

Policy Brief

Museums, Crisis and Covid-19: Vitality and Vulnerabilities Finance and Furlough

Ulster University

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KEY INFO

Research question: Critically evaluate how museums nationally and internationally have adapted their pedagogy and practices in response to Covid-19, and how the most effective of those can be sustained for immediate and long-term needs.

Policy area or themes

- Ethics, Procurement and Governance
- 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

Based at Ulster University Museums, Crisis and Covid-19: Vitality and Vulnerabilities is a UKRI Rapid Response project (AH/V012819/1) focusing on how museums can contribute to community resilience and wellbeing in a time of crisis. It addresses sector adaptability as it adjusts audience engagement and collaboration (such as new collecting practices, programming and exhibitions) in response to Covid-19.

The devolved nature of government in the United Kingdom resulted in a complex web of relief policies and implementation timescales across the four nations. Focusing on the first 18 months of the pandemic (March 2020 – September 2021), this policy brief responds to the financial support packages made available to the museum sector to mitigate against the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis.

Policy recommendations

The following four policy recommendations are focused on finance, funding and furlough. They are taken from work-in-progress analysis.

1. While the furlough scheme was seen as a 'lifesaver' by many institutions, the scheme entailed long-term absence from work. This may have an impact on staff through the loss of training and career development opportunities.

We recommend that additional funding be directed towards staff training and career development to mitigate against any long-term impacts of furlough. We also recommend that research continue into the impact of Covid-19 on career prospects for early or mid-career professionals.

2. Significant emergency funding packages were made available to support institutions forced to close, including a £33m share of the £1.57bn UK Government arts and culture recovery fund. These funds were allocated and distributed at speed, as was necessary. However, at times this resulted in pressures to spend funds rapidly, for example with some funds allocated as late as mid-February 2021 with a requirement to spend by the end of March and the end of the financial year.

We recommend that government bodies review how greater flexibility can be included within allocations of emergency funding.

3. Initial funding streams were well utilised by museums across Northern Ireland. However, we are beginning to see early signs that current funding opportunities are being utilised less.

We recommend further grant application training be provided via organisations such as Northern Ireland Museums Council and the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

4. Lockdown saw a dramatic shift towards online provision of museum content. We are now seeing significant demand for some of this provision to continue as museums open physically once more. This 'blended' approach, providing in-person and digital content, will require significant resource of staff time and finances.

We recommend significant investment in staffing alongside support for digital skills training. This provision of digital skills should be reflected in museums studies degrees. It is essential that the incoming sector staff have the necessary skills to work within a 'blended' vocation.

Key findings

Our research, based on interviews with museum sector staff and stakeholders across Northern Ireland, has reiterated the importance of financial support provided in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. These unprecedented measures have brought them significant lessons and challenges, which we continue to follow through our research. Our findings so far include:

- The furlough scheme viewed as a 'lifesaver' by staff and institutions alike
- Strong communication between management and furloughed staff was key to mitigating the emotional impacts of periods off work



- The long-term impacts of lengthy staff absences (through furlough and illness) are yet to be seen. Responding to associated challenges will require high quality research and adequate funding for museum sector staff.
- Restrictive deadlines for the spending of government allocated funding can place pressure on institutions to spend rapidly, rather than respond reflexively to ever-changing needs within emergency situations.
- The return to in-person museum events alongside the continued providing of digital services will require significant resources, particularly to support staff who are already faced with stretched workloads. It is essential that funding is provided to support institutions and staff in meeting these challenges.

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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