DEMOS

HOW DO WE RE-ENERGISE BRITAIN'S MUSEUMS?

BASED ON RESEARCH FROM THE JOINT PROGRAMMING INITIATIVE ON CULTURAL HERITAGE AND GLOBAL CHANGE

Cultural Heritage AND GLOBAL CHANGE

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

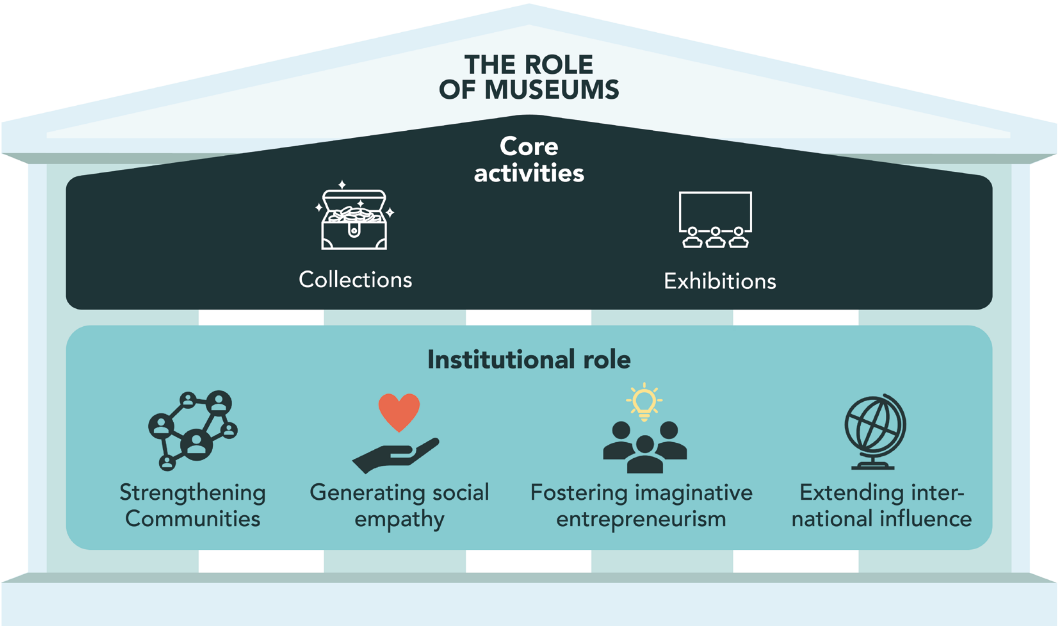
Demos is working to build more effective public services, an economy better aligned with citizen's needs, and greater trust across communities and our democracy. Museums can play a role in all those efforts, as they provide services to the public which can strengthen communities, generate economic activity and extend our international influence - trends which Demos has emphasised over its 30-year history. With over 40 million visits to national museums and galleries last year in total, these impacts should not be understated.

This paper is funded by the Joint Programming Initiative on Cultural Heritage and Global Change, which has run the two-year research project, *Museums and Industry: Long Histories of Collaboration*, looking into how Britain's museum sector can work more effectively. This briefing paper outlines the lessons we can learn from that research, with a focus on long-term thinking, building expertise, and empowering staff. It aims to generate a policy debate around forward-looking reform for museums and the wider cultural and heritage sector.

INTRODUCTION

Museums - defined by the Museums Association as 'institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society' - are an essential asset for our national culture.[1] Around half of Britons visit a museum at least once a year, and nine in ten say museums are important to UK culture.[2] In total, there were 42.5 million visits to the UK's national museums and galleries last year.[3]

Museums are publicly well-known for their core activities: their collections, made up of historically or culturally significant objects that they hold and preserve, and their exhibitions, in which parts of their collection are put on display for the public to enjoy. Arising from these activities, however, is a wider role that museums can play as national, cultural, and educational institutions. Museums have the capacity to strengthen communities, generate social empathy, foster imaginative entrepreneurism, and extend international influence.



Expectations on the role that museums should play - particularly its institutional role - have been contested over time, and the requirements on them have changed dramatically as a result. This has left the sector facing multiple tensions around its purpose, diminishing its confidence and vitality. Based on findings from the project *Museums and Industry: Long Histories of Collaboration* funded by the *Joint Programming Initiative (JPI) on Cultural Heritage and Global Change*, this briefing paper summarises that history, the various tensions, and the questions we need to answer to re-energise the sector. Lessons from this can be drawn from across the GLAM sector (galleries, libraries, archives and museums).[4]

1 Museums Association, 'FAQs: What is a museum?', https://www.museumsassociation.org/about/faqs/#what-is-a-museum
2 National Museums Directors' Council, Survey highlights huge public support for UK museums, 9 May 2024, https://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/news/yougov-survey/
3 DCMS, Museums and galleries monthly visits, 13 February 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/museums-and-galleries-monthly-visits
4 Museums and Industry: Long Histories of Collaboration, Research Repository, https://sciencemuseumgroup.iro.bl.uk/collections/afa7fa4c-4412-48e8-a97b-4f16456ad076?locale=en&view=gallery

A BRIEF HISTORY
FROM PRESERVATION TO PROVISION

1940s-50s
A state arts policy begins to be developed following WW2, with a focus on preserving national heritage

1950s-60s
Cultural policy moves away from a focus mainly on preservation, towards ensuring greater public provision of cultural and heritage

1970s
Inspired by 'Visitor Attractions', museums experiment with new commercial models to ensure they meet the demands of policy makers and the public

1980s
The museum sector is given more freedom to respond to public demands, but this entails an increased focus on organisational management as opposed to cultural assets

1980s-90s
The priorities of government sees museums rebalance their financial models with national policies (e.g. the National Curriculum) and funders (e.g. the National Lottery)

1990s-2000s
The creation of DCMS motivates museums to increasingly develop metrics that illustrate the social benefits of the sector

2000s-2010s
Funding challenges place limits on museums' public provision and they face increasing public challenge over their funding and ethics

The state's arts policy - developed following WW2 - initially focussed on preservation; supporting the survival of national heritage, and its use as a cultural asset, during a period of international conflict and tension. But in successive decades – particularly after the 1965 publication of the first national arts policy – museums policy increasingly focussed on the provision of cultural and heritage education to the public, and in turn on generating culture.

Through the 1970s - as affluence spread and a sense grew of unfulfilled demand for culture and education - this new role for museums strengthened. Many moved towards new commercial activity and 'visitor attractions', experimenting with admission fees and blockbuster shows. At the same time, some moved to align more with national policy - a role consolidated through the formation of the National Curriculum in 1988 and National Lottery in 1994. Concern for preservation diminished further after the Cold War ended and anxiety about the cultural threat faded.

The changing role of museums had wider political impacts on the sector. A policy consensus was formed around the sector's need for greater 'freedom', in part to respond more flexibly to the varied new public demands for culture. Yet, increasing freedom came with museums taking responsibility over their own organisational setup. As such, the organisational demands on museums expanded - for example in developing corporate plans and ensuring financial sustainability - while the role of curators diminished in relative importance. Changes in the museums' organisational structure reflect these changes.

Science Museum Organisational Structure		
	BEFORE 1987	Physical Sciences – Wellcome (Medicine) – Transport – Engineering Museum Services – Administration – Library
	AFTER 1987	Collections Management Public Services – Resources Management – Marketing Research and Information Services

In the 21st century, the growing role of museums in providing cultural and heritage education has been associated with increased scrutiny of their funding and ethics.

TENSIONS FACING MUSEUMS AND THEIR ROLE IN SOCIETY

Since the 1990s, museums have faced three growing and interrelated tensions, in terms of (1) their purpose, (2) their people, and (3) their incentives.

1. Purpose: How should museums balance short-term outcomes vs a longer-term overarching purpose?

Through the latter half of the 20th century, museums became more geared towards temporary, revenue-generating exhibitions, alignment with specific social or educational campaigns, and growth through capital projects. This helped ensure continued interest in museums, and support for its public subsidy.

Yet, just as short political cycles create barriers to longer-term policymaking, the drive for museums to deliver shorter-term, tangible outcomes can work against the pursuit of longer-term objectives. In particular, while long-term preservation and custodianship of artefacts was at one point the central purpose of museums, this has struggled to retain attention.

This tension came to the fore in 2023 when the British Museum - consistently the most frequently visited museum in the country - faced controversy after it was revealed that up to 1,500 items were missing or had been stolen. An independent review called on the museum to keep a comprehensive register of all items in its collections. Yet, this work requires investing resources and a clearer focus on custodianship - which may involve trade-offs.

Both functions may be important, but how should they be balanced?

2. People: To what extent should museum staff be geared towards tangible outputs vs developing curatorial expertise and foundational knowledge?

Museums' growing 'independence' since the 1980s has increasingly led them to take on non-core functions. Some estates once maintained by the Civil Service became the responsibility of museums, and the sector had to grow new layers of managerial and bureaucratic staff for corporate management. Over time the organisational importance of core museum skills has been displaced. The general pattern saw tenured specialists being replaced by junior, fixed-term staff and managers, often spending resources on outsourcing, consultants, and specialist agencies. Short-term contracts limited the long-term build-up of expertise in a particular collection. Low pay has also contributed to short-termism - with the arts sector having one of the highest rates of low-paid jobs in the UK.[5]

Building expertise and foundational knowledge is not just an end-in-itself, but can enable novel and valuable uses of a collection in research and exhibitions. These opportunities may be overlooked if museums are more geared towards short-term outputs.

3. Incentives: How can we balance incentives between those enabling museums' core capacities and those enabling delivery of new outputs?

With their changing sense of purpose and new staff structures, museums have increasingly been incentivised to act more as mediators of various social, cultural and educational experiences and faced rising pressures to align with the goals of government (e.g. through the National

5 Atkinson R, 'Record rise in the number of low-paid jobs recorded in 2024', Museums Association, 5 March 2025, https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2025/03/record-rise-in-the-number-of-low-paid-arts-jobs-recorded-in-2024/

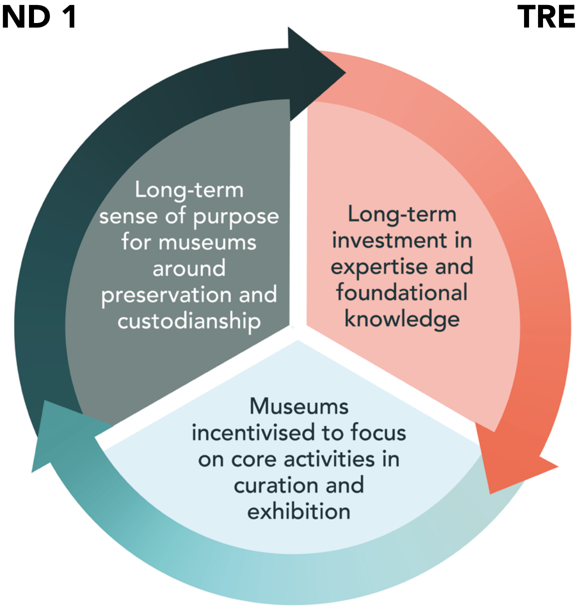
Curriculum), national funders (e.g. the National Lottery), or private funders. Corresponding with this, museums have increasingly been encouraged to focus more on novel outputs to prove their worth, as opposed to their core day-to-day activities as hubs of collections-based knowledge.

Investing in core activities can enable museums to be innovative in their outputs and their contribution to culture and education. Without this, museums come to be seen less as fundamental social institutions, and more as a policy means, or even just as platforms to celebrate achievements, promote events or 'cut the ribbon'.

The JPI's research suggests that museums' increasing incentives to focus on visible new outputs as opposed to their core functions has resulted in the ends to which they are working becoming more contested. In recent years, these debates have particularly centred around ethical controversies in museums' funding sources, particularly from industry and specific philanthropists. Navigating these ethical debates need not result in paralysis among the sector. Yet, to energise the sector, a new balance may be needed in the incentives offered to museums.

These three tensions contribute to one another and illustrate two conflicting trends in the museum sector.

TREND 1



TREND 2

THREE PATHWAYS TO RE-ENERGISE BRITAIN'S MUSEUMS

1. Developing a longer term purpose

A stronger, long-term purpose could play a critical role in re-energising Britain's museums. It could give the sector a clearer sense of how their short-term outputs build upon one another, the range of functions they have in society beyond engaging audiences, and the value in working to achieve longer-term objectives.

A longer-term purpose could be codified. The BBC, for example, is guided by a charter setting out its mission and public purposes, which is renewed every 10 years. In portraying the BBC as a 'market shaper' as well as responding to public demands, the charter pushes the BBC to research, innovate, and engage effectively with the full media ecosystem.[6]

Key questions have to be answered. Who should decide the purpose of museums? To what extent should communities and citizens be involved? Who should lead the change? We have Public Service Broadcasting, but could there be Public Service Curating? And how can museums be held accountable for delivering a renewed purpose?

2. Building foundational knowledge and curatorial expertise

Foundational knowledge, curatorial expertise, and institutional memory are critical to enable museums to better care for their collections, identify new research opportunities, and conceive interesting new forms of exhibition.

To facilitate this, it will first be critical to understand the scale and nature of the problem. What role do curatorial expertise and foundational knowledge play in museums' long-term impact? What are the skills and resource gaps in the sector? A sector-wide audit could help answer those questions. The next step will be investing, for example through new resources, medium-term cohorts of mentorships, fellowships and apprenticeships, longer-term contracts and higher pay.

This approach should not treat museums as siloes, but as part of a living knowledge system with other museums, the wider GLAM sector, schools and universities, civil society and community organisations, and government bodies - at local, regional or national levels.

3. Promoting experimentation and creativity within museums

Promoting experimentation and creativity within museums - where new processes and technologies can be trialled and developed - could help demonstrate the importance of museums' core functions, the ideas and narratives that they can generate, and the value of incentives that promote curatorial expertise. This requires investment in institutional capacity, as well as curiosity, ambition and tolerance of failure.

The result could be novel forms of work with collections that generate wider social benefits. For example, objects from the Science Museum Group Collection have proved useful in the development of new British Sign Language (BSL) signs - where there is a shortage of new scientific terminology - helping to build a scientific vocabulary that enables greater participation of deaf educators in scientific debates.[7] This kind of work has the potential to excite and inspire, and re-energise the sector in Britain.

An experimental approach mirrors the government's recent drive for 'test and learn' approaches to policy development.[8] Under this model, government departments will experiment with multiple new policy programmes at a small scale, learning and adapting as they go, and scaling up those with the most promise. As Demos has identified through our work on Liberated Public Services, experimentation and creativity requires staff who are well-connected to the goals of the organisation, and who are given the autonomy to innovate, learn, and implement.[9] Museums could follow this model in the way staff use collections, curate exhibitions and engage with the public - in turn re-energising the sector.

6 Mazzucato M et al, Creating and measuring dynamic public value at the BBC, December 2020, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/sites/public-purpose/files/final-bbc-report-8_dec.pdf
7 Science Museum Group, 'New BSL Signs Inspired by the Science Museum Group collective', 28 April 2024 https://blog.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/new-bsl-signs-inspired-by-the-science-museum-group-collection/
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9 Glover B, Liberated Public Services: A new vision for citizens, professionals and policy makers, 29 May 2024, https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Taskforce-Vision-Paper_May.pdf

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At a crossroads in Britain's history, we need ideas for renewal, reconnection and the restoration of hope. Challenges from populism to climate change remain unsolved, and a technological revolution dawns, but the centre of politics has been intellectually paralysed. Demos will change that. We can counter the impossible promises of the political extremes, and challenge despair – by bringing to life an aspirational narrative about the future of Britain that is rooted in the hopes and ambitions of people from across our country.

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