

APPG for Museums meeting with Caroline Dinenage MP, Minister of State for Digital and Culture

Wednesday 11th November: 14:00

In attendance

Alex Sobel MP
Alistair Brown, Museums Association
Baroness Quin
Bethany Reynard, NMDC
Caroline Dinenage MP
Chris Skidmore MP
Esme Ward, Manchester Museum
Fiona Talbott, National Lottery Heritage Fund
Iain Watson, Tyne and Wear Museums and Archives
Jonathan Djanogly MP
Kathryn Simpson, NMDC
Kim Johnson MP
Laura Pye, National Museums Liverpool
Leah-May Stanford, Office of Sir Bernard Jenkin MP
Lord Alderdice
Lord Inglewood
Lord Sassoon
Lord Selkirk
Samantha Conlon, Office of Theo Clarke MP
Sir Ian Blatchford, Science Museum Group
Tony Butler, Derby Museums

Speakers

Caroline Dinenage MP, Minister of State for Digital and Culture, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

Iain Watson, Director of Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, Vice Chair of the National Museum Directors' Council and Steering Group Member of the English Civic Museums Network

Summary

Chris Skidmore MP chaired the meeting. Following introductions, Chris welcomed Iain Watson to give an update from the museum sector.

Iain Watson told the group about the current situation facing museums from the perspective of regional and civic museums. He explained that civic museums are often the focal point of a town and include those funded by local authorities as well as those run and supported by universities. The main issue that all museums are focusing on is survival.

The Culture Recovery Fund has been a lifeline this financial year to get museums through 2020/2021, however, there is a concern about how they will survive past that. The challenge is continuing public funding so that museums can be where they are needed to support public health, learning and STEM engagement, raising aspirations and learning the lessons of the past so they are not repeated.

The challenge will be around securing ongoing public funding. Income generation has been severely affected as visitor numbers are 20-30% of the expected numbers for this time of year and the fall off of business strands linked to income. Areas such as hospitality, events and venue hire which have become a significant income strand for museums over the past twelve years will not provide a surplus this financial year.

Museums are avidly watching vaccine news to predict when visitors will return. They have been heartened to see the public reaction to museums reopening and their thanks for making a safe visitor experience.

In summary, the key concerns are visitor numbers; the recovery of self-generated income strands and adequate public funding particularly for local authority museums. It is essential that there is a joined-up approach across all departments which are involved in funding museums.

Q: Chris Skidmore asked what outcome from the Spending Review would allay concerns about the uncertainty of funding post 31st March 2021?

A: Iain responded that there are two key areas that would address concerns. Firstly, to address the ongoing needs of organisations in maintaining their estates and caring for their collections. Secondly, noting that 31st March is not a magic date so the continuation of something akin to the Culture Recovery Fund would be essential to getting services to people who need it most eg work with local services like foodbanks etc. A continuation of revenue funding is essential.

Chris welcomed Caroline Dinenage MP, Minister of State for Digital and Culture. The Minister expressed her delight that there is an APPG for museums to reinforce the role museums play in communities, as a driver for local economies, educating and inspiring the public and spreading wellbeing. She noted that she had visited incredible museums since taking on the ministerial role and wants to support the sector as museums are such a vital part of the nation's cultural fabric in addition to their economic contribution.

The Minister was impressed by the imaginative and pragmatic ways that museums have continued their work during the pandemic and recognised the ongoing impact of coronavirus on the sector. During the lockdown, the Minister frequently met with museums as chair of the Museums Working Group so has learnt the detail of the situation facing the sector and given the DCMS team the arsenal needed to make a case to the Treasury. Working collaboratively with the sector gave the DCMS team the evidence base to secure the Culture Recovery Fund which was one of the only sector specific funds. The £1.57 billion fund is an unprecedented cash injection into UK culture following on from £200 million of emergency funding given to Arms Length Bodies as well as the money secured for the devolved administrations. The feedback so far has been that the money has been a lifeline in addition to other pots of funding such as the Job Retention Scheme and the business rates holiday.

Looking ahead at the challenges and opportunities to come, the Culture Recovery Fund has allowed organisations to weather the impact of Covid, however, there is now the issue of the second wave. The Minister remains committed to supporting museums. The remaining money from the Culture Recovery Fund will be used to support museums and the cultural sector. The extension to the furlough scheme has been warmly welcomed and a massively important support. The Minister added that there is no flick of switch back to normal operations and she will continue to fight the corner of museums across Government.

Q: Chris Skidmore asked about the Culture Recovery Fund and what will happen after 31st March 2021? He highlighted that the APPG is keen to help provide information and policy ideas to share opportunities to provide support for the future. If there is a museum in specific difficulty who has not accessed the Culture Recovery Fund but recognises that in the coming year they will face a deficit or severe financial hardship, what can a museum do to highlight that difficulty and that they need support before they reach a financially unsustainable situation? What is the process to avoid this happening? How can Whitehall and departments work together given the variety of funders to make sure that no museum falls through the cracks?

A: The Minister answered that there are museums who did not apply to the fund in the first instance as at that time, they were managing. £300 million has been kept back so that there is a contingency in place if museums find themselves in a difficult situation now. The Minister is currently discussing with others how that money can be targeted. In regard to specific museums in difficulty, the Minister recommended that they speak to their contact at Arts Council England or the National Lottery Heritage Fund. She advised that her private office would share the details of the museums team within DCMS who have worked so hard throughout the pandemic to help and support where possible. Departments are working collaboratively to give out the funding and makes sure it goes as far and wide as possible.

Lisa Ollerhead, Head of Museums Policy at DCMS, added that the museums team are working with ACE to support museums at risk which ACE keep a list of. She reiterated the Minister's advice that museums who

find themselves in this situation should speak to the ACE team or the museum development service to highlight risk.

Q: Kim Johnson MP asked for details on museums as employers during this time and the impact of the pandemic on staff particularly the reduction of staff as they are the resource which brings these museums to life. How are museums working with staff and supporting unions whilst going through these difficult times?

A: The Minister noted that the furlough scheme has been a lifeline for museums. For museums in places such as Liverpool which have faced difficult challenges in an extended period of lockdown, DCMS is working with the Department for Work and Pensions to see what additional support can be put in place. She added that she was aware of the pressures facing museums such as making sure those who are redeployed receive the necessary training and those who have already been made redundant prior to the extension of the furlough scheme.

Alistair Brown, Policy Manager at the Museums Association, shared with members a link to the MA's redundancy tracker which notes the number of proposed and confirmed redundancies across the sector.

Chris Skidmore echoed Kim Johnson's concern adding that it is important that the expertise and knowledge of well-trained staff is not lost from the sector during this time.

Ian Blatchford commented that representatives of each of the major unions sit on the working group which the Minister chairs and it has helped greatly with the maturity of the discussion and understanding challenges. Museums are only now absorbing the impact of the furlough scheme.

Q: Ian Blatchford shared that there has been a big increase in online audiences during the pandemic, however, museums have also discovered how many young people do not have access to the internet at home. Digital inclusivity and access is a huge issue, given the digital remit within DCMS, what plans do they have to address this post lockdown and how can museums be part of the digital inclusion agenda?

A: The Minister agreed over the pandemic there have been digitally savvy organisations that have hit the ground running. Digital access to culture has kept many people going through these dark times. Digital exclusion is massive, more than anyone had anticipated. The Department for Education have worked hard to address the issue and get tablets out. In addition to the issue of exclusion, there is also the issue of digital confidence and giving people the help and support they need to properly be able to use something which is significantly more complicated than distributing kit. The issue is bigger than DCMS and impacts everything from education to ability to apply for jobs. A digital strategy will be published early next year and more broadly the Government is thinking about the digital skills needed to face the future.

Q: Lord Sassoon asked regarding infrastructure, what is the Department's current approach to bricks and mortar programmes? Quite a few museums have much to do and plans which are ready baked and can be put into action quite quickly. These plans are fitting with the Government's general push to improve infrastructure.

A: The Minister agreed that funding for museum maintenance is very badly needed across the sector and the Department is working on this now with a bid on infrastructure projects including digital infrastructure. The MEND fund which was part of the Culture Investment Fund addressed some maintenance issues. Due to the postponement of the Spending Review, there are a whole range of things which are up in the air. The Department is aware that there are overdue maintenance projects and interesting expansion projects which could be game changing for institutions and the communities who live and work around them. The Minister is pushing hard for support.

Q: Esme Ward, Director of Manchester Museums, shared that she is the Chair of the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance and sits on the DCMS taskforce into loneliness. One thing that has emerged from the taskforce is the strength of collaboration across sectors. As proven by the launch of the National Academy of Social Prescribing, cross sector collaborations are fruitful, what does the Minister see as the opportunities for museums to participate more widely in those?

A: The Minister responded that she used to lead on social prescribing with the Department for Health and Social Care so understands the benefit that arts and culture can bring to health and wellbeing. The Minister will discuss this with Baroness Barran who leads on this within DCMS. Covid has highlighted loneliness issues and there needs to be a deeper look into this area of untapped potential for museums to alleviate these issues.

Q: Chris Skidmore noted that museums are on a reactive backfoot model at present due to the pandemic, they are looking for survival and sustainability, are there any priorities that the Minister would like to identify for museums? Would it be useful for the APPG to look at regional museums and their involvement in the levelling up conversation?

A: The Minister shared that she is looking forward to when she will be able to stop fire fighting and take a step back and plan regarding areas like this. Levelling up is so vital and a number of MPs have told her about expansion projects for museums within their constituencies which have huge economic potential and a huge impact on their local community. An excellent example is the Black Country Living Museum which has regenerated part of the West Midlands and offered so much insight into the history of the area as a fantastic learning experience and a really entertaining visit. A venue like that in the heart of a community can be such a jewel and cultural asset which can drive the levelling up agenda. The points made earlier on digital are vital and there is a potential role for museums in that as well as other areas of digital such as AI.

Q: Tony Butler, Director of Derby Museums, commented that he was interested to hear the Minister's comments on levelling up and supporting communities in the regions. His organisation is about to open the Museum of Making at Derby Silk Mill and they have worked closely with Rolls-Royce, Toyota and Bombardier. How can this collaboration between local businesses and museums be replicated across the country?

A: The Minister shared that prior to becoming an MP she owned her own business for 20 years so she looks at everything through a small business lens and sees that there is much more scope for collaboration. She added that it seems Derby is on to something special and will visit when it is permitted. Festival 2022 is about to announce the short-listed consortia who have been selected to take forward projects. These include collaborations across business, arts, tech and culture with some really interesting ideas that demonstrate a huge pool of untapped potential.

Q: Chris Skidmore asked what can the APPG do that could help the Department with the Spending Review?

A: The Minister answered that she wanted to show that even though the Culture Recovery Fund has been created, there is still a great need for support across the sector and that fund will not fix everything, particularly with maintenance work. It would be helpful to underline that and to remind the Treasury about digital infrastructure needs along side bricks and mortar.

Q: Lord Selkirk suggested that it is important to impress upon the treasury the value of museums, particularly as research institutions, as well as cathedrals, churches and other heritage sites which may have missed out on funding.

A: The Minister agreed and noted that science centres have been unable to access funding as well.

Chris Skidmore thanked the Minister for the discussion and added that he hoped the conversation could continue and that as an APPG, the group aimed to be helpful and constructive and to provide a sound board for the Minister.