

A Manifesto for Museums in Scotland

Scotland's museum sector in 2020-21 – valued but vulnerable

There are over 400 museums across Scotland of different types, size and focus – including national, independent, local authority, university and military museums. They are united in their purpose to safeguard our histories and support our learning, enjoyment, creativity and wellbeing. Working together with local communities, they reflect the stories, achievements and ambitions of people across Scotland, and make Scotland a better place to live, work and visit. In addition to their significant social and cultural role, they also directly benefit our economy, particularly through tourism, employment and skills.

Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, many museums in Scotland enjoyed substantial success due to multiple high-profile openings and renovations, the growth in tourist and visitor numbers, and increasing international recognition and partnerships. The sector also faced serious challenges that pre-date Covid-19, principally stemming from the impact of public funding cuts at local authority level. Local authorities spent 24% less in real terms on culture in 2017-18 than in 2010-11 – a reduction which was felt severely across independent and ALEO museums as well as those directly operated by local authorities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit the sector hard. Museums have been closed for much of 2020 and have operated at much-reduced capacity when able to reopen. The sector is still in a period of crisis, with many organisations fearing for their future in the 2021-22 financial year. The end of the furlough scheme and the prospect of further funding cuts are likely to result in widespread redundancies. Brexit adds additional uncertainty to the operating environment. Without collaboration and investment, our museums will face further reductions in the service they are able to offer, with the associated risk of decline in collections care, expertise and access as well as the overall risk of closure. Investment in our museums must be an ongoing priority for all.

Making Scotland a better place to live, work and visit

Scotland's museums deliver positive outcomes in every area of the National Performance Framework and the recent Scottish Government Culture Strategy and are well-placed to help Scotland recover from the impact of Covid-19.

In particular, Scotland's museums will play a vital role in the following key areas:

- rebuilding tourism and the visitor economy

- supporting learning and education for all
- preserving and interpreting Scotland's heritage
- improving wellbeing, participation and community cohesion
- raising public awareness and action on the climate emergency.

Scotland's museums have a long track-record of success in all of these areas. For example:

- eight of Scotland's 20 most visited attractions are museums, including National Museums Scotland, which is the most visited attraction in the UK outside London with 2.2m visits in 2019
- the Andrew Carnegie Birthplace Museum in Dunfermline was recently named the UK's best heritage attraction for families; the museum received glowing reviews from family judges who praised its staff, activities, sensory backpacks, hands-on exhibits and great facilities
- the Scottish Football Museum in Glasgow runs a pioneering project with Alzheimer Scotland called The Football Memories Project, which pairs volunteers and people with dementia who have an interest in football to talk about teams and matches from the past and work with images and memorabilia to stimulate memories; the project has been nominated for various awards and is recognised internationally as a model of best practice
- the Scottish Maritime Museum in Irvine has been widely praised for its Boat-Building School that helps to preserve boat-building knowledge and expertise while also giving local people, including young offenders and long-term unemployed, the opportunity to gain new skills and confidence
- Aberdeen Art Gallery and Gairloch Museum were joint winners of the prestigious Art Fund Museum of the Year Award 2020, in recognition of their hugely successful renovations and their close work with local communities.

Key issues for the next Scottish Government

Museums in Scotland are committed to delivering towards the National Performance Framework and the Culture Strategy. Museums must be on a sound footing to deliver this work. As we recover from the Covid-19 crisis, we believe that the priority for the next Scottish Government should be to create financially stable museums that can continue to support and work with their communities.

There are several practical steps that can be taken by the new government.

Securing the future of our museums

- Identification of 'core' museum provision that should be made available to and for every person across Scotland.

- Strategic national investment in core museum provision across local authority areas, with recognition this will be made up of different types of museums in different areas.
- Implementation via national and local government of a new museum infrastructure that delivers greater collaboration across types of museums and local authority boundaries to share services, generate efficiencies and maximise the collective public value of museums.
- Support for Museums Galleries Scotland as a strong national development body that works with sector partners to support museums of all types across Scotland.

Supporting partnerships

- Create a deeper strategic partnership with VisitScotland to revive domestic and international tourist visits to our museums, including in rural and island areas.
- Support museums to create powerful partnerships and engagement on climate change and sustainability issues, particularly working towards COP26.
- Support collaboration and partnership between Scottish museums and international partners, particularly in the context of Brexit.

Representation for all

- Museums should be supported to be inclusive, participatory and democratic spaces where people from all backgrounds feel welcome and represented as visitors, contributors and in the workforce and at board level.
- Museums should be supported to decolonise their practice and collections, building on the substantial, sector-leading work that is already happening in Scotland. Museums across Scotland should work to increase research and public engagement to recognise and come to terms with Scotland's colonial past, legacy of slavery and racism.

Access for all

- The next Scottish Government should continue the current commitment to free entry to national museums and support local authorities to make the same commitment.
- Every primary school pupil should visit a museum at least once per year, with government support for transport and programme costs. Visits should be further supported in the classroom through the use of museum digital tools.
- Further support should be made available to museums to improve their digital and online offerings – including to those suffering digital poverty – following the substantial increase in interest in digital cultural consumption during Covid-19.