

Paying a heavy price for a career in the museum sector

As the Museums Association unveils its new salary guidelines, following research revealing that jobs in museums pay up to 12% less than those in other industries,

Jonathan Knott hears about the impact that low pay has on those working in the sector

No one goes into a career in museums to earn lots of money. But as shrinking budgets take their toll, people are increasingly speaking out about the impact of low pay on individuals and the sector.

In July, curator Kathleen Lawther published a blog highlighting the “true costs” of a career in museums, explaining how she needed benefit payments, credit cards, loans and overdrafts to support her journey towards establishing a secure foothold in the sector.

She said she had no regrets about the decisions she had taken, but wrote: “I’ve accrued debts working in museums that I wouldn’t have done in other sectors. This creates a strain on me and affects my career choices. It affects my mental health and my ability to do good work.”

Lawther believes others in the sector are similarly affected. “It’s something that

people aren’t necessarily going to share,” she says. “But I can’t imagine how a lot of people working in museums wouldn’t be stressed about money, because the wages are so low in relation to comparable fields.”

Lagging behind

Her view is supported by new independent research commissioned by the Museums Association (MA), which has found that pay in museums lags behind that for comparable work in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

The research, which was used to inform the MA’s latest salary guidelines, published this month, was carried out by Incomes Data Research, which surveyed 170 museums’ pay scales in early 2017. Researchers examined median pay – the middle value when salaries are ranked in order of size – because this is

less affected by exceptionally high or low values than the standard “mean” average. They compared salaries for seven areas of museum work with those in other sectors of the economy requiring comparable skills and experience.

Overall, it was found that median pay in the museum sector is 7% below that for comparable jobs in other sectors. This held true for six out of seven work areas.

The job categories in which pay is lagging the furthest behind comparator roles (12%) were technician and buildings management, and curator and collections management roles. There is also a large discrepancy for fundraising and marketing, and director roles, which pay 10% less than in other sectors.

Front of house

The only area bucking the trend were roles as

attendants, security and front-of-house staff, where pay was 10% more than in comparator roles. Of course, these roles in a museum context often require more knowledge and skills than they do in other sectors – and the research found that they were one of the most difficult areas to recruit and retain staff in.

The report says the findings are concerning. “This raises serious questions about entry to the museum sector,” it reads. “Museums need to attract and retain a more diverse workforce, but low pay and the widespread expectation that candidates will have postgraduate qualifications will prevent change.”

Given this, it’s particularly worrying that the difference in pay is larger for more junior roles. The research looked at four levels of seniority within each area of work, ranging from “assistant” to “manager/

London’s National Gallery addresses low pay issue

Industrial relations have not been that smooth at London’s National Gallery, with a long-running dispute over its plans to outsource security, visitor services and ticketing to a private company being a particular flashpoint.

In late 2015, an agreement was reached between union members and a deal agreed with museum management over terms and conditions. But the dispute flared up again earlier this year, when the PCS union said “more than one year on from taking over the contract,

Securitas has reneged on a pledge over the real London Living Wage and is creating a two-tier workforce by driving down pay and conditions”.

Away from this issue, the National Gallery has been looking at low pay, and how it was contributing to “phenomenally high” staff turnover, according to Rose Marie Loft, the institution’s head of HR.

Supporting the Museums Association’s findings, Loft says that research by the gallery found that across almost every job category, pay was worse

than for comparable roles, including those in the public sector.

One change that the gallery has made is to introduce flexible benefits, such as allowing staff to trade annual leave days for more pay, and vice versa. The institution also works with a partner that offers staff discounts on spending such as holidays and supermarket purchases through an app.

The gallery pays staff the real Living Wage and has recently applied to become an accredited Living Wage Employer. This year,



The National Gallery has suffered from staff disputes

it also began a comprehensive review of pay across the organisation. An evaluation of each role will be used to design a new pay scale, which will be unveiled next summer.

“The board and our executive have agreed that next year, it will be a financial priority for us,” says Loft.

Staff have been told that the organisation will invest an extra 10% in pay.

“We are looking at making sure that where people are very much under market rates, we can address that,” adds Loft.

head of department". It found that pay for assistants in the curator and collections management job category is 25% lower than for comparator roles, while for assistants and officers in education, programming and outreach, pay is 13% behind.

Breaking point

Alex Bird, the sector development officer for Museum Development North West and an MA board member, says it is common for museum jobs with managerial responsibilities to be advertised with salaries "in the low £20,000s". He says that if pay and responsibilities remain so disproportionate, people will eventually be forced out of the sector.

"There is going to be a breaking point where people will just step away," Bird says.

Ashleigh Hibbins, a museum blogger who has worked in the UK sector for two years following four years in Canadian museums, says the challenge of establishing a museum career has already prompted some of her peers to leave.

"I know a number of people who have left the sector because the jobs were too difficult to get," she says. "And especially early in your career, there is often a lot of cobbling together of multiple part-time jobs. It's not just pay that's the issue, it's also job security."

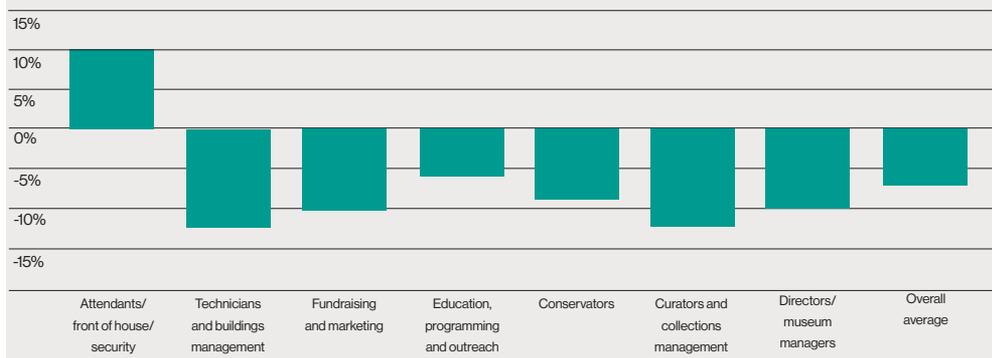
Another concern is that a trend towards independent governance may exacerbate this situation: the research found that salaries at museums formerly funded by local government are generally lower than those that are still funded in this way.

Salary guidelines

But even in a tough funding environment, there are steps that the sector can take to help improve the situation. The MA has published salary guidelines based on the inter-quartile ranges (the middle half of median salaries) found for each job category in the Incomes Data Research. The recommended minimum pay for an assistant museum

Average percentage variation by job category

Variation between museum median typical midpoint salary and market median salary



technician, for example, is £16,513-£21,069, while for a head of education, it is £33,604-£46,509.

The MA says these guidelines "should act as a baseline, above which all museums should seek to pay their staff, regardless of size, type or location".

Another standard that museums can match their pay to is the Living Wage Foundation's real Living Wage (currently £9.75 in London and £8.45 outside the city). Some institutions, such as Birmingham Museums Trust and London's National Portrait Gallery, are signed up as Living Wage Employers, committing to paying all staff and regular on-site contractors this amount.

Clara Paillard, the president of the culture group at the PCS union, says several other museums have raised minimum pay to this level,

without committing to doing so in future.

Changing expectations

Lawther says that to push back against the impact of low pay on diversity, museums should reconsider the widely held view that job applicants need postgraduate qualifications and extensive volunteering experience.

"The blanket acceptance that everyone should be spending a lot of time volunteering before getting paid work doesn't acknowledge that is going to put off a great amount of people and exclude potential talent from working in museums," she says.

Lawther adds that similar attitudes are reflected in national policies such as restricting the national living wage to over-25s: "It's assumed that parents will be able to support young people

until their mid-20s – that isn't the case for a lot of people."

Helen Antrobus, the programme and events officer at the People's History Museum in Manchester, says a frank discussion of pay is crucial to making the issue a priority for decision-makers in the museum sector and nationally. "We often say 'we do it because we love it', but at the same time, we can't let that stop us from saying 'actually, this isn't fair'," she says.

"I think more open, honest conversations would help, especially within the workplace," says Antrobus. "Rather than creating tensions between management and workers, we could all accept that it's something that's happened across the sector and nationally, and find a way to work against it together."

● To see the MA's salary guidelines visit www.museumsassociation.org

Lack of diversity in sector needs addressing



Sharon Heal is the director of the Museums Association

As the only UK-wide membership organisation that represents all museums, we will make the case to governments, stakeholders and funders for the value that museums have in society, and the vital role that the workforce plays in delivering that.

We can also support you through our professional development programmes and events that support you to develop your practice, find your values and give you the confidence to progress your career.

One outstanding workforce issue that has not been resolved is the lack of diversity at all levels of the sector. We know that poor pay and limited opportunities for progression can be off-putting when people are thinking about potential careers. And we also know that a narrow entry path can squeeze some people out, especially if it is combined with recruitment that focuses on mirroring the workforce that we already have.

The salary guidelines will be followed by a toolkit that explores

best practice in recruitment, from apprenticeships and training schemes to thinking about unconscious bias. We will also look at how we retain diverse and talented people once they are working in the sector.

I hope the salary guidelines can support employers, funders and stakeholders to be brave and enlightened, and to reflect and reward the hard work, knowledge and enthusiasm of everyone that works in and with museums and galleries.