**SHARE Museums East blog post for AIM**

**A reciprocal mystery shopping scheme: A case study from SHARE Museums East**

**Background**

SHARE is working to raise the profile and standard of visitor services in museums in the East of England. The Mystery Shopping Scheme was initiated after one of our Front of House Forum events heard from managers at the Museum of London about the significant benefits of mystery shopping. We recognised that mystery shopping schemes are effective in improving visitor services and experiences, but also that industry schemes can be prohibitively expensive for small and volunteer-run museums.

We therefore developed our own reciprocal scheme, and following a successful pilot in 2014 ran the scheme in 2015. 18 museums from across the region took part and enjoyed and benefitted from 102 mystery shopping visits. We have just launched the 2016 scheme and are busy registering museums to take part.

**Aims**

Our aims for participating museums are:

* To provide feedback and insight which can help improve the visitor offer, develop services and generate income
* To provide comprehensive feedback and help evidence issues which can be used for funding applications and advocacy
* To develop front of house staff and volunteers

Our aims for the scheme are:

* To recruit accredited museums and those working towards accreditation, and sufficient shoppers
* To develop an effective and robust scheme which delivers benefits to participants
* To develop a scheme that is cost-effective and manageable for participating museums and SHARE

**Mechanism**

In short museums give a visit to get a visit. Participating museums provide a Museum Lead to be responsible for the scheme within their organisation and at least two volunteers or members of staff to be Mystery Shoppers. Shoppers undertake either three or six visits to other museums during June to October and the museum receives the same number of visits back.

SHARE co-ordinates the training, allocation of visits, data collection and feedback to participating museums. The Shoppers are trained by SHARE to undertake the visits, fill in the mystery shopper questionnaire and submit their completed findings promptly.

The visit – and therefore the feedback – is comprehensive. Shoppers are trained to take account of the visitor experience from first contact via phone and website to arrival, signage, welcome, displays, shop and catering offer. Questions provide both scored answers and more expanded commentary.

Shoppers are recruited by museums on a voluntary basis. Museums are asked to arrange to cover the cost of mystery shopping visits to other participating museums. This includes travel, a small purchase from the shop and refreshment areas and any additional exhibition or event cost if applicable, to a maximum of £100 (although in most cases much less).

**Content**

The questionnaire is really comprehensive and covers so many different areas from signage and welcome, to cleanliness and tidiness, staff interaction, wayfinding, promotion and details such as signage for removed objects.

Shoppers are also asked to undertake some pre-visit research, make sure they interact with staff / volunteers on site, test facilities, go to any special exhibition or event that is on and collect information to take home (eg maps, leaflets, comment cards).

**Outcomes**

In past years feedback has included both things that museums had not previously considered as well as having confirmation of some things they suspected.

Museums who have already taken part have used feedback given to:

* Feed into forward and business plans
* Feed into funding bids
* Make changes and improvements
* Train staff and volunteers
* Provide evidence for budget requests

As with all our schemes and training sessions, participants also place a lot of value on meeting peers and discussing the project, issues and findings with them.

A by-product of taking part is also encouraging reflection as to what constitutes good visitor service, and shoppers find considering their own museums in relation to the museum they are assessing very useful.

**Quotes**

Comments from participants include:

* “The Mystery Shopper scheme has helped greatly to improve our customer service for our visitors by having our museums looked at objectively by ‘shoppers’ who are asked to comment on all aspects of their visit.”
* “It is a great way to see how other museum services function when it comes to front of house etc. The visit allows you to spend the whole day taking in the service including what is good or bad.”
* ““The data has also supported me with direct and specific evidence when I have been looking for support in terms of funding for improvements to the Service.”

**Going forward**

The scheme has gone from strength to strength and is now in its third year. We have learnt some lessons along the way and feel we have the robust and effective scheme we set out to develop. The success of the scheme ultimately rests with the region’s museums and their staff and volunteers, whose enthusiasm and dedication have enabled the scheme to take off.

[Find out more](http://sharemuseumseast.org.uk/share-mystery-shopping-scheme-2-2/) about the Scheme, email [sharemuseumseast@norfolk.gov.uk](mailto:sharemuseumseast@norfolk.gov.uk) or follow [@SHAREmuseums](https://twitter.com/SHAREmuseums) on Twitter.