

Policy Brief

Museums, Crisis and Covid-19: Vitality and Vulnerabilities

Museums and Community Wellbeing

Ulster University

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KEY INFO

Research question: To investigate the offer museums can make to support community resilience during and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis.

Policy area or themes

- Places and Communities
- Creative Industries
- Arts & Health and Social Prescribing
- Skills and Training

Methods: Qualitative interviews and focus groups with museum sector employees and stakeholders in Northern Ireland / Work-in-Progress workshops (feedback opportunity)

Geographical area: Northern Ireland

Research stage: In progress

Summary of the research

The Covid-19 crisis is having a significant impact on the museum sector, nationally and globally. It is exposing the vulnerability of museums, their staff, projects and collections. Elsewhere, innovative programming is demonstrating the vitality and versatility of an engaged, responsive and participatory museum service, proving that museums are places of relevance even in a crisis.

This part of our research project focuses on the contribution museums make to community wellbeing. Drawing on the expertise of work package leaders – lecturer and accredited therapist Dr Breda Friel and senior lecturer in sociology Dr Philip McDermott – our research examines how community wellbeing and resilience have been supported by museums through the pandemic. The work reiterates the integral social role of museums and offers recommendations for how this can be best supported and encouraged.

Policy recommendations

The following four recommendations are based on in-progress research focused on the topic of museums and community wellbeing.

1. One of our interviewees noted that health and wellbeing work was becoming a key component of their museum's operation even before Covid-19. This work has taken a new form during the pandemic, as museums sought to create digital activities that maintained a connection with community groups and supported health and wellbeing.

We recommend that the role of museums as formal spaces of wellbeing and social engagement, based upon strong qualitative evidence, is better recognised as a strategic priority. This should be embedded within government social policies, aligning with health and social care.

2. As museums utilise more digital forms of practice, an awareness is needed of the significance of newly reached digital-communities.

We recommend that future museum funding nurtures opportunities for further innovation, including digital skills training. This includes training to raise awareness of the consequences of digital dependence and of digital exclusion. Funding should also support adequate staff levels to meet the demands of a 'blended' museum, providing online content alongside in-person activities.

3. Our research into community wellbeing also gives focus to museum workers as a set of communities. While the furlough scheme was welcomed, the uncertainty of repeated lockdowns has had an emotional impact on this community. The impact Covid-19 on long-term career development may not be seen for some time.

We recommend that job security, continued professional development and opportunities for career progression be built into future museum policy and the provision of funding.

4. Museums across Northern Ireland have found innovative ways to remain in contact with key communities throughout the pandemic.

We recommend that initiatives which demonstrate potential for long-term social benefit should be supported with continued funding, with strong qualitative evidence being accepted in support of such applications.

Key findings

Through interviews, focus groups and workshops our in-progress research has produced the following findings so far:

- Many museums have engaged in health and wellbeing work pre-pandemic. These skills are already present in the sector.
- This aspect of museum work should be supported through government policy.
- The importance of this work is supported by strong qualitative evidence, the value of which must be recognised as much as quantitative evidence.



- Digital technologies have allowed continued connectivity, and a reach to new audiences and communities, during lockdowns. The continuation of this work should be supported, but an awareness of digital exclusion is important.
- Absences from work through the furlough scheme, increased job precarity and the emotional impact of the pandemic have had an impact on museum workers, a community themselves. It's important that future funding and support for the sector considers the wellbeing of the museum worker community.
- Museums have developed innovative methods of supporting community wellbeing throughout the pandemic. Many of these initiatives, developed in response to an emergency situation, merit long term support beyond covid.

Further information

Further information on the Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project can be found at our website:

<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19>

Work-in-Progress briefing documents from which this policy document is drawn can be accessed here:

<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19/outputs>

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