



Happy Place

Young Adults, Museums
& Wellbeing



Prepared By:

Becky Jefcoate FRSA,
Practitioner Research Associate –
Collections & Wellbeing

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Executive Summary

Happy Place explored how museums can improve young adults' wellbeing through participatory research. Addressing the crisis that 1 in 3 young adults experience anxiety and depression, the Museum collaborated with 49 diverse participants through focus groups, international case study analysis and exercises in slow looking, mindfulness and empathy. The pilot created an immersive "Overgrown Garden" retreat featuring nature sounds, soft lighting, and creative activities. Over four days, 403 visitors participated, with 100% reporting improved mood and joy. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with participants describing transformative experiences of calm and community connection. The project successfully demonstrated museums' potential to support wellbeing through collaborative programming.

Project team

Creative Producers and Peer Mentors: Yasmin Brem-Sheppard, Chloe Coles-Smith, Rose Dolan, Christopher Joseph, Louise Nichols, Elena Ooijman, Alex Payton, Aino Sinioja, Sophie Smout, Sara Williamson Balaguer, Martha Wallace.

Community Participants: Tiegán Ball-Wells, Marie-Alix Bilgischer, Katie Birditt, Harry Blankley, Catherine Brand, Oscar Collin, Cynthia Dong, Lucy Jude Grantham, Zahra Grieve, Raidah Haque, Raisa Haque, Eleanor Lee, Lydia Mitchell, Miriam Mitchell, Lola Osbourne, Aniya Sofia Pramanik, Serika Siriwardhana, Dusan Vajagic, Kelsey Yi Wing Yuen. With members of Cambridge Youth Forum, Romsey Mill, Centre 33 and Cambridge NCS.

Participatory Research in Museums: Why?

Happy Place is an action research project that ethically centres participant agency and seeks to deliver sustainable participation and long-term change for the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Working closely with 49 local young adults alongside Fitzwilliam staff, the project provided insight into how museums can improve young adults wellbeing, and resulted in a pilot pop up wellbeing space and supporting creative wellbeing activities, the *Happy Place* and *Happy Hour* (August 2024 - July 2025).

Why Young Adults and Wellbeing?

The wellbeing of young adults is at an all-time low:

- 1 in 3 people aged 18–25 in the UK report symptoms of anxiety and depression (NHS Digital, 2024), up from 1 in 9 in 2017—and the figure is rising.
- 50% of mental health issues are established by age 14, and 75% by age 24 (Mental Health Foundation, 2024).

Although museums aspire to be inclusive and welcoming, they are not always seen as relevant or inviting to young adults (Hooper, & Nielsen, 2017).



Happy Place at the Fitzwilliam

Research Questions

- How can museums improve young adults' wellbeing through their spaces, collections, and stories?
- Which parts of the museum offer (entrance, galleries, shop, café, digital, outdoor spaces) are most engaging—or need rethinking?
- How do young adults define wellbeing, and what does an ideal museum wellbeing experience look like to them?
- Which museum themes and human stories resonate most?



Happy Place participant in a gallery

Approach

The project utilised participatory action research to develop a museum project that is actively relevant and responsive to a wide range of audiences (Boersma, 2023).

We seek to adopt a careful, caring approach and centre empathy in our work by continually reflecting on our practice and its impact on those we work with (Morse, 2021).

Methodology

Participants were recruited through an open call and community partnerships. The group was diverse and included: culturally and neurodiverse individuals, LGBTQ+ and refugee communities, people with literacy challenges, local residents and students (ARU, University of Cambridge, international)

Learning from Case Studies

The project explored diverse and international wellbeing in museums practice.

Inspiration came from:

- *Rituals of Care* (De Young, San Francisco)
- *Feel the Heartbeat* (Museum Sint Janshospitaal, Ghent)
- *Protest Banner Lending Library* (Netherlands)
- *Space for Calm* (Manchester Art Gallery)
- *Cardboard Apothecary* (The Beaney, Canterbury)
- *Choose your own Path* (The Story Museum, Oxford)
- *Mood Audio* (Getty, Los Angeles)
- *Laughter Lab* (Cartoon Museum, London)
- *Eco Community Wellbeing* (Vancouver Museum, Vancouver)
- *Museum Hack* (The Met, New York)
- *Jury for Joy* (Cumbria Museums)
- *Cocoon* (Perlan, Reyjavik)

These examples helped spark ideas and conversations around what a wellbeing-focused museum experience could be.

This work is so important, and much needed. There is no wellbeing without belonging

Dr Adam Welstead, Head of Student Wellbeing, University of Cambridge

There's a lot going on, and so much of it causes big worry.

Often I just want to escape and find comfort and reassurance that we'll get through this as a human race and everything will be okay in the end.

Happy Place participant

Understanding Young Adults Wellbeing

Through conversations and creative exercises, young people shared their experiences of stress, anxiety, joy, and calm.

Key Themes That Support Wellbeing:

- A desire to feel calm and grounded
- The importance of resilience
- The need for escape and retreat from daily pressures

Creative Engagement & Feedback

The project explored:

- How the physical museum environment (entrances, galleries, shop, café) could be improved to become more welcoming and engaging
- Slow-looking and mindful sketching exercises, which participants described as calming and emotionally powerful
- Sensory and empathy-based activities to explore the human stories behind objects and artworks



Happy Place participants in a gallery

Connecting with the Collection & Creation of the Happy Place

Five themes emerged:

Escape to another world
Inspiring awe and wonder
Everyday human stories

Sense of perspective
Enduring human spirit

Emerging Themes for Wellbeing Experiences

Feedback and ideas were grouped into seven key areas:

1. Creating conditions for comfort and relaxation
2. Providing a backdrop for creativity and self-expression
3. Creating mindful moments throughout the museum
4. Permission to play and choose-your-own-adventure experiences
5. Multi-sensory and immersive experiences
6. Building social connection and community
7. Emphasising empathy, care, and accessibility

Creation of the Happy Place & Happy Hour

During the second phase of the project (April – July 2025) participants co-designed and hosted a wellbeing pilot, consisting of a pop-up chill-out space for museum visitors, the *Happy Place* alongside lunchtime Happy Hour activities.

The Creative Studio was transformed into an immersive, welcoming retreat with an Overgrown Garden theme. Features included:

- Areas for connection, creativity and calm
- Nature sound effects, soft lighting, videos, a smellscape and sensory prompts
- Drop-in activities such as mindful Bee inspired printmaking, origami butterflies, zen gardens, yoga in the galleries, relaxing massage, crochet creatures, rock painting, the creation of a giant garden canvas and a self-guided wellbeing trail around the museum with mindful and slow looking prompts. 'Down the Garden Path.'

Visitor Feedback and Highlights

403 people visited Happy Place over 4 days and 12% of these visitors were surveyed about their experience.

- **Emotional Impact:** The experience was consistently described as calming, joyful, peaceful and uplifting with 100% of respondents stating that Happy Place successfully sparked joy and improved their mood
- **Creative Engagement:** Activities like rock painting, printmaking, and collaborative canvas art were hugely popular
- **Sensory Experience:** Soft light, nature sounds, and gentle music created an immersive atmosphere which visitors appreciated and enjoyed, with many visitors staying for several hours
- **Therapeutic Elements:** Hand massages, tea rituals, the friendly welcome and spaces to relax on cushions and in hammocks enhanced the feeling of care
- **Social Connection:** Visitors appreciated opportunities for quiet conversation and shared experiences

"Happy Place brought me tranquility and inner peace—it taught me to be more patient and observant."

Happy Place visitor

Engagement Scores

Average engagement score: 5 out of 5

"It lifted my mood as soon as I walked in."

Happy Place visitor

Results

What visitors wanted to see more of in future at the museum

- Regular wellbeing events and creative drop-ins
- Family-friendly and intergenerational wellbeing sessions
- After-hours or late-night Happy Place programming
- Replication across other museums and cultural spaces

"I really wish other museums had spaces like this."

Happy Place visitor

Participant feedback

Participants described their experience as overwhelmingly positive. Many spoke of how the project offered a sense of relief, joy, creativity, and connection during challenging times.

"I've very much enjoyed it. Being able to come and create something together felt very special."

Happy Place participant

Participant Highlights

Key highlights included:

- Collaborative creative activities
- Connection and conversation with others
- Support from the museum team

"Working with Becky – such a kind, creative project leader, she listened to me and made me feel valued."

Happy Place participant

Impact on Wellbeing

All participants reported that the project lifted their mood or sparked joy.

"It was very creative and felt great to be promoting joy."

"I've learnt ways to calm myself and be happier."

Happy Place participants

Facilitation and Support

All respondents rated the support from the museum team very highly (5/5), describing the environment as warm, responsive, and enabling.

"The museum team really cared about the project and about us and made us feel part of something important."

Happy Place participant

Connections and Friendships

Participants reported:

- Making new friends
- Strengthening existing friendships
- Building connections with museum staff

"The project has made it so easy for us to craft, chat and bond together."

Happy Place participant

Building a Positive Relationship with the Museum

Participants expressed a positive shift in how they perceived the museum:

- From a formal institution to a welcoming, creative space
- Somewhere they would now visit more often
- A place of creative experimentation and belonging

"It's always felt like a really safe space. Involvement in something so positive has helped me really feel valued."

Happy Place participant

Wellbeing, the Museum's Role and the Future

All respondents felt strongly that wellbeing and happiness should be a focus for museums, and wanted more Happy Place pop ups and events

"There's so much untapped potential in joy, creativity, and connection through culture."

Happy Place participant

Conclusion

The feedback from participants and visitors highlights the deep value Happy Place has offered – emotionally, socially, and creatively. There is a clear appetite for further wellbeing-focused programming, and the project has significantly strengthened the museum’s role as a space for joy, connection, and community.

Happy Place was a resounding success—demonstrating the power of creativity, care, and co-design to support wellbeing in museum settings. It showed that when museums listen to and work alongside young adults, they can become places of refuge, inspiration, and community.

By embedding wellbeing into the heart of programming—not as an add-on, but as a core offering—museums can play a powerful role in supporting the next generation.

Recommendations

1. **Repeat and scale** the *Happy Place* initiative—seasonally, thematically, and in partnership with other organisations
2. **Provide larger and more visible spaces** for *Happy Place* at the museum, with more room for zoned areas for calm reflection and social connection
3. **Retain and expand** multi-sensory, creative, and immersive elements



A Gnome

“More Happy Place events please! Please can we make this a regular event? So many of my friends would come if we had this every month”

Happy Place participante

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