

Assessing the Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on University Museums

18th May 2020

The DCMS Committee has launched an inquiry into the 'Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors'. It will consider both the immediate and long-term impact that Covid-19 and the related social and financial measures are having on the wide range of industries and organisations under the Committee's remit. <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/250/impact-of-covid19-on-dcms-sectors/>

In response to this inquiry, this report presents findings from research with University Museum Group (UMG) members that **aims** to:

- Assess the **immediate impacts** of COVID-19 on university museums
- Assess the **efficacy of support** provided to university museums to date
- Consider the **likely long-term impacts** of COVID-19 on university museums
- Ask how the university museums sector might **evolve** after COVID-19, and **how DCMS might support** this innovation

The purpose of this research is to:

- Inform a collective response to the DCMS inquiry from UMG
- Shape a strong advocacy position and discussions with Research England.
- Provide a UK-wide summary of the challenge facing university museums

The UMG circulated a consultation document amongst members on the 27th April 2020. In total, 21 institutions contributed responses to this research. All quantitative data are shared in aggregate and qualitative responses have been anonymised.

1. Summary Findings

In total, 21 museums and galleries took part in this study, representing 10 universities, 475.5 FTE staff and 4.2 million visitors.

Immediate Impacts

- Every aspects of museum work is affected.
- An indefinite recruitment freeze is in place across most institutions, placing important projects and next year's contributions to university teaching and research at risk.

- All volunteering work has been suspended for the majority of institutions in the short term
- Two thirds (14 institutions) have entered the lock down period with capital/building works in train. In almost all cases these projects are either suspended or experiencing significant delay.
- The majority of institutions are able to carry out regular IPM monitoring, however, some institutions are still in the process of negotiating access. Object-based conservation work has largely ceased.
- Public access to collections for research, teaching and enjoyment has been severely compromised.
- Current loans activity has ceased.

Access to Support

- Access to financial aid and other forms of support is limited and inconsistent
- At the time of writing, just eight of 21 participating institutions (38%) are using the job retention scheme.
- In many cases, museums are awaiting clarity from their home institutions on eligibility for the scheme.
- Only one institution has applied for emergency funding.
- The principle barriers to accessing emergency funding are: eligibility for current schemes; funders indicating to university museums that they are a low priority; and, unwillingness to compete with more vulnerable organisations.

Long Term Impacts

- The full financial impact on the HE sector is unknown, however, university museums and galleries are anticipating substantial losses across all areas of funding: university, public, philanthropic, commercial and endowment.
- Concerns for the workforce are acute and include the risk of redundancies, irreplaceable loss of collections and research knowledge and staff wellbeing. Museums express particular concern that progress towards diverse and representative museum workforces will falter or reverse.
- Support for researchers is compromised, contributing to a drop in future research outputs drawing on collections that may last for years.
- Social distancing requirements will reduce visitor numbers dramatically. On reopening museums are concerned about maintaining public safety; fear progress on diversifying

audiences will be undermined and observe that social distancing will challenge social and learning outcomes for visitors.

- A drop in schools visits will have an impact on income and crucial widening participation work.

Opportunities

- Several institutions have noted increases in engagement through social media and high levels of participation in new forms of digital programming.
- Museums have a civic role to play supporting public wellbeing during and coming out of lockdown.
- Institutions see opportunities to become more relevant, inclusive and to deliver greater social impact through new forms of collaboration, knowledge exchange and research in response to the 'big questions' Covid 19 has thrown up e.g. in the fields of arts and health, social mobility and ageing.
- Many museums see an increased teaching role supporting their institutions to deliver cross-disciplinary teaching drawing on digitised collections.
- Greater collections digitisation has the potential to increase access and facilitate international collaborations, particularly valuable for research.

What support does the sector need to respond to the opportunities identified?

University museums need:

- Financial support. Clarity on access to the Job Retention Scheme; greater investment from Research England and the HE Sector; long-term commitments from funders and funding to cover lost revenue.
- New approaches to income generation and philanthropy.
- Advocacy, both inward facing (demonstrating the value of museums for teaching, research and widening participation) and outward facing (ensuring university museums are not forgotten and allowed to 'fall between funders and stools').
- Digital upskilling and capacity building: This need is greatest within smaller organisations.
- Evidence that demonstrates social value. The shift to digital first programming, teaching and research challenges existing methods of monitoring activity and evidencing impact and demand new approaches and adequate resourcing.
- Guidance to support remobilisation/reopening, in particular maintaining social distancing.

- Support from UMG in co-ordinating cross-institutional collaboration, sector advocacy and guidance.

2. Participating Institutions

The following 21 museums and galleries took part in this research, representing 10 universities:

- The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham
- University of Cambridge Museums: University Museum of Zoology, Sedgwick Museum, Polar Museum, Botanic Gardens, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Museum of Classical Archaeology, Whipple Museum of the History of Science
- Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts
- Durham University Museums and Attractions
- Great North Museum, Newcastle University
- The Hunterian, University of Glasgow
- University of London: UCL Museums and Collections: Grant Museum of Zoology, Petrie Museum of Egyptology, UCL Art Museum. Royal Holloway Collections, Galleries and Exhibitions
- The University of Manchester: Manchester Museum, The Whitworth
- University of Oxford: The Ashmolean and the Museum of Natural History
- Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading

The 21 participating institutions have a combined audience of **4.187 million visitors** for the academic year 2018-19.

The institutions employ a total of **475.5 FTE staff**.

In total, 18 institutions shared financial data for the academic year 2018-19. These institutions have a combined budget of £34.8 million, which breaks down as follows:

Budget 2018-19	Combined Total (18 Institutions)
<i>University and HE investment and grants</i>	£17.3 million
<i>Public sector grants (includes Arts Council, Heritage Lottery, Big Lottery)</i>	£3.2 million
<i>Private sector income (includes sponsorship, donations, private trusts and foundations)</i>	£4.0 million
<i>Commercial income</i>	£6.5 million
<i>Endowment</i>	£3.8 million
TOTAL	£34.8 million

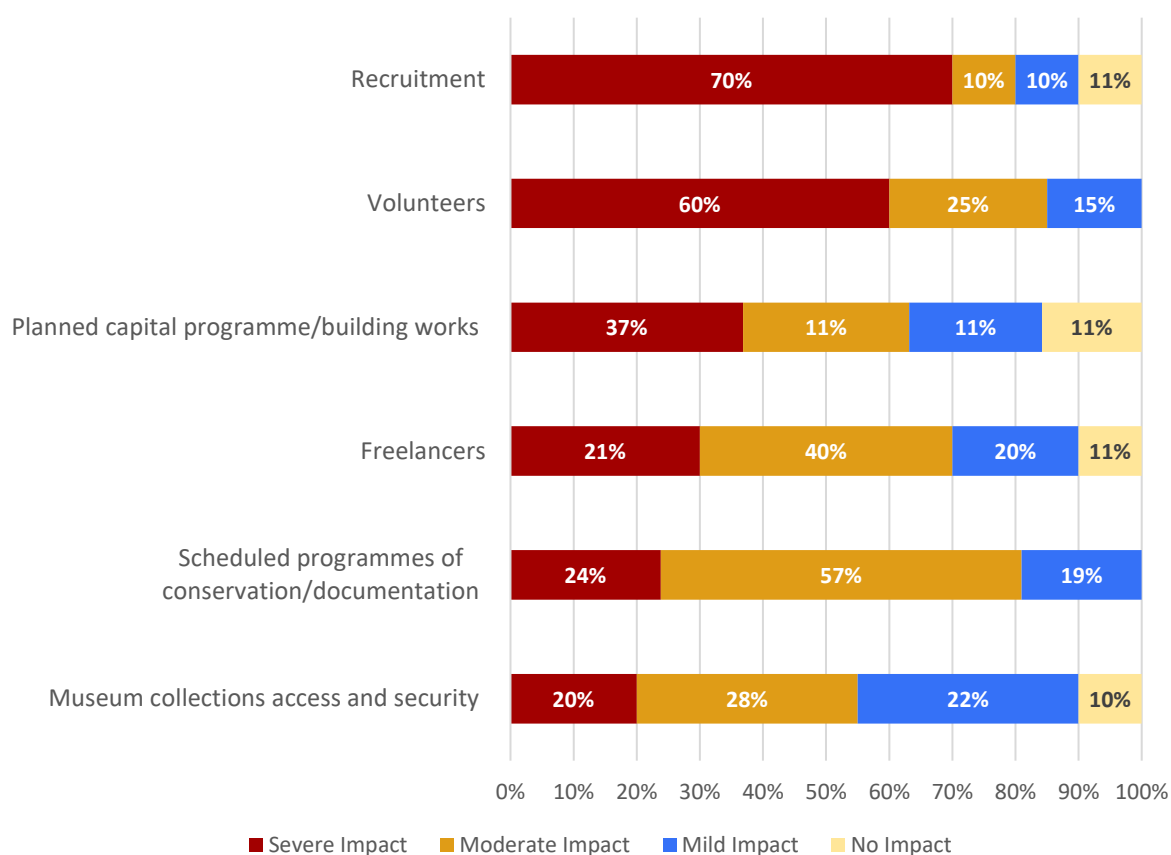
3. Immediate Impacts

This section addresses the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on university museum workforces, buildings and collections, programme and finances. In this section, we are also present information on the support that university institutions have accessed in the short term (job retention scheme, emergency funding) and any barriers to accessing support.

3.1 Severity of Impact on University Museum Activities

The chart below shows the estimated severity of the immediate impact of the Covid-19 crisis on different aspects of museum operations.

The consultation finds that the crisis affects every aspects of museum work. Recruitment, volunteering, planned capital works and scheduled programmes of conservation and documentation are most severely impacted.



An indefinite **recruitment** freeze is in place across most institutions, placing important projects and next year's contributions to university teaching and research at risk.

All **volunteering** work has been suspended for the majority of institutions in the short term, with a knock on impact to both project delivery and on volunteers themselves who derive evidenced social,

health and wellbeing outcomes through volunteering. Institutions are particularly concerned about the impact on student volunteers and those in vulnerable groups who, in some cases, make up the majority of the volunteer team. Some organisations have been able to put in place remote volunteering activity e.g. digitisation projects, wellbeing programmes and participation in citizen science projects has increased sharply.

Two thirds (14 institutions) have entered the lock down period with **capital/building works** in train. In almost all cases these projects are either suspended pending review or experiencing significant delay. This includes essential maintenance and repair, works to existing exhibition spaces, new build spaces, improvements to stores and labs, new study centres and facilities for researchers, access improvements, IT infrastructure change and new staff facilities. External funders (including ACE and NLHF) have reiterated their support and flexibility at this time, however there remain significant concerns that match funding will be difficult or impossible to raise over the next year. Likely reductions in funding from home universities will jeopardise development works – activities that often drive innovation.

University freezes on ‘non-core’ spending is compromising institutions capacity to engage **freelance** workers to deliver or support activity. Organisations are mindful of their role as a crucial income stream for freelance workers and want to continue to support those with whom they work regularly as well as sustaining their local arts and technical infrastructure, much of which is reliant on freelance contracts.

With regards **collections**, the majority of institutions have been able to carry out regular IPM monitoring and cleaning by rota, however, some institutions are still in the process of negotiating access. Object-based **conservation** work has largely ceased, generating challenges for future exhibition loans, displays and collaborations. Where staff can access digitised collections records at home, documentation work continues, but at a reduced pace. Many institutions are not able to access collections remotely and here all collections documentation is paused. Students are experiencing substantial interruption to conservation and technical training. Large-scale conservation works scheduled to take place during the summer (non-teaching period) will not take place this year.

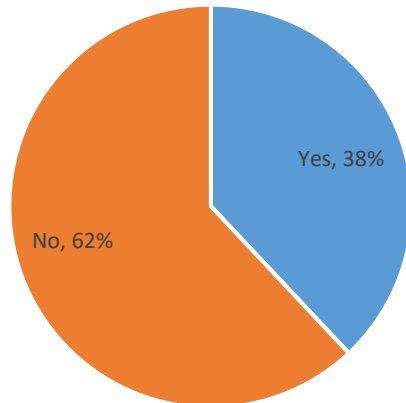
Public **access to collections** for research, teaching and enjoyment has been severely compromised - threatening accreditation for some. Capacity to respond to research enquires and facilitate academic research and teaching is substantially reduced. Current loans activity has ceased.

Almost all institutions have received support from their estates teams to maintain **collections security** during lockdown. Some have accessed security advice from William Brown, National Security Advisor ACE. Facilitated access for staff to complete regular checks while maintaining social distancing has also been possible.

3.2. Access to Support

Job Retention Scheme

Are you using the job retention scheme?



At the time of writing, just eight of 21 participating institutions (38%) are using the **job retention scheme** and have staff on furlough. These institutions have furloughed between 25% and 60% of staff. Departments with the highest proportion of furloughed staff are visitor teams and collections care/technicians.

Just over 60% of institutions have not accessed the job retention scheme so far. The decision on whether or not museum and gallery staff can be placed on furlough rests with the university rather than the institution.

In many cases, museums are awaiting clarity from their home institutions on eligibility for the scheme. Some universities have already decided not to pursue furlough options.

[University] has not applied furlough scheme to areas of activity that rely to any extent on public funding. No applications are made in respect of grant funded staff or any role that could be linked to domestic tuition fees. A very small number of roles that are supported by commercial income streams have been furloughed i.e. theatre technicians.

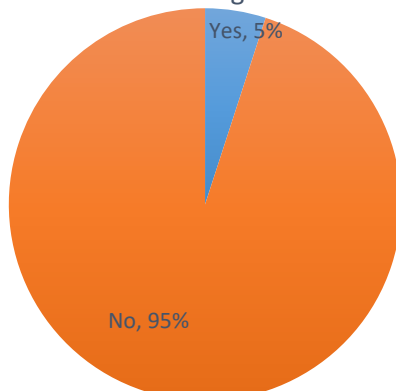
We are still (!) waiting for the University to make a decision about whether they will be using the scheme. We hope to furlough 4 part time visitor services staff

One university museum is managed by the local authority and is therefore ineligible.

Note: the university with a stated position not to use the Job Retention Scheme presented above, changed their policy shortly the closure of the consultation. As of 20th May just over 40% of staff are on furlough.

Emergency Funding

Are you applying for emergency funding?



Only one out of 21 institutions has applied for (or is planning to apply for) emergency funding.

The reasons given for not applying are:

- No immediate cash flow issues.
- Ineligible to apply to funds e.g. grants available to previous grantees only.
- Failure to identify funds university museums are eligible to apply for
- Funders have advised university museums not to apply /signalled that university museums are a low priority.
- Unwillingness to compete for funds against more vulnerable organisations.

4. Long Term Impacts

This section explores the challenges UMG members see arising from the Covid-19 crisis in the longer term. Future opportunities are explored in section five below.

Financial

The full financial impact on the HE sector is unknown, however, university museums and galleries are anticipating substantial losses. Contributors cite the potentially devastating impact of the combination of loss or reduction in all areas of funding: university, public, philanthropic, commercial and endowment.

University support will be hit by drastic falls in student admissions, student rental, catering and conference functions, research income and from lost endowment income.

University museums are considered 'non-core' and have been asked by home institutions to reduce non-pay spend wherever possible to protect cash balances for next academic year. There is considerable uncertainty over the future of internal funding streams, often used to fund teaching and research.

The biggest concern in this regard is the University income, which is 50% of our total budget and so relatively small percentage cuts could have a major impact.

Financially the loss of earned income could potentially cut deep. A drop in the contribution from the university could result in staff cuts and a lean public programme.

Greatest concerns are potential for marginalisation of museum services going forward if treated as 'non-core' and withdrawal of all but token HEI funding support resulting in loss of staff, expertise and continuity of collections knowledge. Reputational damage from failure to meet commitments to freelancers and other partners.

Commercial/trading income will be reduced, as will public donations and income from overseas touring. Delays to capital projects will increase costs. Some institutions are anticipating reduction in teaching income. Some express concern that the current level of financial support from Research England will not be maintained.

The most serious challenge will be the impact on funding – primarily from the University but potentially from ACE and Research England if these are affected. We also recognise that the adjustments that will be needed for reopening will be significant and also have long term impact on income generation. We are already starting to look ahead to how we operate more as a digital museum, but this will take time and investment.

Staffing

Several institutions are concerned that redundancies will take place but state that the situation is not yet clear enough to understand this risk fully. Museums express particular concern that progress towards diverse and representative museum workforces may falter or reverse.

Possible long-term reduction in staffing if external funders reduce or remove funding in future funding rounds. That will have knock-on effect on service provision across all aspects of the museum's work.

There [is] a risk to collections, and especially those dispersed across campuses if staffing levels drop off too far.

With potential redundancies, recruitment freezes and reduced access to our collections workforce diversity is likely to contract or reverse

These issues are particularly acute within smaller institutions:

It would be almost impossible to manage the [Museum] properly with any fewer staff. A downturn in budget would mean closing the exhibition programme and displaying works from the collection on a 'static' basis; but research would continue, as would the Director's role as a PhD supervisor. We would continue to be a resource for external exhibitions. We would need to change the direction of our lecture and symposia programmes as this would no longer be exhibition-led. We would lose contact with practitioners.

With only three staff, two of whom work part-time, any long-term commitments to increased hygiene measures are likely to have an impact on work-loads. We may also need to reduce our opening hours if we cannot staff the Museum.

Museums face the irreplaceable loss of professional staff knowledge that will impact on research support as well as teaching and public access.

Several institutions raise concerns over staff wellbeing and morale.

Research and Teaching

Social distancing will challenge object based teaching approaches.

Support for researchers is compromised, contributing to a drop in future research outputs drawing on the collection that may last for years. External research visits, international collaborations and projects that rely upon conferences and seminars hosted in the museum will be impacted.

Cuts also have the potential to interrupt museums' capacity to demonstrate their value in relation to teaching and research – with knock on effects to advocacy and access to external funding. Strong, evidence-based advocacy for the value of museums to teaching and research is needed now more than ever.

The concern is, if cuts do come, how will we demonstrate our ability to support core teaching and research outcomes with less resource – which will dent our ability for advocacy?

Increased teaching demands may decrease capacity for other museum functions:

There may be pressure on curators to make greater contributions to new teaching / online teaching, further reducing resources for curatorial work/collections and museum activities

Visiting (public and schools)

When museums are able to reopen, social distancing requirements we will reduce visit numbers and require extra staffing to manage access. There are concerns for how museums can maintain public safety and minimise risk for visitors, volunteers and staff when buildings reopen.

An extended period of closure followed by an extended period of low visitation diminishes the status of a museum that has lifted its profile significantly in the last decade and is still struggling for visibility

Social distancing will challenge the nature of the visit experience and social and learning outcomes for visitors. Progress on diversifying audiences may be undermined:

Social distancing in a sector where physical presence, both with the objects and with other people, has always been one of our USPs, changed visitor demographic and needs.

Museums are likely to privilege their most loyal visitors with the highest propensity to visit, at least in the short to medium term. There needs to be active work to make sure this doesn't become a long-term strategy which undermines the work already done to improve access and diversify audiences.

Work with international communities will be compromised:

Our strengths have been in Indigenous community/international engagement. While this does certainly not all take the form of in-person visits, visits and encounters are critically important and they will be substantially reduced for as long as it takes travel to recover to pre-Covid levels, if it ever does.

It is uncertain when schools will return. This will have an impact on earned income and vital widening participation work, necessitating the development of new learning offers.

We have always prioritised creating connections between children and objects in our approach to education. However, it is unclear what the long-term impact will be on in-house learning delivery...we might be delivering far fewer in-house sessions and we will see numbers drop. We are thinking about how we might pivot to creating materials for use in schools, including videos – but there are potential resource issues there, because these are costs we have not covered before.

5. Looking Forward

This section looks at the opportunities for university museums to evolve in the future. This section also presents feedback from members on what support is required to make this happen.

5.1 Opportunities

Digital Public Engagement

Several institutions have noted sharp increases in engagement through their social media channels. Lockdown has also enabled a wider group of staff than usual to become familiar with, and contribute to, social media. This raises training needs and resourcing challenges.

Our social media...has been very successful following a deliberate campaign to engage followers and set digital tasks. This has achieved national and international press coverage. Last month over 8 million 'impressions' with a recent increase of c 10K in twitter followers and 10% increase in Instagram followers and growing fast.

Some institutions have realised high levels of participation through new forms of digital programme.

A whole new programme has been developed to bring the Botanic Garden into people's homes while closed. This includes weekly Wellness Wanders – 10 minute, calm and relaxed films that explore what is looking good and has changed in the Garden that week and Bitesize Botantics - short films/montages of the Garden each Monday morning. There is now a Gardening Club where the Learning team give tips on how to grow vegetables and make your garden wildlife friendly, a daily quiz on social media and downloadable family activities, none of which existed before the lockdown.

Museum resources have been curated digitally on a mobile website mminquarantine. We have pivoted to digital content with several ongoing social media campaigns. At present all on site events and programming has ceased due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Early years and youth programming moved on line. Continue to provide on line learning resources for schools, home and adult education. Working with the scouts, to join a virtual tour of the Vivarium with a view to creating an on-line scout badge with the museum!

There are also opportunities to reframe learning delivery in digital terms and create resources for schools to use without visiting the museum, which we probably would not have considered otherwise – we may, however, run into resourcing problems.

Institutions are responding to growing digital inequality resulting from lockdown by continuing to engage with the public off-line. Some international work also continues.

Care Packages packed and delivered to those living in temporary B&B accommodation to provide family-based activity packs which have been distributed by Shared Health. We are developing a significant new strand for young people, of South Asian heritage funded by the British Council.

New civic roles

Museums have a civic role to play supporting public wellbeing during and coming out of lockdown.

Museums as key to recovery, anchors on campus, civic university/museum

Institutions see opportunities to become more relevant, inclusive and to deliver greater social impact through new forms of collaboration, knowledge exchange and research in response to the 'big questions' Covid 19 has thrown up e.g. in the fields of arts and health, social mobility and ageing.

I would hope that our access to research could make us public friendly centres for responding to the 'big questions' that COVID has thrown up about the world.

We want a greater diversity in our stories and our staff [to be] relevant to diverse audiences and to contribute to social justice. To achieve this we need to facilitate knowledge exchanges and initiate research projects that improve social justice. This needs a shift in thinking to take steps to commit to greater understanding of what this means for programmes and enable community participation. This participatory way of working is resource intensive and will require support.

Opportunity for growth of arts and health, social inclusion and ageing programmes and research.

Opportunities to actively contribute to rethinking perceptions around science and expertise and the significance of universities for everybody.

Changes to buildings to manage social distancing provide new impetus to make buildings more accessible:

...if we have to fundamentally redesign our buildings etc to ensure social distancing and hygiene measures are in place, then this should also be an opportunity to make sure our buildings are accessible to all. Financial support for changes to infrastructure would be extremely useful here: there is all too little funding available to actually improve physical access to our buildings.

Teaching and Research

Many museums see an increased teaching role supporting their institutions to deliver cross-disciplinary teaching drawing on digitised collections. Greater collections digitisation has the potential to increase access and facilitate international collaborations, particularly valuable for research. Museum collections can also be used as a resource for students that require an alternative to fieldwork projects.

...blended learning that provides greater opportunity for cross-disciplinary object based learning and promotes critical thinking. To achieve this we need to consider object based learning spaces and digitised collections that made available through genuinely accessible portals. Teams will need also need individuals with the skills to create digital learning resources.

5.2 What support does the sector need to respond to the opportunities identified?

Financial support

- Clarity around furloughing from those universities yet to authorise its use.
- Greater investment from Research England and HE sector
- Longer-term commitments from major funders for the sector by extending existing funding packages by 1 or 2 years.
- Extension of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (data collected before the 12th May Treasury announcement of the extension on the furlough scheme until the end of October)
- HMRC Exhibition tax return scheme continuation should be promoted.
- Funding to recover lost revenue (as opposed to new activity).

New approaches to income generation

- More partnerships with commercial sponsors, as embraced by the wider sector

- Development of enterprise arms to improve monetisation of assets
- Development of new commercial model and income (shift from touring exhibition focus)
- New forms of philanthropy and engagement with alumni.

Advocacy

The majority of institutions state the importance of advocacy, both internal towards host institutions and to external research bodies and publics.

- *Advocacy to make argument at highest level that university museums are core to the delivery of university teaching and the support of university research as well as defining the uniqueness of the British university experience.*
- *The risks to the sector are very great and critical now is that we raise our voices effectively and in the right places to ensure that we are not forgotten and do not fall between funders and stools.*

Digital Upskilling and Capacity Building

There is an urgent need for support for museums to switch to a digital first approach across public engagement, collections and teaching. Social distancing and remote working will necessitate new digital skills and resources for the short and medium term. The challenge is greatest within smaller organisations with limited resources.

- *Support required is staff resource to carry out digitisation of collections and archives (which will be potentially challenging to raise internally in the current financial situation).*
- *Digital evolution seems inevitable – but we face this with a lack of resource, funding, infrastructure and, in some cases, knowledge.*
- *Smaller museums are going to (continue to) struggle with this and risk being left behind – this will need to be recognised on the level of funding opportunities but also within the sector, because there is a very real tendency for the situation/context of larger museums to dominate the discussion and planning. Training opportunities etc would be useful here.*

Reopening / Remobilisation

University museums need guidance on good practice for social distancing to ensure staff, volunteer and visitor safety.

- *Greater support for staff: visitor services staff and cleaners are some of the lowest paid and undervalued staff in the museum sector, but they are going to be the ones putting into place the measures which protect visitors and make them feel reassured. This is an opportunity for museums to improve the commitments and benefits they make to their staff – to bring them in-house, to reduce the use of zero-hours contracts etc. No museum can open without its front of house staff.*

Evidence

Evidence-based approaches to demonstrating social value will be vital to support advocacy work. The shift to digital first programming, teaching and research challenges existing methods of monitoring activity and evidencing impact and demand new approaches and adequate resourcing.

- *Visitor numbers are likely going to fall – perhaps long term if social distancing measures need to be observed, meaning busy exhibitions and large-scale events are a thing of the past. It would be useful in this context to develop new and more measured metrics of success:*

judging us primarily by visitor numbers has always been a blunt tool, but it is going to become quite an unhelpful one if numbers are significantly reduced.

Support from UMG

Members see a particular role for UMG to co-ordinate advocacy across the sector and share guidance and good practice. Collaboration is particularly important for smaller university museums:

- *Examples of practice, approaches, good news stories and new models from other university museums would be especially useful.*
- *Shared vision and advocacy document for university museums would support local conversations and planning.*
- *In the longer term, strong advocacy messages to VCs and policy makers - along the lines of the advocacy work that the UMG has done previously, but with a substantial updating to reflect current situation.*
- *There is a considerable risk to small, often already underfunded, collections. There might be more consolidation/centralisation of collections within universities. Hopefully there will be larger scale collaboration and support. Sectoral bodies could become more important.*
- *This question may depend on the threat and closure of museums, and perhaps smaller institutions will need to find a common cause with bigger 'parental' homes. This should be set into a national plan for change, not a crisis-response and UMG can play a very important role here.*