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Introduction

Michael McGregor, Director, Wordsworth Grasmere

Chair of the MDNW Sustainable Improvement Fund panel

The Sustainable Improvement Fund has always been an effective barometer of the climate in which museums operate. Looking back at previous reports, the words 'innovation', 'resilience' and 'community' frequently occur. 2018 to 2024, dominated by the pandemic, a cost of living crisis and growing concern about climate change, saw these supplemented by words like 'recovery', 'digital' and 'environmental'.

For museums, as for society, the period covered by this report was a time of unprecedented upheaval. Museums were forced to completely rethink the basis on which they operated and engaged with their audiences. This led to an acceleration in digital access, but as the report illustrates more traditional methods such as loan boxes were equally important ways of sharing collections at a time when, emerging slowly from lockdown, people were wary of visiting indoor venues.

Along with post-Covid recovery, environmental responsibility was a major theme of SIF grants during this period, helping museums to care for collections more efficiently and develop projects to raise awareness of climate change.

As someone with a background in fundraising, I can appreciate the value of a fund like SIF which supports core activity, the essential work that is beyond overstretched budgets and difficult to fund elsewhere. Thanks go to Arts Council England for making this possible, and also to Art Fund and Curious Minds, who enabled us to supplement our funds and offer recovery and reopening grants to many organisations at a critical time.

From Workington to the Wirral, SIF has enabled so many wonderful projects to happen. None of this would have been possible without the expertise of my colleagues on the SIF panel, who somehow made time to review and discuss applications whilst keeping their own organisations running. And of course, huge thanks go to the amazing team at Museum Development North West. Working tirelessly through an incredibly testing time they ensured that museums retained their place at the heart of our communities.

Sustainable Improvement Fund 2012-24

The Sustainable Improvement Fund has been a core strand of our programme since Museum Development North West (MDNW) was set up in 2012.

Each year a minimum of **15%** of our funding from Arts Council England (ACE) was available directly to museums to apply for through SIF.

Reach

Eligible museums were those that were our priority for the MDNW programme in general – museums in the North West that were Accredited, held provisional Accredited status and those officially recognised as working towards Accreditation that were not national museums, National Portfolio Organisations, English Heritage or National Trust properties.

Whilst the number of Accredited museums in the region fluctuated slightly year on year, approximately **75%** of all the museums in the North West were eligible to apply to SIF each year.

Across the 12 years of the fund **72%** of museums eligible to apply either received funding for their own project or were part of a consortium project that was funded.

Criteria

The criteria from 2012 was structured around ACE's five goals as set out in their strategic plan Great Art and Culture for Everyone, and which MDNW's own programmes were based. Museums could also apply for funding to concentrate on specific Accreditation areas for development and from 2019-20 we introduced a new criteria - seed funding to bring in extra capacity or knowledge to work up a bigger application to ACE's National Lottery Project Grants.

In 2022-23 we began to transition towards ACE's current strategy, Let's Create, using their Investment Principles as the criteria¹.

¹<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create>

Pandemic response

When the pandemic hit in March 2020 and museums closed their doors, we were able to reprofile our own budget as well as draw in external funding to be able to give out additional funding directly to museums.

The 2020-21 SIF funding had already been allocated just before we went into lockdown but we were able to add an additional grant programme in summer 2020. We launched the Covid-19 Recovery Grants fund to support North West museums with their recovery and reopening plans.

We reallocated part of our core budget which we put together with strategic partnership funding from Art Fund and Curious Minds Partnership Investment.

£70,973 was distributed to 12 projects. 30% of the funding was allocated specifically for museums working with their local school(s) to explore new ways of providing a learning experience; another 30% was ringfenced for museums in areas of low cultural community engagement, where the museum was the main cultural offer in a locality, or a museum in an urban area that has niche collections and specific cultural offers outside the larger city institutions.

The investment from Art Fund was part of a new partnership in which it contributed £280,000 to Museum Development Covid-19 Recovery Grant programmes across the UK to reach museums that had not yet received emergency public funding.

The logo for Art Fund, featuring the words "Art Fund" in a blue, sans-serif font, followed by a blue underscore.The logo for Curious Minds, featuring a stylized "cm" in a rainbow color palette above the words "curious minds" in a black, lowercase, sans-serif font.The logo for Museum Development England, featuring the words "museum development" in a small, black, sans-serif font above the stylized letters "md" in a rainbow color palette, with the word "england" in a small, black, sans-serif font below.The logo for Museum Development North West, featuring the words "museum development" in a small, black, sans-serif font above the stylized letters "md" in a green and purple color palette, with the words "north west" in a small, black, sans-serif font below.

For 2021-22 MDNW's usual allocation of its funding towards the Sustainable Improvement Fund was supplemented by another contribution from Art Fund. We also increased the amount of funding for which museums could apply. Projects supported museums to develop new sustainable offers, re-engage with audiences and adapt programmes and services as a response to the pandemic.

The investment from Art Fund was the second year of a partnership in which it contributed investment to Museum Development Recovery Grant programmes to reach museums that had not received emergency public funding.

In spring 2021 we used our budget to launch Rapid Reopening Grants, giving support to museums planning to reopen when national restrictions allowed for it.

This was not our main grant fund, but a light-touch small grants scheme. Funding was given to cover costs to reopen in a Covid-safe way. Museums could apply for up to £2,000 and 22 museums were funded.

Through the continued partnership with Art Fund, in 2022 MDNW, Museum Development Yorkshire (MDY) and Museum Development North East (MDE) secured an additional investment of £37,250 to add to a ringfenced pot of £15,000 from our ACE investment to award as Recovery and Reset Grants.

The main aim of the fund was to support recovery and reset of museums in the wake of Covid-19 under three key areas - developing and using collections in new ways; audience development; volunteering and workforce development. Four museums in the North West were awarded grants totalling £19,000.

In 2023-24, through the continued partnership between Art Fund and MDUK, MDNW secured an additional investment of £14,250 to support workforce development, distributed through the MDNW CPD Bursaries and Audience Engagement Grants. An additional £20,333 from our core ACE funding was also invested across these funding streams. 18 CPD bursaries were awarded along with 10 Audience Engagement Grants. Further details of all Art Fund's investment into Museum Development is available on the Museum Development UK website².

Museum Development North grants

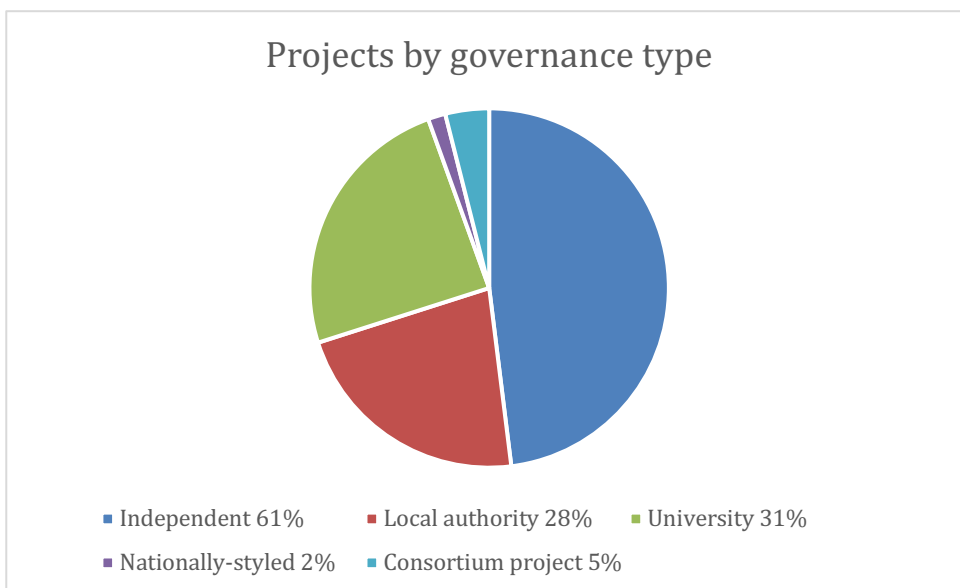
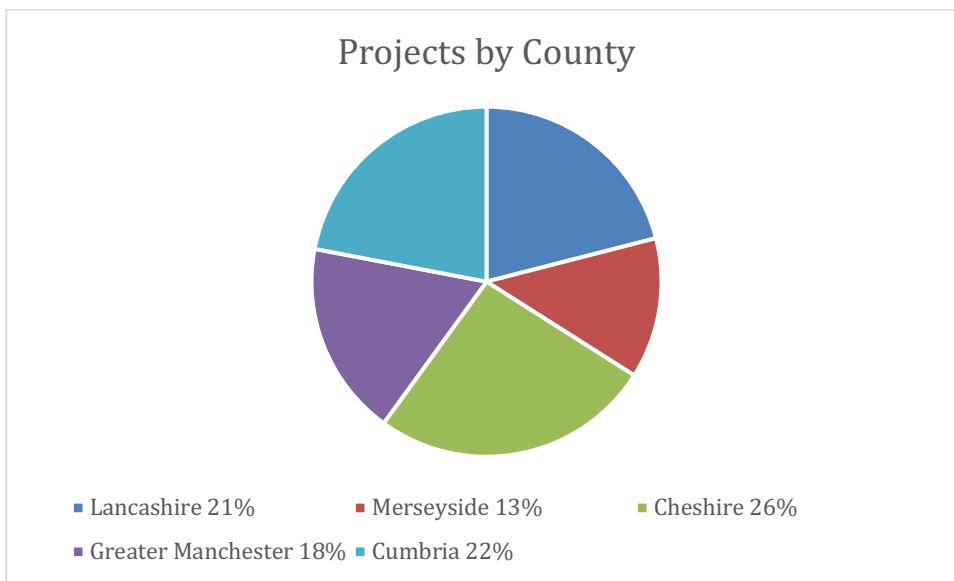
In April 2024 MDNW will amalgamate with MDY and MDNE to form Museum Development North. A small grants fund will remain a core part of the programme; by 2026 20% of our funding from ACE will be distributed directly to museums in the North through small grants, building on all three regions' previous grant programmes, including our own Sustainability Improvement Fund.

² <https://mduk.org.uk/covid-19-recovery/>

SIF statistics, 2012-24

Between 2012 and 2024 MDNW has given out a total of **£619,224** through the Sustainable Improvement Fund to **136** projects.

The following show both the geographical spread and the governance type of museums (the lead museum for consortium projects) across the 12 years.



SIF 2018-24

In 2018-24 just under £300,000 (£296,926) was awarded to **71** projects involving **59** individual museums in the North West. Accredited museums and those formally working towards Accreditation in the region were eligible to apply, with the exception of National Portfolio Organisations, national museums, English Heritage and National Trust properties. Approximately 110 museums were eligible to apply to SIF each year; across the course of the programme in 2018-24 approximately **54%** did receive direct funding through SIF. The overall success rate for an application to SIF was **82%**.

In 2018 ACE's new National Lottery Project Grants opened up the availability of more direct funding to museums through this grant scheme, and for longer and more developmental projects. We altered SIF priorities to ensure no duplication with ACE's new fund, and in 2019 we also introduced a new criteria to encourage museums to use SIF as seed funding to work up a National Lottery Project Grant application for a larger project.

Our intention was for SIF to be used for shorter projects with which museums could make small but significant changes, including core museum work without a direct or immediate public outcome. From the pandemic, however, SIF's focus shifted to meet the immediate needs of museums to adapt programmes and services as a response to Covid-19, developing new sustainable offers and re-engaging with audiences.

2022-23 was the first year we were able to fully align SIF with Art's Council's Let's Create Investment Principles – Ambition & Quality, Dynamism, Environmental Responsibility, Inclusivity & Relevance – as well as supporting projects to help museums continue to navigate through the impacts of the pandemic. Museums' experiences in the previous couple of years probably gave a greater urgency to focusing our collective work around these pillars.

SIF panel

From 2018-24 the SIF panel comprised:

Michael McGregor, Director, Wordsworth Grasmere (Chair)

Gill Brailey, Director of Learning, National Justice Museum

Jeff Cowton MBE, Curator, Wordsworth Grasmere

Katy Ashton, Director, People's History Museum

Darren Grice, now Director of Culture, Salford Culture and Place Partnership;
Deputy Chief Executive, Your Trust, Rochdale whilst on SIF panel

Esme Ward, Director, Manchester Museum

Katherine Lynch, Director of Heritage, Port Sunlight Village Trust

Gordon Watson, Chief Executive, Lakeland Arts (Chair) (to 2018)

David Tetlow, Cultural Assets Manager, Chorley Borough Council (to 2020, again in 2023)

Laura Pye, Director, National Museums Liverpool (from 2019)

Jane Davies, Curator, Lancashire Infantry Museum (2019-2021)

Rob Sanderson-Thomas, Director, Norton Priory Museum & Gardens (from 2021)

Emma Chaplin, consultant (2023)

Sue Hughes, consultant and former SIF panel member (2023)

Our thanks to all of the panel for their time and advice in assessing SIF applications, and additionally to those who stepped in to assess additional grant funds we were able to provide during the pandemic.

The following pages outline all the recipients for each year of the SIF programme.

Projects funded - 2018-19

In 2018-19 we altered the criteria to ensure there was no duplication with ACE's new National Lottery Project Grants. SIF became a fund to which museums could bid for grants for materials or support to make small but significant changes with simple projects based around collections, audience development or environmental sustainability.

<p>Bramall Hall & Hat Works Museum (Stockport Council), development programme to upskill staff and volunteers in collection documentation and photography skills</p> <p>Catalyst Science Discovery Centre, Widnes, rehousing of ICI General Chemicals archive files</p> <p>Cheshire East Museums forum (Congleton Museum lead), developing collaborative skills training and collections overviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Congleton Museum - Macclesfield Silk Museum - Middlewich Heritage Trust - Nantwich Museum <p>Congleton Museum, improvements to environmental monitoring and control</p> <p>Helmshore Textile Museum & Queen St Mill (Lancashire County Council), activities programme to engage, support and facilitate local groups' support</p> <p>Lancashire Infantry Museum, Preston, redisplay of the medal collection</p> <p>Macclesfield Silk Museum, improvements to environmental conditions</p> <p>Museum of Policing in Cheshire, Warrington, 'A Bobby's Job' new exhibition</p> <p>Nantwich Museum, improvements to collections store</p>	<p>National Waterways Museum, Ellesmere Port, train staff and volunteers in essential boat care skills, and in photogrammetry and CAD for recording boats</p> <p>Port Sunlight Village Trust, collections review</p> <p>Prescot Museum, Knowsley, collections store stations</p> <p>Ruskin Museum, Coniston, improvements to environmental monitoring and control</p> <p>Salford Museum & Art Gallery, improvements to storage of costume collection</p> <p>Tameside Museums & Galleries, improvements to collections storage and documentation procedures</p> <p>Touchstones Rochdale, implement recommendations from a security report to enable national loans for Dippy exhibition</p> <p>Victoria Gallery & Museum/Garstang Museum of Archaeology (University of Liverpool), audience development plan</p> <p>The Whitaker, Rossendale, purchase of Collections Management System</p>
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2019-20

The same criteria were kept for 2019-20 as the previous year with grants for materials or support to make small but significant changes with simple projects based around collections, audience development or environmental sustainability to complement the programmes of work delivered in 2017-19.

<p>British Deaf History Society, Warrington, develop an audience development plan and test audience engagement activities</p> <p>Cheshire West & Chester Council</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Grosvenor Museum- Lion Salt Works- Stretton Watermill- Weaver Hall <p>develop an audience development plan across the service, enable staff to understand current and potential audiences better</p> <p>Englesea Brook Chapel & Museum of Primitive Methodism, Crewe, purchase of mannequin</p> <p>Judges' Lodgings, Lancaster, improvements to Welcome Gallery</p> <p>Lancaster City Council</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Lancaster City Museum- Lancaster Maritime Museum- Cottage Museum- King's Own Royal Regiment Museum <p>develop an audience development plan and support staff training in gathering audience data</p>	<p>Mersey Fire & Rescue Service Heritage and Education Centre, Bootle, purchase of PA equipment to improve accessibility of exhibitions</p> <p>Nantwich Museum, purchase of roller racking for collections store</p> <p>National Waterways Museum, Ellesmere Port, work with artist to develop events and activities exploring links between the museum's collections and plastic pollution in UK's waterways</p> <p>Prescot Museum & Kirkby Gallery, Knowsley, purchase of humidifier to improve environmental conditions and secure loans</p> <p>Quaker Tapestry, Kendal, pilot workshops to inform future programming</p> <p>Warrington Museum of Freemasonry, environmental improvements to display cases</p>
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2020-21

In early March 2020 the Sustainable Improvement Fund panel met to consider applications and offer funding for 14 projects to begin in the new financial year, but the pandemic then hit two weeks later. All the original offers of funding were honoured, and museums were able to make changes to or delay their projects in light of the impacts of the pandemic. All projects were eventually completed.

<p>Avro Heritage Museum, Stockport, develop a schools offer</p> <p>Bolton Museum & Art Gallery, a decolonisation project to connect contemporary minority communities in Bolton with the world collections at Bolton Museum</p> <p>Congleton Museum, upskill volunteers to interpret iconography of a Roman coin hoard</p> <p>Gawthorpe Textiles Collection, Burnley, 20th century costume review</p> <p>Hat Works Museum, Stockport, work with Manchester drag collective, The Family Gorgeous, to explore the role that hat-making/wearing and headgear play in the creation of their drag</p> <p>Helmshore Mills Textile Museum (Lancashire County Council), Rossendale, conservation and interpretation of water turbine</p>	<p>Judges' Lodgings (Lancashire County Council), Lancaster, climate change project</p> <p>Lancaster City Council, Lancaster City Museum Collections Centre specification</p> <p>Nantwich Museum, textile conservation</p> <p>Norton Priory, Halton, develop habitat trail through Norton Priory woodland</p> <p>Ordsall Hall, Salford, Carbon Literacy project</p> <p>Ravenglass Railway Museum, environmental monitoring</p> <p>The Whitaker, Rossendale, environmental sustainability project</p> <p>Williamson Art Gallery & Museum, Wirral, social history collections review</p>
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2021-22

For 2021-22 MDNW's usual allocation of its funding towards SIF was supplemented by a contribution from Art Fund. Projects supported museums to develop new sustainable offers, re-engage with audiences and adapt programmes and services as a response to the pandemic.

<p>The Armit: Museum, Gallery, Library, Ambleside, LED lights to upgrade exhibition spaces and reduce carbon footprint</p> <p>Bolton Museum & Art Gallery, work with an artist to create a space and sensory objects linked to the collections for children with SEND to participate in interactive object handling sessions, either guided or independently</p> <p>Cheshire Military Museum, Chester, market research and audience development to restart the education service</p> <p>Kendal Museum, purchase of EPOS system to improve customer service and increase income generation</p>	<p>Keswick Museum, consultancy support to establish a more inclusive, flexible approach to volunteering, with multiple volunteering pathways available</p> <p>Lancaster City Council, Lancaster City Museums, consultancy support to establish an equal access strategy and develop a Disability Advisory Group</p> <p>Victoria Gallery & Museum, University of Liverpool, mindfulness programme to aid wellbeing of staff, students and visitors</p> <p>Williamson Art Gallery & Museum, Wirral, publicly searchable collections database to increase digital accessibility; testing search terms and tagging with focus groups to ensure inclusivity and relevance</p>
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2022-23

For 2022-23 project criteria was based around the Investment Principles of ACE's Let's Create strategy. Museums were funded through projects to support equity, diversity and inclusion, environmental sustainability, digital and technical development, and navigating through the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

<p>The Armit: Museum, Gallery, Library, Ambleside, expertise and equipment to determine the requirements for digitisation of collections</p> <p>British Commercial Vehicle Museum, Leyland, effective and cost-efficient solution to achieve the digitisation of the Museum's collection of over 1,000 reels of 16mm film</p> <p>Congleton Museum, 3D printing facilities to provide digital tactile access to collections</p> <p>Elizabeth Gaskell's House, Manchester, interactive family garden trail using QR codes to provide information on the plants, environment and wildlife in the garden</p> <p>Englesea Brook Chapel & Museum of Primitive Methodism, Crewe, 'Access Englesea Brook' project to open up the site and collections to a more diverse audience through physical adaptations, training, and digital storytelling</p> <p>Lancaster City Council, Lancaster City Museums, improved light levels within the galleries following the recommendations made in a Disability Access Audit</p>	<p>Macclesfield Museums – Silk Heritage Trust, programme to train, strengthen and inspire the guiding team at Paradise Mill, so that they are better able to research and tell new stories to new audiences</p> <p>Nantwich Museum, create onsite digital offer increasing access to the history and heritage of the Museum's collections</p> <p>Quaker Tapestry Museum, Kendal, improve accessibility for audiences with neurodiversity, visual impairments, and hearing impairments</p> <p>Warrington Museum & Art Gallery, creation of roof top garden at local shopping centre, working with schools and communities to become advocates for ground level, community environmental action</p> <p>Williamson Art Gallery & Museum, Wirral, commission a wayfinding and signage strategy to aid the commercial offer</p> <p>The Whitaker, Rossendale, work with local communities to redesign a gallery and re-interpret the collection</p>
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2023-24

For 2023-24, the final round of SIF, project criteria were again based around the Investment Principles of ACE's Let's Create strategy. As projects had to be completed by the end of March 2024, with no extensions permissible, we funded simple, straightforward projects with little risk built into them and that could continue work already underway, where funding would enhance or advance work already being done.

<p>The Armitt Museum, Gallery, Library, Ambleside, 'Amble with The Armitt' digital trails which tell stories of the local area through objects, artworks, and books</p> <p>Bury Art Museum, development of marketing strategy to generate additional income and increase marketing and audience development capacity within the Bury Art Museum team</p> <p>Elizabeth Gaskell's House, Manchester, improve and update external and internal visitor signage to improve access, and support development of a high-quality visitor experience</p> <p>Englesea Brook Chapel & Museum of Primitive Methodism, Crewe, working with a local school and a peace charity, co-create a peace garden mirroring the stories of peacebuilders in the museum</p> <p>Kendal Museum, reinterpretation of world wildlife gallery, incorporating environmental and social impacts and addressing how the collection was acquired</p>	<p>Lancaster City Council, Lancaster City Museums, assess and evaluate new operating models to optimise the income generating potential in light of budget cuts</p> <p>Museum of Wigan Life, walking tour aimed at new younger audiences using 'silent disco' technology to complement the Museum's 'Make Some Noise!' exhibition of the unique musical heritage of Wigan and Leigh</p> <p>Nantwich Museum, development of a permanent science and sustainability educational offer to diversify the current history-focused education offer</p> <p>Peter Scott Gallery (Lancaster University), piloting a participatory approach to reinterpreting the Pilkington collection</p> <p>Prescot Museum, Knowsley, using space in an empty shop unit to systematically scan records of photographic albums which have never been digitised</p> <p>Quaker Tapestry Museum, Kendal, commission costed building condition survey and energy audit to support an application to the Museum Estate and Development Fund; work towards becoming a Carbon Literate Organisation</p>
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Case studies

Prescot Museum, Knowsley **Collections Store Stations (£2,850), 2018-19** **Know Your Knowsley (£4,431), 2023-24**

Participation in MDNW's collections care programme identified improvements to the stores. Funding created a new four-person workstation, integrating clever multi-purpose functions. Volunteers could spend more time working on the collections; the number of 'behind the scenes' visits increased, with visitors having increased understanding of what was involved in looking after collections.



Pandemic restrictions prevented volunteers from carrying on with this work but in 2023-24 the Museum secured another SIF grant to use space in an empty shop unit to restart work on the collections by a mixture of existing and new volunteers.

"I love coming here, I just get so engrossed in what I'm doing, I can forget about everything else. It's just a few hours each week, but it's time for me."

Prescot Museum volunteer

Cheshire West & Chester Council **Audiences Matter (£4,875), 2019-20**



20 staff across West Cheshire museums worked with audience development consultant Marge Ainsley to make better use of data to start to embed audience development into the culture of the service. Staff workshops led to the development of a common vision, putting audiences at the heart of it. Early successes saw an increase in family activities during half-term as a result of focused effort to use Facebook and Marketing Cheshire channels for event promotion, and the trebling of numbers at a comedy night.

Hat Works, Stockport
All Hat No Shade (£5,000), 2020-21

Hat Works wanted to ensure that a more diverse range of voices were present within the gallery displays by working with artists from the LGBTQ+ community.

They worked with members of the Family Manchester drag collective, acquiring three hats from each artist and kickstarting contemporary collecting after a 10-year hiatus.

Each artist's hat story was attached to the object record on the collections database and could be used to interpret the headpieces both online and in the gallery.

Excellent object biographies were created at the point of entry so that future generations can interpret the hats in ways that are relevant to them.



Bolton Museum & Art Gallery
A Fun and Inclusive Museum (£6,500), 2021-22



Based on previous work and consultation with SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) families, the museum used funding to provide a sensory and interactive trail for children with SEND to participate and enjoy the museum collections.

They worked with an artist to create the space and sensory objects linked to the collections. The sensory backpacks allowed children to navigate the collections at their own pace, and to choose which area in the museum they would like to visit next, through the visual aid of the sensory trail.

Warrington Museum & Art Gallery Urban Oasis (£6,560), 2022-23

Following on from an MDNW Green Grant to research community urban gardens the Museum secured a SIF grant to create a garden on the roof of a local shopping centre.

They used a North West-based organisation to design and build the garden, involving a local school, a local nursery and a new volunteer team to help plan, plant and maintain the garden.

In the first year over 200 students from local schools took part in new formal learning workshops for Early Years and Key Stages 1 and 2.

The Museum's new volunteer group planned a series of community events including a garden equipment swap shop, composting and fertiliser demos and an eco-artist event linked to 'The Wild Escape' national project.



Quaker Tapestry Museum, Kendal Building Survey & Energy Audit (£5,000), 2023-24

Carbon Literacy Project



Quaker Tapestry Museum commissioned an energy audit with recommendations on how to improve the heating system and efficiency of the building. It provided a vital resource for planning, prioritising, and fundraising around sustainability and carbon reduction.

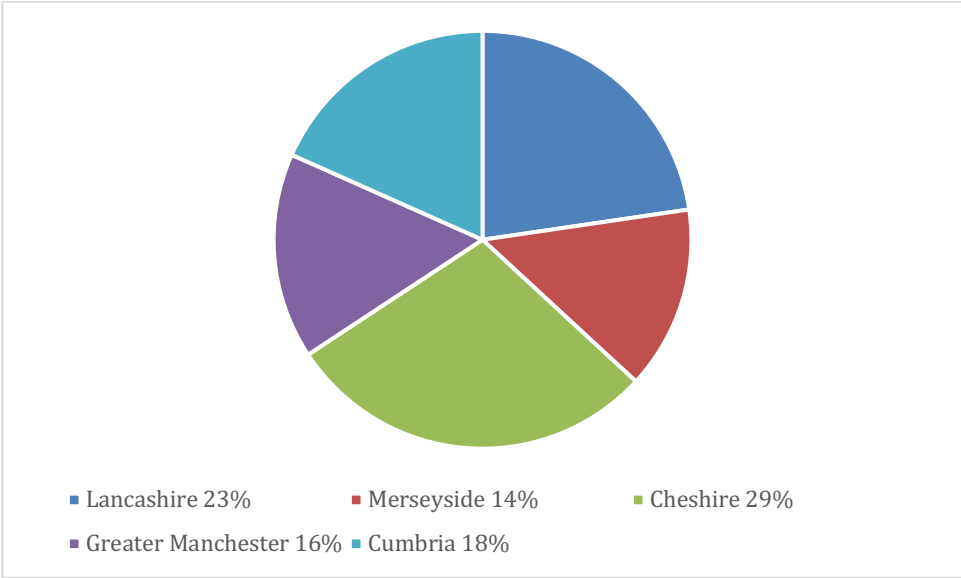
70% of staff were trained in Carbon Literacy during the project, with the museum aiming to become a Carbon Literate Organisation.

SIF statistics, 2018-24

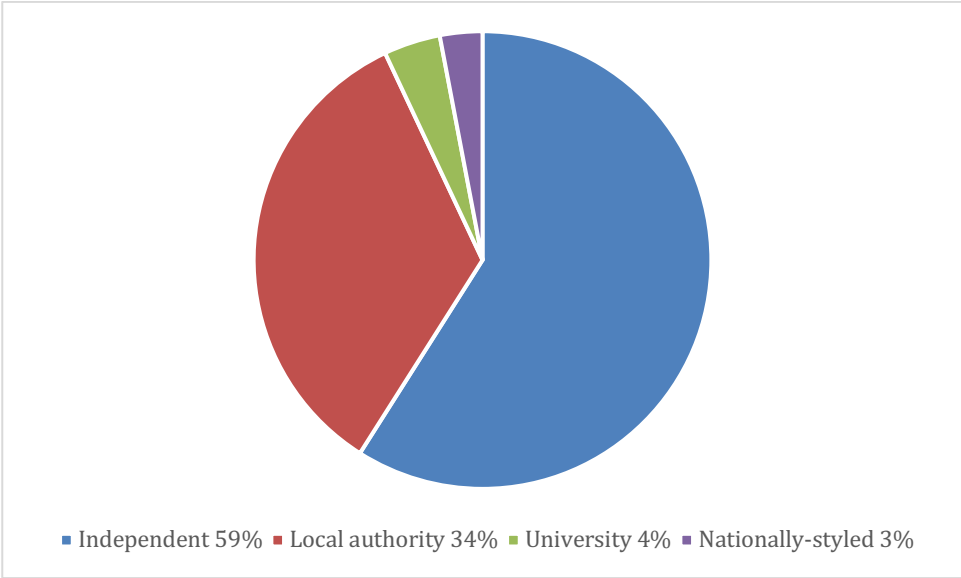
Total amount of funding - **£296,926**

Total number of projects - **71**

Proportion of funding by county



Proportion by governance type





MDNW, March 2024

Images:

Title page – school workshops in rooftop garden, courtesy of Warrington Museum & Art Gallery
p2 – Mersey Fire & Rescue Heritage & Education Centre, © Simon Critchley 2019; crafternoon at Victoria Gallery & Museum, University of Liverpool, © Simon Critchley 2019; Elizabeth Gaskell's House, courtesy of Victoria Smith, 2019; Bolton Museum , courtesy of Victoria Smith, 2019
p16 – Prescott Museum, © Simon Critchley, 2019; Lion Salt Works, courtesy of Catherine Mailhac 2018
p17 - Hat Works Museum, image courtesy of Cheddar Gorgeous, 2020; sensory backpacks, image courtesy of Bolton Museum 2022
p18 – Barrow Hall School, courtesy of Warrington Museum & Art Gallery, 2023
p20 – MDNW team at Dove Cottage, Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere, © Alison Criddle 2023