

Emergency Funding: Successes, Challenges and Concerns

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

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Briefing Outline

As the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the UK cultural sector became clear, agencies responsible for promoting culture, arts and heritage looked at how they could provide protection and security for the sector. 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 briefing offers a short insight into the financial support packages made available to the museum sector to mitigate against the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis as well as documenting the speed and agility shown by museums in their responses to lockdowns and the pandemic. The briefing presents **four** key themes in response to the financial support offered and presents some early recommendations for future work.

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

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: Furlough: The ‘Lifesaver’

Perhaps the most well publicised and wide-reaching financial intervention during the Covid-19 crisis has been the ‘furlough’ scheme, where the Government continued to pay 80% of the wages of staff who were required to not work during the crisis. In some instances, the remaining 20% of a salary was topped up by employing organisations, as was the case with National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI). In relation to securing the future of the organisation, the Head of Experience and Enterprise Development at NMNI has described the scheme as a ‘lifesaver’.

The overall success of the furlough scheme cannot be overstated. For the NMNI Director of Operations, the scheme allowed for the ‘safeguarding [of] the future of the organisation’. For NMNI, the additional success of the scheme came from allowing a clear communication early in the pandemic on how furlough would be managed, who would be affected, and for how long.

“Initially some staff interpreted the scheme as tantamount to redundancy and NMNI had to carefully explain the nature of the scheme – that wasn’t it. If anything, it is about safeguarding the future of the organisation.” (Director of Operations, NMNI)

Nevertheless, furlough has not been without its difficulties. For example, furlough was not equipped to respond to the needs of the precariously employed, such as agency staff. This has resulted in loss of work and some people entering new sectors. Long periods of absence from work during furlough may have an impact on staff through the loss of career development and training opportunities. Despite such interventions, it has been suggested that job precarity in the cultural sector in Northern Ireland increased as a consequence of Covid-19 (Johnston et al. 2020).

It is essential that employers are cognisant of the actual and potential long-term impacts of having been on furlough. For instance, reflecting on the scheme at the time, there should not be an assumption that ‘if someone’s on furlough they’re all OK’ (Local Authority museum manager).

Learning from this, consistent communication is key to staff wellbeing and should be built into crisis planning. This does not erase the difficulties of furlough but maintaining a connection between an individual and their place of work had a positive impact. Post-furlough mitigations should be considered such as an expansion of staff training opportunities, supported by funding bodies and organisations.

2: Spend quick, or miss out

The provision of a £33m share of the £1.57bn UK Government arts and culture recovery fund has been a valuable source of financial protection for the sector. A slice of this fund went from Department for Communities to Local Councils and another portion was delivered as the Heritage Recovery Fund, by the NLHF. Additional financial backing has been available from other sources such as the Art Fund and Northern Ireland Museums Council.

Given the emergency context, the communication of the terms, eligibility, and distribution of the £33m were set at speed. The pace of the distribution of financial support combined with restrictions to budget expenditure within the financial year resulted in funds from certain schemes being allocated as late as mid-February 2021, with a requirement that they be spent by the end of March 2021.

This continued restrictive approach to financial planning and spending could be seen to compromise long-term planning in the use of emergency funding and stands in contrast to the remarkable flexibility and agility shown by museums in adapting to the pandemic. Additionally, for those museums with a greater portion of staff on furlough, or those operating with a smaller staff number initially, may find it challenging to adequately plan for the rapid use of financial support while also juggling the day-to-day commitments of museum operations.

We recommend that future allocations of emergency funding be directed through existing funding bodies with the necessary sector expertise, such as the NLHF. This can facilitate a distribution of funds that allows greater flexibility in spending. There is scope for more detailed research into the use, distribution, and impact of this funding and further research is required into the emergency funding of local authority museums.

3: Knowing how to access funding

“I think what the whole exercise of applying for grants demonstrated is that certain museums were much better at putting together their grant application forms and were very resourceful. Local museums did extremely well out of the different award programs that were on offer. I suppose it's like everything, the more you do it, the better you tend to get at it”. (Focus group participant)

An uneven distribution of skills in applying for grant funding is a potential cause of inequity in access to museum funding – emergency or otherwise. As one Local Authority museum staff member noted, ‘museums are expensive places to run. [...] You’re always having to go get funding streams’ to manage a site. For some Local Authority museums, this need to apply to particular funding pots was mitigated by the security of council and government funding, although details of the impact of this provision is currently unavailable. However, for other museums, the process of applying for significant grants may be unfamiliar. Future-proofing the sector against any further crises is important as the sector transitions to a post-Covid environment.

We recommend further grant application training, from organisations such as Northern Ireland Museums Council, National Lottery Heritage Fund, and local government.

4: Finance and long-term planning

For some museums, financial packages were used to support long-term changes that are envisioned as having sustained benefits for the institution. This has notably been seen in funding for the acquisition of digital equipment, including audio-visual equipment and editing software. This equipment has been essential in reaching audiences during periods of lockdown. However, as museums pivot towards the so-called ‘blended’ approach – where digital events, resources and educational sessions continue alongside in-person events – the long-term value and impact of this funding is unknown. Furthermore, there is potential for much deeper analysis of the effectiveness of the digital investment, in all its diversity, to maximise the return of future initiatives.

We recommend that funding and support is provided for the ‘blended’ museum, in the form of digital skills training and investment in necessary staffing to support both in-person and online content.

5: Next Steps

The Covid19 pandemic has significantly changed how we work and engage with others. This research has found remarkable agility within the Northern Ireland museum sector, with individuals embracing changing working patterns, learning new skills, and providing a different museum service.

As the pandemic evolves, and we learn from the experiences of the past 18months, we must reflect on the most important lessons and push for the changes that will nurture museums that are both relevant and resilient.

A key message that emerged from our research around the job retention scheme (furlough), as well as the provision of emergency funding, focuses upon engagement. We found that frequent communication between managers and staff on furlough provided an important sense of security during extremely challenging times. Emergency funding has served not only to provide museums with financial security during the pandemic, but also to support their adaptation to the provision of online content and the development of long-term plans to engage with local and global audiences. Whether internal or external, engagement and collaboration is key to a resilient sector.

As we move forward, the analytical and engagement roles of research projects like this one, working closely with museums and advocacy bodies, is critical to the sector. We recommend further research into: the long-term impacts of furlough on career development; the provision of emergency funding and support within local authority museums; and the impact of 'blended' approaches to museum work.

IF YOU HAVE ANY COMMENTS ON THIS BRIEFING, PLEASE SEND THEM TO:

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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

