

**Response to the Life Beyond COVID Inquiry – August 2020**

**About the Museums Association**

The Museums Association (MA) is a membership organisation representing and supporting museums and people who work with them throughout the UK. Our membership of over 13,000 includes all types of museums, from small volunteer-run local museums to large national institutions and people working in all types of roles from directors to trainees. Founded in 1889, the MA was the world’s first professional body for museums. We are a campaigning organisation and lead thinking in UK museums with initiatives such as *Museums Change Lives and Collections 2030*. We also provide £1.3m per year of funding for museum projects via our Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund. Our Vision is for ***socially engaged and sustainable museums at the heart of their communities***. During the current crisis the MA has provided workforce support through leadership and essential mentoring schemes; networks for furloughed staff; online training and events; advocacy and policy guidance; and additional funding for museums to sustain engagement with collections. For more information about the Museums Association, see our website: [www.museumsassociation.org](http://www.museumsassociation.org)

This response is based on consultation and feedback from MA members and key stakeholders.

1. **Are there any positives you would take from this pandemic?**

The pandemic continues to have a serious impact on the museums sector. Museums faces very serious financial shortfalls that will result in redundancies and will limit the future public offer that museums are able to provide (we expand on this in Q2 below). However, despite these challenges, museums have stepped up to the plate during the crisis, adapting their offers to engage audiences and meaningfully serve communities:

* Museums across the UK have made efforts to support their communities during this difficult period. Many museums have helped the national effort by providing educational resources for home-schooling. Several museums have donated vital PPE supplies from their conservation labs to the NHS.
* Many museums have worked hard to collect items that will help represent the coronavirus crisis in the future.
* The current crisis has highlighted the importance of museum digital services – both digitised collections and online outreach. Museum content has been vital in supporting education and entertainment throughout the crisis, including via major partnerships such as the BBC’s Culture in Quarantine strand and #MuseumFromHome day.

The crisis – and the gradual reopening of museums since July – has shown that museums are loved and treasured by audiences and communities across the UK; and has demonstrated that museums can be flexible and responsive to their audience’s needs, even in the most difficult circumstances.

1. **What are the things that you are most worried about?**

The pandemic will have long term financial impacts on the museums sector, affecting employment, the workforce and the UK’s role in international partnerships. Public attitudes and confidence to visit also present an ongoing challenge for museums.

Financial Impacts

* The crisis has brought about the total loss of earned income for museums from tickets, shops, cafes, private hires, events and other common ways for museums to earn income. Other sources of earned income, such as memberships and licensing contracts have also fallen sharply. This has caused an immediate cash flow crisis for some organisations as many were operating with low reserves in advance of anticipated peak season income over the spring and summer. Many museums are at risk of cash insolvency.
* We expect some independent and former local authority museums to become insolvent due to the crisis, leading to permanent closure, significant down-sizing or long and expensive efforts to re-establish organisations from zero. Closure may result in the sale of museum collections and the loss of collections hitherto held in public trust, or the transfer of collections to already over-stretched national and local authority museum services.
* For those museums that survive this crisis, many will have exhausted their financial reserves and will need to work hard over a number of years to rebuild to a position of financial resilience. Staff costs are the greatest expense for museums (typically 60%) therefore jobs will be at risk when costs need to be found. We are already seeing substantial redundancy consultations in major organisations such as Tate’s commercial arm, the National Trust, and National Trust for Scotland.
* National, local authority and university museums which were less at risk of insolvency during the initial stage of the coronavirus crisis are nevertheless greatly concerned about their future finances. They have lost significant amounts of earned income due to the lockdown; and they are extremely concerned about the possibility of another period of public sector austerity in the aftermath of the crisis – having already made significant changes and reductions in their service levels during the past decade of austerity.
* The sector urgently needs long term grant funding to survive the period after lockdown in order to cope with a longer-term reduction in visitor numbers, philanthropy, international collaborations and other sources of income. The Cultural Recovery Fund is a welcome investment for the sector. However, longer term financial support will be needed in all nations of the UK, so museums can continue to adapt to these new circumstances.
* Reopening does not mean recovery for our sector. Most museums are only able to cater for around 30% of their normal audience numbers under social distancing rules. This means that museums immediately start to incur costs of operation upon reopening, but with a much reduced income. As a result, they are likely to be operating at a loss for some time, with continued strain and risk.

Employment

* There have been multiple impacts from redeployment, furlough and now redundancy. Staff costs are the greatest expense for museums (typically around 60% of budgets) therefore jobs will be at risk when costs need to be found. We are already seeing substantial redundancy consultations in major organisations such as Tate’s commercial arm, the National Trust, and National Trust for Scotland. The level of future job losses depends substantially on the extent to which government support schemes can be successful in preventing insolvencies, and the willingness of the government to provide ongoing assistance to organisations after lockdown to get back on their feet.
* Museums also rely on a wide network of freelancers, self-employed and temporary staff to provide frontline and back of house services (e.g. education sessions, conservation of objects, business support etc.) We can already see that many seasonal staff will not be employed over the peak season; that freelance work is drying up in many areas; and that there will be a very large oversupply of new graduates via Museums Studies courses and those graduating from apprenticeship schemes who will be unable to find their desired employment in the sector due to the current crisis. This has real impacts now for many people and their livelihoods. For the future of the sector, it is likely to undermine workforce diversity and talent.

Sector partnerships & public attitudes

* There are practical concerns around temporary exhibitions and events which generate substantial income for many museums. No museums will be able to reopen with temporary exhibitions due to limits on audience numbers, and the inability to agree and put into place loans and marketing.
* The UK is also very likely to be ‘out of sync’ with other countries. The lending and borrowing ecology is hugely dependent on international counterparts and it is likely that the delay to the UK’s reopening will have put future projects at risk as certain exhibitions become unfeasible due to other international or national commitments of objects. Museums often plan years ahead, therefore schedules could be impacted for years to come, disrupting business planning and adding additional costs to already pricey endeavours.
* It remains to be seen what impact the coronavirus crisis will have on the public’s behaviour and consumption patterns. The latest public attitude research from ALVA shows that the public will be much more cautious about attending public spaces and gatherings for some time to come – 33% of UK audiences say that they are unlikely to want to return to a museums for a long time[[1]](#footnote-1)
* In particular, it is difficult to envisage international tourism returning to pre-crisis levels for several years. Many of the larger museums rely hugely on international tourism with as many as 45% of visitors coming from overseas. We therefore anticipate that there will be a period of adjustment during which museums will need both public support and a reappraisal of business models in order to secure their operations in the long-term.
1. **What do you most hope changes for the better?**

Museums Role in Supporting Communities

The crisis has shown the vital role that museums play as hubs at the centre of communities across the country. Museums and heritage sites are above all community assets for all to enjoy and participate in, and we believe they will be needed more than ever in the period after the coronavirus crisis. Through their venues, their collections, their events and their passionate staff, museums can promote community cohesion; enable health and wellbeing; and promote reflection and debate on issues of public interest, and support local and regional visitor economies. Museums will require ongoing support and investment from DCMS, arms-length bodies and local authorities to perform these varied roles – we cannot go back to a lengthy period of austerity.

Museums are of particular importance to schools and educational organisations in supporting both formal and informal education, and the sector is well-placed to support the education sector as it exits lockdown and returns to normality. School visits should start as soon as it is safe to do so – and museums could play a more intensive part in enabling some schools to return by hosting classes on a full-time basis, which has previously been successfully trialled via the My Primary School is at the Museum project[[2]](#footnote-2).

Museums and the High Street

Museums will play an enhanced role in the recovery of city and town centres. The need for rejuvenation and diversification of the High Street had previously been recognised in a range of government initiatives such as future High Street Fund and Heritage Action Zones. The coronavirus crisis will accelerate the decline of retail in city centres; it is unlikely that all retailers will return to their stores after lockdown. It will be important to maintain an infrastructure of culture and leisure activities to ensure city centres are places where people can live, work and play. Civic museums in particular are well placed to reimagine city centres. Their varied collections and position as conveners of public space can help people make global connections to contextualise local issues. Museums can also assist in the ‘relocalisation’ of retail, supporting new networks of local makers and artists. It is important that DCMS and MHCLG support local councils through adequate revenue grants to maintain a cultural infrastructure in cities.

Digital Services

The current crisis has highlighted the importance of museum digital services. One legacy of the current crisis is therefore likely to be continued increased demand for digital resources which will necessitate sustained, strategic investment from key funding bodies.

Public Investment in Museums

The pandemic has demonstrated the importance and public value of museums. At the same time, it has become clear that some element of public funding is fundamental for all types of museums. Looking to the future, the work of museums needs to be profiled across government departments, so that DfE and MHCLG also understand the delivery and impact museums can make across the board for communities. Support is also needed from government and across the wider cultural sector to rethink the future of museums and the role they can play in a post-Covid society.

1. <https://www.aim-museums.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ALVA-Attractions-Recovery-Tracker-wave-4.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://myschoolatthemuseum.site/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)