

Museums Matter

Executive summary

Museums preserve, protect and promote one of the few irreplaceable public assets: the nation's collective memory, knowledge and history. Preserving our heritage through museums is a fundamental aspect of maintaining a healthy and prosperous civil society.

Museums are civic institutions that simultaneously serve a local, regional, national and international audience, as well as an online audience who may never cross the threshold. Museums matter because they uniquely serve a public past, a public present and a public yet to be born.

The collections held in trust by national and local governments belong to the public, and museums recognise this with sophisticated public engagement. There is a public expectation that general and local taxation supports publicly-owned museums – Arts Council England's 2014 Public Attitudes Survey showed that 70% of the public support maintaining public investment in museums¹.

Public investment matters to local and central government because of the impact museums have on public policy priorities by:

- creating a **thriving, vibrant and diverse cultural life** for the nation;
- contributing to **regional prosperity**;
- developing **tourism** – museums are the country's most popular visitor attractions;
- strengthening the UK's **soft power**;
- developing **peaceful and prosperous communities** by creating safe and welcoming community spaces;
- promoting **health and well-being**;
- **education**, life-long learning, skills development and **apprenticeships**;
- being world leaders in scientific, technological and creative **innovation**.

Museums are now cultural enterprises and have adapted quickly to reductions in public funding. Nevertheless, it takes time and investment to make this change. To be successful cultural enterprises museums must be able to maintain their public trust and popularity, as well as their reputation for expertise and high quality collections care. This requires core and secure investment: substantial and in-year funding cuts make it very difficult to change operating models.

The UK museum sector is more vibrant, popular and internationally respected than it has ever been. Visitor numbers have never been higher: in 2014-15 there were over 71 million visitors to the UK's national and major regional museums alone². The sector has benefited from significant investment from the lottery, foundations, private donors and the public purse; and through the skill and generosity of a dedicated workforce and thousands of volunteers. The long-term legacy of this investment is now at risk.

Since 2010, museums have prioritised keeping the doors open. To do this, they have had to reduce the less visible curatorial and conservation functions. This is not sustainable. Long-term erosion of expertise and an inability to invest in maintaining the basic fabric of buildings will cause long-term damage to the vitality of the whole museum sector.

In the wider context of local and central government spending the amount allocated to museums is very small. Cutting this will have only a minimal impact on deficit reduction, but the value of what is lost will be much greater. If museums reduce the extent to which they curate, acquire, conserve and engage with the public, the collections and cumulative knowledge wither and the many positive impacts museums have disappear. Future generations will not forgive this generation should it be the one which fails in its duty to protect the nation's heritage.

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¹ Public attitudes towards arts and culture: ComRes research study for Arts Council England, 2014 http://press.artscouncil.org.uk/press_releases/112/

² Total 2014-15 visitor figures for NMDC member museums: National museums in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, English Major Partner Museums and Glasgow Museums.