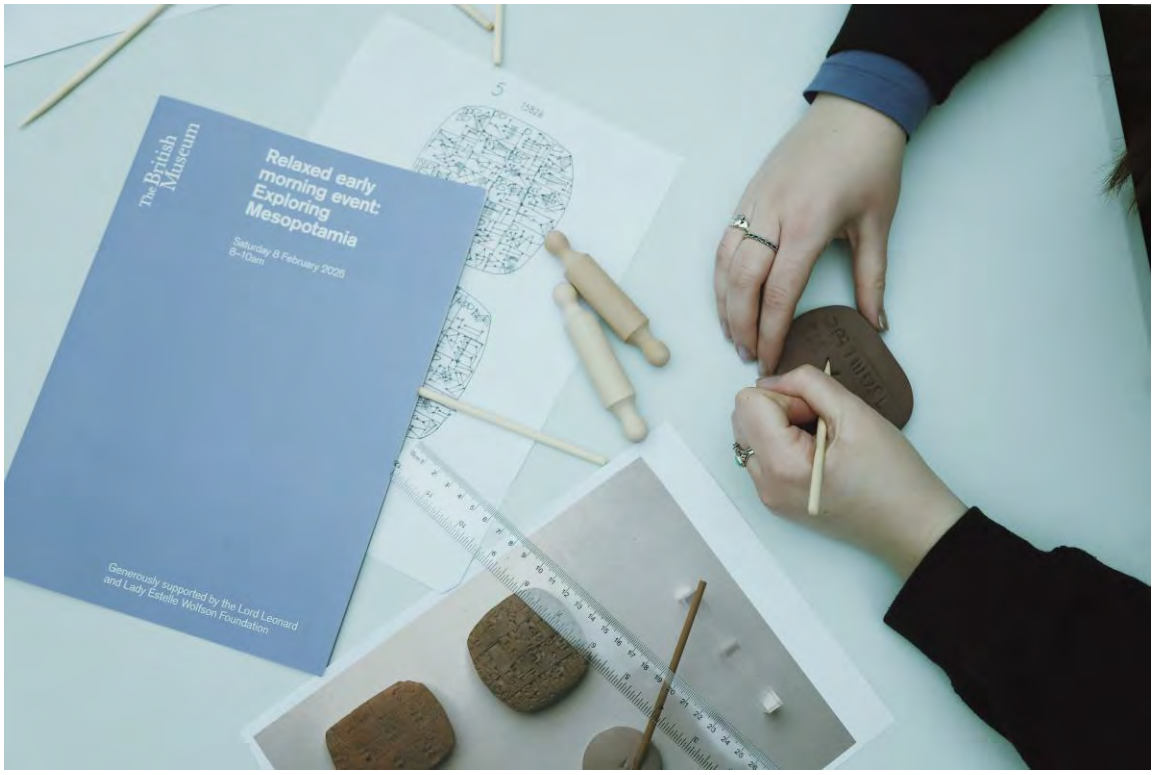
The Lord Leonard and Lady Estelle Wolfson Foundation Access and Education Programme: Phase III

Year 3 Report: 8 July 2024 – 7 July 2025

Submitted September 2025

Summary

In November 2019, the Lord Leonard and Lady Estelle Wolfson Foundation awarded the British Museum £112,500 over three years to support Phase III of the Wolfson Access and Education Programme. Phase III officially began on 8 July 2022 and produced a range of events and resources to support autistic and learning disabled families to engage with the Museum, as well as create opportunities for individuals to broaden their experience, skills and knowledge through front-of-house volunteer placements. This final report covers activity between 8 July 2024 and 7 July 2025.



Activities at a relaxed early morning event.

Relaxed out-of-hours events for families

The events developed as part of the Wolfson Access and Education Programme are designed to provide access to the British Museum for children and adults who are autistic, learning disabled, or have mental health conditions. Pre visit information including a sensory story and map is provided to participants ahead of each event to help them prepare for their visit and feel more comfortable with the Museum's layout and features. Each event consists of a range of creative and sensory activities led by learning disabled or neurodivergent artists. Sensory quiet spaces and additional resources are also provided to help families explore and enjoy the Museum.

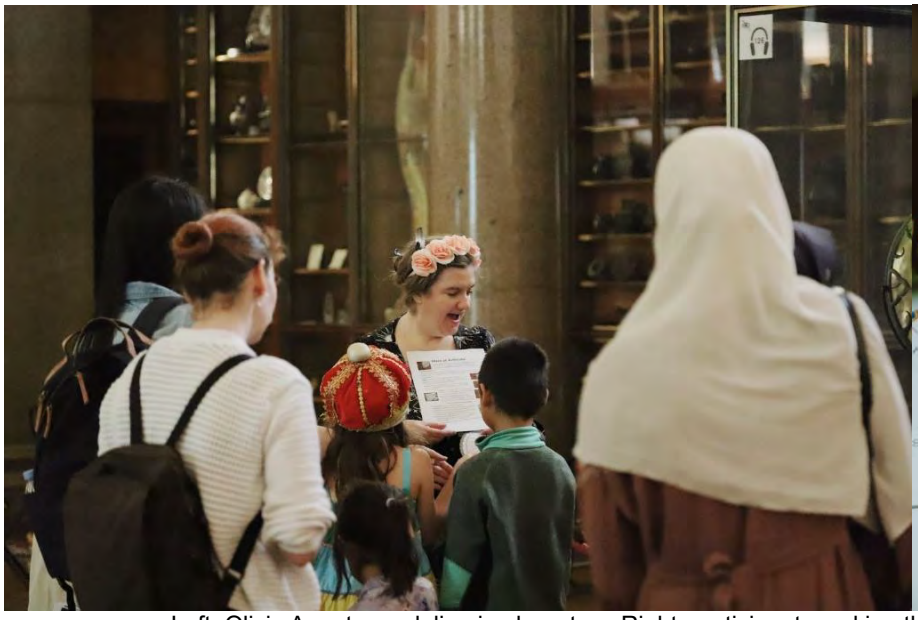
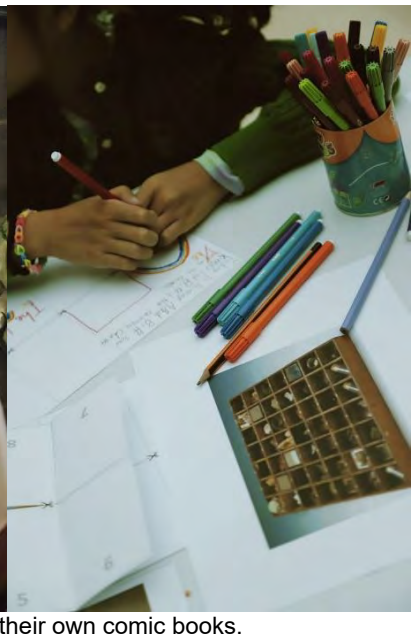
The events delivered during Year 3 of Phase III are described in brief below:

Relaxed early morning event: Marvellous Makers: Summer Reading Challenge
Saturday 10 August 2024, 08.00-10.00, Galleries 1–2a, 4, 6–10 and 12–23

Storyteller Olivia Armstrong delivered a sensory adventure about myths, magic and monsters in the Enlightenment Gallery. In this event, families came face-to-face with a monstrous mermaid to hear its mysterious tale. The event also included a creative drop-in workshop led by Iqra Babar where families immersed themselves in the art of comic books and created their own.

This event was developed as part of the Marvellous Makers-themed Summer Reading Challenge 2024, developed by The Reading Agency and the arts charity Create. 200 individuals booked onto the event, which was attended by 35 due to disruption around the Museum on the evening. A selection of feedback is below:

- “Thank for putting this on. It makes such a difference, he knows the museum well now and wants to return. He was happy to stay until 12.30 because it was a quiet start. Your staff were all excellent at being supportive and understanding.”
- “Walking straight in as a dream - my son really struggles in queues. The quiet made him comfortable and the people were excellent. He remembered coming before - we visited the mummies - but he stayed much longer, more happily and was much more receptive due to the quiet conditions.”



Left: Olivia Armstrong delivering her story. Right: participants making their own comic books.

Relaxed early morning event: Exploring Mesopotamia
Saturday 8 February 2025, 08.00-10.00, galleries 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59

This early morning event offered families a chance to explore the fascinating world of Mesopotamia in a calm environment. Visitors engaged with sensory-based activities, including object handling sessions and creative arts and crafts designed to spark curiosity and connection with the collection.

Stuart Milburn, an artist and ambassador from the national arts charity Outside In, led an interactive workshop where families created their own clay cuneiform tablets inspired by ancient writing systems. Stuart's workshop encouraged participants to experiment with texture, layering, and mark-making, while learning about the history and significance of early writing.

This event was specifically designed to be accessible for autistic and learning-disabled children and families, with selected galleries open exclusively before the Museum opened to the public. Feedback from attendees highlighted the value of the quiet, supportive environment and the hands-on creative experience. 105 people attended and a selection of feedback is below:

- "Thank you for such a wonderful event. The calm atmosphere and sensory activities made my child feel comfortable and engaged — creating the clay tablets was a real highlight, and the staff were so thoughtful and supportive throughout."
- "It was amazing to experience the Museum before it opened, with no crowds and a relaxed vibe. My autistic son loved being able to explore the galleries at his own pace, and we both enjoyed learning about Mesopotamia in such a creative way."

Left: Stuart Milburn leading the session. Right: A participant interacting with a clay tablet.

Relaxed early morning event: Exploring Ancient Greece
Saturday 12 April 2025, 08.00-10.00, galleries 1, 2, 2a, 4, 6, 9, 8, 7, 20, 21, 22, 23, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 18b, 18a, 18

This event invited families to explore the world of ancient Greece in a calm and welcoming environment, with exclusive access to selected galleries before the Museum opened to the public. Visitors enjoyed a mix of sensory activities, including object handling and arts and crafts, designed to engage children and families of children who are autistic, learning disabled, or have mental health conditions.

Midlands-based printmaker and arts facilitator Fae Kilburn, from the national arts charity Outside In, led an accessible printmaking workshop. Families created their own prints inspired by the Museum's ancient Greek collection, using a range of tactile techniques. Storyteller Olivia Armstrong also hosted an interactive storytelling session, bringing ancient myths to life through sensory activities based on tales of gods, goddesses, and the people who worshipped them.

The event welcomed 176 attendees. Feedback from families highlighted the relaxed atmosphere, high-quality facilitation, and the joy of combining storytelling with hands-on creativity:

- "Olivia's stories were incredible – my daughter was completely absorbed. It felt like the myths came alive in the gallery."
- "The printmaking was brilliant. My son, who usually struggles with group activities, was so proud of the piece he made. The calm setting and friendly staff made a huge difference."

Left: Fae Kilburn leading the session in the Great Court. Right: example of artwork produced by participants.

Relaxed evening event: Exploring East and Southeast Asia
Saturday 3 May 2025, 18.00-20.00, galleries 61-66, 90-90a, 92-94, 33, 33a, 95, 67

In this evening event, visitors were invited to watch an uplifting Bollywood dance performance by students from Step Change Studios in the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery, before taking part in family-friendly Bollywood dance workshops held in the Great Court.

The workshops, led by award-winning Step Change Studios, were designed to be inclusive and accessible, with options for both standing and seated participants. 148 families and individuals of all abilities came together to learn vibrant Bollywood moves while exploring the Museum's Asia collections in a calm and welcoming atmosphere. Feedback is provided below:

- "The workshop was such a joy – my child, who is usually shy, was dancing and having fun. The atmosphere was so warm. Thank you."
- "It was amazing to experience the galleries after hours with music and movement. The team made everyone feel comfortable, and the mix of dance and culture was brilliant."

Bollywood performance from Step Change Studios.

Relaxed out-of-hours events for adults

The events are designed to provide access to the British Museum for adults who are autistic, learning disabled or have mental health conditions. Events are often developed in collaboration with SYNERGY, an advisory panel designated by Camden Council as an 'Expert by Experience' on services for learning disabled people.

The events delivered during Year 3 of Phase III are described in brief below:

Relaxed evening event: Music through time
Monday 16 September 2024, 18.00-20.00, galleries 38–43a, 46–48, 59, 61–63, 66 and 68–73

Drake Music is a national arts charity that has been pioneering the use of accessible music technology for over 20 years, enabling more people to make music. They are specialists in using technology to break down disabling barriers to making music. Inspired by listening to the sounds of instruments from the Museum collection, Drake Music delivered workshops where attendees could play some of their accessible instruments and make their own track.

The event was also joined by Zeina Klink-Hoppe, Project Curator for the Modern Middle East, who answered questions about the history of the objects in the galleries. 36 people attended and a selection of feedback is below:

- "Our members all enjoyed the evening. They liked being in the museum after hours when it is quiet and (LDN member) enjoyed having his own personal tour of the Islamic room (he went round with one of the museum team who told him about the exhibits)."
- "Everyone enjoyed making music with Drake Group and were pleased to see them again (we did some sessions with them before)."

Drake Music performing and inviting audience participation.

Relaxed evening event: Bubble Club at the Museum
Tuesday 3 June 2025, 18.00-20.00, galleries 1, 2, 2a, 27, 26, 24, 25, 4, 6, 9, 8, 7, 21, 22, 23, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 18b, 18a, 18

In this evening event, four Bubble Club DJs performed music from Africa, Mexico, China and South Asia. Bubble Club is a non-profit learning disability arts programme based in East London since 2005. The organisation co-produce high-quality, accessible night club experiences at top venues around the city and run a variety of development programmes for learning disabled artists and DJs.

The event received overwhelmingly positive feedback from its attendees, with audiences praising the inclusive atmosphere and the energy brought by the DJs, as well as from those who enjoyed walking around the galleries in a quieter setting. It showcased the talent and creativity of learning disabled artists while creating a truly collaborative experience for all participants. Staff and visitors noted that the event encouraged cross-cultural connections, reduced ableist barriers, and demonstrated the value of accessible programming in enriching the Museum's public programming. There were also attendees from peer museums, including the Science Museum, who came to benchmark and learn from the event.

Front of house long term volunteer placements

The volunteer placements delivered through the Wolfson Access and Education Programme increase pathways into volunteering by providing opportunities for adults who are autistic and or learning disabled to develop skills and undertake a role in a supported environment. The placements also support the Museum's Hands on desks sessions, which allow visitors to handle real objects and find out more about the collection through relaxed, informal conversations. Volunteers facilitate object handling, encourage discussion and answer visitors' questions.

Two placements were delivered in Year 3 of Phase III, with one volunteer supporting the Hands on desk in the Enlightenment Gallery and the other in the Money Gallery. Both individuals received tailored training and ongoing mentoring to build confidence in public engagement, object handling, and communication skills. Over the course of their placements, they contributed to creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for visitors, offering unique perspectives that enriched the interpretation of the collection. Volunteering days and the number of interactions with visitors for both Year 3 volunteers are detailed below.

Volunteer placement 1		**Volunteer placement 2**	
Volunteering date	**Visitor interactions**	**Volunteering date**	**Visitor interactions**
24/09/2024	33 adults	07/11/2024	40 adults and 3 children
08/10/2024	71 adults	21/11/2024	44 adults
24/10/2024	27 adults	05/12/2024	36 adults and 8 children
05/11/2024	24 adults	19/12/2024	17 adults and 3 children
03/12/2024	50 adults and 2 children		
Total	**215 adults and 2 children**	**Total**	**137 adults and 14 children**

Left: supported volunteer on Hands on desk. Right: Hands on desk objects.

Feedback from both the volunteers and visitors has been highly positive, highlighting the value of providing supported pathways into volunteering. These placements not only foster personal development and employability skills for participants but also align with the Museum's commitment to accessibility and inclusive engagement with diverse audiences. Moreover, after the completion of both placements, both volunteers joined the core volunteer team at the British Museum and continue to support the Hands on desk programme. Insight from both volunteers and the Access Team on the success of the placements is below:

- Volunteer feedback: "To volunteer here still feels like a dream. Usually, I feel I take 1 step forward and 2 steps back but I feel I've taken 50 steps forward. Been an uphill battle trying to find work. I start something and it ends."
- Volunteer feedback: "This placement has given me confidence and the feeling that I have something valuable to offer. It's made me realise that with the right support, I can achieve more than I thought possible."
- Access team feedback: "From these placements, we've learned that providing consistent mentoring, clear structure, and opportunities for face-to-face interaction are crucial in building confidence and ensuring volunteers feel integrated into the wider Museum team."

Sensory trail

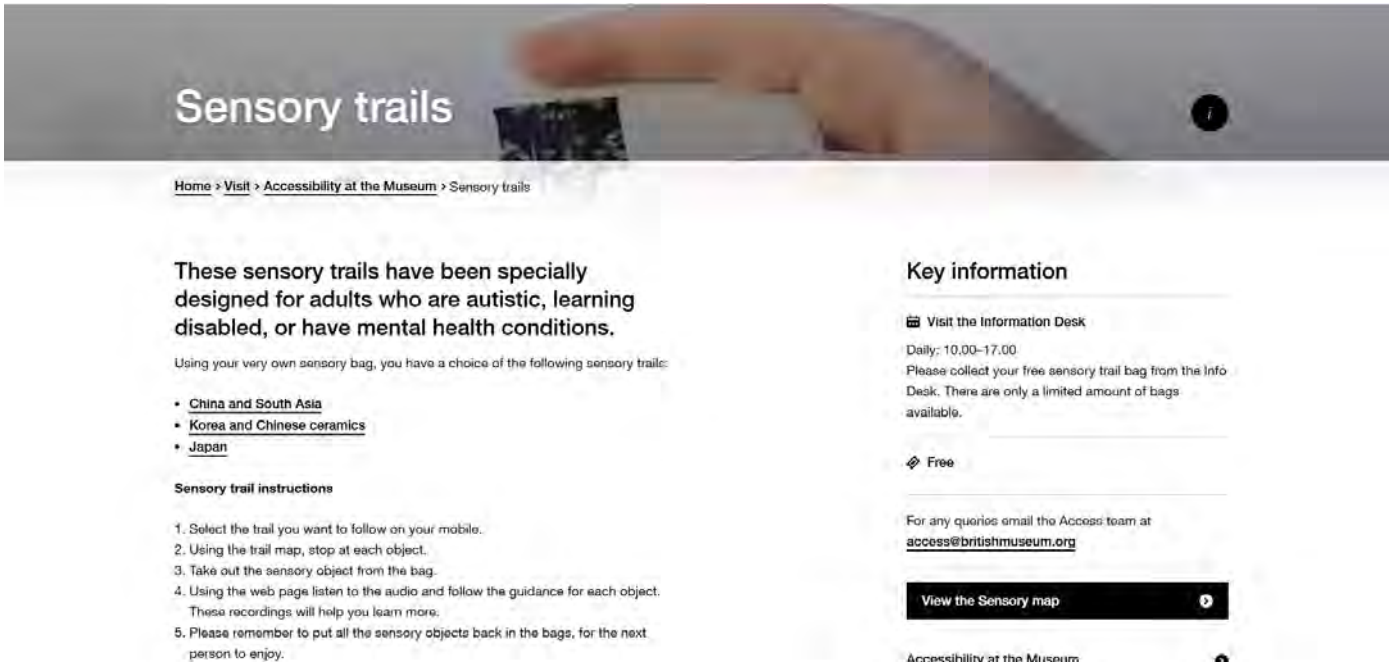
Since its soft launch on Thursday 7 March 2024, the Wolfson Sensory Trail has moved from pilot to full implementation, becoming an integral resource for autistic, learning disabled, and neurodivergent visitors seeking a more inclusive and self-guided experience of the British Museum. The sensory trail was embedded onto the Museum's website in March 2024, providing online access to the pre-visit film, downloadable maps, an audio guide, and guidance on how to use the sensory bags.

This website allows visitors and support workers to plan their visits in advance. The trail webpage is currently temporarily unavailable due to changes in the displays it references, but it will be reinstated once updates to the galleries are complete to ensure the content remains accurate and relevant. The Museum currently expects the website to be live again in the winter.

Visitors can also collect sensory bags on-site at the Information Desk in the Great Court, designed to enhance engagement with the collection. These ‘convertible’ bags—adaptable as a backpack, shoulder bag, or briefcase—contain a curated selection of tactile objects, finger torches, a magnifying glass, the trail map, and the British Museum sensory map. Together, these resources provide both structure and flexibility, allowing visitors to explore at their own pace and in ways that feel safe and calming.

Since the launch, the sensory trail has received positive feedback from both neurodivergent audiences and support workers, who have noted the trail’s ability to reduce anxiety, encourage exploration, and provide a richer, more meaningful connection with the Museum’s spaces. Mencap participants, who were involved in co-designing the trail, have reported increased confidence and enjoyment during their visits, while Museum staff have observed higher levels of independent engagement from users.

Key learnings from this trail—particularly around co-production with neurodivergent communities and the use of multisensory objects—have directly informed the development of a dedicated sensory trail for the *Ancient India: living traditions* temporary exhibition (22 May – 19 October 2025). This marks a significant step towards embedding accessibility and sensory inclusion across both permanent collections and temporary displays.



Sensory trail webpage on the British Museum website.

The trails have also allowed staff, especially visitor services and curatorial staff, to widen their knowledge of how to support non-linear visitor experiences. The Access Team delivered a session to Visitor Services staff and volunteers focusing on supporting resources like this. Feedback indicates that pre-visit materials (especially the introductory film) help visitors feel prepared and relaxed, while the tactile and visual elements of the sensory bags enhance engagement with complex or abstract objects

Some feedback on the success of the trails is below:

- From a participant: "I felt calm the whole time, which never happens in busy places like this. The bag made it easier to understand and enjoy the objects — I didn't feel lost or overwhelmed."
- From a support worker: "The pre-visit film and sensory tools gave our group the confidence to explore independently. For many, this was their first time feeling at ease in such a large museum."
- From a Mencap collaborator: "Designing the trail made us feel seen and valued. It's not just an activity; it's a way of making the Museum open to everyone."

Sensory trail in the Japan galleries.

Evaluation

External evaluator Jo Offer evaluated both the supported volunteer placements and sensory trails from August to December 2024. Jo used the specific project aims as a framework to measure its impacts alongside a range of qualitative and quantitative data gathered both during the project and as part of the final evaluation process.

A combination of 1:1 conversations (online and in person) surveys, questionnaires and observations have been gathered, reviewed and presented to show what the project has achieved and where there were challenges and recommendations. With coordination support from the Wolfson Programme Manager, Jo conducted project evaluation sessions with 17 individuals who have been closely involved in the project. This included discussions with 7 placement volunteers, 6 support staff, 1 parent and 3 staff members of the general volunteer team, as well as the Wolfson Programme Manager and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager. Jo also observed a placement volunteer at their Hands on desk station and observed and spoke to visitors using the sensory trail across two days. A copy of the evaluation report is provided as an appendix to this final report.

Overall, the independent evaluation confirmed the project met its aim of creating volunteering pathways for autistic, learning disabled, and neurodivergent adults, enabling participants to develop soft and practical skills in a supported environment. Those who took part in the evaluation praised the project's high-quality and thoughtful delivery, highlighting the access resources produced and how the British Museum's Access Team fosters meaningful engagement between volunteers, visitors, and the collection.

The sensory trails and their associated resources were praised as being exceptionally well designed and curated. Neurodivergent and learning-disabled participants noted the trail's rich, stimulating way in supporting connection with museum objects, motivating curiosity, self-reflection, and conversation while ensuring moments of quiet observation. The sensory resources and audio-visual guide were highlighted as exemplary tools for expanding access and creating excellent entry points for audiences to experience the trails. This project laid strong foundations for the British Museum to adapt and apply across different areas of the collection, extending its impact. Minor adjustments will also be made to the printed guide and sensory bag, along with clear usage guidelines, which could further support independent engagement.

❖

The British Museum remains very grateful to the Lord Leonard and Lady Estelle Wolfson Foundation for their generous support of the Wolfson Access and Education Programme since 2014.