

Councillors' Information Bulletin: 15 July 2025

Title of Update: RAMM Highlights Report 2025-26 (Q1)

Relevant Officers: Helen Hartstein, Audience Development Manager
Julien Parsons, Collections and Content Manager

Contact for general enquiries:

Jo Quinnell, Assistant Democratic Services Officer, Corporate Resources

Email: democratic.services@exeter.gov.uk

1. What is the update about?

This is the quarterly highlights report for the Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, showing museum activity for the period April to June 2025.

2. Background

The quarterly highlights report, along with other reports showing activity against targets, is taken to RAMM's Oversight Panel and reported to Arts Council England as part of its National Portfolio Organisation funding agreement. The oversight panel consists of six councillors and two external representatives.

3. Current position

Organisational Update

- An external review of RAMM led by Rob Curran of Esito began in April. Results will be communicated to Exeter City Council's Senior Management Board in July 2025. The restructuring of the ECC Culture team has been pushed back to Q2 to reflect the findings of the report.

Activity plan

Visitor Experience (Activity 1)

- Following a site visit in May, RAMM achieved an outstanding result in its VAQAS (Visitor Attraction Quality Assessment Scheme) assessment, run by Visit England. It improved on its previous score to record an overall mark of 87%. Among the top

scores were Pre-arrival (online presence) and Retail which both were rated at 100%, and the quality of the attraction which was marked at 91%.

Exhibitions and Events (Activity 2)

- *Food Beyond the Plate* included multiple elements of community participation, with co-curated slideshow of community voices about culture and memories of food.
- *Tastes Like Home* filled the cafe walls with artist Hannah Mumby's illustrations of senses and emotions evoked in conversations in community settings through the previous year.
- *A Feast for the Eyes* exhibition opened in Gallery 20 in April. It features more than 30 works of art – paintings, prints, photographs and drawings – from RAMM's collection responding to the theme of food, to accompany our current temporary exhibition in galleries 21 and 22. Artists featured include Hogarth, Lucien Pissarro, Isabel Codrington and Peter Randall-Page.
- From cheese to chocolate making, tractor rides at Shillingford farm, clay pot and forage basket making and storytelling the Easter Holidays saw a selection of family friendly events themed around food.
- RAMM Lates in April (300 people) also focused on food with a traditional tea dance and lindy hop workshop, talks on fermentation and food networks and the chance to get creative around food plus much more.
- We welcomed Guy Singh Watson from Riverford Food and renowned chef Michael Caines for two separate evenings exploring the future of food with Q and A sessions.
- Our family events continued in May and June with two under 5's storytelling sessions - Pancakes and Pierogi, and half term events with a 1920s theme.

Digital (Activity 3)

- Q1 2025/6 was the first complete quarter of RAMM's guide on Bloomberg Connects being accessible to the public. The average number of users per month has increased from 63 in Q4 2024-5 to 196 in Q1 2025-6. An increase of 211%.
- QR codes linking to relevant objects in RAMM's Bloomberg Connects guide were included in an exhibition, *Food: Beyond the Plate*, for the first time. In Q1 2025-6, the 21 QR codes were scanned 173 times.
- A significant update to the shop site is in progress aimed at improving the user interface and user experience. The updates are planned to finish and go live next quarter.

Contemporary Art (Activity 4)

- The two 2025/26 artist commissions are in progress. Sarah Gillespie's work will be shown as part of the *Wild* exhibition due to open on 26 July. Charmaine Watkiss

visited RAMM in June to progress her plans for two- and three-dimensional work to be displayed in RAMM's World Cultures galleries.

- An open call for two commissions for the 2026/27 programme were advertised and two outstanding locally based artists were selected: Jason Singh and Gemma Anderson-Tempini. They will work to the theme of Fungi, to display as part of a major RAMM exhibition in autumn 2026, *Living Labyrinths*.

Children and Young people (Activity 5)

- RAMM has started an 18-month project to review its learning provision for children and young people. It is ten years since the current programme was launched. The current programme was introduced incrementally, including home education and online learning materials as well as in-person activities at the museum. We need to ensure it remains useful for teachers, inspiring for pupils, the topics align with the curriculum, the content reflects best practice, and it is properly resourced and provides learning that is much needed in today's polarised society.
- RAMM's popular home education craft workshops continue to sell out. This quarter saw two workshops take place in mask making and spoon carving for home educated teenagers led by local craft practitioners.
- The Mini Explorer Zone, RAMM's new designated early years interactive family area, opened in the World Cultures gallery on 25th April. The area takes young children aged 0 – 7 on a journey around the world with four new interactive hands-on activity panels and a new permanent creative postcard making station for a quieter reflective activity. The reading corner is also brimming with new international books featuring stories and illustrations to inspire the next generation of mini adventurers. All under a skyscape of cloud lamps and a drifting hot air balloon.
- RAMM ran free family friendly craft activities on a wildlife and object handling round theme of wildlife and re-wilding at Exeter's Respect Festival in June, linking to summer exhibition 'Wild'.
- RAMM's Volunteer Engagement Lead has been working with Exeter City Council HR team to put in place an U18 volunteer policy that will enable the museum to ensure that it continues to provide a safe and fulfilling environment for young people to engage with the museum, but also all services provided by the council.

Individual Creativity (Activity 6)

- The museum welcomed a coachload of families on low incomes from the southern side of Dartmoor, offering a craft activity.
- Over-50s wellbeing programme Museum Meet-Up continued to develop into a relaxed space for a boost of museum-themed culture, with workshops related to bees; art using plant-based colours; playful accessible poetry on a food theme.
- RAMM presented 20 Top Tips for Dementia-Friendly Object-Handling at the annual Dementia-Friendly Heritage Network gathering in Wales.

- Side by Side sewing event for Refugee Week reached out to community partners around the city to collaborate on an activity promoting community cohesion and anti-racism. Handmade bags will be used to gift games and art materials to young people with mental health issues and asylum seekers.

Skills Development (Activity 7)

- We have multiple summer placements starting within the museum team
- 6 school students starting on their work experience in July.
- Our Youth Panel (made up of 14 people) will be looking at how to build Youth voices and ideas into the plans for the upcoming NPO bid. Phoebe and Meredith (one of the youth panellists and now an intern) will deliver a creative brainstorm on the Arts Council themes. With the aim of developing some tangible ideas to put forward to the team, coming from a young and engaged audience.

Dynamic Collections (Activity 8)

- A call out for the second artist commission was shared. We received 20 expressions of interest and interviewed 3 artists
- Aga Wanowicz was selected as the artist for second group of artist workshop
- In June we ran two textiles workshops with Hikmat. 17 participants at the first workshop, 15 participants at the second workshop.
- Design work has been completed on South West Collections Explorer (SWCE) website which will go live in Q2. SWCE is a collections portal for museums and archives in the South West of England and will launch featuring collections from RAMM and 7 partner organisations.

Community engagement and university collaboration (Creative Arc) (Activity 9)

- We have attended and added our voice to the first two Visioning sessions of the Exeter Heritage Partnership 'Exeter Heritage Champions' NHLF funded project which is exploring forming a formal entity to champion Exeter's heritage and enable stronger partnership working. It aims to not only share skills, best practice, training and resources, but also seeks to make Exeter's heritage more accessible to those that experience barriers to volunteering, including those that are socially isolated and for those whom English is a second language.
- RAMM presented a public showing of The New Exonians with Inclusive Exeter, a documentary about the lives and challenges of migrant communities, predominantly healthworkers of south and southeast Asian heritage. Participants passed racist protests in the city on their way home from the film, a reminder of the timeliness of this new collaboration.
- RAMM's presence at Respect Festival contributes to Exeter's annual celebration of diversity and helps staff to make and strengthen contact with community partners.

Investment principles plan

Ambition & Quality

- After conducting a review of programming themes by all staff, the community panel, youth panel and volunteers, RAMM has modified them in the light of feedback received in these sessions. They will continue to be regularly reviewed as we approach future NPO applications.
- The I&I toolkit reports for 'Are We Nearly There Yet' and 'Dartmoor' were presented at the NPO oversight panel in April. For both exhibitions over 90% of survey respondents rated their experience as good or excellent.

Inclusivity & Relevance

- Through its Museum Meet-Up programme, RAMM is actively seeking to widen the diversity of creative practitioners, recruiting three new artist-facilitators who identify as physically disabled, neurodivergent (cardboard artist James Lake), and of diverse ethnic community heritage (plant artist Ione Maria Rojas and writer Harula Ladd). James Lake showed a short, autobiographical animated film which enabled him to relate to visitors' experiences of acquired disability, mobility obstacles, dyslexia and mental health struggles as a result of economic hardship.
- RAMM has registered its interest in the Arts Council England All In programme.

Environmental Responsibility

- *Food: Beyond the Plate* included an up-to-the-minute digital map of local food activism, produced in collaboration with Exeter University academics and citywide initiatives on food sustainability.
- Planning for *Wild*-themed outdoor activities (making butterfly feeders to promote biodiversity) includes requiring craft materials to be biodegradable.
- Our Mechanical & Electrical consultant's contract was extended for another 12 months in this quarter, allowing us to ensure the critical work is completed and future-proofing our environmental controls. The cumulative total of financial savings made through the M&E work, as of April 2025, are £157,000 with further savings/energy reductions to come.
- Several members of staff have attended carbon literacy training, organised by Exeter City Council's Net Zero team.

Dynamism

- The co-leadership took part in a number of workshops with the external consultant to evaluate various delivery models against agreed criteria. Following this external review of the museum, the team will be developing a business plan to build financial resilience.

- The new *Make* engagement programme is experimenting with making budgets stretch further by commissioning instructional zines to enable facilitators without specialism in specific art fields (eg ceramics, textiles) to deliver creative activities.
- RAMM's DMO spoke on a panel alongside individuals from the University of Exeter, the National Trust and Calvium at Exeter University's first AI and Creative Industries Festival. The panel explored the role of AI in the GLAM sector, highlighting how it could help enhance collections data by automating processes like tagging. However, the panel stressed that AI must be used responsibly, as GLAM institutions have a duty of care to both their audiences and collections.
- The Development Team have been working with the Digital Media Officer to improve and add flexibility to the customer purchase path. The aim is to make the experience better and also to upsell memberships. This has been put in place for Friends memberships and is resulting in a steady increase in new sign-ups.
- The Development Team have established a new framework and established the legal basis to support a programme of prospect research and cultivation. The aim is to grow income from mid-high-level gifts. This is a new focus for the team when grant funding is becoming more difficult to secure.
- Work has commenced to increase revenue generation on the RAMM site and the online shop. Slow page speed is a significant cause of users abandoning online purchases. Page speed globally has been reduced from 5.5 seconds to 1.5 seconds. A plan has been developed to create a customised, more streamlined online booking experience in place of the current iframes. Improvements to the structure, navigation and design of the online shop are also underway with a view to increase its revenue.
- Staff have benefited from a number of courses and training sessions. RAMM's Casual Visitor Services staff attended training sessions covering visitor experience, security, and safeguarding topics amongst others. This served as an excellent refresher for long-time Casual staff, as well as a strong benchmark for newer Casual team members, and will be delivered consistently in the future. Other courses attended, funded by Arts Council England, included: Arts and the Outdoors; GEM's Engaging with Schools; Museums & Public Programs Summit; Reframing and Managing Stress as a Volunteer Leader; Empowering Growth: Sustainable Fundraising Strategies; 'Prospecting for Gold' about prospect research; the Institute of Fundraising Conference; Oxford Cultural Leaders sessions on Connecting in Challenging Times and Navigating the Future with the Three Horizons Framework.

4. Future position

n/a

5. Are there any other options?

n/a

6. Conclusion

RAMM continues to deliver a varied, inclusive and ambitious programme of activities to its audiences in the city and further afield. It is performing well against its targets and KPIs