

Debate on supporting museums, galleries and historic buildings open to the public, affected by the restrictions in place to address the COVID-19 pandemic

House of Lords

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Key messages

- Councils are the largest investor in cultural activity, spending over £1.1 billion on museums, theatres and libraries. They are directly responsible for around 350 museums in England, fund many more, and provide support to independent museums. Many councillors will also act as trustees. Councils run some important tourist attractions, including castles and historic buildings.
- The closure of crucial cultural assets due to the coronavirus pandemic has brought some challenges which will persist as the lockdown measures ease and eventually end. As an example, the culture, tourism and sport sectors make a significant contribution to council budgets through earned income, business rates, fees and charges.
- Government support so far has been welcome, particularly the extension of the furlough scheme until October and the £3.2 billion of funding and cash flow measures made available to councils. The Government should continue to demonstrate that it will meet the extra costs and loss of income of local authorities, including from their in-house museums and galleries. As discretionary services, these are the services likely to face severe cost pressure and possible closure if council budgets are under-resourced.
- Many museums, heritage sites and historic buildings will lose their crucial summer income, meaning they will have little or no income to maintain their collections and buildings over the rest of the year. Heritage sites are expensive to maintain, regardless of whether they are open to the public or not.
- The volunteer base that supports many council cultural activities, including museums, has been badly affected. Many volunteers fall into the particularly vulnerable groups and are likely to need shielding for some time. This poses a challenge in keeping community assets open during the recovery phase. We will need to support these volunteers by ensuring there is clear guidance on safeguarding to ensure they return when they are able to.
- A recent Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (Alva) survey of 668 people who had recently visited an attraction found that only 16 per cent would visit museums and art galleries “as soon as the opportunity arises”.¹ Further work will be needed to gain public confidence that these buildings will be a safe place to visit as we move into phase three of the recovery plan.
- The financial impact of coronavirus will be felt in the museum and heritage sector long after the immediate crisis is over. For the sector to survive, the emergency financial support packages currently available must not end on a ‘cliff edge’ and longer-term financial support packages suitable for this sector must be considered for the end of 2020 and running into 2021.

Briefing

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FURTHER INFORMATION

The work of the LGA

We are working with Arts Council England, Core Cities, Key Cities, the Culture and Leisure Officers Association (CLOA), Community Leisure UK (CLUK), London Councils, and the Rural Services Network, to help support cultural organisations to deal with the current situation. We are aligning our support with all these organisations so we can share good practice, collect evidence and make the case for culture and the future. Councils are supporting the industry by advancing payments, relaxing monitoring requirements, and offering letters of comfort.

We are also seeking a position for councils on the main recreation and leisure ministerial taskforce being established in response to the coronavirus pandemic. With councils spending over £1.1 billion on museums, theatres and libraries, as well as investing over £1 billion a year on sport, leisure and green spaces, we believe it is crucial that their views are represented when the Government starts planning to reopen the sector.

Financial viability

The Government has gone some way to ensure museums, galleries and historic buildings are supported, most notably the furlough scheme, which we are pleased to see has been extended to October. The Government has also provided £3.2 billion of emergency funding for council services. A range of other packages will also help the sector, including funding from Arts Council England, who provided £160 million to support individual artists, freelancers and cultural organisations, as well as the £50 million from Heritage Lottery Fund, which will help sites such as war memorials, ancient castles and houses, who face the additional challenges of high maintenance costs for their buildings during the current closures.

We are concerned for the future of charities and trusts that deliver council contracts to run cultural facilities, such as museums, galleries and historic buildings. Despite the financial packages provided by the Government, and various other funding pots provided by partners, there remain significant holes in support. For example, the £3.2 billion is largely responding to social care pressures and does not extend to support DCMS' sectors. Additionally, many museums, heritage sites and historic buildings will lose their summer income, and most will likely close for the season in October, meaning they will have no income to maintain their collections and buildings. Heritage sites are expensive to maintain, regardless of whether they are open to the public or not.

We have therefore been asking the Government to look at how the gaps in support can be closed. If we are unable to save these community resources, we know it will cost us much more in the medium and long-term to reopen facilities that have not been maintained, and to re-establish the expertise that their teams bring to this work. If the sector is to survive the pandemic, any emergency financial support packages currently available must run well into next year.

Volunteers

Council facilities are used heavily by grassroots community groups and volunteer groups, whether through sports pitches and playing fields, or rooms for hire in libraries and historic buildings. Often, the volunteer base that supports council cultural activities, particularly museums, has been badly affected. Many

volunteers fall into the particularly vulnerable groups and are likely to need shielding for some time. This poses a real challenge in keeping community assets open and thriving during the recovery phase. We will need to support these volunteers by ensuring there is clear guidance on safeguarding to ensure they return when they are able to.

Public confidence

Alva recently conducted a survey of 668 people who had recently visited a visitor attraction found that only 16 per cent would visit museums and art galleries “as soon as the opportunity arises”. More than half (54 per cent) said they would wait and see what happened “for a short while”, and almost a third (29 per cent) were “unlikely to want to visit for a long time”. Respondents also cited their fear of sparking a second wave of the virus by visiting attractions too early.

People were more likely to want to return immediately to outdoor attractions: 31 per cent said they would go to country parks and nature reserves as soon as possible, and 29 per cent said this about gardens. Museums, galleries and historic buildings will therefore have to think how present themselves in a way that will encourage public trust, and how to communicate in a way that builds confidence and captures the public mood.

Based on this evidence, it will take some time before visitor numbers and consequently income will be anywhere near pre-COVID-19 levels. Therefore, any financial support for museums, galleries and historic buildings will have to be extended long-term, if the sector is to survive.

ⁱ <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/public-highly-cautious-about-returning-to-museums>