

Events in museums and historic houses

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Significant income can be generated from hosting events in museums and historic properties. Events also have the potential to reach a wider demographic than gained from usual opening, therefore expanding the number of visitors and increasing spend at the property/museum.

However, hosting events in sensitive interiors or alongside collection items can also increase risk of damage. Most events will cause an increase in dust levels and potentially increase the risk of accidental damage or theft of collection. Events that provide food and drink will increase the likelihood of food debris and spillages which may affect pest activity.

Weighing risk & reward

Opportunities

- Functions and Events generate income
- Allow visitors to experience the historic house in a different way
- Increase access to the property
- Increase awareness about the property and attracts new audiences

Risks

- Increase in risk of damage to the collection from increased agents of deterioration
- Increased footfall increases wear and tear and risk of accidental damage
- Increased dust levels
- Possible increased light levels as opening after hours
- Security issues, risk of theft
- Introduction of food and drink, staining, attracting pests

Planning events

When considering hosting functions and events at your property it is important to assess the different areas of the house or museum and discuss which spaces are suitable for hosting events. 'Event' is a very general term; there may be areas that are suitable for some events but not suitable for more invasive events.

Before

The following decisions should be made for each area/room:

- What events and clients are suitable e.g. recitals, plays, weddings, drinks receptions, lectures, dinners, children's birthday parties, political and corporate events?
- How many events are allowed per year?
- What is the guest capacity? Will guests be seated, standing? Account for support staff who may need space to move around the guests. Consult the fire safety capacity limit (local emergency services can assist with this).
- Is the current heating system suitable? Will there be restrictions on how the building can be heated and can extra heaters be brought in?
- Is the current electrical system suitable? Can contractors use plug sockets, or should electrical equipment be battery operated?
- Will a generator be required for contractor use, e.g. caterers?
- Can catering be done on site? Are there restrictions on the type of cooking e.g. deep fat frying?
- Which areas may be no access e.g. behind ropes?
- What kind of equipment will be permitted e.g. staging, plinths, musical instruments, display boards, tables and chairs?
- Are there floor loading or access routes to be considered? Will extra protections be required, e.g. castor caps?
- Will filming and photography be permitted? Are there copyright or loan agreements that could impact this?
- Will music and dancing be permitted? Would vibration monitoring be possible?
- If music is permitted, can it be amplified? Consider maximum level of decibels.
- Will extra lighting be permitted, such as LED candles? Will real candles be allowed? Consider specifications for UV/lux levels and where lights can be placed. It may be appropriate for a member of staff to place lights in sensitive locations rather than contractors.
- What routes will be used for guests and support staff to access the area? (Guest/contractor parking, loading and unloading)
- How will an event impact on security in terms of collections and interiors and the site as a whole?
- Is food and drink allowed? Are there any restrictions, such as foods that could stain (turmeric, red berries etc.) or greasy canapes?
- Will flowers be permitted? Are there restrictions on size and species of plant, e.g. lilies? Consider how water is used in arrangements.
- Licensing restrictions for alcohol
- Time restrictions if there are tenants.
- Which interiors/collections will be most at risk and how can these be protected?
- Do some collection items need moving out of harm's way?
- Are safety glass/Perspex table covers needed for flat surfaces?
- Are stilettos allowed? Do heel protectors need to be worn?
- Are extra mats needed at entrance or to protect the floor?
- Are there restrictions on any loan objects which need to be considered?

During

- Have adequate supervision in all areas with interiors and collections. Supervise contractor set up.
- Brief front of house staff on the specific activities.
- Have heel protectors to hand.
- Have appropriate staff on hand, e.g. duty manager or electricians/facilities if possible
- Have spill kits easily accessible.
- Lock off areas that you don't want people to have access to.
- Leave adequate time for set up and preparation.

After

- Adequate clean up after events. Consider opening times and events the next day.
- Supervise pack down, ensure liquids and food are disposed of correctly, flammables are removed from site, equipment is stored correctly, load out is carried out safely
- Review event - consider post function report, try to get feedback from as many teams as possible so the event can be evaluated and positive processes are carried forward and negative aspects are changed or removed.

Minimising risk

There are several steps you can take to minimise risk to your historic property if you are considering hosting an event. Make sure to:

- Assess which interiors are suitable for what types of events, some areas more robust than others, where can food and drink be allowed, what are the room capacities for events
- Discuss what protection is needed, glass/Perspex tops for tables, heel protectors, matting, supervision in certain rooms, do certain collections need removing
- Put restrictions in place, what food and drink are allowed, capacity limits, access routes, choice of contractors familiar with building, how many events allowed, type of events allowed
- Plan what kind of equipment is allowed onto the property and where it can be placed and used
- Ensure there are adequate resources for cleaning interiors and collection before and after events, extra resources
- Spill kits on hand where food and drink are involved
- All event staff should be trained to deal with spillages and have enough knowledge to be able to adequately protect interiors and supervise guests

Consulting a conservator

One of the best ways to minimise risk is to consult a professional conservator. Conservators can support you throughout the process and make sure everything goes smoothly. They can:

- assess the risks associated with different events before and during events
- advise on functions and events risk assessments, policies and procedures
- supervise set up and pack down, ensuring liquids and food are correctly set up and removed from site
- stipulate protection and restrictions needed
- provide supervision during the event, dealing with unexpected challenges
- work with contractors on behalf of the property and assess RAMS.
- inspect props, plinths other items for pest infestation, mould that could introduce a biological risk into the property
- review menus, lighting plans, flower arrangements and proposals for music or other entertainment, assess risks and provide advice on how to minimise/remove risk
- provide Functions and Events training for staff and contractors
- assist with object movement
- advise on the placement and positioning of equipment