

The crisis in UK heritage

A Prospect briefing



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Contents

Summary	3
Why heritage matters	4
A sector in crisis	6
The impact of austerity	7
Covid and the cost-of-living crisis	11
Other factors	15
Issues for review	16

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Summary

The UK's heritage sector is one of its greatest economic strengths, as well as being fundamental to quality of life and pride of place across the country. Since free entry was introduced across large parts of the sector by the last Labour government, it has also served as a powerful engine of education and inclusion. The sector has a strong track record of using comparatively modest amounts of public subsidy to leverage significant additional income from visitors and donors without, for the most part, compromising these objectives.

Today, however, the sector is in crisis. Jobs are being lost, skilled and experienced staff are leaving the sector, and many organisations and sites now face the risk of significant downsizing or closure.

This crisis is the result of a “perfect storm” of factors that have left the sector uniquely vulnerable at this time. The most important of these include:

- The impact of **austerity** since 2010, seen both in direct DCMS support and indirectly through the financial pressure placed on other vital funders such as local authorities and governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This eroded the sector's resilience and left it poorly prepared to weather difficult times
- Lockdowns and other public health measures required to manage the **Covid pandemic**, which impacted the sector's ability to operate and sustain income perhaps more than any other sector of the economy
- Subsequent and ongoing **economic stagnation and the cost-of-living crisis**, which has hit the sector particularly hard at a time when it is desperately struggling to rebuild visitor numbers and self-generated income

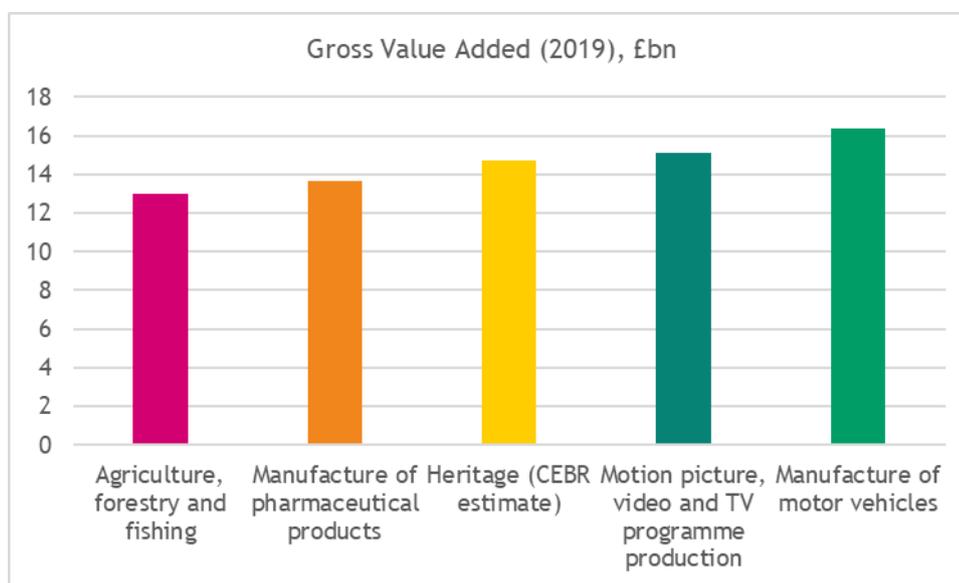
Why heritage matters

Heritage makes a unique and vital contribution to our society and our economy. Numerous studies have confirmed its importance for health and wellbeing, community cohesion, child development and education,¹ raising growth and productivity, and “levelling up” living standards and quality of life across the country. For example:

- a study of cultural engagement in Scotland found that people attending museums or libraries were around 20 per cent more likely to report good health²
- another study found that the positive mental health aspects of visiting museums and heritage sites was most pronounced in areas of high deprivation³
- a comprehensive review of evidence found that “historic places and assets, and interventions associated with them, can have a wide range of beneficial impacts on the physical, mental and social wellbeing of individuals and communities”⁴
- 80 per cent of people say heritage sites and projects make their town or city a better place to live. Key benefits included “supporting local economies, making local areas more physically attractive, encouraging local pride, and increasing social cohesion.”⁵

Research conducted since the onset of the Covid pandemic have highlighted the important role played by the sector in supporting wellbeing and mental health.⁶

Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, the heritage sector was contributing £14.7bn in direct Gross Value Added to the UK economy⁷ – more than agriculture or pharmaceutical manufacturing, and only slightly less than total film and TV production or the entire car industry.⁸ In a single year (2015) UK heritage attracted 13.2 million international tourists, spending a total of £7.4bn.⁹



Source: Office for National Statistics; Centre for Economics and Business Research

If indirect and induced impacts are added in, total GVA rises to £36.6bn.¹⁰ Funding for heritage has been found to have particularly high “multiplier” effects. For example:

- on average, £1 of public sector expenditure on heritage-led regeneration generates £1.60 additional economic activity over a ten-year period¹¹
- a Transparent Economic Assessment model found grants made from the National Lottery Heritage Fund generated a return of over three times what was originally invested¹²
- a 2013 study by Oxford Economics found that the British Library delivers economic value of £5 for every £1 invested¹³
- for every £1 spent on Local Authority Planning Archaeology, the local economy benefits from an average return of £15¹⁴

These impacts are especially important to places where heritage makes a particularly valuable contribution to local and regional economies, such as the North East, Wales, and Scotland.¹⁵

A sector in crisis

Today, however, the UK heritage sector is in crisis. Jobs are being lost, skilled and experienced staff are leaving the sector, and many organisations and sites now face the risk of significant downsizing or closure.

Just a few current examples include:

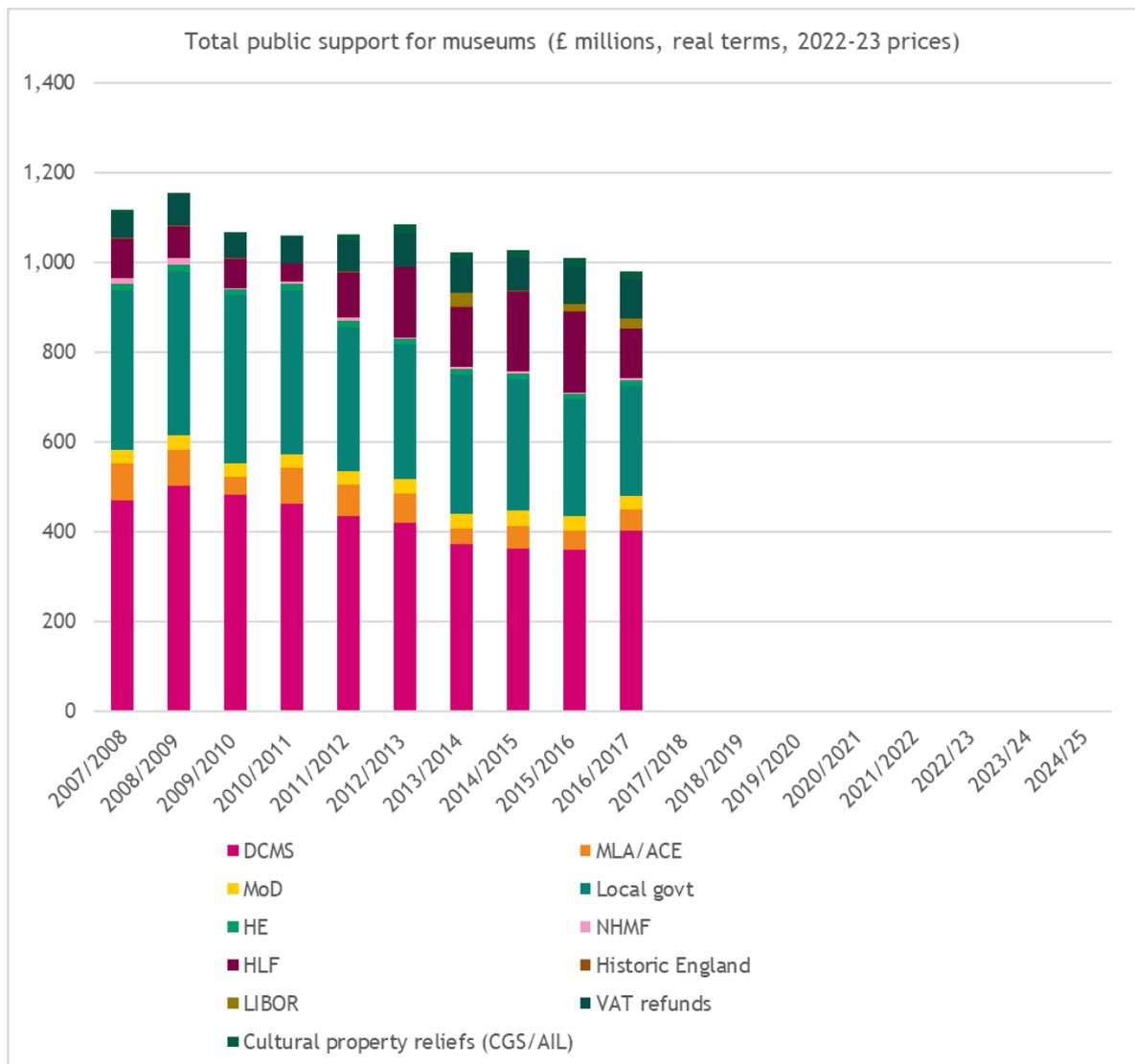
- **National Museums Liverpool** reported to the Government last year that “increased energy costs and the fact that we are still recovering from Covid means NML, like many of our National Museum colleagues, have produced a deficit budget for 23/24.” It has cited affordability as a reason not to pay the additional £1,500 cost-of-living payment mandated by the Government for other Civil Service employees, which is putting a severe strain on employment relations.
- The **Science Museum Group** is currently consulting on redundancies for up to 33 staff, on top of significant redundancies already made in the immediate aftermath of the Covid pandemic.
- **English Heritage** is finding it challenging to reverse falls in visitor numbers enforced by Covid-related lockdowns, particularly for less well-known sites, because of cutbacks to staffing and resources in areas like marketing and digital.
- **Royal Botanic Gardens Kew** has been particularly hard hit by fluctuating energy costs, due the importance of carefully controlled temperatures in greenhouses and labs. It is also now seeking to relocate its Herbarium, which will require significant capital expenditure which risks being traded off against current budgets needed for people and expertise.
- The **Welsh Government** has announced a £16m cut to support for culture, sport and tourism in 2024-25, including a 10.5% cut to Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales and the Arts Council Wales in 2024-25, ostensibly to address funding pressures in the NHS and local government.¹⁶ This is thought likely to lead to the loss of up to 95 jobs in the museum; more than 20 jobs in the National Library of Wales; and 7 jobs in the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. The latter will reduce RCAHMW’s headcount to below 30 and is likely to lead to merger with another body/restructuring.

The impact of austerity

Total taxpayer support for the UK heritage sector is comparatively modest. The Mendoza review of the museum sector in England estimated total public funding – including DCMS Grant-in-Aid, local government spending, and a range of other channels such as Historic England, the Arts Council and Heritage Lottery Fund – at around £850m a year.

If this calculation were broadened to cover other parts of the sector such as historic sites, and other nations of the UK were included, it seems unlikely that the total would exceed £1.5bn.

Compared to total Gross Value Added to the UK economy that has been estimated in the region of £40bn a year, this is not a large outlay. Compared to the tens or hundreds of billions spent on other public services such as education and health – which, as evidence referenced above shows, heritage spending complements and enhances – the amount is smaller still.

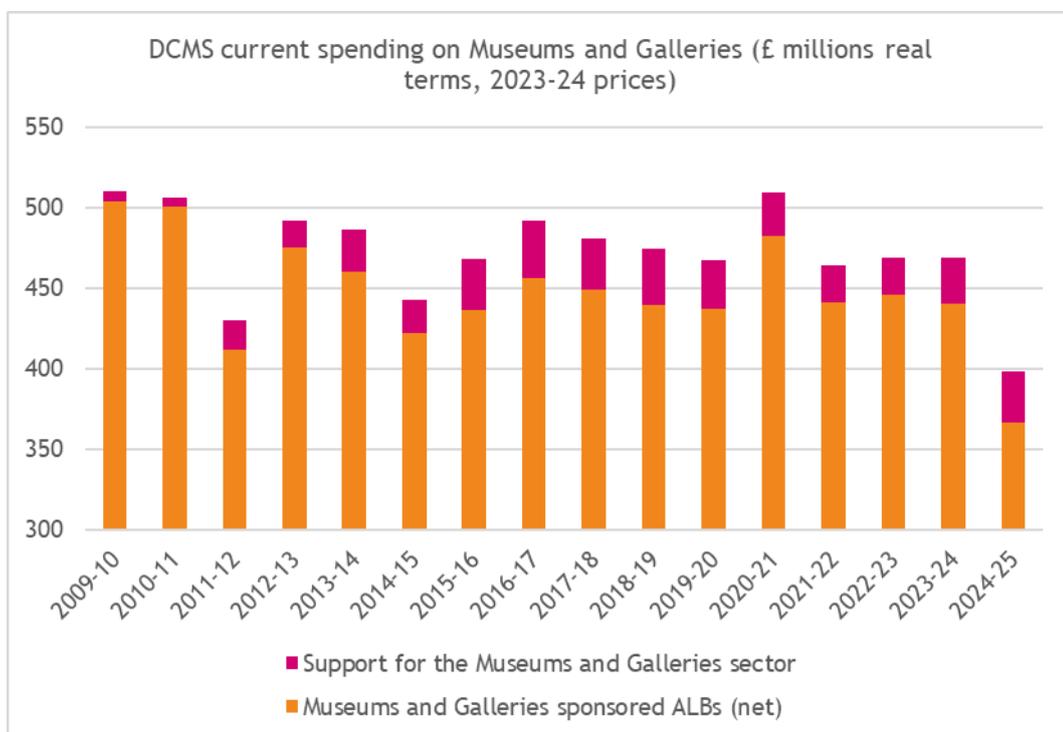


Source: Prospect analysis of figures published in Mendoza review¹⁷

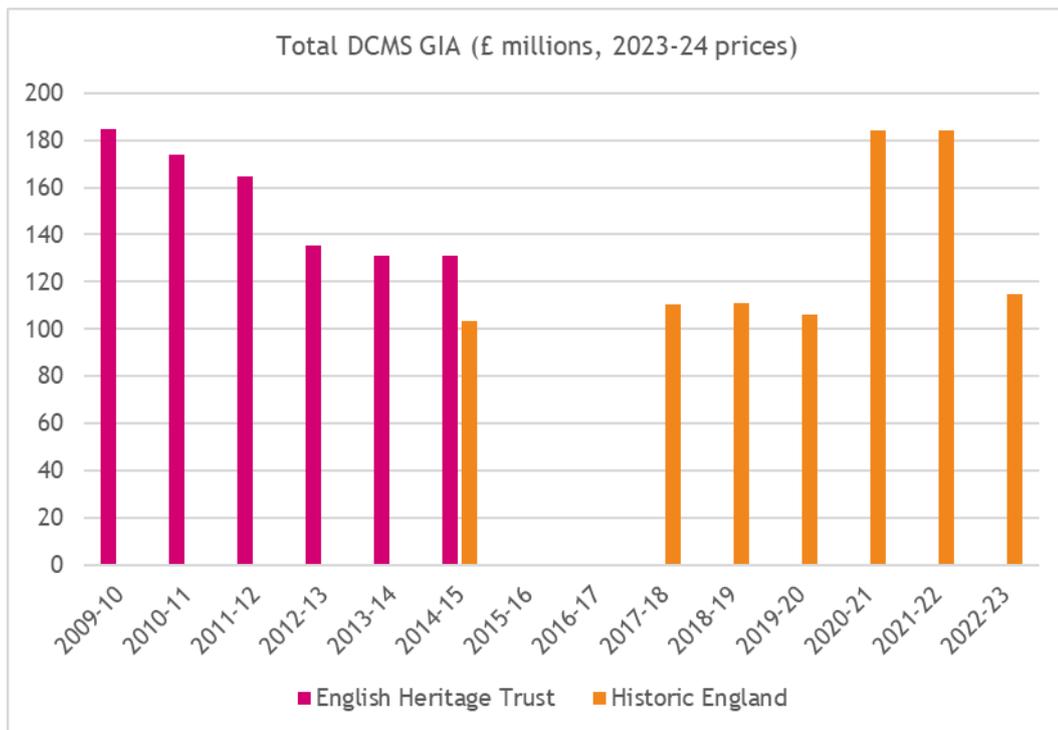
The squeeze on DCMS Grant-in-Aid has been compounded by pressure on other sources. Despite this, public support for the sector has been cut sharply in real terms over recent years:

- Figures compiled for the Mendoza review show that, by 2016-17, DCMS funding for museums in England had fallen by 17% in real terms, and local government funding by 34%
- Prospect analysis of DCMS publications shows that, despite some recovery in the latter part of the last decade non-capital Grant-in-Aid and other support for museums and galleries was still 8% lower in 2023-24 than in 2009-10, and is set to be cut further in 2024-25 to a level 22% lower
- Analysis of DCMS figures also shows that DCMS Grant-in-Aid to Historic England in 2022-23 was also 38% lower in real terms than Grant-in-Aid to English Heritage in 2009-10

A recent analysis commissioned by Arts Council England found that between 2009-10 and 2022-23 total expenditure by local authorities on museums and galleries fell from £268.45m to £241.01m, a decrease of 16% in cash terms and 36.7% in real terms.¹⁸



Source: Prospect analysis of DCMS data



Source: Prospect analysis of DCMS data¹⁹

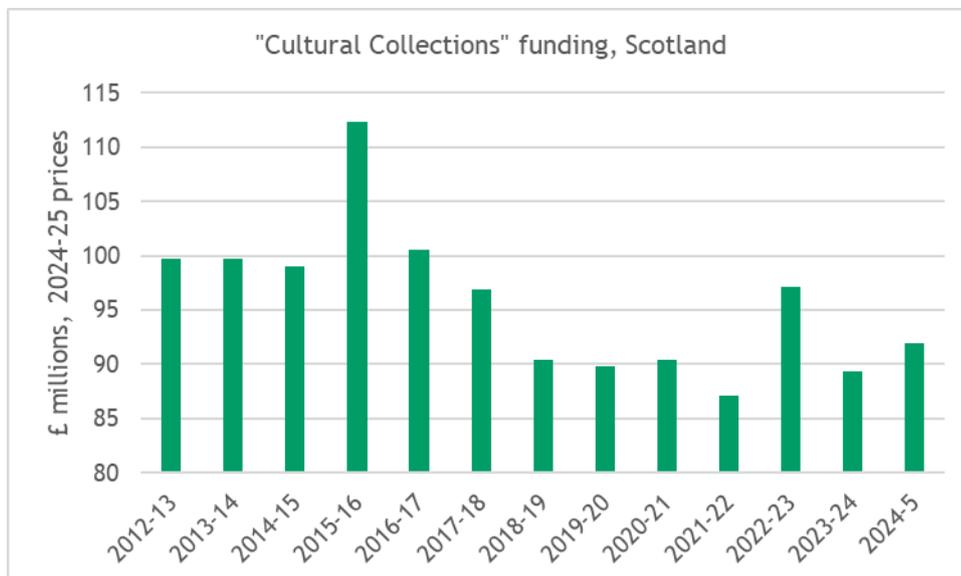
Comparable figures for heritage funding in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are less readily available but the experience of Prospect members suggests that they would tell a similar story as governments struggle to manage priorities within ever-tighter real terms allocations.

In Wales, for example:

- The 2023 Tailored Review found that “like the culture and heritage sectors across the UK, [Amgueddfa Cymru/Museum Wales] faces considerable headwinds. In recent years AC has been using reserves to support day-to-day spending. On present trends reserves will be exhausted by 2025/26 unless there is a significant increase in Grant-In-Aid”²⁰
- The 2020 Tailored Review of the National Library of Wales found that in recent years has been “difficult” to “ensure that the NLW is financially sustainable ... partly due to the financial pressures the Welsh Government has been under, and the Government’s inability to make longer-term commitments for more than one year”²¹
- The Arts Council of Wales warned at the end of 2023 that it had already lost a third of its real-terms funding since 2010,²² before accounting for further cuts imposed in the 2024-25 budget.
- Historic Buildings and Places warned earlier this year that “Wales’s heritage is increasingly at risk due to incremental underfunding of the sector over the last decade. The historic environment is a finite resource and these services, cultural traditions and jobs need to be supported.”²³

In Scotland, Prospect has warned that “Covid support both from the UK and Scottish Government has largely dried up and most organisation have now fully reopened properties with the inherent overheads this implies. Settlements for public sector bodies have been exceptionally challenging with all organisations struggling to reach a balance between recovery, investment and staff. All organisations are struggling against the challenge of rising costs caused by spiralling inflation. They are also struggling to recruit and retain staff particularly within security and visitor service grades where the job market is becoming increasingly competitive”.²⁴

Scotland's overall Culture Budget was cut sharply in 2023-24, with the cut falling most severely on Creative Scotland.²⁵ Overall culture funding has fallen 4% in real terms since 2012-13 according to analysis by Campaign for the Arts. Within this, the "Cultural Collections" budget which supports National Museums Scotland and Museums Galleries Scotland has seen an 8% real terms cut since 2012-13.



Museums Galleries Scotland has warned that "There is a misalignment in Scotland's culture policy ambitions and the current lack of investment in museums and galleries – a key component to Scotland's culture and tourism economy".²⁶ The National Museum of Scotland has admitted it is becoming "frayed around the edges" and risks long-term decline without a funding rethink.²⁷

Against this background new discussions are emerging about the possibility of a greater reliance on charging, despite the setback to inclusion, participation and overall impact this could entail. The Welsh Deputy Culture Minister has warned that entry fees could be considered for Wales's national museums in response to funding challenges.²⁸ Museums Galleries Scotland has warned that "In the absence of alternatives, some organisations have cited a need to consider whether they can charge for admission to create income."²⁹ *The Times* has reported that this is now being actively discussed "behind closed doors".³⁰

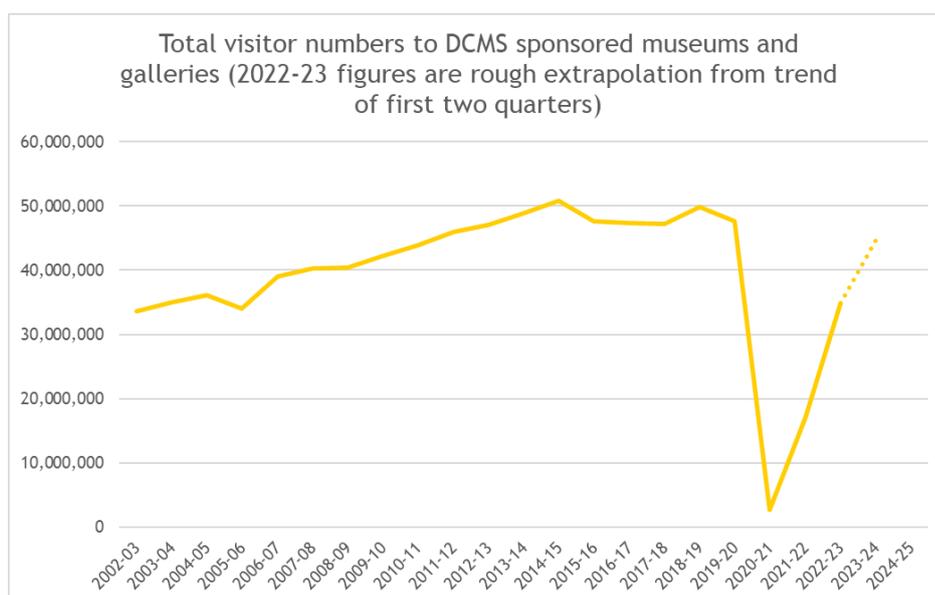
Free entry to museums and galleries was one of the proudest and most lasting achievements of the last Labour government (the current Conservative Chancellor celebrated it as a "landmark policy" when he was Culture Secretary).³¹ It was enabled by around £100m additional funding for museums and galleries announced in the 1998 Spending Review,³² and measures in the 2001 budget allowing free (as well as charging) museums to reclaim VAT³³ (at a cost then estimated at around £10-15m a year).³⁴ At the time some in the sector warned that the long term success of the policy required "the maintenance by central government of satisfactory levels of grant in aid".³⁵ In 2007 sector leaders warned again that "free admission was only made possible through additional public funding".³⁶ This is clearly being borne out today as years of cuts put this invaluable public service at risk.

Covid and the cost-of-living crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic, associated opening and travel restrictions, and other public health measures such as social distancing requirements, had a devastating impact on heritage sector revenues.³⁷ Academic research has found that key heritage sectors including museums, botanical and zoological gardens, and historical sites and buildings were among the worst-hit sectors of the economy, with drops in activity of 20 to 40 per cent in 2020.³⁸

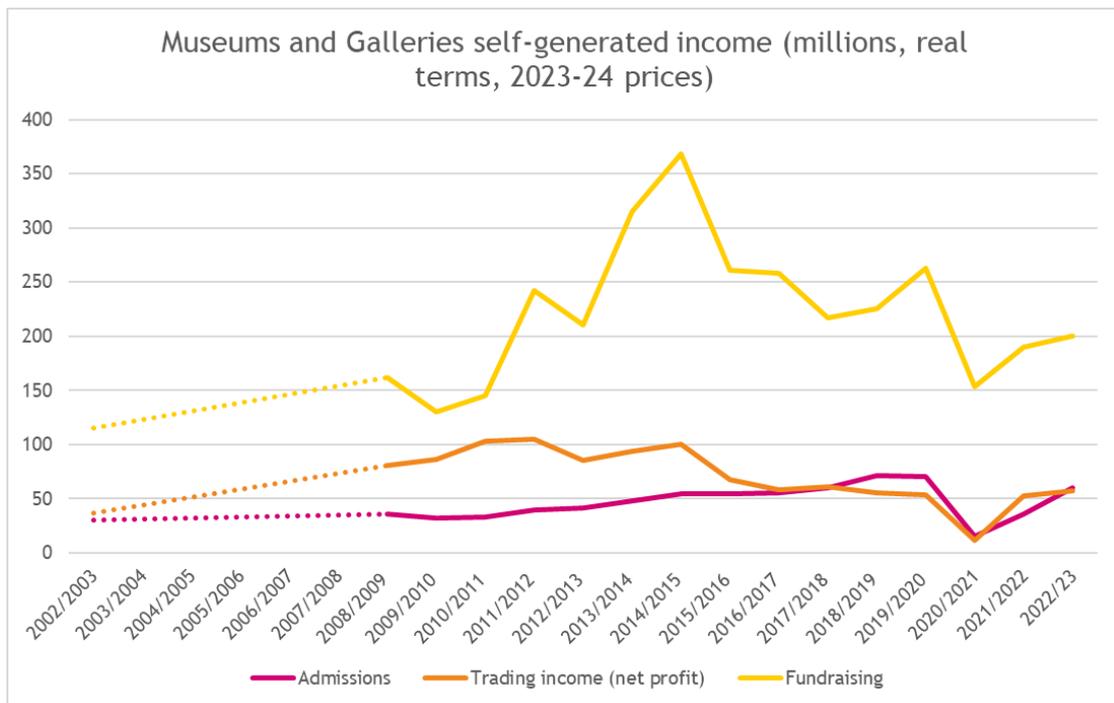
The disruption has been longer-lasting than in many other sectors, with visitor numbers yet to fully recover. The sector is particularly dependent on overseas tourism, which remained relatively subdued for a long period after the lifting of travel restrictions.³⁹ Staffing cuts made during the lockdown period have left organisations unable to rapidly scale back up once restrictions were lifted, meaning some galleries or attractions remain closed even as they struggle to tempt back visitors.⁴⁰ Disappointing experiences can then have even more long-lasting effects on reputations and viability over the longer term.

In 2022, visitor numbers at major museums such as the British Museum, Tate Modern, Victoria and Albert and National Gallery were still very substantially down on 2019.⁴¹ Total visits to UK museums in the first half of 2023 were still 23% lower than the same period in 2019.⁴² Figures released in March 2024 by the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions suggested that “visitor numbers to the UK’s museums, galleries, cathedrals, zoos, castles and country houses are increasing but remain stubbornly below pre-pandemic levels”. The lingering impact of Covid lockdowns on international tourism and the behaviours of over-65s were thought to be factors.⁴³



Source: Prospect analysis of DCMS data⁴⁴

The latest data for DCMS funded museums and galleries shows total admissions revenue still below pre-Covid levels in real terms, with trading income back to 2019-20 levels though still significantly down on the earlier part of the decade.

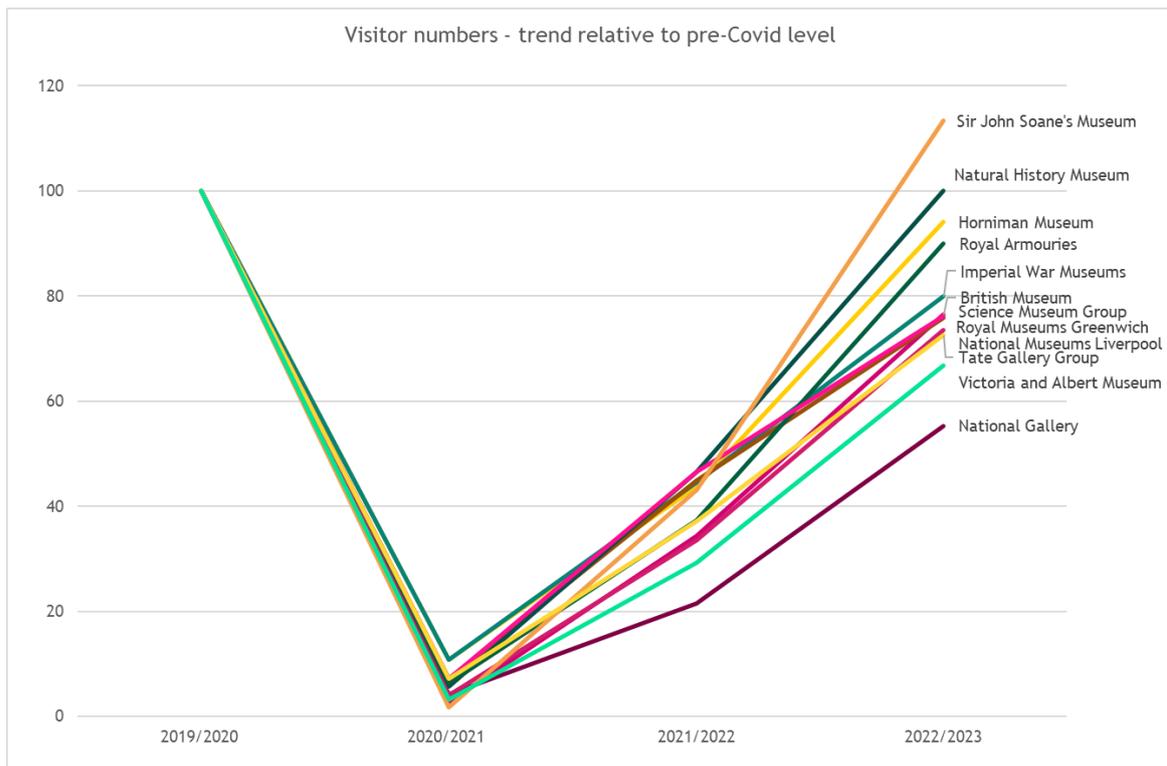


Source: Prospect analysis of DCMS data⁴⁵

This is however an aggregate or average picture that conceals important inequalities among organisations and locations. There are clear signs that some institutions have been harder hit than others – with, for example, the Natural History Museum reporting that 2022-23 saw “strong recovery in visitor numbers to 5.3m (2022: 2.5m), comparable to pre-pandemic levels”,⁴⁶ but National Museums Liverpool warning that “full recovery will not be realised until the earliest 2024/25”.⁴⁷

Internationally known museums and tourist sites have advantages that other equally important organisations and places lack, leaving them more reliant on building loyal bases of repeat visitors, stimulating word-of-mouth recommendations, or proactive communications and marketing where capacity is much denuded after a decade of austerity.

These divergences are brought out clearly in the latest DCMS data, which shows a wide range of experiences for different DCMS funded museums and galleries coming out of Covid, with the Natural History Museum back to 2019-20 levels but many others still 20-30% below.



Source: Prospect analysis of DCMS data⁴⁸

These challenges have been compounded by the cost-of-living crisis, which has impeded the recovery of a sector which, for most people, is seen as a discretionary activity, and additionally made it harder to convert even partial recovery in attendance into additional revenues as visitors exercise more restraint over voluntary donations or spending on cafes, shops and special exhibitions and events.

In Scotland, Museums Galleries Scotland has stressed that

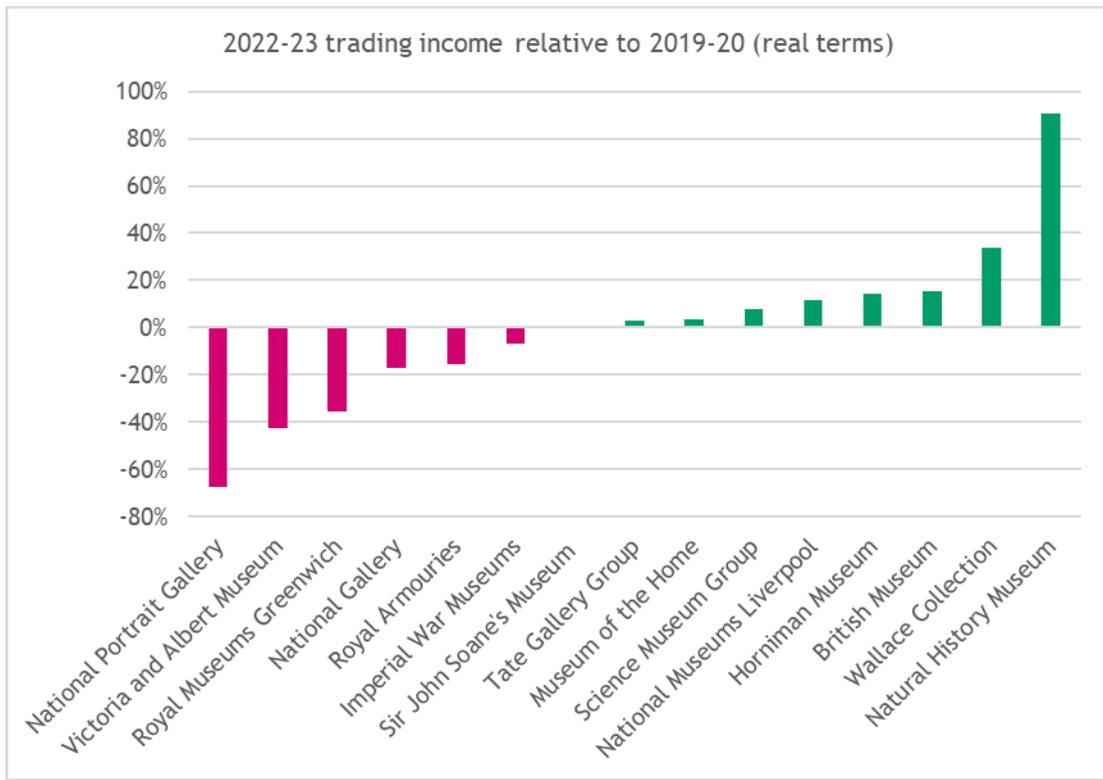
“the cost of living crisis has made it extremely challenging to attract visitors which is compounded by the fact that the cuts are impacting on the quality of what these organisations can offer and their ability to maintain the buildings that house these important collections... avenues to help raise funds such as marketing, conservation, events and exhibitions have to be carefully managed or stopped completely in an effort to meet budget savings targets, which in turn reduces the ability to raise income and drive visitors”.⁴⁹

These pressures have had a further impact on trading income – revenue from shops, cafes and other facilities that supplement core admissions revenue. Again, these challenges have not been experienced equally by different organisations – latest DCMS data shows a wide divergence in the extent to which centrally supported museums in England have been able to return to pre-Covid levels of trading income.

These pressures have also been very evident on institutions and sites that do not receive direct funding from the Government, and are so even more reliant on trading income or, in some cases, membership subscriptions. The National Trust describes a “challenging backdrop of high inflation and a cost-of-living crisis” that has both increased its operational costs and depressed visitor numbers and membership income relative to targets⁵⁰ Another self-funding organisation known to Prospect has this year identified a number of planned investments in areas such as new

technology, carbon reduction and profile-raising that may have to be deferred despite the negative impact this could have on future revenue growth or strategic objectives.

In Scotland similar challenges are faced by National Trust Scotland, the National Mining Museum and the Collective Gallery in Edinburgh.



Source: Prospect analysis of DCMS data⁵¹

Other factors

In addition to the major drivers set out above, a number of other issues have been highlighted as potential contributors to the sector's current difficulties. These include:

- Cultural organisations are facing more scrutiny and challenge over their fundraising and sources of donations.⁵² One sector expert has noted that “While it might be justifiable to refuse funding from unethical sources, the questions for art organisations remain – who will step in to fill the gap?”⁵³
- Both donors and political decisionmakers are often likely to favour ad hoc “top ups” or financial injections for particular projects (whether a new building or a special exhibition) because of their symbolic or “PR” value, over steady support for running costs and in-house capability development. This can create pressure to prioritise high-profile capital projects in the absence of the resources necessary to fully make the most of them
- Low pay is a longstanding problem in the sector, both for highly qualified heritage professionals whose salaries are typically strikingly out of line with their levels of specialist skill and expertise, and for the large numbers of less qualified, often casualised public-facing staff in retail, hospitality and facilities management roles.⁵⁴ Longstanding and costly difficulties with recruitment, retention and turnover have been sharply exacerbated by recent inflation and labour market pressures
- Uncertainty over future funding trajectories, typically confirmed only a year in advance, and lack of flexibility around carrying over underspends or overspends, is making it hard for organisations to plan investments or develop capacity where this entails financial commitments over the longer term. This exacerbates the chilling effect of current heightened uncertainty over future visitor numbers and self-generated income
- Increased concerns over risks of theft and cyber-attacks have left many organisations switching resources into increased spending on security measures⁵⁵

Issues for review

Given the importance of heritage sites and institutions to our society and economy, and the damaging strains they are currently under, the financial and funding predicament of the sector needs urgently to be reviewed. This needs to include:

- a full evidence-based and in-depth analysis of the impact of the Covid pandemic and subsequent cost-of-living crisis on heritage organisations and in particular the challenges many still face in rebuilding capacity, profile, attendance, income and long-term financial health
- a review of staffing and skills pressures in the sector. This should include investigation of the barriers to effective utilisation of freedoms enjoyed by some organisations to set pay outside the Civil Service pay remit to address recruitment, retention and turnover problems, and the case for better pay transparency and pay progression in publicly funded heritage bodies to support retention and career development
- the case for giving heritage organisations more medium and long-term certainty over public funding streams to enable better planning, innovation and capacity development
- the case for giving heritage organisations greater flexibility and autonomy over allocations of funding between years, and between capital and current budgets
- evaluation of the extent to which funding for heritage organisations and projects can complement or enable savings in other areas of spending such as education, community regeneration, or health and social care, and consideration of closer working and budget-pooling across departmental and organisational boundaries
- the overall economic and social benefits of restoring real terms current funding to pre-austerity levels.

The contribution made by UK heritage to our country is unique and irreplaceable. It is a national asset we must take care of if we are to preserve these benefits for future generations.

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- ¹⁷ Prospect analysis of figures compiled for Mendoza review, using HMT GDP deflator y. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-mendoza-review-an-independent-review-of-museums-in-england>
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- ²⁴ <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/committees/constitution-europe-external-affairs-and-culture-committee/9-prospect.pdf>
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- ²⁶ <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/committees/constitution-europe-external-affairs-and-culture-committee/correspondence/2023/61-museums-galleries-scotland.pdf>
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- ³³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1684143.stm>
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⁵³ <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/museum-fundraising-dodgy-donors-philanthropy/>

⁵⁴ For more detail see <https://library.prospect.org.uk/download/2022/00591> ; also <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2022/07/hourly-pay-for-some-museum-roles-down-25-since-2011/>.

⁵⁵ <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/british-museum-to-fully-digitize-collection-following-theft-scandal-2381495>; <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2024/01/british-library-to-share-learning-from-cyberattack/>

The crisis in UK heritage

A Prospect briefing