

Curious Futures Case Study

Young Associates: Museums Mystery Shopping Project

The Curious Minds Young Associates programme began in March 2016, with the aim of upskilling and developing a group of young people, who are already engaged in arts leadership and possibly thinking of starting a career in the arts, and were ready to take the next step into a regional leadership role.

Fast forward to March 2017. We now have a team of 13 Young Associates, who have successfully completed their induction and training period with us, and are starting to go out into the arts and cultural sector, working on our behalf.

One of their first opportunities was to work with [Museums Development North West](#), acting as mystery shoppers at selected venues across the North West.

How it all started

Alex Bird, Sector Development Officer, describes the initial thinking behind the project:

“We were keen to get the opinions of young people on museums as part of our Goal 5 work, so we developed a mystery shopper programme. We provide the participating museums and Curious Minds provide the Young Associates, who were keen to get out and about and visit museums across the North West”.

Lion Salt Works in Cheshire were one of the participating museums:

“Traditionally youth audiences can be somewhat of a mythical unicorn... difficult to attract and difficult to create a sustainable relationship with. I was intrigued when an email from MDNW hit my inbox. I applied on behalf of the Lion Salt Works and we were successful. So, what now? We open our doors to a group of young people, let them loose and see that they think...” (Jonathan Nash, Community and Learning Officer).

Young Associates, Keeley Wilkinson and Danielle Ash, were asked to visit Lion Salt Works and recognised the vital role that they could play in developing the youth offer from the museum:

“...by engaging with a diverse range young people, you are helping to strengthen the need to preserve the historical features of the Lion Salt Works. Giving the young people the chance to contribute will help the Lion Salt Works move forward”.



Judgement Day arrives

So, with all partners recognising the value of this work, Keeley and Danni, headed off to the Lion Salt Works to explore their offer to children and young people, looking specifically at how their venue and exhibitions welcomed and engaged with a younger audience.

Overall, they *“...found the experience of the Lion Salt Works Museum an inspiring one”* and agreed with team that *“the museum content was different to anything we had visited before because of its uniqueness”*.

For Jonathan from the museum it felt like *“...judgment day arrives (dun, dun, dun)!”*. The findings were mixed, as you would expect, but Jonathan feels comfortable that *“there are positives and areas for improvement, some of which are really simple, quick fixes”*.

On reading the follow-up reports from the Young Associates Alex noted that they *“...offered insights into the museum offer that, as museum professionals, we would overlook. They covered everything from retail offer to signage and came up with some wonderful recommendations”*.

From the point of view of Danni and Keeley, they hope that *“...by improving access to the site, digital interactions and special events, the museum will benefit massively”* and are looking forward to seeing what happens next.

So, what next...?

This has been a really positive step forward for the Young Associates programme, showcasing one of the ways that they can make a clear contribution to the development of the cultural and creative sector and support the engagement of other children and young people.

Museums Development North West has agreed to fund three of the participating museums to implement some of their ideas and make improvements to their offer, signage and activities. The process has been described as *“really illuminating”* for the participating museums and Curious Minds, with the Young Associates, are really looking to developing this work and taking it forward.

If you are interested in finding out more about the Young Associates then please contact holly.ball@curiousminds.org.uk.

