY

Veteran Life Untold Stories: The People Behind the Uniform exhibition, Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum, December 2022-April 2023

This was a shared authority project. Apart from two participants, none had ever visited Lisburn Museum before. The idea that museums were not places for them, combined with Lisburn Museum's desire to widen access to culture, aligned to the trust's aim to address veteran issues such as social isolation, reintegration into the community and ongoing mental health.

The theme of placemaking centred on themes of belonging, community and home. Participants took ownership of the project. Overall feedback from them was that we got their story right and that they felt they had been listened to, that they belonged to something bigger than their individual experience. These stories have a place in the local community and in Lisburn Museum itself.

While serving, participants had a sense of place (albeit one that could constantly change), purpose and identity. After service, this sense of identity and where they belonged post-service was uncertain. Lack of recognition for service, continuing PTSD, sticking to their own and difficulty settling into civilian life were reflected by all participants.

The project took longer and was more labour intensive than we had expected. It was probably the most emotive project for staff and participants. The biggest positive was that the museum space was viewed as safe, the staff were trusted and we had access to different personal reflections of veteran life.



Experienced staff need to work on these projects: the work required an empathetic detachment. The project grew beyond all expectations. It was labour-intensive but Lisburn Museum now has an archive that will be there for future generations to study. Trust is essential, a learning agreement is essential because it manages expectations.

Some 130,000 words from veterans and their families were gathered as part of the project and they are due to be published shortly.

“

I just want to say a huge thank you for giving the spouses and children an opportunity to have their voices heard.”

Louise, wife of veteran



CASE STUDY

Shared History Outreach Project, Museum of Free Derry, 2019-present

Now in its fourth funded year, the Shared History Outreach Project was set up by the Museum of Free Derry and the Siege Museum to facilitate joint visits to both museums.

The two museums, though only around 100 yards apart physically and telling perhaps the two most important stories in the history of this city, would be regarded by many to be poles apart in terms of politics, so it is a surprise to some that the two have worked together for many years now.

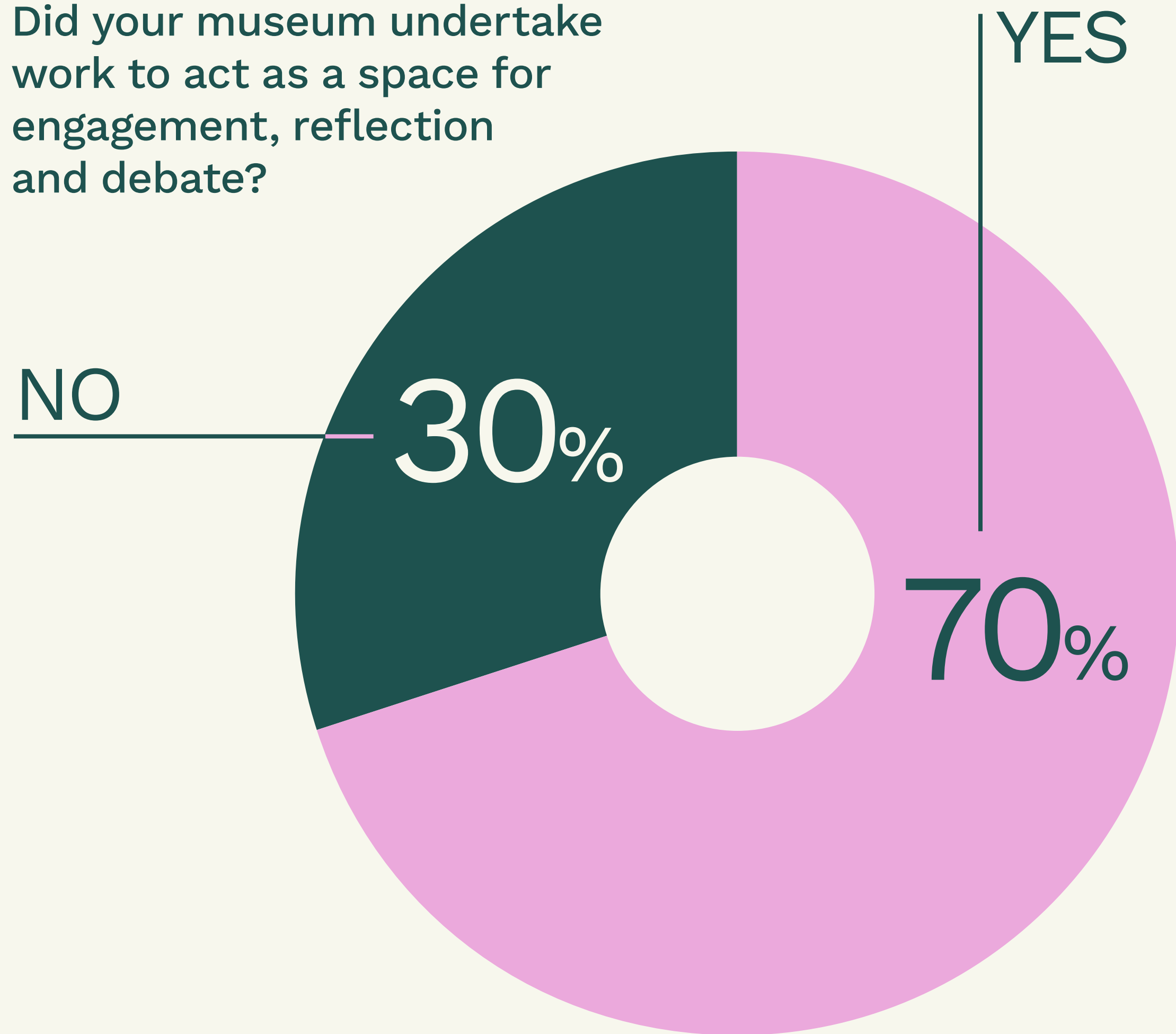
Under this project, groups and schools from all communities here are encouraged to visit both museums and to discuss the different histories presented with staff. The aim of this is to introduce people to histories that they may not normally get to experience, or would not regard as their own. We hope that this encourages a greater sense of belonging to all involved, more of a sense of ownership of all of our shared history, and a greater sense of mutual understanding and respect between the different communities here.

Over the four years of the project, which was heavily impacted by Covid, hundreds of people of all ages have taken part, and feedback from participants shows clearly that the project is meeting its goals. The funding model enables us to cover admission fees, transport costs and catering for the groups involved, and we have used the same model to create a similar programme aimed specifically at local schools.



Acting as a space for engagement, reflection and debate

Did your museum undertake work to act as a space for engagement, reflection and debate?



A majority of respondents reported that they had undertaken work to act as a space for engagement, reflection and debate. Targeted activity in this area was slightly less common than in health and wellbeing and placemaking, which may reflect the complexities of undertaking this work in the context of Northern Ireland's social and political landscape.

One respondent described how work in this area can be off-putting to some visitors, who may not want to be confronted with difficult or thought-provoking topics in their free time.

“

It can be quite difficult because it's not always a conversation people want to randomly get involved in. People don't want to sacrifice their leisure time.”

Interviewee

“

[We have] a gallery that any group can ask to use to put on a display. And it can be a single-voice, 'preaching to the converted' exhibition, if that's what a community wants, or it can be reaching out. We might end up having a particular group who want put on an at-times uncomfortable exhibition: in that space, is there open debate. It doesn't belong to any one particular group, it belongs to the community.”

Interviewee

“

We would tend to really play it safe. But for good relations, you have to try to push the boundaries a bit to get the conversation going.”

Interviewee

Acting as a space for engagement, reflection and debate →

However respondents felt that this is an area in which museums can play a significant role as long as they approach this work with thoughtfulness and care.

The importance of the museum as an unbiased space rooted in historical fact was acknowledged by several respondents, who described how their organisations provide a trusted arena for addressing divisive topics such as the customs border, the 2021 centenary of partition and the multi-layered legacies of conflict.

“

It’s the credibility of museums: they’re starting from historical facts and they’re starting from an unbiased point of view.”

Interviewee

Museums are well-placed to platform differing perspectives on shared history, encourage audiences to reflect on their own preconceptions, and foster good relations.

Given the polarising nature of social media, respondents reported that face-to-face engagement is particularly useful, enabling people to have difficult conversations and ask questions in a safe environment.

“

[Our exhibition] inspired people to think that ‘maybe the history that’s been passed on to me isn’t completely the full story. And maybe sometime in the future, I should try to explore that in a bit more depth’.”

Interviewee

In addition to addressing historically divisive topics, museums in Northern Ireland are acting as a platform for exploring contemporary issues such as the climate crisis, Brexit and the pandemic.

CASE STUDY

LGBTQ+ history at the Northern Ireland War Memorial, 2022-present

In February 2022 the Northern Ireland War Memorial (NIWM) decided to mark LGBTQ+ History Month for the first time through an online talk entitled *Bad Companions: A Study of Queer Life during the Second World War*. The talk was written and delivered by Michael Fryer, NIWM's partnerships and engagement lead, with the aim of exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ people who both served in uniform and lived on the home front during the Second World War. This led to Michael writing a blog post based on the talk for the museum's website and developing an LGBTQ+ tour of the museum, which he delivered for the first time in February 2023.

As a Second World War museum, the NIWM's values include authenticity and showing respect, hosting fitting commemorations that are inclusive of all. With this in mind, we believe it is important to provide unique learning experiences which reach out to the whole community in Northern Ireland, inspiring engagement, reflection and debate.

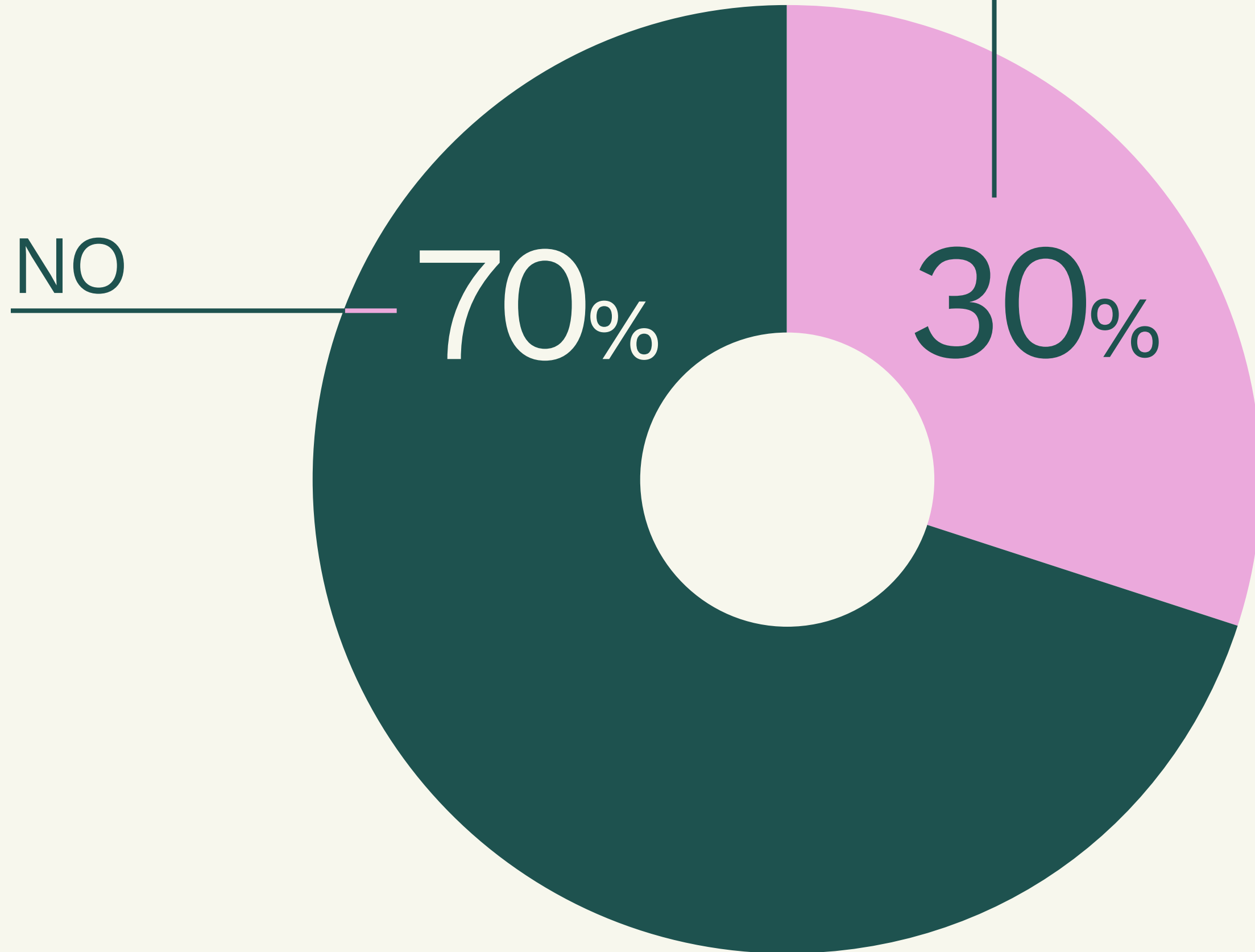
The NIWM's original talk on queer wartime history was well attended and led to good engagement with audience members. The subsequent blog post on the museum's website was the most read of any blog post of 2022, which indicates there is an interest in this topic among our audiences. The LGBTQ+ tour of the museum in February 2023 built on Michael's research for his original talk and allowed us to tell new stories using our collection, receiving a positive response from our visitors.

Our advice to other museums considering developing this kind of work is to trust your audiences, hold onto your values and build on good research. We have been pleased by the response to our LGBTQ+ programming and we look forward to continue to build on this work in future.



Addressing the legacy of colonial collections

Did your museum undertake work to address the legacy of colonial collections?



Compared to other parts of the UK, museums in Northern Ireland face unique and complex challenges in how they address the legacy of colonial collections.

Our research found that there is a growing interest in this area of work, but practice at local level remains in its infancy. Overall, 30% of museums in Northern Ireland are undertaking work to address the legacy of colonial collections. Of the local museums that are engaged in this work, most were involved in programmes led by national museums rather than in their own discrete activity.

A number of respondents said they didn't feel their collection was relevant to this area of work. Others hold collections related to the history of the British empire, colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, but have not undertaken in-depth research into aspects such as provenance.

Respondents reported hesitancy and a lack of confidence about working with these collections in the context of contemporary discussions around decolonisation. For some, this has meant that items that were previously on display have been put in storage.

However respondents say they have become more aware and mindful about colonial legacies in their everyday work, with a number reporting that they have reconsidered the language they use or how local historical figures are remembered.

Collections documenting British rule on the island of Ireland, and the resultant conflicts, provide a multi-faceted and challenging legacy

“We don't have enough research done. We don't feel confident that we have enough information.”

Interviewee

for museums in Northern Ireland. Respondents said their organisations take varied approaches in addressing these legacies: most start from the position of an objective observer; others have a remit dedicated to telling one perspective of the conflict and take a different approach.

“[The museum] is in itself an anti-colonial project so most of our work in some way reflects an anti-colonial ethos.”

Interviewee

One respondent, whose organisation holds archives of distressing material such as graphic photographs and moving images, described how, given how recent this history is, particular care must be taken when engaging audiences and staff welfare must be a priority.

“You do have to be very careful as to how you release that material, and what material can be seen by members of the public.”

Interviewee

Among the respondents who felt this area is relevant to their collections, there was a general feeling that further guidance and support is needed in order for them to take this work forward.

CASE STUDY

Global Voices Local Choices, led by National Museums NI, 2022-present

Global Voice Local Choices is a collaborative project between National Museums NI, Northern Ireland Museums Council, and the African Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland, and is funded by the Museums Association Esmée Fairbairn Foundation Collections Fund. The organisations have a common interest in addressing colonial legacies by bringing diverse cultures and perspectives into local and national museums across Northern Ireland. Diaspora communities and people of colour get to make choices about world cultures collections and how they are interpreted, challenging collectors' narrow perspectives.

Objects carry challenging stories that have to be managed carefully. Securing commitment and building trust takes time, considering the project is time-bound. Language can be a barrier. Defining "marginalised" can be complex because diverse individuals identify as marginalised.

Overcoming and addressing issues requires patience, flexibility and partnership. We embrace adaptability, learning from the process and accommodating different perspectives.

Twelve months into the 18-month project, there has been a steady increase in interest and participation in the museums among marginalised and newcomer communities. There is an exchange of expertise through meaningful relationships. Exhibitions are enriched by alternative perspectives and stories, and curators are more confident in presenting these collections. Over 25 different cultures are represented. Visitors to museums are learning more about other cultures settled in Northern Ireland, dispelling misunderstanding about them.



Our advice is to be authentic and audience-centred. Address barriers to participation. Create programmes and activities that participants will enjoy. Embrace community input, feedback and lived experiences in decision-making to enrich understanding and drive improvement. Flexibility and empathy are essential, particularly when supporting individuals with trauma.

Including and centring the voices of those directly connected to these heritages is crucial to promoting diversity and inclusive representation. These are ethical imperatives and are more beneficial than maintaining colonial legacies within museums. Global Voices Local Choices models positive change through shared ownership and celebration of cultures.

How many people are museums engaging with social impact work?

07

According to the Department for Communities, overall cultural engagement is strong in Northern Ireland, with 79% of adults engaging with culture, arts and heritage in 2021-22².

The diverse nature of social impact work means that engagement in the four areas can range from small, more focused groups to broad programming that reaches thousands of people. This is reflected in our findings; audience engagement in these activities ranged from groups of less than 10 participants to large-scale programmes with audiences of up to 40,000.

Respondents reported a significant spectrum of engagement depending on the nature of the project.

While some projects are designed to reach a large number of participants, other respondents felt that smaller groups – “quality over quantity” – are more impactful, although concern was also expressed that this may “reduce the headline impact” of an organisation.

A small number of respondents reported low audience engagement in some aspects of this work. However, there was a general feeling that social impact work, particularly in the areas of health and wellbeing and placemaking, acts as an important driver for museum engagement and inclusion, boosting overall participation and bringing new audiences, including under-represented groups, into museums.

2. Engagement in culture, arts heritage and sport by adults in Northern Ireland's local government districts 2022, NI Department for Communities (June 2022)

How is this work supported within the organisation?

08

Funding

We asked survey participants how their **health and wellbeing** work was funded. Of those who said they have undertaken work in this area:

67%

funded this work through external grant funding.

We asked survey participants how their **placemaking** work was funded. Of those who said they have undertaken work in this area:

88%

funded this work through external grant funding.

We asked survey participants how they funded work to **act as a space for engagement, reflection and debate**. Of those who said they have undertaken work in this area:

71%

funded this work through external grant funding.

We asked survey participants how their work to **address the legacy of colonial collections** was funded. Of those who said they have undertaken work in this area:

33%

funded this work through external grant funding.

47%

funded this work through by internal core funding.

19%

funded this work through internal core funding.

43%

funded this work through internal core funding.

33%

funded this work through internal core funding.

No

respondents reported using internal project funding.

6%

funded this work through internal project funding.

14%

funded this work through internal project funding.

33%

funded this work through internal project funding.

“

[Being well financed] gives us a lot of freedom to be able to try different things and build on what we've previously delivered.”

Interviewee

The majority of respondents reported that the social impact work their museum undertook in the financial years 2021–22 and 2022–23 was funded by external grant funding.

External grant funding tends to mean that social impact projects are linked to the outcomes of organisations outside the museum. Some museums reported that evaluation of their social impact work was tied to the outcomes of funders.

“

A lot of the evaluation is built into funded projects”

Interviewee

In some cases, internal funding allowed museums to have more control over the social impact work they delivered.

These examples demonstrate the impact different types of funding can have on what kind of social impact work the museum undertakes. Project outcomes are often determined by funders, especially if the project funding is external.

One interviewee reported that their museum aligned its outcomes in its strategic framework with the outcomes of the main funders in the sector, demonstrating the influence that funders have over social impact work in the museum sector.

Time-limited projects

We know that social impact work in museums can be time-limited, especially when linked to project funding.

We asked survey participants if their social impact work was a time-limited project. Of those who said they have undertaken work in this area:

44%

said their health and wellbeing work was time-limited project.

88%

said their placemaking work was a time-limited project.

46%

said their work to act a space for engagement, reflection and debate was a time-limited project.

20%

said their work to address the legacy of colonial collections was time-limited project.

Despite placemaking being reported by respondents as the most common type of social impact work undertaken by museums in Northern Ireland, it was also the most likely to be time-limited, with 88% of respondents who undertook this work reporting that the project was time-limited. This figure directly corresponds with the fact that 88% of respondents who undertook placemaking work reporting that the project was externally grant-funded. Therefore, funding is having a direct impact on the longevity of projects related to placemaking.

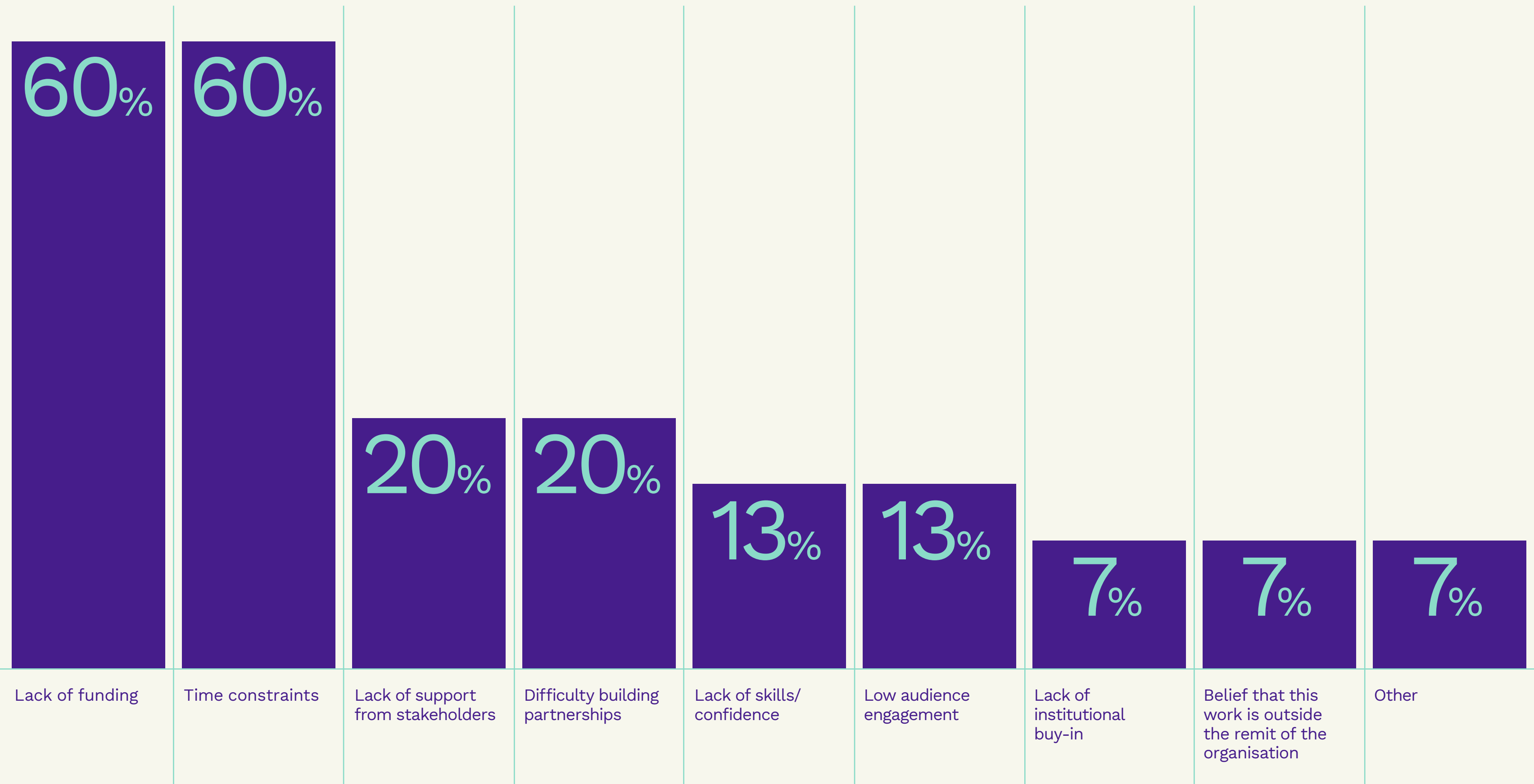
Addressing the legacy of colonial collections was least likely to be a time-limited project - although this is a small sample size given the lower numbers of museums undertaking work in this area.

What are the main challenges to undertaking this type of work?

09

Health and wellbeing

What challenges, if any, did you face when doing this work?



We asked survey participants what challenges they faced when undertaking health and wellbeing work.

60%

reported lack of funding and time constraints as challenges.

20%

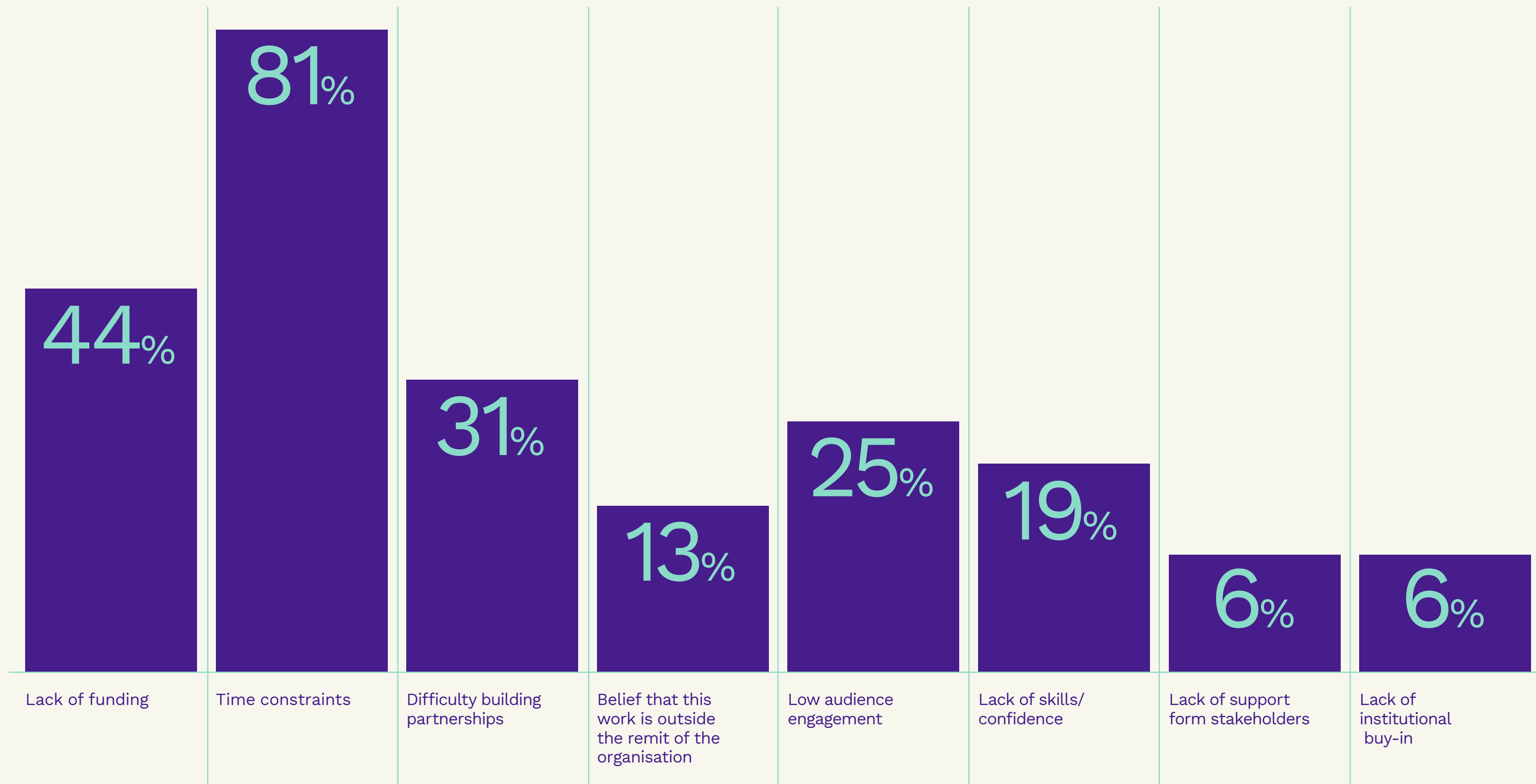
reported lack of support from stakeholders and difficulty building partnerships as challenges when doing health and wellbeing work.

13%

reported lack of skills/confidence and low audience engagement as challenges.

Placemaking

What challenges, if any, did you face when doing this work?



We asked survey participants what challenges they faced doing work related to placemaking.

81%

reported time constraints as a challenge.

44%

reported lack of funding as a challenge.

31%

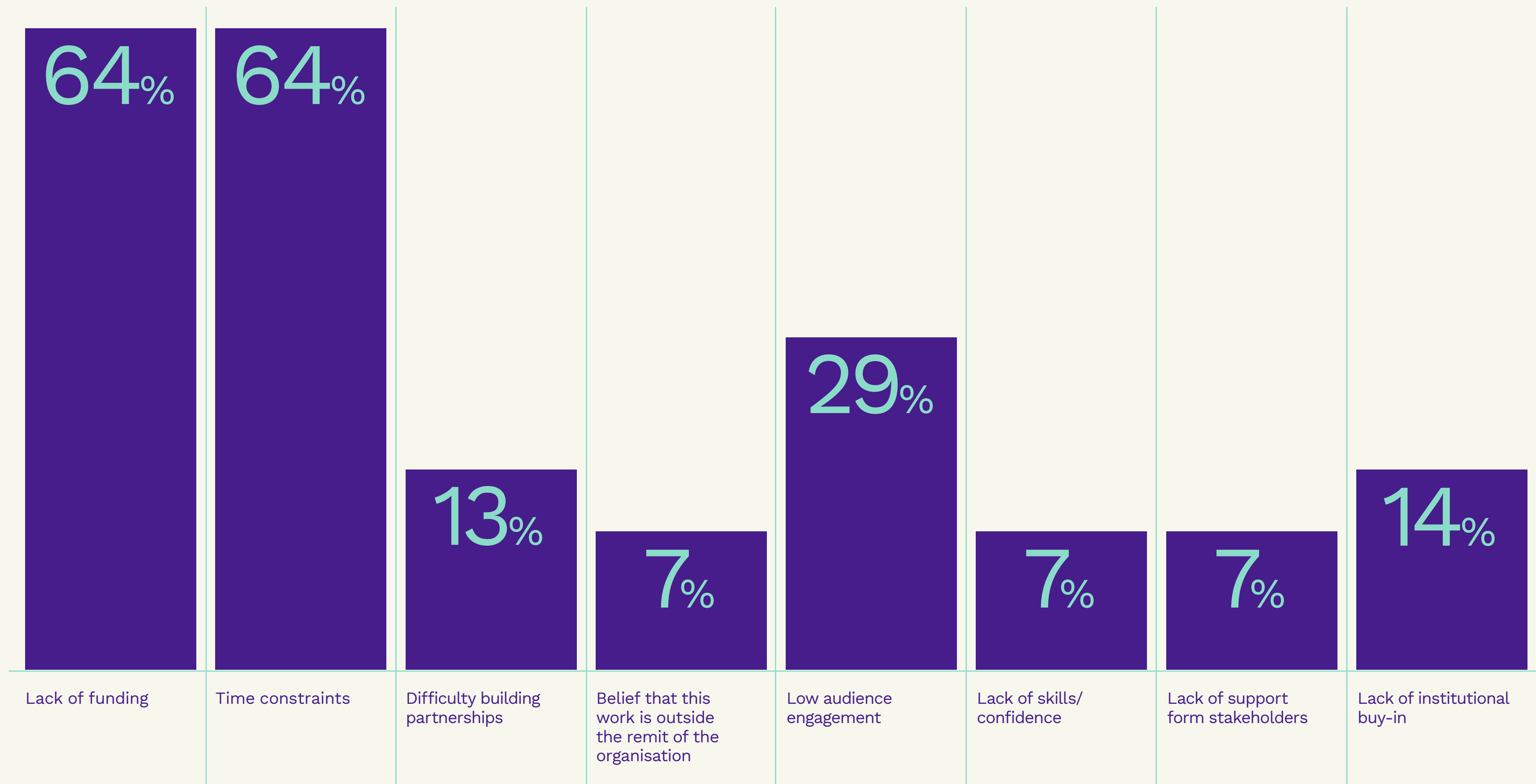
reported difficulty building partnerships as a challenge.

Only **6%**

of respondents reported lack of support from stakeholders or lack of institutional buy-in as challenges.

Acting as a space for engagement, reflection and debate

What challenges, if any, did you face when doing this work?



We asked survey participants what challenges they faced when undertaking work to make their museum act as a space for engagement, reflection and debate.

64%

reported lack of funding and time constraints as challenges.

29%

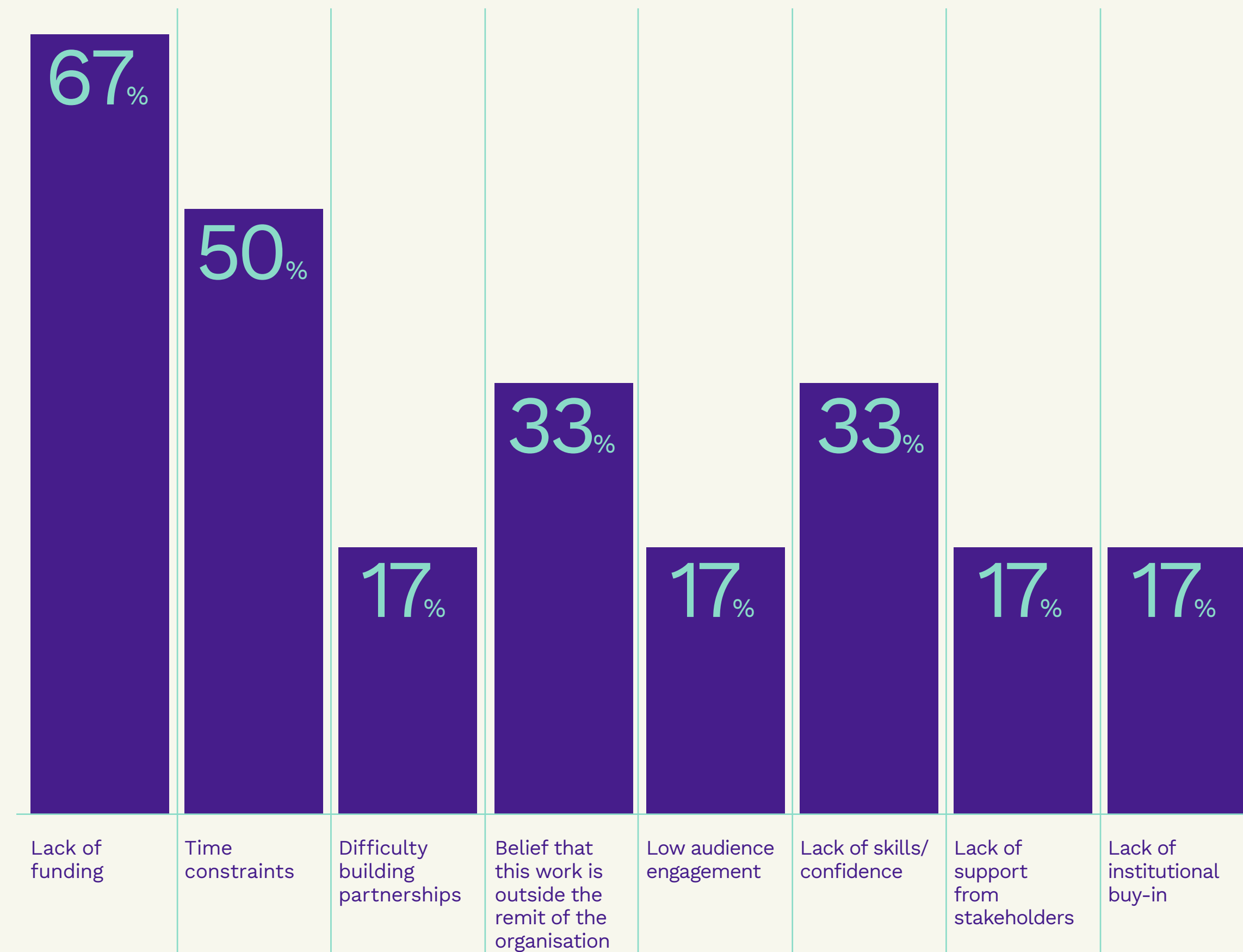
reported lack of audience engagement as a challenge.

14%

reported lack of institutional buy-in as a challenge.

Addressing the legacy of colonial collections

What challenges, if any, did you face when doing this work?



We asked survey participants what challenges they faced when undertaking work to address the legacy of colonial collections

67% reported lack of funding as a challenge.

50% reported time constraints as a challenge.

33% reported a belief the work is outside the organisation's remit and a lack of skills and confidence as challenges.

17% reported lack of audience engagement, lack of support from stakeholders and difficulty building partnerships as challenges.

Lack of funding and time constraints were cited as the main challenges by respondents when doing social impact work.

Lack of institutional buy-in was cited by the fewest number of respondents as a challenge when doing health and wellbeing or placemaking work, suggesting that there is an understanding of the importance of doing this work across museums in Northern Ireland.

When it came to using the museum as a space for engagement, reflection and debate or addressing the legacy of colonial collections, lack of institutional buy-in was cited as a greater challenge with 14% and 17% of respondents identifying this as a challenge when doing work in these areas respectively.

A third of respondents reported that lack of skills or confidence was a challenge when doing work to address the legacy of colonial collections.

Other challenges

During our interviews with museum workers, several further challenges when undertaking social impact work were identified.

One of these was the impact that Brexit has had on the ability of museums in Northern Ireland to access funding opportunities.

“The UK was always part of Interreg. And it’s not just heritage, it’s science projects, it’s marine technology, it’s aerial technology, and it’s agricultural. [It’s] a huge European-wide project which funded research that we can no longer be a part of.”

Interviewee

A number of interviewees cited the difficulty of measuring social impact as a key challenge.

“The qualitative and quantitative problem that we struggle with is that we have targets to make that are not the nice fluffy stuff... being inspired by looking at an art painting, or maybe some connection with a family - it’s very hard to measure that.”

“I find it really difficult to define. We know we’re doing good work, but how do we define and measure and sustain some of that work?”

Budget cuts and a culture of short-termism were identified as further challenges.

“Unfortunately because of the way the budget is going to work here in Northern Ireland, I don’t think museums are going to have the money anymore to be able to [do these] programmes.”

Interviewee

“There’s a real loss of momentum and knowledge if you’re only bringing in staff temporarily to complete a project.”

Interviewee

Our research made clear that funding is one of the main challenges museums in Northern Ireland face when doing social impact work and that the outcomes of funders are to some extent shaping what type of social impact work is being undertaken. The project nature of external grant funding is, in some cases, limiting the ability of museums to sustain or build on social impact projects.

What support
is needed
going forward?

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Health and wellbeing

We asked respondents what would support their organisation to do more health and wellbeing work.

- **75%** of respondents said more funding and **65%** said more resources/guidance.

Placemaking

We asked survey participants what would support their organisation to do more work on placemaking.

- **60%** of respondents said more funding and **55%** said more resources/guidance.

Addressing the legacy of colonial collections

We asked survey participants what would support their organisation to do more work to address the legacy of colonial collections.

- **43%** of respondents said funding and **21%** said more resources/guidance.
- Some respondents felt this work was not relevant to their collection.

Acting as a space for engagement, reflection and debate

We asked survey participants what would support their organisation to use their museum as a space for engagement, reflection and debate.

- **55%** said funding and **50%** said more resources/guidance
- **1** respondent said that sector lobbying would support them with this work.

The majority of respondents said that more funding and more guidance/resources would support them to do more social impact work. More funding for health and wellbeing work was identified as the most pertinent with three quarters of respondents reporting that more funding would support them to do more work in this area.

Although 14% of respondents undertaking work to use the museum as a space for engagement, reflection and debate reported lack of institutional buy-in as a challenge, no respondents reported that support getting senior management buy-in would help them to do more work in this area.

Next steps and recommendations

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As a result of this research, the Museums Association will:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Use this data to advocate for the value of museums in Northern Ireland and their impact in their communities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Consider how signposting to existing resources could be improved. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Communicate to funders that the key challenges museums in Northern Ireland face when doing social impact work are lack of funding and time constraints. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Evaluate what additional resources to support this practice are required. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Assess what resources the MA provides to support museums to do work on health and wellbeing, placemaking, act as a space for engagement, reflection and debate, and addressing the legacies of colonial collections. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Advocate the need for core investment in museums in Northern Ireland to support museums to do social impact work. |

The Museums Association recommends that:

- Museums should dedicate adequate resource from core budgets to social impact work to allow initiatives to be sustained and developed.
- Museums should recruit permanent staff for social impact work to allow partnerships and relationships to be sustained and developed, and to prevent the loss of knowledge when a staff member leaves.

Further resources

The MA has produced a range of materials to help museums take their social impact work forward:

Museums Change Lives

Guidance and case studies on delivering social impact

Supporting Decolonisation in Museums

Guidance to help museums address the legacy of colonialism

Power to the People

A framework for participatory practice

Measuring Socially Engaged Practice

A toolkit on approaches to measuring social impact

A Manifesto for Museum Learning and Engagement

A framework for learning practice grounded in cultural democracy

Image credits

Front cover: the Linen Lab at the FE McWilliam Gallery, image courtesy FE McWilliam Gallery; p15: participants in Florence Court's Collections Care and Conservation programme, image courtesy National Trust; p18: a display wall at the Veteran Life Untold Stories exhibition, image courtesy Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum; p19: participants in the Shared History outreach project, image courtesy Museum of Free Derry; p22: visitors attend the LGBTQ+ tour at the Northern Ireland War Memorial, image courtesy Northern Ireland War Memorial.

This report was kindly supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund

