

Museums and the cost of living crisis

About the Museums Association

The Museums Association (MA) is a membership organisation representing and supporting museums and people who work for and with them, throughout the UK. Our membership of 12,000 includes all types of museums, from small volunteer-run local museums to large national institutions and people working in all types of roles from directors to trainees. For more information about the MA, see our website: <http://www.museumsassociation.org/home>

The MA is deeply concerned about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on museums across the UK and in Wales. The rapidly increasing rate of inflation and energy costs are having a disproportionate impact on the sector in the following areas:

Workforce

Museum workers are already poorly paid compared to equivalent roles elsewhere, as evidenced by our [2017 Salary Survey](#). Double digit inflation combined with pay increases that are below the rate of inflation mean that museum workers are seeing their real terms incomes decreasing at the fastest rate for decades.

Many workers in the sector will struggle to meet rapidly rising energy and food costs in coming months, which is already having hugely negative effects on both physical and mental wellbeing.

In addition, poor pay in museums is also leading to staffing shortages, in particular for front of house positions.

Institutions

Museums are facing rapidly increasing costs across their operations and many of our members are reporting increases of 300-500% in their energy costs. This is causing significant problems for the sector as organisations seek to maintain appropriate conditions for audiences and for collections. This impact is disproportionate for museums which are often situated in energy-hungry historic buildings.

Other costs are also rising, including wage bills and capital project costs and there are other pressures on parent organisation budgets, such as local authority services. These stresses come when the sector is still in the process of rebuilding after the pandemic and a decade of austerity. Many organisations are not in a strong position to deal with another economic shock.

Audiences

The public is becoming less willing to spend on paid-for museum experiences, including charging museums and temporary exhibitions. This is evidenced in the latest research which shows that the cost of living has now overtaken Covid as the principal reason to not visit an attraction. This is a significant blow for museums that were successfully rebuilding audiences post-pandemic.

Meanwhile, museums with free entry will see an increase in use by the public as they remain one of the few cost-free days out for the public. Over the winter museums are likely to be used as safe warm spaces by people unable to heat their own homes.

We are calling for:

Pay – we are calling for museums and funding bodies to work together to ensure that substantial pay offers are made to the museum workforce this financial year. Museum workers need pay settlements that will enable them to keep pace with the cost-of-living pressures that they are experiencing.

Investment – We are calling for governments, arms-length bodies and local authorities to work together to invest strategically in the museum sector. Maintaining revenue support is vital for organisations to stay open in this challenging period. We are also calling for specific support for museums to ensure that they are able to act as warm spaces for communities during the winter.

- The Westminster government should urgently create a new round of the Culture Recovery Fund distributed under the Barnett Formula, to ensure that museums are able to survive the winter.

Energy bill support – Whilst we welcome the six-month energy price cap for businesses and charities, which will help museums in the short-term to get through the winter period, it is only a temporary fix and the details of how it will work are still unclear.

We are calling for urgent action to help museums meet the rapidly rising cost of energy. Energy is a large, fixed cost which museums are obliged to cover in order to stay open and to maintain environmental standards for their collections.

- To meet this challenge, the Westminster government should introduce an energy price cap for museums. (It is important to note that tax cuts or business rates rebates are unlikely to help museums given that most organisations already benefit from substantial tax discounts.) This support should be put in place to ensure that museums are able to act as warm spaces for communities during the winter; and maintain the standards required to care for public collections.

In the longer term we need strategic investment to support museums become more energy efficient and environmentally friendly, so we can reduce our carbon footprint and create sustainable futures for our organisations and our communities.

Many museums up and down the UK have pledged to open their doors as warm, safe spaces for their communities over the winter. Museums are ideal places to provide this service; they are free or low cost, have the facilities and amenities that the public need and of course they have amazing collections, stories, exhibitions and programmes that can keep people entertained and engaged for hours. But in order for museums to do that, they need support and investment now.