

Analysis

and wanted to protect our resources as much as we could knowing there would be a famine period on the way. We made some decisions that were tough, based on experience.”

The crisis is not just taking a toll on institutions; there are significant human impacts, both on the museum sector workforce and its audiences. Many cultural institutions are not in a position to offer pay rises to their workers in line with rocketing inflation (see p4 and p15), leaving employees who were already burnt out by the pandemic now struggling to pay the bills.

Being flexible

Even with their hands tied on pay, some museums are rethinking the workplace benefits they offer to protect staff wellbeing and mitigate financial pressures. This includes maintaining a flexible approach to hybrid working – one of the few silver linings of Covid – enabling people to save on travel costs, as well as introducing simple measures such as a moratorium on important meetings over the school holidays to ease childcare demands.

More radical steps are also being considered – one institution is looking at a four-day week, as well as flexible contracts that would allow staff to “get the best of both worlds” by working for museums while pursuing opportunities in better remunerated sectors.

There is also a moral imperative to the crisis. With around a third of children in the UK now estimated to be living in poverty (see p13), government-funded cultural venues have a duty to remain accessible to all

and to try and avoid passing rising costs on to the public. Audiences that are already under-represented in museums, including ethnic minority and working class groups (see p14), are also those most likely to be affected.

Tailored offers

Some museums are tailoring their offer to ensure that these groups still have access to a relatively low-cost leisure activity. A number of venues now distribute free entry tickets in food bank parcels; one institution has started to change its entry price model, enabling parents to access children's spaces cheaply.

In line with its remit to serve the nursing community, the Florence Nightingale Museum is working with a nursing foundation to offer targeted support to those in hardship. “We do want to be mindful of supporting our community,” says Green. “Nursing is a role where people don't earn a fortune.”

The museum has also frozen prices for local school groups. “We're trying to target the people who need it most and take the hit to our margins,” he adds.

Despite these challenges, Green is confident that the museum's prudence means it is in a good position to see the crisis through. Echoing other small venues, he says a supportive board and an ability to be “agile” during unpredictable times have been crucial to its success. But there's unlikely to be much time to pause for breath in the next few months. “Everybody's got to keep their eyes open,” he says. “You do wonder when the end will come.”



Strutt's North Mill Museum in Derbyshire is threatened with closure

Looking forward

Museums in Northern Ireland have faced numerous challenges but are hoping a new policy for the sector will provide a renewed sense of purpose.

By *Simon Stephens*

It has been a tough couple of years for museums in Northern Ireland and this difficult period for the sector looks set to continue. Not only has there been the challenge of the pandemic followed by the cost of living crisis, but there has also been the ongoing fallout from Brexit and the associated political instability.

Most museums in Northern Ireland have been able to cope with pandemic, helped by financial support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and advice from organisations such as the Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC). But the crisis has exposed the vulnerability of some museums in the face of falling visitor numbers and revenue.

In April, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council announced that Flame Gasworks Museum had closed for the foreseeable future. Inniskillings Museum, although still operating as part of the Regimental Museum Group, is yet to reopen its doors to visitors. And Newry Mourne and Down District Council, which is responsible for Down County Museum and Newry and Mourne Museum, is restructuring its service, a proposal that has received strong local objections.

Lots of the financial support for the sector was channelled through the Covid Recovery Programme for Heritage



‘The most important way to support our museums is to begin an open process of engagement and consultation that will lead to a new Northern Ireland museums policy’
Elizabeth Crooke

Organisations. The aim was to reduce or remove operating deficits that arose in the 2021-22 financial year because of Covid-19.

The Heritage Fund made 10 awards totalling £331,560. Six of those with grants, totalling £235,210 (71%), were to organisations in the independent museum sector (local authority museums couldn't apply) suggesting greater financial need for these types of organisations.

Going forward, this raises a number of questions, including whether visitor numbers will be sufficient to enable them to get through this year.

Many of the issues faced by the whole sector during the period have been assessed by a research initiative led by Ulster University. Museums, Crisis and Covid-19, a UKRI Rapid Response project that came to an end in May, focused on how museums can contribute to community resilience and wellbeing in a time of crisis. It looked at how the sector has adapted to the pandemic by engaging with audiences through new ways of collecting, programming and exhibition making, including digital engagement.

Upping the digital skills and confidence of staff was among the challenges that museums faced during the pandemic.

Loss of volunteers was another. These ongoing challenges have been joined by new ones, in particular the cost of living crisis.

"The cost of living crisis is an emotive issue for a lot of people now because they can't afford to heat their homes," says Roisin Doherty, a curator with the museum and visitor service at Derry City & Strabane District Council. "Why would they decide to come out and pay a charge to get into a museum?"

So, where does all this leave the sector? Many are looking forward to the development of a new museums policy for Northern Ireland. The current policy dates to 2011 and an update is sorely overdue because of the context that museums are working in has been hugely changed by the pandemic, Brexit, the climate crisis and lots more.

"The most important way to



The Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project has been looking at how the sector can contribute to community resilience and wellbeing

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Paul Mullan



support our museums is to begin an open process of engagement and consultation that will lead to a new Northern Ireland museums policy," says Elizabeth Crooke, professor of Museum and Heritage Studies at Ulster University and the principal investigator for the Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 research project. "The process needs to begin to enable our sector to engage with each other and our stakeholders to strategically address museum purpose and vision.

"This is vital for the NIMC, National Museums NI, our local and independent museums, and the many stakeholders that work closely with museums and depend on the vitality and relevance of our sector. With a confident museums policy, we can use that to shape the work of the NIMC as the key advocacy body for the museum sector in Northern Ireland."

But the current political crisis in Northern Ireland is a barrier to progress. The Stormont assembly is currently paralysed because the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) has said it will not nominate ministers to form a new executive because of its concerns over the Northern Ireland protocol that was agreed by the British government as part of the Brexit deal with the EU. The DUP move effectively leaves the assembly unable to function, which impacts all areas of government.

"The museum sector and stakeholders need to know what is going on with the museums policy," Crooke says. "We all know it is outdated, we all know there is an appetite for a new policy, and there have been hints that the process to begin addressing the new policy is on the horizon. But a lot about the new policy remains ambiguous. We need some clarity on when a process will begin, or at least what is delaying it."

Paul Mullan, the head of the Heritage Fund in Northern Ireland, believes there are lots of opportunities for museums, but the government needs to engage with the sector and understand the impact it can have.

"There's a public purpose for the likes of local museums and national museums, and that's what government has got to really buy into," Mullan says. "It's also recognising one of the big learnings out of the Covid period was how we engage with our local spaces. How do our museums help us understand the heritage that is around us, the sense of place? And how does that play into who we are as people? There has always been a role for museums and cultural institutions to help us understand who we are better."

But for museums to achieve all this, they really need to see some progress on a new museums policy and that looks some way off at the moment.