

APPAG for Museums meeting with Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

Tuesday 19th January 2020: 15.00

In attendance:

Lord Alderdice	Office of James Sunderland MP
Sharon Ament, Museum of London	Emmie Kell, Cornwall Museums Partnership
Maggie Appleton, RAF Museum	Diane Lees, Imperial War Museums
Thomas Ashton, Office of John Stevenson MP	Ian Levy MP
Maria Balshaw, Tate	Andrew Lewer MP
Simon Baynes MP	Andrew Lovett, Black Country Living Museum
Ian Blatchford, Science Museum Group	Andrew Mackay, Tullie House Museum
Lord Boateng	Zak Mensah, Birmingham Museums
Bruce Boucher, Sir John Soane's Museum	Steve Miller, Norfolk Museums Service
Xavier Bray, Wallace Collection	Laura Pye, National Museums Liverpool
Kevin Brennan MP	Nick Ralls, Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust
Jilly Burns, National Museums Scotland	Paddy Rogers, Royal Museums Greenwich
Theo Clarke MP	Beth Reynard, NMDC
David Cole, NMDC	David Rowland, DCMS
Baron Crathorne	Lord Sassoon
Mike Crowhurst, DCMS	Kathryn Simpson, NMDC
Nicholas Cullinan, National Portrait Gallery	Chris Skidmore MP, Chair
Richard Deverell, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew	Alexander Stafford MP
Baroness Doocey	Alison Thewliss MP
Jane East, Natural History Museum	Shona Thomas, DCMS
Gabriele Finaldi, National Gallery	Kathryn Thompson, National Museums Northern Ireland
Hartwig Fischer, British Museum	Suzie Tucker, NMDC
Jo Gideon MP	Hattie Turner, Office of David Johnstone MP
Camilla Hampshire, Royal Albert Museum and Art Gallery	Dominic Tweddle, National Museum of the Royal Navy
Yvonne Hardman, Leeds Museums and Galleries	Sara Wajid, Birmingham Museums
Blerina Hashani, British Library	Esme Ward, Manchester Museum
Rhiannon Hiles, Beamish	Iain Watson, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums
Edward Impey, Royal Armouries	Helen Whitehouse, DCMS
Jeff James, The National Archives	

Speakers

Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

Andrew Lovett, Director of the Black Country Living Museum, Chair of the Association of Independent Museums and member of the NMDC Executive Committee

Minutes

Chris Skidmore MP chaired the meeting. Following introductions, Chris welcomed Andrew Lovett to give an update on behalf of the museum sector.

Andrew Lovett focused on the shared issues and opportunities facing the sector. He noted that although it is unknown when the current lockdown will end, it is certain that will not be the end of restrictions. And whilst being able to re-open will be enormously welcome, it does not equal recovery. Andrew gave insights from the perspective of his role of the Chair the Association of Independent Museums. Even before the current closure, AIM estimated that about half of its members would be closed until Easter 2021. Last year that seemed like a reasonable strategy yet as the months go on, the challenge grows and it is likely to lead to more job losses and less capacity to achieve great things for audiences. The Black Country Living Museum has benefited from over £5m of investment from Arts Council England, the furlough scheme and the Culture Recovery Fund and has been able to avoid redundancies.

The current nationwide lockdown, coupled with the expectation that restrictions impacting normal day-to-day living will continue after it is lifted, weigh heavily on the trajectory of recovery and will impact visitor attendance. Support from the Government including Here For Culture and the Job Retention Scheme has meant that hundreds of museums survived and were given a chance to thrive once more. Whilst the second round of Culture Recovery investment and the extension of the furlough scheme until the end of April this year are very welcome, there is concern there will not be a return on that investment if support is not found for the whole of 2021. Museums are anxious to work with the Secretary of State and the Department to shape and quantify what will be needed.

The concept of levelling-up is understood and welcome. Speaking for a museums sector which ranges across the UK with its recognised disparities, it would be good to understand what role DCMS sees for museums within this agenda. Museums can play a major role in the recovery of domestic tourism and are keen to do so.

The Government is committed to ensuring the UK moves to being a low carbon economy. COP26 in November will shine a light on the UK response. How will the Department strengthen its support for museums to enable them to adapt and achieve decarbonisation targets? Has thought been given, for example, to a Green Capital Investment Fund for the infrastructure of museums?

Investment in museums comes from many sources, with universities and Local Authorities being the largest investors. There would be great benefit in more strategic and fully sighted cross-departmental thinking. For example, Derby Museums faces a 10% reduction in its Local Authority grant, which seems at odds with the Levelling Up agenda. It would be reassuring to hear how DCMS is working with colleagues across Government, especially in the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, Research England, and the Ministry for Housing, Communities & Local Government, to achieve the greatest possible joined-up, impactful thinking and investment.

And finally, the Museums and Galleries Exhibition Tax Relief can make a real difference in getting a new exhibition off the ground and helping to support growth in visitor attendance – however, this legislation has a sunset clause approaching. Again, joined-up thinking would include not letting this lapse, particularly as museums seek to recover from the economic damage caused by Covid-19. It is hoped that the sunset clause will be addressed in the upcoming Budget in March.

The Secretary of State responded to Andrew's comments by first reassuring that he knows the value of the sector and acknowledging the importance of museums and heritage to the Department. He hoped that this was reflected in the Culture Recovery Fund which helped major institutions and local museums. He met with the Chancellor and economic ministers earlier in the day and discussed the importance of sense of place and the contribution of heritage and museums to local identities which is so important to the Levelling Up agenda. It is not just improving rail networks and broadband but people wanting to stay where they are born and making places where people want to visit and live.

The Secretary of State recognised the incredible challenges faced by the sector and thanked all involved for their hard work and passion in keeping the sector alive. He noted how proud he was to have held on to and saved most of the sector. He will make the argument for ongoing support to the Chancellor especially as such a huge investment has already been made. He pointed to the museums who have become vaccination hubs as an example of organisations being part of the social fabric of the UK.

Regarding reopening, there are early signs of the disease coming under control. The Culture Recovery Fund's second round will support organisations until June. He was clear that he would like to give an opening date as much in advance as possible, yet wants to be cautious and give a date that is deliverable. Hopefully this will be possible as more data is gathered from the vaccine roll-out and if numbers continue to decrease. If there is a gap between the end of support and the opening date then the Secretary of State will address those concerns with the Chancellor. Over the summer, non-pharmaceutical interventions had a suppressive effect on visitor numbers and this is to be expected again as museums reopen.

He highlighted two challenges related to tourism. Firstly, the return of domestic tourists, which is quite easy in rural areas but getting tourists back to city centres is more of a challenge. Secondly, the revival of international tourism and the return of big-spending international visitors as travel restrictions ease. COP 26, the G7 summit, the celebration of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee and the Commonwealth Games all present opportunities to boost the tourism industry.

Touching on climate issues, the Secretary of State noted that a condition of the Culture Recovery Fund was to take steps on climate issues. He suggested a meeting with Alok Sharma and Kwasi Kwarteng to discuss how the tremendous assets that are museums can contribute towards COP26, and meetings with DCMS to discuss how individual institutions can be supported to decarbonise.

Regarding cross-departmental working, changes have been made and the criteria of the Culture Recovery Fund expanded as the previous criteria made it challenging for Local Authority museums to apply.

Finally, responding to the point about Museums and Galleries Exhibition Tax Relief, HMRC has commissioned research into how the relief is operating and to ensure maximum value. Subject to the findings of the research, the Secretary of State will make the case to remove

the clause. The Secretary of State closed by saying that there is now a clear path to normality and he and the Department will be there to offer support each step of the way.

The Chair thanked the Secretary of State and called for questions from members:

Q: Jo Gideon MP commented that Stoke-on-Trent has a great generalist museum but no museum specifically dedicated to ceramics. There are a great number of ceramics hidden away and not displayed. Will national museums and government agencies pull together a package that would create something new and unique to Stoke-on-Trent and which other parts of the country could capitalise on, in line with Levelling Up?

A: Oliver Dowden expressed his disappointment that his visit to Stoke has been postponed and would like to visit as soon as possible. The area has a rich heritage and there is an opportunity to open up these heritage buildings in a mixed-use way, e.g. to have work spaces but also to exhibit great collections. The immediate focus will be on survival rather than expansion but the Department is keen to do further work in this area in the future.

Q: Alison Thewliss MP asked if there would be further funding to support museums in England and consequentially for Scotland? Glasgow has many municipal museums that are operated by an arm's length company but owned by the council. The pandemic has resulted in a huge loss of income.

A: Oliver Dowden answered that he is in close contact with the Scottish Government. The Barnett consequential funding from the Culture Recovery Fund is being allocated now and if there is any further funding then it would be subject to Barnett consequentials as well.

Q: Load Boateng is on the board of the Museum of London and Chair of the Churchill Archives. He noted investment is required to improve digital access. In turn this will broaden access as students find it hard to get into museums and archives, even pre-Covid. More investment in museums' digital offer would help with access, education and levelling up.

A: The Secretary of State agreed that this was a very important point and access needs to be broadened whilst home learning continues and in schools over the medium to long term. The fusion between digital, tech and the creative industries is an area the Department wants to work on and one where there is huge potential for growth.

Q: Lord Sassoon congratulated the Secretary of State on the funding he secured for the sector which was brilliant for immediate survival. Lord Sassoon asked if he had anything to say regarding the arm's length principle and what he thinks is applicable to national museums?

A: Oliver Dowden responded that he and the Chancellor worked very closely on the Culture Recovery Fund to give the correct response to the sector. The arm's length principle is vitally important and will be upheld. It gives institutions great strength. As the Culture Secretary, whilst respecting arm's length principles, it is appropriate to discuss culture issues and explain the Government's position to organisations that are funded by the Department. In no way is this meant to undermine their independence.

Q: Chris Skidmore noted that museums which are funded by universities or Local Authorities are facing significant funding challenges due to constraints on their parent organisations. What are the Secretary of State's thoughts on raising the alarm about museums which do not come under the purview of DCMS if they are in trouble? He noted the closure of the Florence

Nightingale museum. How can these closures be stopped before it is too late especially with Local Authority museums?

A: Oliver Dowden shared that he is alert to the challenges faced by Local Authorities and the funding environment for museums, and that there are mechanisms in place to flag issues as they arise. Changes have been made to the Culture Recovery Fund so that Local Authority museums can apply. The closure of the Florence Nightingale museum is truly a shame, but there was a real fear of the threat of closure for hundred of museums, so it is a relief that the number of closures has been very limited so far.

Q: Baroness Doocey asked if the Secretary of State could confirm that museums, galleries and other heritage attractions will be able to reopen at the same time as non-essential retail?

A: The final decision has been taken on the roadmap out of Covid-19. The default presumption would be that the country will go back to the tiers system, however, that is subject to further assessment as the disease comes under control. The Secretary of State will make the case for institutions to open as soon as they can. The concern is how viable it is for organisations to open with restrictions still in place.

Q: Laura Pye, Director of National Museums Liverpool, said it was great to hear the Secretary of State discussing the Museums and Galleries Exhibition Tax Relief and offered to provide examples as he builds evidence. The relief has been a game changer, enabling ambitious projects such as the exhibition 'China's First Emperor and the Terracotta Warriors' at the World Museum in Liverpool as well as small museums to make changes to their displays.

A: The Secretary of State thanked Laura for her offer in proving evidence of the value of the tax relief. He felt the three most important Government interventions since the creation of the Arts Council England have been the National Lottery, tax reliefs and he hoped that the Culture Recovery Fund would go on to be the third. He added that any evidence would be gratefully received.

Q: Emmie Kell, CEO of Cornwall Museums Partnership, asked that, considering the upcoming G7 Summit in June, how can museums best support the Government to connect heritage and tourism? Tourists were able to return in numbers to places like Cornwall in the summer. Culture and heritage can help tourism to be less seasonally driven. Cornwall Museums Partnership would like to work with the Government to promote experience-led tourism.

A: The Department would be delighted to work together on this, and a group will be convened to discuss what can be done in Cornwall around the time of the G7 summit and using the moment to showcase tourism and culture.

Any other business

The Chair noted that the APPG plans to speak to a Minister from the Treasury. Chris Skidmore asked members to suggest other speakers. The group is also a convening mechanism for letter-writing if there are any subjects it would be useful to raise. The APPG will also organise a virtual museum visit.

Lord Boateng noted that meeting with the Treasury would be very important as the Spending Review will be vital for cross-cutting funding. He also suggested meeting with a minister from Department for Education about schools' access to museums and their digital offer. Chris Skidmore agreed and will contact Nick Gibb to a meeting on education and museums. Lord Sassoon added that when the group meets with the Treasury Minister, it would be useful to have the Head of the Arts spending team present too.