

Early Birds

Report for the Lord Leonard and Lady Estelle Wolfson Foundation March 2019

Science Museum

The Science Museum strives to be the best place in the world for people to enjoy science. We connect visitors with science through our exhibitions, learning and family programmes to inspire the next generation of doers and innovators.

At the core of our work is the Science Museum's world-class collection, which forms an enduring record of scientific, technological and medical progress from across the globe.

Early Birds

Early Birds is a sensory friendly morning for children who need a quieter environment to enjoy the museum. The museum opens from 8:30am before the general public gains entrance, as regular visiting hours can present intolerable queues, crowds and noise for children on the autistic spectrum or those suffering from anxiety. As well as exploring the museum during this quieter time, Early Birds families are also given a selection of additional activities until 11:00am.

Early Birds activities are aimed at children aged 15 years or younger. The sessions are open to everyone who needs a quieter environment, as well as their friends, carers or families. By starting early, limiting the numbers of visitors per session, and adjusting the environment in the museum, we work to ensure that it is as comfortable and accessible as possible.

The Lord Leonard and Lady Estelle Wolfson Foundation have generously pledged support for this project over three years. This report outlines the activity over the year 2018/19 and plans for the year to come.

Night Owls

Night Owls is a sensory friendly evening event aimed at visitors ages 16 and over, their friends, carers and families. Now in its fourth year, we continue to receive positive feedback on Night Owls and to modify the programme based on visitor needs.

Events and Attendance

Over the last year, we held five Early Birds sessions and one Night Owls session:

Visitor numbers:

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| • 18 March 2018 | Mathematics Early Birds: 130 adults, 142 children |
| • 5 May 2018 | Superbugs Early Birds: 160 adults, 171 children |
| • 14 July 2018 | Superbugs Early Birds: 82 adults, 85 children |
| • 29 September 2018 | Engineering Early Birds: 156 adults, 155 children |
| • 10 November 2018 | The Sun Early Birds: 153 adults, 154 children |
| • 8 December 2018 | The Sun Night Owls: 118 adults (16+) |

Early Birds

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Visitor numbers have substantially increased in 2018/19, so much so that events are regularly fully booked. Please note that the dip in visitor numbers for July's Early Birds was due to the introduction of GDPR, which meant we couldn't contact our mailing list about the event.

Activities

This year at Early Birds and Night Owls, we have introduced new activities alongside favourites like our Robotics workshop and planetarium. New this year has been:

- Zoolab – animal handling workshops that give visitors the chance to meet and learn about snakes, cockroaches, millipedes, giant snails and more.
- SM:ART Mechanics – workshops in which visitors become engineers, making their own motorised pens to take home.
- Science Shows – modified versions of the Science Shows we present regularly in the Museum. Shows like 'Problem Solved', teaching engineering skills, and 'Destination Space', about the International Space Station, are modified for an Early Birds audience.
- STEM Experts – STEM professionals have volunteered their time to run activity stations at our sensory friendly events. At our Engineering Early Birds, an engineer ran a session on the science behind glow-in-the-dark. At Night Owls, a leading solar physicist worked in collaboration with an artist to deliver a drop-in art workshop about the sun.
- *The Sun: Living With Our Star* – During Early Birds, we have offered free access to *The Sun: Living With Our Star* to give visitors an opportunity to explore this amazing exhibition about our closest star, muting the loud exhibition noises to make the space more accessible for this audience.
- Planetarium – The Planetarium, facilitated by Imperial College's outreach team, has become so popular that we have trained Science Museum staff on running the sessions. This allows us to use the Planetarium at times when Imperial's Outreach Ambassadors are not available.

2018/19 Updates

- Due to the success of our sensory friendly programming, we have been approached by other museums who are looking to make their organisations more accessible for visitors with autism spectrum conditions. This has led to us:
 - Presenting at a museum forum in Belfast about the Early Birds programme.
 - Meeting with the Family Programmes Coordinator of Manchester Museum.
 - Meeting with a volunteer representing the Imperial War Museum.
 - Discussing the programme with Hampton Court Palace's Visitor Operations Manager.
 - Meeting with a member of Swedish public heritage organization Västärvet's learning team.
 - Meeting with the Community Learning Officer of the Postal Museum.
- We have started to rent a mobile changing unit (the Mobiloo) for our Early Birds and Night Owls events. This enables visitors who require a Changing Places toilet to participate in the

Early Birds

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Early Birds and Night Owls events. We will continue to provide these facilities at all our Early Birds and Night Owls events but, in the future, we hope to install a permanent Changing Places toilet, as there is currently no other facility in the South Kensington area. The lack of this facility is a barrier to families visiting the area.

- This year, based on feedback we received from adults who are unable to visit the Museum on a typical day, the Night Owls age range was expanded from 16-25 to anyone 16 and up. This allowed adults with autism spectrum conditions and/or other sensory needs to attend the Museum and participate in activities when they otherwise wouldn't be able to.
- We have received feedback that some children with autism spectrum conditions struggle getting up in the morning and, as a result, it is quite difficult to attend an Early Birds event. We will trial an evening session for families in November 2019.
- We have started running accessibility awareness training across the museum. This has given front facing staff tools and confidence when interacting with visitors with autistic spectrum conditions on a typical day. We are particularly proud of this direct impact that our sensory friendly events have had on improving accessibility across the Museum's wider programme.

Feedback for Early Birds

We continue to receive positive feedback from Early Birds and Night Owls visitors:

- "I just wanted to say thank you for arranging Night Owls last night. It was a great opportunity for my son who has autism to enjoy the museum without the crowds and noise which he finds difficult. The staff were friendly and sympathetic and little touches like turning off the hand-dryers in the toilets was very thoughtful. Thanks to all involved in planning these events."
- "[My son] was able to interact and respond to the museum's exhibits in a way that just isn't normally possible for him. It is such a pleasure as a parent to be able to see him enjoy the learning experience so much. Everything, from the initial information you sent, to the early morning start enabled him full access to the experience and to be at his very best. Reducing all those anxieties meant he was able to just 'be' and be ready for learning and fun. So often it feels as parents to special needs children we are fighting the world - it is a rare pleasure to have something that is so obviously thought out and accessible. We look forward to the next one. Thank you to all your staff who were brilliant. What an amazing thing you have done."
- "[Early Birds is] the only way we can access the museum as a family." (Parent with twins aged 5.)
- "[Early Birds is] fun for my son and as a family. I feel less judge as he's around peers with similar issues so when he's stimming or on the rare occasion having a meltdown it's easier to handle as everyone understands." (Parent with child aged 4.)

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Upcoming sessions:

- Sunday 17 March 2019: The Sun Early Birds
- Saturday 4 May 2019: Space Early Birds
- Saturday 6 July 2019: Night Owls
- Saturday 5 October 2019: Space Early Birds
- Saturday 23 November 2019: Intelligence Early Birds
- Saturday 14 December 2019: Intelligence Early Birds
- Sunday 1 March 2020: Early Birds (Theme TBC)

We would like to thank the Lord Leonard and Lady Estelle Wolfson Foundation for your support in making Early Birds and Night Owls happen. It is thanks to you that the Museum can create a sensory friendly environment to access and enjoy science.

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