

Future looks bright but funding is still a challenge

The Museums Association's second annual survey reveals rising visitor numbers and a greater focus on often-marginalised groups. But it's against a backdrop of continued funding cuts, a shrinking workforce and the uncertainty of Brexit. By *Jonathan Knott*

The Museums Association's (MA) annual survey of the museum sector is published this month. Museums in the UK is the second report of its kind, following last year's survey and the cuts surveys that the MA published from 2011 to 2015.

The online survey ran from September to November 2017, asking a wide range of questions about museums' work in 2016-17. It received 308 responses, representing 435 museums (about 17% of institutions in the country). The mix broadly reflects the breadth of the UK sector in terms of types of museum and region, and includes respondents from all of the UK's nations.

Many will recognise the report's snapshot, which reveals a sector that is in many ways flourishing, while some museums face serious problems. Visitor numbers are growing, public-facing work remains strong and there is an increasing focus on positively impacting people's lives.

But equally, many museums face reduced public funding, loss of staff and maintenance backlogs – with the uncertainty of Brexit hanging over everything.

Most museums report growing or stable visitor numbers, with 47% saying numbers have increased and 19% reporting no change.

Museums' public-facing work also remains strong, with 88% saying their public events activity has either increased or stayed the same in the past year. Likewise, 60% say they have maintained

Overall museum income (excluding capital funding)

	Decreased	Increased	Stayed same
Historic Scotland	0%	0%	100%
Local authority (LA) museums	39%	18%	42%
Independent ex-LA museums	54%	38%	8%
Independent museums	18%	53%	29%
Military museums	17%	50%	33%
National museums	18%	27%	56%
National Trust	0%	50%	33%
National Trust for Scotland	0%	100%	0%
University museums	25%	25%	44%
Other museums	40%	20%	40%
Total	26%	37%	35%

Comparison is with previous year. Not all percentages add up to 100 as a small number of museums gave no answer

their level of activity in temporary exhibitions, and a quarter report an increase. In terms of school visits, 83% of museums have either increased or maintained their level of activity.

Group focus

Museums are also working with a wide range of specific groups. The most popular groups to work with were schools (77% of museums), local community groups

(74%), friends or supporters associations (59%) and youth groups (55%).

But among the report's most encouraging findings are the high percentages of respondents working with groups not traditionally associated with the sector – 46% of museums have been working with health and wellbeing providers, and 47% with disability groups. There are also significant proportions that work with

black, Asian and ethnic minority communities (23%), LGBTQ+ groups (19%), environmental groups or campaigns (18%), refugees or asylum seekers (15%) and gender equality groups (12%).

Although the data sets are not directly comparable, the percentage of museums working with many of these groups has risen significantly since last year's survey. The largest increases are for disability groups (rising from 13% to 47%) and LGBTQ+ groups (8% to 19%).

Mixed picture

But all museum work relies on adequate resources – and here, the survey reveals a more mixed picture. The overall outlook appears reasonably healthy, with most museums saying their income either increased (37%) or remained the same (35%). The results also seem to lend support to the transitional narrative promoted by major reports such as the Thurley

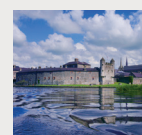
Fermanagh County Museum, Northern Ireland

One of two museums in Enniskillen Castle, Fermanagh County Museum reopened in September 2016 following a £3.5m redevelopment. It received EU funding from a programme administered by Tourism Northern Ireland, as well as £2.4m from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The project opened up a formerly derelict corner of the site and created seven new galleries. The museum service also merged with the county's

visitor information centre and its reception acts as a one-stop shop for tourism, heritage and genealogy advice. Following the reopening, visitor numbers and income have increased.

Sarah McHugh, the museum and heritage manager at Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, says the new venue includes a Living Memory Gallery, which facilitates the museum's work with local groups to interpret controversial events in the area's recent past and



Fermanagh County Museum is in Enniskillen Castle

to develop its collections.

She says the merger of Fermanagh and Omagh councils in 2015 has benefited the service by encouraging it to develop partnerships and contribute to local outcomes across a wider area.

"A large part of our programme and partnership work is cross-border [with the Irish Republic]," says McHugh. "Whatever happens with Brexit, the key thing is that we maintain and build on that."

Review of Amgueddfa Cymru (National Museum Wales) and the Mendoza Review of museums in England. The latter argued that museums “need to increase and diversify their income further”, stressing that “public funding is ultimately finite”.

This shift is happening, according to the survey. Almost a third (30%) of museums reported a drop in regular public funding (not capital) – double the percentage (14%) for which it had risen. But the proportion experiencing an increase in income from earned sources such as cafes and shops (46%) is higher than those for which this stream had decreased (19%). The same holds true for income from grants, donations and philanthropy, with 42% of museums experiencing a rise and only 17% a decrease.

Local authority museums Nonetheless, there is a significant proportion of museums (26%) for which overall income has decreased. The biggest losers are those funded by local authorities (39%) and independent former local authority museums (54%).

These types of museums are also the most likely to have experienced a fall in regular public income (51% and 58% respectively). Many are increasing their income from other sources, but their responses make clear that finances for local institutions remain challenging.

One local authority museum in north-west England says: “Decreasing funding due to pressures on local authority budgets in turn puts pressure on us when trying to maintain the building and particularly the grounds (car park, footpaths etc).”

About half of museums (53%) said there has been no change in their staffing levels since last year, and the proportion of museums cutting back their workforce (21%) is balanced by the percentage taking on more employees (20%). But within local authority museums, the

Did your museum work with any of the following stakeholders during the past year?

	No	Yes
Schools	23%	77%
Local community groups	26%	74%
Museum friends or supporters organisations	41%	59%
Youth groups	45%	55%
Health and wellbeing providers	54%	46%
Disability groups	53%	47%
Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities	77%	23%
LGBTQ+ groups	81%	19%
Environmental groups or campaigns	82%	18%
Refugees or asylum seekers	85%	15%
Gender equality groups	88%	12%

figures reveal a clear tendency for making cutbacks, with 34% saying full-time staff levels have decreased, and only 6% reporting an increase.

Alistair Brown, the MA’s policy officer, says the overall findings are not as reassuring as they may seem. “A closer examination of the data shows that larger museums are making substantial redundancies, while museums reporting increases in staff tend to be smaller organisations adding a limited number of posts,” he says. “So the survey results are consistent with a shrinking overall workforce – and that’s something that we’re deeply concerned about.”

But the results suggest a healthy outlook for museums’ volunteering capacities, with 84% of respondents saying volunteer numbers had increased or stayed the same. However, it is clear that recruiting volunteers will be a key challenge, with museums facing an ageing volunteer workforce and competition from other organisations.

An independent museum in Yorkshire says: “Potential

volunteers are being bombarded with requests for their help by more and more organisations that can no longer rely on paid staff.”

Shadow of Brexit

Brexit is another major source of uncertainty, with the potential to remove funding sources, disrupt workforces and impact tourism. Most museums (84%) have received no EU funds for programmes or capital developments since 2010. But EU funding for purposes including redevelopment, digitisation and research have made a big difference to individual institutions. About a third of museums (36%) have staff who are citizens of non-UK EU countries. Overall, this demographic comprises 4% of the sector workforce (in line with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport’s figures for the cultural sector). The proportion is highest in Northern Ireland (7%) and Scotland (6%). Brexit is a particular concern for Northern Irish museums because of its potential impact

on the border with the Irish Republic. A report from Ulster University and the Irish Museums Association due to be published this month will urge Northern Ireland’s Department for Communities (as well as the government of the Irish Republic) to make funding available for museums and related organisations to undertake a “Brexit audit”, to consider the impact on funding, policy, planning and practice, workforce, training and partnerships.

General sector concerns about Brexit include the possibility of difficulties working with European partners and risks that relate to economic disruption, including a rise in supply costs and reductions in philanthropy. Many museums are worried about receiving fewer visitors from EU countries, although others hope that a weaker pound and relaxed visa requirements for non-EU countries will boost tourism.

Broader challenges identified range from maintenance backlogs to political uncertainty and terrorism. Among the opportunities cited are capital projects, partnerships, and initiatives such as the Great Exhibition of the North.

There is clearly much for museums to look forward to, but in the light of continuing funding challenges, two of the report’s less dramatic figures provide food for thought. In the past year, 11% of museums cut opening hours, and 4% have introduced admission charges. These developments suggest the sector could look very different in the future.

Findings will help MA promote value of museums

There is an appetite for discussion and debate about the future of the sector, and a realisation that in order to inform this debate, we need good data and a better understanding of the true state of museums in the UK. This survey is a step towards achieving that and gives a snapshot of the

current health, and concerns, of the museum world.

The survey points to a sector that is increasingly engaging with local audiences and developing relationships with communities in order to better understand and share collections. It’s great to see more museums engaging with the themes of Museums Change



Sharon Heal is the director of the Museums Association

Lives and making a positive contribution to society.

The MA will use the findings to make the case for museums and the vital role that we can play in enhancing health and wellbeing, creating better places for us to live and work, and providing space for debate and reflection over the course of 2018.