

## Museums and Community Wellbeing

A Work-in-Progress Briefing published by Museums, Crisis and Covid-19

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[www.ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19)

## Briefing Outline

The Covid-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown measures utilised by most governments globally has had profound impacts on people, their environment and their ways of life. Museums and heritage sites have the potential to provide important therapeutic spaces for both individuals and communities both during and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated impacts of lockdowns, restrictions of movement and personal loss and grief.

These impacts have been felt across communities. What role then might museums have in bridging these recent challenges to the 'community' and in helping communities consider the impact of Covid-19 and the rebuilding of the future? Here, the museum's role as a space of social renewal and community healing clearly comes into play. This short briefing presents early findings in response to these questions.

## Feedback

This briefing document shares our work so far with the intention of facilitating feedback on the project as it progresses.

Responses can be emailed to [museumsandcovid@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:museumsandcovid@ulster.ac.uk)

### **Museums, Crisis & Covid-19: About the Project**

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.

This briefing offers an insight into the project's work-in-progress. Your feedback on the work presented is welcomed, as the project seeks participation and engagement in the direction offered to the sector.

## 1: Healing and Wellbeing

Museums have provided an important wellbeing resource during the pandemic. This has been the case whether provision of events has been online or in-person following the safe reopening of some sites. The idea that activities, whether physical or online, were cathartic was a theme which emanated across the interviews undertaken for this research project.

For example, for those living alone, collaborative and intellectually stimulating activities provided an important point of connection to people during periods of restricted movement.

An acknowledgement of the wellbeing potential of museums, such as through using engagement with artifacts and narrative enquiry, are well embedded in museum practice in Northern Ireland and backed up in the literature on museums (Morse 2020).

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“People have said how much that it almost became like a support network at the same time? People were actually just able to chat. One woman said had she not come to meeting that night she wouldn’t have opened her mouth all day. She lives on her own, she wasn’t going out, and she was like ‘I actually wouldn’t have spoken today if I hadn’t come to this.’ (Anon interviewee, NMNI)

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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 suggests that the skills that required in supporting communities after the pandemic may already be existing in the sector, ready to be utilised and adapted to new needs.

**We recommend that the role of museums as formal spaces of wellbeing and social engagement is better recognised as a strategic priority. This aspect of museum work should be embedded within government social policy, aligning to health and social care policy. This should be supported by strong qualitative evidence from research projects such as this.**

## 2: Digital Connectivity and Community Engagement

The rapid shift to online engagement has been an integral part of changes brought about by the pandemic. For the ‘Reimagine, Remake, Replay’ project, work which seeks to connect young people to heritage through digital technologies and creative media, online engagement provided an integral element of connectivity and support during periods of lockdown. In this case, online activities allowed a community of young people with a shared interest in heritage to keep in touch through the pandemic, providing much needed mental health support in the process.

However, it is not the case that digital connectivity was a catch-all solution. Some practitioners expressed concerns that efforts to reach new audiences or communities would be lost through digital engagement. Another curator noted that Covid-19 restrictions stopped a number of initiatives that were serving important health and wellbeing roles in the community. For example, work with residents of care homes has been limited due to the length and level of restrictions in such environments. This will impact work that museums may wish to undertake with elderly communities as well as adults with learning difficulties or other care needs.

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“Unless you've got a group that has an established relationship already then you can continue to work digitally with them in certain ways. But if you're getting a new group together there's just too much lost doing it digitally.”

(Independent museum practitioner)

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**We recommend that museum development and funding agencies support the digital reach of museum programming. They should recognise the significance of new digital-communities and encourage greater awareness of consequences of digital dependence and exclusion.**

**We recommend nurturing opportunities for further innovation, including digital skills training and adequate staff levels to meet the added workload associated with the ‘blended’ provision of in-person and online programming.**

### 3: The Museum Worker Community

Working from home has offered a flexibility that many wish to see maintained post-Covid-19. Similarly, our research has found a positive response to the provision of furlough (See Briefing 1). However, the impact of disconnection on the close-knit working environment of the museum sector should not be understated. This impact was, for some, made more difficult by the process of coming off and then going back on furlough as lockdowns lifted only to be imposed again. One museum manager noted that ‘the whole emotional journey of going out [on lockdown] again was really hard’ and required a lot of pastoral care.

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“For those of us that were on furlough, it was so nice getting back into the museum [...] I was getting emotional welcoming visitors back. Seeing your colleagues, it was great being back. But then it made it so much harder once you heard there was going to be another lockdown and that we were going back on furlough.”

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For a number of our participants, the pandemic has coincided with or even precipitated moves to a new job. The workplace communities that existed prior the pandemic have shifted and changed. One interviewee noted that this might especially be the case with regards to volunteers who may have been shielding or otherwise concentrating on looking after themselves, and their families, during the pandemic. They suspect that ‘it will be a real challenge to get the pre-existing volunteers back’. As yet we do not have a clear picture of the impact of this across the sector.

**As museums gradually re-open to pre-Covid-19 levels, we recommend museum management and funding bodies consider job security and opportunities for career progression within future policy and funding opportunities. This should be undertaken to offer support to museum workers as a community as well as responding to increased precarity in the sector (see Briefing 1).**

## **4: The Future of Community Engagement**

The pandemic has resulted in significant reflection on the social role of museums as places of community engagement – in multiple forms. While our research reiterates the importance of this role, it finds that the period since March 2020 has led to extensive reflection on the museum’s role going forward. How can the forms of engagement facilitated by digital technologies during lockdown be maintained? How can the forms of community engagement disrupted by lockdowns be redeveloped? How can these debates shape flexible and hybrid approaches for the future?

For one senior staff member at NMNI, the focus on wellbeing that has emerged through the pandemic has resulted in a questioning of the pre-pandemic performance metrics for museums, where ‘success and achievement were only measured through growth’. For them, the key question is ‘was that actually delivering for society?’. This, our research suggests, is a question that should be built into performance analysis and project funding which may require a wider focus on qualitative evidence.

**We recommend that social impact and community engagement should be foregrounded in funding decisions and the assessment of museum performance. Funding should support initiatives developed during Covid-19 that have demonstrated potential for long-term social benefit.**

## **5: Next Steps**

This briefing captures the challenges of maintaining between museums and communities (including, but not limited to, their audiences, local residents, and their own workforce) during the pandemic. Simultaneously, museums have shown ingenuity in providing continued programming through the pandemic and in their welcoming of visitors following the reopening of physical spaces. The recommendations set out above articulate how the challenges faced and the ingenuity shown can be supported by the sector.

We see clear avenues for future research on the impact of the pandemic on workplace communities, including a focus on the impact on staff development, progression and job security. Additional research is required on the impact of the expansion of digital programming, with particular focus on the impact on staff workload and on issues of access and longevity of digital materials. There is scope for collaborate efforts to design a research methodology for capturing new qualitative data essential to sectoral planning. Detailed data from such research can provide valuable evidence to support future decision-making within the sector.

**IF YOU HAVE ANY COMMENTS ON THIS BRIEFING, PLEASE SEND THEM TO [museumsandcovid@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:museumsandcovid@ulster.ac.uk)**

## Project Team

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## Project Partners

Museums Association, Northern Ireland Museums Council, National Lottery Heritage Fund (Northern Ireland), Tower Museum, Derry City and Strabane District Council

Project Website

[www.ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19)

# Head&Heart

ARTS AND MENTAL HEALTH FESTIVAL

11th-13th of June 2021



**Image:** Advert for Reimagine, Remake, Replay's online 'Head & Heart' festival – a project for young people (Courtesy of Clodagh Lavelle).