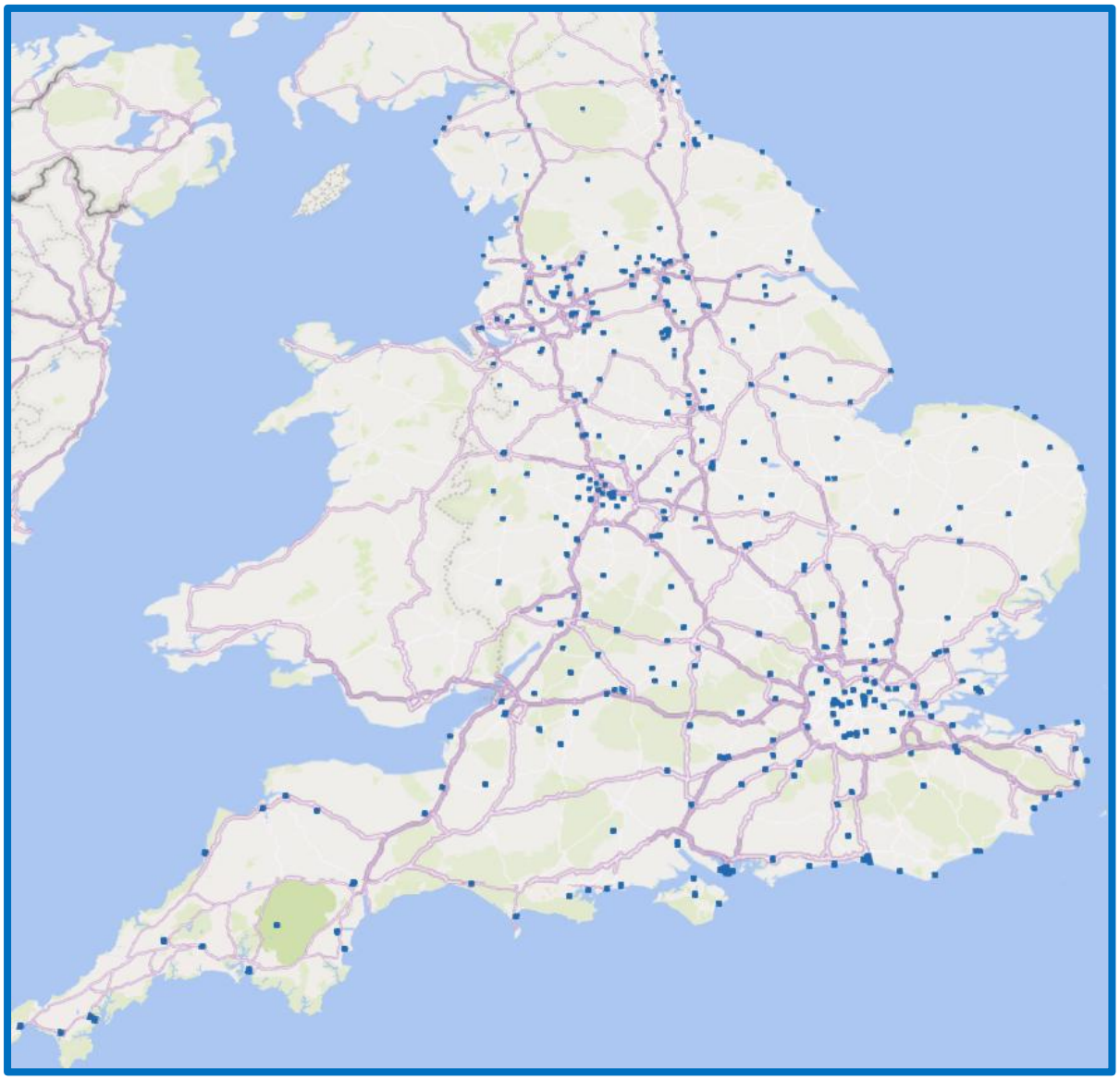
A Vision for English Civic Museums
Current State Analysis and Evidence of Impact



English Civic Museums Network
December 2025

[Inside front Cover]

Front Cover Map
This England's c.500 Civic Museums, with thanks to the Mapping Museums Project, University of London https://museweb.dcs.bbk.ac.uk/home

Credits and Acknowledgements
This report was prepared for the English Civic Museums Steering Committee by Mark O'Neill, PhD, FMA, FRSA, former Head of Glasgow Museums, Honorary Research Fellow, Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG), University of Leicester. This report builds on insights developed during the AHRC funded 'Addressing the Museum Attendance and Benefit Gap' network, led by RCMG. Research and editing were supported by Rowan Brown, MA, PG Dip, AMA, former CEO of Museums Northumberland. With contributions from Jon Finch, Sara Wajid, Tony Butler, Carolyn Dalton, Deborah Marsland, Kim Streets, Paul Sapwell, Zak Mensah and Philip Walker and the English Civic Museum Network Membership. Sections of the report were read by David Anderson, Rachel Trantor, Suzanne MacLeod, Augustin Lagarde, Daria Incarnato, all of whom made invaluable comments. The remaining errors are entirely my responsibility. Several AI applications were used in literature searches, and to cross check analyses.

Mark O'Neill, December 2025
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Foreword

Daily life is local. This is true even though we live in a time of global economic turbulence, shifting geopolitical tensions, threats to traditional alliances and even to democracy itself. No matter how long our commute or how far away from home we work, no matter that we have lived in the same place for generations or moved to where we live last year, the centre of our lives is local. The quality and character of our place is a vital source of security, belonging and community, which are essential to humane lives. Over the past 200 years over 500 museums were created by locals, mostly through Councils, to ensure that our environment is enriched by a sense of time, that we can explore how those who have lived in our place in the past, how they related to nature, what they regarded as beautiful, how they coped with the struggles which afflict all humans, from birth to death and everything in between, and beyond. Civic museums have long cooperated and shared professional learning, but it took a crisis for us to appreciate that the over 500 institutions add up to much more than the sum of their individual contributions. England's civic museums form a Distributed National Collection: millions of objects, archives, and artworks telling the story of the nation through local places. They constitute an essential part of the national cultural, social and economic infrastructure.

In the past twenty or so years local museums have come under unprecedented financial pressure, due in turn to the pressures on local government funding caused by central government budget reductions and the dramatically increased costs of adult social care. Local authority funding for museums has fallen by over a third since 2011, equating to a real-terms loss of over £100 million annually. Decades of innovation and reinvention mean that some are doing well, hundreds are at risk of closure, redundancy, or disrepair. The number of councils declared bankrupt continues to grow.

The ECMN is open to any local museum to join. There is no membership fee. We have no staff and no budget. At the moment we have 96 member organisations, and we continue to grow. All our work is done by our Committee on a voluntary basis. We advocate for museums to central and local government, whom we support by providing a direct link to this vital network and collating information available nowhere else. This report is part of that support. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is committed to devising research methods which will enable the value of museums to society to be quantified in economic terms – but in the context of the far wider range of value generated by public service, cultural heritage organisations. This report aims to give a snapshot of the most robust research on the impacts of museums across six domains, and to address the failings and gaps in that research. These domains are: Cultural Value, Human Capital: Education and Learning, Civic Identity and Social Capital, the Economy, and Health and Wellbeing.

We are very grateful that the government, through DCMS, has recognised the value of local museums, and, despite the pressures on their budget, have provided essential lifelines through the Museums Renewal Fund (MRF) and Museums Estates and Development Fund (MEND). The recent announcement (January 2026) of more than £100 million over the next five years, specifically earmarked for local museums struggling with maintenance backlogs and bills, marks a true milestone. This is expected to directly support up to 200 sites across the country. The urgent need is for them now to move on, in partnership with local government, to undertake long-term change, to ensure that this investment is built upon and the sector becomes structurally sustainable.

A Vision for English Civic Museums: Executive Summary

This document analyses the current state of England's network of 500 Civic Museums, makes proposals for a national investment and development strategy, and assesses the quality of the evidence for their impact on society. This serves as a background to the next step – a strategic approach to capitalising on the huge potential of civic museums to contribute to the achievement of government priorities in terms of local growth, tourism development, public health, education and employability. Civic museums can help develop a new kind of social cohesion that works for 21st century England, aimed at renewing democracy and countering social fragmentation and divisiveness by combining honest history with celebrations of England's achievements, and reflecting diversity with finding common ground.

Current State Analysis

Civic museums and the National Distributed Collection, developed over 200 years and based often in historic buildings, constitute a crucial part of what the British Academy calls England's 'social and cultural infrastructure'. They are the cornerstone of local culture and identity and have huge potential to contribute to national, regional and local government priorities.

Scale & Reach: 500 civic museums, managing a National Distributed Collection of millions of objects, and attracting 50–60 million visitors annually.

Funding Crisis: Local Authority museums have had £100m cuts to annual budgets since 2011, and have accumulated a £400–£600m maintenance backlog.

Public Support: 80% of Britons want funding maintained or increased.

Social Value: Museums are only realising a fraction of their potential impact on levelling up cultural participation, social cohesion, educational enrichment and economic growth. Frontier Economics' conservative estimate of just the health benefits of museum engagement is £8bn a year.

Based on this, we propose that a national strategic investment programme is needed to realise the potential of civic museums to:

- Maximise the impact of local museums on civic renewal, addressing social fragmentation and polarisation, catalysing the kind of social cohesion required for 21st century England.
- Support the successful delivery of LGA reorganisation and its place-making ambitions.
- Transform and innovate in order to take a long-term, target driven approach to tourism development and to maximise the economic impact of museums
- Dramatically expand audiences to drive the levelling up of access to the tangible cultural, educational, civic, and social capital benefits of museum visiting
- Ensure the demonstrated health benefits of museum visiting are accessed by far greater numbers of those whose health is most at risk.

- Take a long-term sustainable, decarbonised, approach to caring for the Distributed National Collection.
- Rationalise existing portfolios and develop new funding streams for a sustainable sector.

Proposed Investment: £70m Renewal Fund + £50m MEND Fund, totalling £120m a year.

We believe that the evidence of impact presented below demonstrates the current and potential contribution of Civic Museums .

The Impact of Civic Museums: The Evidence

Social Reach

A 2024 YouGov survey found that 48% of UK adults (c.21 million people) make in-person visits to museums at least once a year, with 35% of adults (c.11 million) visiting twice or more. This is by far the highest level of usage of any publicly funded cultural asset. It also found that 89% of UK adults think museums are important to UK culture, with nearly half (47%) saying they are very important. Three quarters (76%) of UK adults think having a local museum adds value to their area. This represents very high user and non-user value. A review of the most robust research found significant museum impacts in these six areas:

1. Cultural Value

Visitors report a wide range of valued experiences - intellectual, social, spiritual, belonging – which motivate attendance. The large-scale Arts & Humanities Research Council study on *Understanding the Value of the Arts and Culture* concluded that participation in the arts, including museum engagements, fostered 'reflective individuals and active citizens'. Museum visits are associated with £2,317 annual life satisfaction value and £1,056 annual leisure satisfaction value – 'substantial' effect sizes 'comparable to health and sport benefits'.

2. Human Capital: Education and Learning

There is robust evidence showing that school visits generate cognitive gains (knowledge, critical thinking, tactile and visual learning) and personal development (creativity, confidence, empathy, identity). There is promising-to-moderate evidence that museums contribute to family learning, lifelong learning and employability.

3. Civic Identity and Social Capital

Analysis of data from the DCMS Taking Part Survey suggest that England's c.500 civic museums constitute the nation's most extensive and inclusive network in the entire arts and heritage sector. International studies have found that cultural participation is positively associated with civic behaviours (volunteering, community organising), political engagement and interpersonal trust.

4. Spillover Impacts 1: The Economy

The economic value of the millions of objects and hundreds of heritage buildings preserved and made accessible by museums has not been calculated, but they constitute a foundational, irreplaceable part of England's cultural and social infrastructure. Many impacts - economic growth, place-making - flow from this. Widely accepted multiplier methods show that museums contribute significant Gross Value Added to local and regional economies, generating an estimated £3 for every £1 of public sector investment.

5. Spillover Impacts 2: Health and Wellbeing

Large-scale longitudinal studies carried out by epidemiological experts present robust evidence that museum visiting contributes to mental and physical wellbeing. Evaluations of small-scale museum activities show a direct impact of wellbeing, though its duration is uncertain. The non-market Wellbeing benefits of museum visiting are estimated at £1,000 per adult per year, amounting to over £8 billion annually in aggregate UK benefit.

6. The Benefits to Disadvantaged Groups

Research indicates that economically, educationally and otherwise disadvantaged visitors to museums benefit more, proportionately, than better-off, better-educated visitors. Civic museums can therefore play a significant role in levelling up participation in culture. The Government *Green Book* advises that a 'welfare weighting' multiplier of 1.3 to 2.4 should be applied to economic valuations to capture this. This is not done in most economic impact studies. As the DCMS Taking Part/Participation Surveys show that 40% of lower socioeconomic groups visit museums, all of the above economic valuations are significant underestimates.

A Vision for English Civic Museums
Current State Analysis

1.0 Introduction: England's Civic Museums

England's c.500 civic museums constitute the nation's most extensive cultural network and attract the most inclusive audiences in the entire arts and heritage sector. They are custodians of millions of locally, nationally and internationally important public assets which constitute a National Distributed Collection. Despite funding pressures, they continue to innovate, improving access, developing collections and leading place-based partnerships. The reduction in Local Authority funding over the past 15 years has greatly affected civic museums, and Local Government Reform will have a major impact on their capacity to deliver. This report offers an analysis of the current state of English civic museums and a summary of the evidence for the impact of museums. This serves as a background to the next step – a strategic approach to capitalising on the huge potential of civic museums. This approach would include aligning local museum objectives with national outcomes, addressing shortcomings and anomalies in the current funding regime, and ensuring the sustainable, effective and efficient functioning of civic museums. Beyond this rationalisation however, the great opportunity is to mobilise the unique potential of this network to deliver a locally-rooted, national programme for civic repair and levelling up cultural participation. It would develop a new kind of social cohesion that works for 21st century England, aimed at renewing democracy and countering the social fragmentation and divisiveness by combining honest history with celebrations of England's achievements, and reflecting diversity with finding common ground.

2.0 Background

England's first local museums were an expression of the English Enlightenment, having their origins in late 18th century Philosophical or Antiquarian Societies or skilled worker associations such as Mechanics' Institutes, which laid the basis for civic collections. All were founded with the aim of improving understanding of art, science and 'natural philosophy' amongst the local populus. Museums were the first cultural institutions in England (even before Libraries) on which local government was empowered to spend local tax income. The 1851 Census revealed that England was the first country in the world where more than 50% of the population lived in urban areas. Shortly before this, in 1845, the Museums Act aimed to help the 'shock cities' of the Industrial Revolution to build civic identities, amongst populations that were growing, mainly through migration, at unprecedented rates. Long before universal suffrage and universal state education, England's towns and cities founded museums to educate the general public so that they were equipped to live in an industrialising, democratising, globalising society and had healthy, affordable leisure options. In the 180 years since, local museums have continued to carry out this function – of enabling communities to adapt to change, while providing a sense of continuity, place and belonging.

Civic Museums have gathered and preserved collections which represent the heritage, global connections and artistic ambitions of England's communities from a local perspective. 203 of England's civic museums were founded before World War II, 121 before World War I. In the field of archaeology, they preserve tens of millions of objects which represent stories from the times the country was first inhabited, and the societal changes ever since. When traditional rural life and associated ways of living and working began to disappear, their collections documented this world which is such a deep part of English culture; more recently they supported public awareness and action in the face of climate crisis. A recent study found that Local Authorities are the second largest custodian of historic houses after private ownership. There are 262 in total, which is 37% of all LA museums and 30% more than the National Trust (NT). Most (87%) are listed buildings and a high proportion are in accessible urban locations, compared to the 82% of NT properties being in rural settings[1]. These special places are often icons of local identity – and are costly to maintain and provide access to.

During World War II, when the national museums closed, most civic museums remained open and, with greatly reduced staffing, mounted highly innovative programmes to maintain civic morale[2]. Civic museums were the first to respond to the social and demographic changes of post-War England, documenting changing working-class history and culture, recognising the cultures and histories of immigrant communities and developing engagement practices which renewed their local roots for new generations. They documented the decline of the steam, coal and iron industries in England, celebrating the communities and skills which grew up around the mines and factories, helping people mourn what they had lost. They also supported the careers of local artists, craftspeople and designers, and inspired generations of scientists and technologists. From the start, civic museums helped communities deal with dramatic change and the loss of traditional ways of life, but they were not, or not primarily, about nostalgia. They also looked to the future, celebrating contemporary science and technology, affording widespread public education about industry and innovation for the first time. They represented a confident view of society's capacity to address its problems, and of local government as drivers of Progress and strategic investors in the Common Good.

2.1 A National Distributed Collection

The millions of objects accumulated over 250 years by England's civic museums, share the stories of every aspect of English history from its geological formation and the time humans first settled here, to showcasing the latest science and technology. They

[1] A. Toole (2025) *Public Houses Conference Report*, Leeds Museums and Galleries.
[2] C. Pearson and S. Keene (2017) *Museums in the Second World War: Curators, Culture and Change*, London, Routledge

inhabit hundreds of historic listed buildings, and together, constitute a Distributed National Collection of national and international importance which has enormous latent potential.

2.2 Levelling Up Cultural Participation

Museum visiting, like outcomes in health, education, income, physical and mental health and life expectancy, follows the general socioeconomic trajectory. Just as Upper Socioeconomic Groups (USEG) have better employment prospects, physical and mental health, and live longer than Lower Socioeconomic Groups, they also visit museums more often[3]. It is this pattern which shows that museum visiting is not simply a reflection of personal preference, but also involves influences of structural inequalities in our society. More specifically, it has been an accepted finding in cultural sociology for at least 30 years that the most significant predictor of cultural attendance, including museum visiting, is level of formal educational qualification[4]. This intersects with other factors – income, race, ethnicity, disability - but, given its primacy, it is surprising how little attention it receives in government policy and in research on museum impacts. Its importance is even greater given the evidence that visitors from 'disadvantaged' and 'rural and high poverty' areas benefit more than better educated, better off visitors; this is presented in the section on Learning below.

When the DCMS Taking Part survey was introduced in 2005/6, it recorded that participation amongst all social groups rose up to 2010/11, including that of LSEGs, by ten percentage points. According to the 2015 Warwick Commission, despite the introduction of free entry in all national museums in 2001 'analysis of annual performance indicators of DCMS-funded museums revealed that visits by UK residents fell by 3% over the period 2008/09 to 2011/12, while visits from UK residents from lower social groups fell even more, by 12%[5]. National museums stopped publishing demographic data about visitors in 2011, but these historic data imply that the great majority of the increase in LSEG visits up to 2010/11 took place in civic museums.[6] It is this capacity to attract audiences from lower socioeconomic groups that ECMN wishes to mobilise on a national scale.

Over the same period, the gap in attendance between USEGs and LSEGs remained constant at c.24 percentage points. After 2010/11 when Austerity was introduced, the

[3] Brook, O., O'Brien, D., Taylor, M. (2020) Culture is bad for you: Inequality in the cultural and creative industries, Manchester University Press.
[4] O'Hagan, J.W> (1996) Access to and Participation in the Arts: The Case of Those with Low Incomes/Educational Attainment', *Journal of Cultural Economics 20:269-282*.
[5] Knell, J (Rapporteur) (2015) *Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth: The 2015 Report by the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value,* The University of Warwick.
[6] National Museums Liverpool are exceptional in having high levels of LSEG visits. If they were excluded from the analysis of National Museums, the inequalities in access would be even greater.

gap began to widen, exacerbated by the impact of COVID and the cost-of-living crisis[7], and it may now be as much as 30 ppts (the way the data are published makes comparison difficult). In the most recent study, comparing 2023/2024 and 2022/2023, 'class differences in cultural engagement have in most cases increased…54% of people in managerial/professional households visited museums and galleries, compared to 41% of people in intermediate households, 31% of people in semi-routine/routine households and 25% of people in never worked/long-term unemployed households.'[8] This increased inequality is likely to be the result of both reduced capability amongst LSEG communities to visit (caused by forces such as precarious employment which require long working hours, increased in-work poverty and the cost of living crisis), and the reduced capacity of museums to programme relevant, attractive and affordable events and exhibitions. The precise ratio and the interactions between these two factors will vary from area to area.

Despite these inequalities, it is clear that substantial numbers of people, including many from Lower Socioeconomic Groups, visit museums. A 2024 YouGov survey found that 48% of UK adults (c.21 million people) make in-person visits to museums at least once a year, with 35% of adults (c.11 million) visiting twice or more[9]. This suggests that England's c.500 civic museums constitute the nation's most extensive and inclusive network in the entire arts and heritage sector. Performing arts venues by their nature attract fewer users than heritage venues. National Museum, National Trust, Independent Museums[10] and English Heritage venues are generally less affordable and inclusive that local authority funded civic museums. Any programme for levelling up cultural participation, social cohesion, educational attainment and civic wellbeing should factor in the impacts of museums. It also found that 89% of UK adults think museums are important to UK culture, with nearly half (47%) saying they are very important. Three quarters (76%) of UK adults think having a local museum adds value to their area. This represents very high levels of user and non-user value.

2.3 Scaling Innovation

Despite the financial constraints over the past decade, civic museums have continued to innovate in relation to access, collections care, research and development and economic, social and healthcare partnerships. These are demonstrated in the numerous awards won by civic museums in awards programmes run by the Museums Associations, the Local Government Association, Museums + Heritage, Family Friendly Museums, the Civic Trust, Historic England and the Art Fund. Museums collaborate and

[7] Taking Part Focus on Museums Report (2017), DCMS

[8] D. O'Brien, M. Taylor, R. Wang (2025) *Arts, Culture and Heritage: Recent Trends,* Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, pp.33,36.

[9] https://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/news/yougov-survey/

[10] There are notable exceptions, such as the Black Country Museum and Beamish.

share best practices, but the real opportunity for maximising their contribution to creating social cohesion is to mobilise the entire network, creating a national strategy of cultural renewal and civic repair.

3.0 An Investment Strategy for England's Civic Museums

3.1 Local Government Review, Devolution and Place-based Cultural Development

Local Government reform creates both risk and opportunity for local museums, due to the financial position of LAs, the fact that local and regional museums will be greatly impacted by local government reorganisation, and by the devolution of functions and funding to new strategic authorities. Many civic museum services will be merged or gain a remit for a wider area if they are the sole civic museum in their new unitary authority. This provides an unprecedented opportunity for re-imagining the LA museum landscape. This means looking across LA museums as a whole, creating a coherent, fair and sustainable support system that preserves and leverages the cultural, social, learning and economic potential of the National Distributed Collection, all in the context of the wider provision of cultural services by unitary and strategic authorities. Any long-term Government strategy for museums or local government reform needs to recognise and maximise the benefits of local interdependencies. Embedded in their localities, there can't be a future for civic museums without their being integrated into the new structures of local government.

3.2 International Comparisons

England is the only English-speaking country in the world and one of only a handful in Europe where the central government agencies for funding and developing the Arts and Museums are merged. This is because the institutional logic, planning timescales and development requirements of organisations with responsibility for collections are radically different from those which produce or host performances or temporary exhibitions of contemporary art. Most ACE grant recipients do not have anything like the overhead, management and development costs of these vital English cultural assets that are, in most cases, owned and funded by Local Authorities. Every aspect of museum work is affected by this trans-generational responsibility. Norway is the only other country with a similar structure to ACE. The Kulture Direktoratet differs however in that its strategic priorities reflect the entire range of museum functions, including research, collections care and development. In the Netherlands, 12 non-national museums are considered part of the National Cultural Infrastructure and are funded in the same way as National Museums. The reform of local government needs to be informed by these and other international experiences.

3.3 Anomalies: Accessibility and Free Entry

National Museums are funded to enable free access, creating an anomaly with LA reliant museums, many of whom are forced to charge[11]. A recent paper by the Cultural Policy Unit thinktank sets out arguments against charging tourist for access to National Museums, but these apply equally to all taxpayer funded museums[12]. The lack of a coherent strategy for civic museums over the past thirty years has resulted in a complex array of business models. Many LA services have fought to maintain free entry, others have mixed models, charging for some but not all venues, and some charge for all.

3.4 Inequalities in Museum Provision

One of the most basic drivers of museum attendance is simply the availability of museums. This varies greatly across the country. According to Ballatore and Candlin of The Museum Mapping Project based at Birkbeck College, University of London: 'In England, museums tend to be more concentrated in the South, reflecting the general North–South divide'. Museum provision in the West Midlands, the North East, and the North West is 'significantly below average' for England. They conclude: 'considering both absolute and per capita counts, it can be observed how the North suffers from a dramatic lack of museums compared to the rest of the UK, missing out on the potential for income generation and tourism development in relatively less affluent areas.'[13] Any programme of cultural levelling up needs to take this supply side deficit into account, and to maximise the effectiveness of existing museums in areas of lower-than-average national provision.

3.5 Calculating Additional Funding

Amongst museums directly funded by DCMS, National Museum Liverpool's annual grant is c.£22 million, that for the Museum of the Home, c.£2 million. If all 500 civic museums received the level of NPO funding of North East Museums (formerly Tyne & Wear Museums and Archives) on a per head of population basis, the total annual spend for the whole of England would be £216 million. If the *per capita* calculation were based on Manchester City Art Gallery's NPO funding, the total would be £163 million. These suggest an increase of between four and five times the current level of annual investment in civic museums. We are not asking for a 'return' of the c.£243million of LA funding lost in the past 15 years. We believe that, with new, strategic, investment, totalling £120 million a year, we can deliver a dramatic levelling up of cultural and heritage participation, based on increased innovation, productivity, participation and partnerships, which delivers a wide range of societal benefits. New funding may not be

[11] See Tristram Hunt: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/25/threat-to-local-government-heroic-role

[12] See: https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2025/03/entry-fee-would-undermine-foundational-principle-of-national-museums/

[13] Ballatore, A. & Candlin, F. (2023) 'A geography of UK museums'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 48, 213–229

available immediately, but we believe that new structures are essential to enable any investment to be spent with maximum efficacy and efficiency.

3.6 Match Funding

A national funding partnership to support LA reliant museums would clearly require a match funding arrangement. To prevent grant substituting existing revenue, any new system would need to consider the recent history of local government funding. Provision would need to be made for local authorities which at present cannot provide match funding, or funding at the specified level, with transition arrangements over time. Without this, the museums in the local authorities that have suffered the most, (usually the most deprived[14]) will continue on a downward spiral.

3.7 Rationalisation, Closures and Collections at Risk

Many civic museums are housed in Listed buildings which would be difficult and often prohibitively expensive to use for commercial or other purposes, in a context where essential maintenance is persistently deferred because of budget pressures. We estimate that a backlog of £400m to £600m has been accumulated. Further, local political imperatives have a strong presumption against closures, which are thought to damage local morale. This can result in hollowed out museums which lack the capacity to care for or research collections, mount exhibitions or events, or maintain partnerships with local communities, but which are still notionally 'open'. Many civic museums are subject to a regime of managed decline, punctuated with crises which make planning and service development difficult. A national strategy would support local authorities in reviewing and rationalising their venues with a view to creating more sustainable services. Overcoming the presumption against closure will only be possible where there is the prospect of dramatically improved services in the prioritised venues in the foreseeable future.

3.8 Partnerships

ECMN members are aware that individual initiatives or programmes by individual organisations to reduce inequalities are much less likely to succeed than systems reform, where all interacting elements of a complex societal whole are focused on clear shared outcomes. Civic museums' strong track record of local and regional partnerships can be built on to increase the coherence and effectiveness of economic, social and cultural renewal initiatives at unitary and strategic authority levels. They constitute the only national network of cultural venues which has the capacity to function as multi-functional local catalysts for this kind of systemic change. We believe that the 500 LA museums which manage the National Distributed Collection are not only a vital part of England's cultural infrastructure, providing free or affordable access

[14] Institute of Government (2022) *Neighbourhood services under strain How a decade of cuts and rising demand for social care affected local services*.

to our national story in all its local depth, complexity and diversity, but a resource whose immense potential has only begun to be tapped.

The pressures on the civic museum sector over the past 30 years have required staff to develop exceptional leadership skills. These have enabled the survival of the museums and the continuation of innovation in relation to access, collections care, research and development, and economic, social and healthcare partnerships, in the face of ever decreasing resources. LA museums are also by far the most diverse museum sector in terms of staff, with breakthrough appointments at CEO level at, for example, in Birmingham, St Albans and Warwickshire. Nonetheless ECMN recognises that much more needs to be done to upskill museum leaders and the wider workforce to take up the challenges and opportunities of civic renewal and to promote diversity and equality of opportunity in terms of gender, disability, race and class. Additional investment in these capacities is essential to releasing the potential of civic museums.

3.9 A Civic Museums Investment Strategy

3.10 ECMN Proposal

ECMN proposes a £120m comprehensive funding model that delivers long-term infrastructure sustainability through two linked interventions:

1. Extension of the Museums Renewal Fund (MRF) 2026-28
2. Extension of the Museums Estates and Development Fund (MEND) 2026-28

This proposal directly supports key government priorities: local growth, wellbeing, skills, the visitor economy, and net zero. It will deliver visible, place-based renewal and public value which improves people's lives and economic well-being for generations.
There are at least 75 museums at risk according to latest MRF funding, including Birmingham Museums Trust, Derby Museums, The Bowes Museum, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums, Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Royal Pavilion & Museums Trust Bristol museums, Leeds museums, and York Museums Trust.
This funding will help preserve an estimated 8,000-12,000 existing jobs across England's civic museums, protecting roles in curation, education, conservation, and visitor services.
England's 500+ civic museums collectively serve an estimated 50-60 million visits annually, making them essential infrastructure for community engagement and tourism.
The urgent maintenance backlog for England's civic museum estate is estimated at £400-600 million, covering critical repairs including roof systems, environmental controls, fundamental accessibility improvements, and decarbonisation requirements. Rather than continuing this neglect because of the scale of the problem, what is needed is secure funding to tackle this backlog systematically over a 10-to-15-year period.

3.11 Alignment with Government Priorities

This proposal contributes directly to cross-government objectives:

- **Regional Growth** – revitalising civic infrastructure and strengthening local economies through cultural tourism and creative employment.
- **Local Government Reform and Devolution** – integrating museums into new unitary and combined authority structures as engines of community engagement, cohesion and regeneration.
- **Health and Wellbeing** – providing inclusive creative spaces that support learning, belonging, and good mental health.
- **Education and Skills** – linking to local schools, FE/HE providers, and skills pathways in the creative and heritage sectors.
- **Net Zero and Sustainability** – supporting the decarbonisation and energy efficiency of public heritage buildings.

To fulfil the Government's ambition to promote place-based social cohesion, wellbeing, economic growth, local government reform and cultural enrichment and renewal, the network needs to be mobilised in a coordinated, strategic way. This means ensuring that museum provision is integrated coherently into Local Government Reform. This would need to take into account:

- Precedents set by existing levels of national funding of civic museums through a range of mechanisms
- Levels of deprivation by
    - geography – in cities, rural areas, shires and towns
    - educational disadvantage
    - protected characteristics, including disability, gender, ethnicity and sexuality
    - Local levels of museum provision and the North-South divide.
    - social and cultural infrastructure (as measured by the British Academy metric)
- Specialist collections and research potential
- Income generation opportunities and targets
- LA match-funding and contribution targets
- Existing quality assurance schemes which provide demanding improvement metrics such as Visit England's Visitor Attraction Quality Scheme and the Cabinet Office Customer Service Excellence certification programme.

While deeply place-based, viewed systemically, England's 500+ civic museums, which manage a National Distributed Collection and have a demonstrated capacity to reduce inequalities in visiting, form a vast cultural, intellectual, economic and social asset - an

essential part of England's national 'social and cultural infrastructure'[15]. Civic museums can be at the heart of cultural, social, economic, learning and democratic renewal, contributing to place-making, wellbeing, citizenship and sustainability. We believe that this is achievable through a partnership between central government and the new unitary and strategic local authorities which places museums at the heart of engaging and inspiring our communities with a new, more confident vision of the future. We cannot 'return' to earlier forms of belonging which have been eroded by technological, political and socioeconomic change. We must use our cultural and social infrastructure assets to forge new forms of social cohesion with our local and regional neighbours.

- **Economic growth:** Museums underpin local visitor economies. For example, for every £1 of public investment in Leeds Museums & Galleries generates £9 spending.
- **Employment:** Sustains 8,000-12,000 skilled jobs in heritage, education, and creative industries.
- **Education and skills:** Provides informal learning and vocational development pathways.
- **Health and wellbeing:** Reduces social isolation, enhances community belonging, supports mental health. Source: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/678e2ecf432c55fe2988f615/rpt_-_Frontier_Health_and_Wellbeing_Final_Report_09_12_24_accessible_final.pdf
- **Environmental:** Facilitates estate decarbonisation and resilience to climate impacts.
- **Public value:** Strengthens civic identity, trust in institutions, and perceptions of local renewal.

The reform of unitary and strategic authorities creates both a necessity and an opportunity for a radical reorganisation of this network, through a partnership between central and local government, to place museums at the heart of engaging and inspiring our communities with a new, more confident vision of the future. This is urgent, not only because of the financial position of LAs but also because local and regional museums will be greatly impacted by local government reorganisation and the devolution of functions and funding to new strategic authorities. Many civic museum services will be merged or gain a remit for a wider area. Museums need to be included in the planning of the reform, to avoid ad hoc decision-making which will not realise their potential for economic, social and cultural regeneration. Long-term Government strategy for museums and local government reform needs to recognise and maximise the benefits of local interdependencies, and integrate museums into the new structures of local government.

[15] Bennett Institute for Public Policy (n.d.) *Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure,* The British Academy.

A Vision for English Civic Museums:
Part II: Evidence of Impact

4.0 Introduction

The multiple and rich purposes and impacts of museums and the infinite variety of visitor responses make evaluating their impact difficult. Measurement is necessary, however, both for public accountability and to improve services by learning about What Works in relation to achieving agreed goals. The aim of this report is to not to do a comprehensive literature review, but to summarise the methodologically most robust research available for the impacts of museums, along with promising studies which can be built on. It also seeks to address the most robust criticisms of the literature on museum impact, to avoid the pitfalls of advocacy-based surveys. Preference is given to peer reviewed publications in academic journals. Reports commissioned by heritage organisations from reputable research companies are included if they demonstrate robust methods and transparent use of data. Sample size and survey design were also assessed, along with whether they were observational or longitudinal studies (see text book on Statistical Studies). Qualitative evidence and studies commissioned by specific institutions are used, but with caution, due to the risks of confirmation bias.

The study will start with a comment on the values underpinning different modes of measurement and then assess the evidence of impact in five key areas:

1. Cultural Value and Public Funding
2. Human Capital: Education and Learning
3. Civic Identity and Place Making
4. Spillover Impacts 1: The Economy
5. Spillover Impacts 2: Health and Wellbeing

These assessments are made against the general background that museum visiting tracks the general socioeconomic gradient as described in Part I. The visitor profiles of most museums do not reflect the demographic of their catchment area, with USEGs overrepresented and LSEGs under-represented. The degree of the disparity varies greatly between individual museums and museum sectors. This paper has argued that civic museums are the most inclusive section of the arts and heritage sector and has the most potential to achieve representative audiences.

4.1 Market and Non-Market Values

The report embraces a number of regimes of value, including the intrinsic power of culture to enrich the lives of individuals, families and communities and the monetising of both the market and non-market value of museum impacts. The latter has been criticised as reducing the rich, humane, roles of museums, to managing the demand for the consumption of cultural services, and commodifying public assets, often in ways that increase inequalities. Maximisation of income and monetisation metrics are both

necessary to sustain museums and to enable the very different options competing for public funds to be compared using a common metric. Doing this in ways that preserve the power of museums which is rooted in their non-substitutable, non-market cultural impacts and which broaden and deepen audience engagement is one of the key challenges of museum management in the 21st century. The report also dips into the history of museums and publicly funded culture, as this created the amazing assets and expert traditions we have today, as well as a path dependency with both enables and blocks the transformations needed to serve contemporary and future needs. Some significant gaps in the research will also be noted.

5.0 Cultural Value and Civic Identity

Attempts to get 'back to basics' about what museums are for or to define the measurable utility of museums often falter because of the range and depth of experiences which visitors report, including: aesthetic, educational, historical, imaginative, inspirational, intellectual, meaningful, learning, personal, spiritual, 'flow' immersion, therapeutic, restorative, escapist, relaxing, joyful, tearful, social, civic pride, empathy, challenging, and belonging[16]. Many of these experiences are shared with other forms of cultural participation, including commercial and amateur as well as publicly funded formats. It is the enabling of these experiences through compelling stories based on local collections in shared, publicly-owned spaces that means they constitute a Common Good. If delivered to a high standard in ways that are responsive to current socioeconomic and demographic realities, they can help create social cohesion and foster learning and ambition. It is these which inspire people to visit and from which a wide range of 'spillover' utility effects or 'positive externalities' ensue - from economic growth through the visitor economy and the creative industries, to place-making, urban renewal and health improvements.

The 2016 *Understanding the value of arts & culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project*[17] carried out the most extensive study of its kind anywhere in the world, surveying the UK and international literature and commissioning 70 new pieces of rigorous research. Its definition of culture was very wide, and included museum visiting. It concluded that the evidence indicates that cultural participation

- Can help 'shape reflective individuals facilitating greater understanding of themselves and their lives, increasing empathy and respect to others and an appreciation of the diversity of human experience and cultures' (p. 7).

[16] See for example: Packer, J. (2008) 'Beyond Learning: Exploring Visitors' Perceptions of the Value and Benefits of Museum Experiences' *Curator: The Museum Journal,* 51/1:33-54; Nigatu, T.F.; Trupp, A.; Teh, P.Y. 'A Bibliometric Analysis of Museum Visitors' Experiences Research'. *Heritage* 7: 5495–5520.
[17] Crossick, G. & Kaszynska,P. (2016) *Understanding the value of arts & culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project*, Arts & Humanities Research Council.

- May 'produce engaged citizens, promoting not only civic behaviours such as voting and volunteering, but also helping articulate alternatives to current assumptions and fuel a broader political imagination. All are fundamental to the effectiveness of democratic political and social systems.' (p.7).

What the Cultural Value Project did not study was the precise conditions under which these outcomes are achieved. A rigorous qualitative study of museums in Glasgow and Newcastle found that the 'exhibitions and museum-based community development projects ...provided a context that allowed those with low levels of capital, in its various forms, to make investments that resulted in social benefits. It might be argued that the result of investments in human, social and cultural capital might be forms of identity capital that enable people to understand and modify the social world to their advantage'[18]. A study in the neighbouring field of built heritage explored 'whether living in areas of historic built environment also helps build social capital', using three large datasets (Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study, the National Heritage List for England, and the English Index of Multiple Deprivation). It found that 'people living in places with greater historic built environment experienced higher levels of personal relationships, social network support, and civic engagement 'areas with heritage assets may provide both socially inviting and aesthetically pleasing environments that could help strengthen community and restore pride in place' (p.251). This was an observational rather than a longitudinal study so its findings are suggestive rather than conclusive (see 6.0 on Statistics).

5.1 The Economics of Public Funding of Museums

A major economic argument for state investment for arts and heritage, according to economist Professor John O'Hagan, is supporting a country's identity - 'those elements of national life which characterise a country and distinguish its attitudes, institutions, behaviour, way of life from those of other countries'[19] (p41). He elaborates the case as follows: 'like the physical well-being of its people and lands, the cultural identity of a nation must be cherished and protected... The appropriate analogy of public spending to support ('protect') the sector is then with national defence. [This is]... what economists call a 'public good'. Once provided, it creates benefits for all: once paid for it is impossible to exclude anyone and therefore there is no incentive for anyone individual to pay his or her share of the cost of providing the output. State funding in this case is inevitable' (p.42).

5.2 Public Funding of Exclusive vs Inclusive Museums

[18] Newman A., & McLean F. (2004) 'Presumption, policy and practice', *International Journal of Cultural Policy,* 10:2, 167-181

[19] O'Hagan, J. (2009) 'The Arts and the Wealth of Nations: The Role of the State', *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies,2/2:41-52.*

This argument requires refinement. In the 19th century, romantic nationalism was often viewed as a liberating force, unifying fragmented countries and driving resistance to imperial domination. Museums usually represented romanticised, idealised and unitary visions of the 'imagined community'[20] of the nation. In the 20th Century, in extreme forms, nationalism became a major cause of 20th century world wars. Some Victorian towns and cities however, booming due more to immigration than natural increase, forged a strong sense of civic identity based on a shared place, despite extreme inequalities. Just as some museums take an elitist approach, serving the best off and most educated groups in their catchment areas, simplistic definitions of 'national culture' can be used to extract narrow, nativist, mythical interpretations of complex histories, not only excluding citizens who don't have an ancient local ancestry, but also masking historic internal conflict and division. Civic museums have taken a lead in transforming the traditional version of social cohesion based on nostalgia for a romanticised, homogenous past, to one based on more historically correct accounts of the past and responsive to the diversity of the present. While the justification for public funding of museums is based partly on market failure, it is also this civic and national role which, analogously with defence, merits public investment.

5.3 A Public Good in a Polarised Society

In the current state of divisive polarisation, the most significant political fault line in society is that between the educated and the educationally disadvantaged[21]. The museum public good which must be cherished is that of public education in its broadest sense. The nature and reach of civic museums mean that they can be amongst the few places in society where everyone, no matter their background, can congregate to share cultural experiences, to see their stories told and to hear those of others, in places that simultaneously celebrate human universals, explore cultural difference and challenge polarisation. Civic museums have the potential to address historic injustices, from the Peterloo Massacre and the horrors of child labour during the industrial revolution to the depredations of slavery and the persistence of poverty. Visitors can also see inspiring beauty and precious nature, alongside stories of inspiring role models, individuals and communities which have shown resilience in the face of adversity, have fought injustice and have worked to make England a more prosperous and creative place. In O'Hagan's terms, to justify funding museums as a public good, analogously with national defence, museums need to be become more and more places which not only contribute to human capital but where it is 'impossible to exclude

[20] Anderson, B. (1983*) Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso.

[21] Ford, R., Bunting, H., Scott, R., Sobolewska M. (2023) Degrees of Separation: The education divide in British politics, London, Social Market Foundation. Available at: https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/degrees-of-separation/#:~:text=Education%20is%20the%20strongest%20predictor,who%20pass%20away%20each%20year.

anyone'. Though civic museums lead the arts, culture and heritage sector in terms of inclusion, there is a great deal of work to be done for museums to realise their potential to level up cultural participation i.e. to attract genuinely representative audiences. A national strategy which goes beyond developing individual institutions and which capitalises on the scale and distribution of the network is essential to achieve this.

5.4 Understanding 'What Works' for Civic Cohesion

The evidence for the outcomes (surveys and case studies) presented by the AHRC *Cultural Value Project* is robust but it does not argue that all cultural engagement has these human development outcomes. Indeed culture has been used to promote exclusive and anti-democratic values, and historically most museums supported a traditional version of the status quo. Research on which specific approaches to heritage are most likely to inspire 'reflective individuals and active citizens' is scarce. One rigorous study which included experimental elements of the impacts of displays on issues of reflection on identity related to 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland. It found that, even where people had strong emotional responses, 'these emotions do not correspond to shifts in perceptions of past violent conflict'. It concluded that while the 'balanced curatorial approach…prevents further polarisation, it also limits the potential for fostering social cohesion'[22]. More recently many museums have chosen actively to support democracy by promoting individual reflection and active citizenship through co-production, consultation and other forms of engagement. The most in-depth examples are the Citizens' Juries carried out by Birmingham Museums Trust[23] and the National Galleries[24]. More research is needed to identify the precise modes of display and public engagement which are most effective in nurturing cultural citizenship and renewing democracy in our increasingly diverse and polarised society.

5.5 Conclusion

The invention of each of the major communications technologies of the past 120 years, from cinema and television to the internet and AI, led to predictions that museums would disappear. Museums have not only survived, but, at least until COVID, attracted more visitors than ever before. It is arguable that the main impact of museums is the very fact of the large numbers of people who visit, despite the competing attractions. Visitors value the wide range of cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual experiences that museums enable. These cultural experiences receive public support because they have unique aspects which are not provided by the market. There is robust evidence that museum visiting and engagement can promote the development of reflective

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[22] Balcells, L. & Voytas, E., (2024) 'The Troubles and Beyond: The impact of a museum exhibit on a post-conflict society' *The American Journal of Political Science.* Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajps.70001?msockid=11820478809e690f1dc712e481d068f7

[23] See https://www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/about/what-we-do/citizens-jury

[24] See https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/news/ng-citizens

individuals and active citizens, which is central to our democracy. It is noteworthy that a peer-reviewed, longitudinal study based on UK *Understanding Society* data, put a monetary value on the life satisfaction derived from museum visiting (one to four times a year) of £2317. It noted that these values 'are consistent with those reported in previous research' [25].

6.0 A Note on Statistical Studies

Observational studies provide a snapshot of a population at one point in time. They can show correlations (e.g. between health and museum visiting), but they cannot prove causation. Statistical methods can adjust for factors like class, education, income, or ethnicity, which strengthens associations but does not establish cause.

Prospective studies measure key factors (e.g. museum visiting) at the start and then track outcomes over time (e.g. illness or death). They provide stronger evidence of causality because they reduce the risk of reverse causation (e.g. healthier people being more likely to visit museums).

Longitudinal studies follow the same individuals repeatedly over time, tracking 'treatments' (e.g. museum visiting) and outcomes. They provide the most robust evidence for causal relationships.

A key methodological issue is the distinction between statistical significance and effect size.

Statistical significance indicates how likely it is that a result occurred by chance. It does not show the size or practical importance of the effect in the real world.

Effect size measures the magnitude of the impact, giving a clearer sense of real-world relevance.

[25] Fujiwara D. (2013) *Museums and Happiness: The value of participating in museums and the arts,* Museum of East Anglian Life/ACE. Fujiwara, D. Kudrna, L., Dolan, P. (2014) *Quantifying and Valuing the Wellbeing Impacts of Culture and Sport.* DCMS.

7.0 Human Capital: Education & Learning

Museums and heritage sites have an established educational mission – many were founded in the 19th century explicitly to educate and inspire the public, recognizing the higher level of literacy, design awareness and general knowledge required by an industrialising and democratising society. Today, they provide a vast range of formal and informal learning opportunities: school field trips tied to the curriculum, family programmes, early years play/learning sessions, adult courses, and volunteering or training opportunities and training for teenagers and adults. All these groups also engage with the self-led learning opportunities provided through everyday visits. This is evidenced by an extensive literature covering cognitive gains (knowledge, critical thinking, tactile and visual learning) as well as personal development (creativity, confidence, empathy, identity) [26]. An idea of the great variety of creative and impactful education programmes can be gained from the Group for Education in Museums (GEM) *Case Studies*[27]. As with other aspects of civic museums, the current state of formal museum education provision is mixed. A 2024 Group for Education in Museums (GEM) survey concluded that there is 'a divide within the sector, mirroring a divide in the UK with 50% of practitioners able to innovate while 50% are really struggling'[28].

How effective are these museum-based learning experiences in delivering educational outcomes? In a sector committed to quality and collaboration, the literature on English museum education comprises primarily of qualitative case studies and evaluations, with a focus on improving practice[29]. Generalisation from these evaluations can be difficult and, as they are often commissioned to meet funder requirements, they may be subject to confirmation bias. There is nonetheless extensive qualitative evidence that museums can play a significant role in supporting formal, informal, and lifelong learning for all age groups.

7.1 Early Years

Early childhood (ages 0–5) is a critical period for brain development, language acquisition, and social skills. Museums have increasingly offered programmes for this age group – such as toddler storytelling, baby-friendly gallery tours, and play-based exhibitions. The evidence here is mostly qualitative or based on practitioner observation, as measuring developmental outcomes in infants and toddlers is challenging and there are many confounders, as well as issues of bias. A peer reviewed article by Piscitelli & Anderson (2001) of children's museum experiences found that young children can form meaningful connections with exhibits and start developing

[26] Falk & Dierking (2013) *The Museum Experience Revisited,* London, Routledge.
[27] https://gem.org.uk/our-work/publications/case-studies/
[28] https://gem.org.uk/resource/museum-learning-report-2024/ p.8. This was a self-selecting, online survey, and so is not necessarily representative, but the CEO of GEM views it as broadly representative (personal communication).
[29] See for example: Group for Education in Museums *Journal; Journal of Museum Education*.

museum literacy (like how to behave and explore in such spaces) from a very early age, which can set patterns for lifelong learning[30].

7.3 Targeting Transitions

The methodological difficulties in tracking long term impacts and the importance of the context – home and school – in shaping museum learning suggests that the most effective programmes are those targeted at short term outcomes which have long term impacts. For example the Amelia Scott museum in Tunbridge Wells, in partnership with Kent County Council Early Years Service and Local Family Hubs organised Millie's Journey, a creative health and early intervention programme. It was designed to support children who were about to enter formal education but were not yet ready to start school due to anxiety, social challenges, or delayed development — many of whom had limited access to early years support during the pandemic. Evaluation showed clear outcomes, including 100% of participating families reporting improved confidence in their child ahead of starting school. If the core challenge is translating short-term excitement into long-term improvement – a student might be inspired by a museum trip, but without follow-up, the effect could fade – this programme solves that problem because its outcome is the follow up. Because it has a built-in exit strategy to the next stage in the children's learning journey and helped them with that transition, it had a greater chance of having a long-term impact than a stand-alone activity, even if it were integrated into the curriculum.

Given the strong theoretical foundation and large numbers of significant case studies, the evidence for early years is graded promising-moderate. The Art 'Fund Mini Wonders' programme with Nesta, which is piloting activities for 2- to 4-year-olds and their families with eight UK museums, may produce some useful results.[31]

7.4 School Partnerships

The most robust studies of museum school visits are American, providing strong proof of concept. A quasi-experimental study carried out in the Guggenheim Museum in New York[32], and a pre- and post-interview study at The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston showed that museum activities could improve critical thinking and toleration of those with different views. A 'quasi-experimental, 7-year longitudinal study of participants in an out-of-school STEM programme at a large, urban science museum ' found that ...in comparison to a control group... youth who participated in the

[30] Piscitelli, B. & Anderson, D. (2001) Young children's perspectives of museum settings and experiences. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 19, 269-282

[31] https://www.artfund.org/professional/news-and-insights/art-fund-and-nesta-pilot-mini-wonders-early-years-innovation-programme

[32] Downey, S. Delamatre, J. & Jones J. (2007) 'Measuring the Impact of Museum-School Programs: Findings and Implications for Practice', *The Journal of Museum Education* , 32/ 2, 'Critical-Thinking Skills in the Museum' pp. 175-187

programme had higher rates of graduation in general, graduating with a degree in STEM, and ultimately beginning a STEM career.'[33]' Falk & Needham interviewed people who had visited the California Science Centre a decade after it opened in 1998 and found 'strong evidence that this science center "contributes to science learning, interests, and behaviors of a large subset of the L.A. community" (p. 11)[34].

In a randomly controlled trial (RTC) of the impacts of 'culturally enriching field trips'[35] in Atlanta, Georgia over two years, Erikson et al. were surprised to find that this 'treatment', regarded as too small to have a lasting effect, improved test scores, behaviours and attendance one to two years later. The authors speculate that 'the treatment helped facilitate a smoother transition for students between elementary and middle schools; that it 'may have exposed students to a broader world and helped them adjust to experiences that were unfamiliar to them'; that it may have 'affected students' academic performance through school engagement'; and that 'students may have learned skills or content from the field trips that assisted them on their exams' (p.896). At a minimum, they argued, that 'even if the effect is due to random error, the results clearly demonstrate that treatment students experienced no harm on their academic performance from missing days of class time to attend culturally enriching field trips, and they possibly experienced a boost' (p.897).

7.5 School Visits and Inequalities

Kisida et al. (2016) supported above the findings from the Boston and New York studies in a similarly rigorous experiment. They also found evidence 'that disadvantaged students …may reap the greatest benefits from arts exposure facilitated by their school' (p184). These findings were confirmed in a Randomized Controlled Trial at Crystal Bridges Museum in Northwest Arkansas, involving 10,912 students, 489 teachers at 123 different schools. They found that all students benefited but 'students from rural and high poverty schools benefit even more than others from visiting an art museum ' (p82).

In a 2022 article Stopforth and Gayle criticised the way that 'cultural capital has made the transition from social science to educational policy. New guidance from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) states that 'as part of making the judgement about quality of education, inspectors will consider the extent to which schools are equipping pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital they

[33] Aaron Price. C., Tai, R.H., La Nguyen, c. (2025) ' A longitudinal study of a museum-based out-of-school time program's impact on STEM career pathways' *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology 100*.
[34] Falk, J. H., & Needham, M. D. (2011). Measuring the impact of a science center on its community. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 48/1:1–12. The Science Centre has collections-based displays as well as purely interactive exhibits.
[35] Erickson, H.H., Watson A.R. Greene, J. P. (2021) 'Culturally Enriching Field Trips', *The Journal of Human Resources*, 59/3:879-904

need to succeed in life''[36]. Drawing on large datasets they found no evidence that family cultural capital, (whose definition included visiting museums), had no impact on examination results – only reading initiatives had a (moderate) impact. The authors concluded that school visits to museums could not be justified on the basis that they reduced inequalities by increasing children's cultural capital and hence improved their examination results. Even if, as the U.S. evidence suggests, disadvantaged students benefit more than others from school visits to museums, these benefits would have to be significant to overcome the socioeconomic determinants of inequality to a degree that they show up in population level statistics.

Given the rigour of the US studies however, it is clear that there are circumstances when museum visits can improve examination scores, but these are not the focus of museum visits. There is no national museum education policy (or indeed museum policy) which directs museum visits to focus on examination results. There is no research which specifies the focus and 'dose' of museum visits required to improve results and no investment programme to deliver that dose to at a population level. Demonstration projects involving multiple visits, and school residencies in museums, show promising results[37], though these rarely explore the sector-wide implications or costs and viability of scaling up/out. Museum visits are designed, usually in partnership with schools which specify the service they believe to be effective, to provide general enrichment and inspiration for learning, within contexts where collections are interpreted in ways that are relevant to the curriculum. A major issue for museum visits is the costs of transport which schools have found increasing difficult, as pressures on school budgets mount[38].

DCMS Audience surveys show that over the past 10 years about 40% of adults in Upper Socioeconomic Groups and 60% from Lower Socioeconomic Groups did not visit museums[39]. This means that for many English children, especially those from working-class homes, school trips are the only times when they visit museums[40] and hence access the local and global cultural and natural heritage which their communities have decided to preserve. As with health and wellbeing impacts, whatever the learning impact of museums, frequency of the 'treatment' will make a significant difference. While it may be unlikely that a single school trip will have a long-term impact on children's life chances, these visits are about cultural citizenship and belonging as

[36] Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills, 2019: 10
[37] E.g. https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/projects/2016/my-primary-school-is-at-the-museum.
[38] The Welsh Government provides funding for free school visits to local museums, linked to the new Welsh curriculum https://gem.org.uk/gem-museum-travel-bursary-scheme/
[39] O'Neill, M. and MacLeod S (2025) ' Addressing the Museum Attendance and Benefit Gap or Is there a better story for museums?' 22-25.
[40] Phillips, M., Woodham A., & Hooper-Greenhill E. (2015): Foucault and museum geographies: a case study of the English 'Renaissance in the Regions', *Social & Cultural Geograp*hy, 1-34.

much as achieving specific learning goals. They may contribute to the high level of 'existence value' attributed to museums in England – a term used by economists to discuss facilities which people value, even if they do not use them themselves.

7.6 Lifelong Learning

Crowley et al.'s summary of the role of museums from a Learning Science perspective found that they 'provide a wide range of diverse examples of designs to support learning for audiences ranging from the youngest children to the oldest adults (p. 461)[41]. Research on adult visitors shows that they do acquire new information but their primary focus is on 'meaning making' and on affective learning based on their identity, whether that's their identity as belonging to a particular nationality or cultural group, or as someone who visits museums[42]. This is of vital importance for the civic and cultural capital role of museums, considered below.

7.7 Family Learning

In a 2017 review of 'museums of learning for children: a decade of research', Andre et al. found 'growing evidence suggesting that museum exhibitions, when supported with facilitating strategies and activities, can positively influence children's science attitudes and concept knowledge, understanding, teamwork, communication and group communication skills, and critical thinking skills in history, science, arts and humanities' (p.68)[43]. Research on family learning during self-guided museum visits shows a wide range of purposes, varying in their degree of 'formality' in relation to learning. But all families, from whatever background, scaffold their children's learning, and frequently engage in collective learning where children and adults both shared their insights and knowledge.[44] Moussouri's deep ethnographic research on family learning[45] shows that museum visit prompts families to enact and display who they are (e.g., intimacy, shared stories, "significant objects," school involvement), strengthening family identity through joint activity and talk. Families combine museum resources with their own cultural resources to make meaning "smoothly" across galleries—an efficacy benefit that reinforces identity and confidence in public cultural spaces. For families from non-dominant cultures, museum conversations trigger memories and intergenerational narratives, linking childhood homes, migration and racism to present

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[41] Crowley, K. Pierroux, P. and Knutson, K. (2014) 'Informal Learning in Museums' in Sawyer, R.K. (Ed) *The Cambridge Companion to The Learning Sciences,* Cambridge University Press.

[42] J. Hohenstein, & T. Moussouri (2018*) Museum Learning: Theory and Research as Tools for Enhancing Practice,* Routledge, London pp.77-79. Falk, J.H. and Dierking, L.D. (2013) The Museum Experience Revisited. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

[43] Andre, L., Durksen, T. & Volman, M.L. Museums as avenues of learning for children: a decade of research. Learning Environ Res 20, 47–76 (2017).

[44] Hohenstein, J. & Muossouri T. (2017) *Museum Learning: Theory and Research as Tools for Enhancing Practice,* London, Routledge.

[45] Moussouri, T. (2024) *Museums, Identity and Family Practices, London,* Routledge (Open Access)

identities. This helps families “discover and draw on the strength of their own culture.” (p. 119). Parents/guardians intentionally cultivate values, tastes and roles through museum-related practices (e.g., modelling curiosity, aspirations, gendered chores as contested norms). This benefits family formation and the socialisation of children. Family discourse both during and after visits structures supports family collaborative sense-making. Family learning is also a motivation for working class families to visit museums – even if the adults find museums uninteresting for themselves, they bring their children, seeing museums as worthwhile and affordable destinations[46]. The most recent (2025) research by the American Alliance of museums found that museum visitors often find it easier to find family quality time when they can discuss/learn together at a museum (or in a park) than at home, because of the pressures of housework and screen activity. The large-scale rigorous survey also found that these findings break down far less by political affiliation than the dominant media narrative would suggest i.e. even people with polarized political views share a common experience of museum visiting. The important research on which museum interventions best support family learning is a growing field[47].

7.8 Employability

A 2020 study called *Museums making a demonstrable positive impact in the fields of education and employability* – a literature review commissioned by Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS)[48] - found:

- Evidence that museum learning experiences improve knowledge retention and deepen understanding through object-based learning and experiential approaches.
- Positive impacts on 'cultural capital' – enhancing young people’s confidence in engaging with arts and heritage.
- Increased teacher confidence and capacity to deliver curriculum content when working with museum staff.

For example, a longitudinal evaluation was carried out of the Circuit project, which developed young people’s involvement and employability through a programme with ten galleries across the UK, led by Tate. The research ‘showed that the Circuit project was effective for supporting the young people to develop their. Derby Museums runs programmes in partnership with Rolls Royce, Vaillant and John Smedley. *Launch into Engineering*, a programme sponsored by Vaillant UK, is a work experience programme

[46] Miles, A. (2013) ‘Culture, participation and identity in contemporary Manchester’ in Wolff, J. and Savage, M. (Eds) in *Culture in Manchester: Institutions and Urban Change Since 1850,* Manchester, Manchester University Press.

[47] See Kupiec, K., Malmberg, L. E., & Mathers, S. (2022). ‘The Effectiveness of Museum Intervention on Parent–Child Conversations: A Meta-Analysis’. *Visitor Studies*, *26*(1), 82–101, for a summary.

[48] Toonen, S. (2020). Museums Making a Demonstrable Positive Impact in the Fields of Education and Employability. Edinburgh: Museums Galleries Scotland. Available at: Museums and Education Impact Report

which develops young people with an interest in engineering. Inspired by the collections and realised in the Museum of Making workshop, young people can develop the skills and understand roles involved in engineering today and in the future. As with the Amelia Scott project above, this targets young people at the point of a key transition, from school to work,[49] increasing its chances of having a positive long-term impact[50].

Careers in the arts and heritage have many barriers for young people from socially and economically disadvantaged groups. *CIRCUIT* was an arts programme for young people aged 15-25, led by Tate and funded by Paul Hamlyn [51] It took place in ten galleries in England and Wales 2013-2017. The galleries involved young people in programming, to inform the gallery staff about young people's interests. In 2017, Coles and Thomson interviewed 21 young participants who wanted to make a career in the arts. While the CIRCUIT programme was effective in supporting these young people's employability ambitions, perhaps its greatest interest is what it made explicit about the barriers experienced by participants depending on their backgrounds, 'particularly their family financial resources and knowledge'[52]. Those who could live with their parents and be financially supported and have access to knowledge of how networks and systems worked, formulated more ambitious and strategic career plans than those who had to work to support themselves, had insecure housing and often could not see a way of earning a living in the arts (p.5). The Group for Education in Museums recently published a compilation of 20 case studies of how museums are trying to address these barriers[53]. All the projects provided a Lessons Learned section, which provide excellent practical advice for museums wishing to undertake this kind of work, in particular relating to the complexity of partnership work and the adaptations museums need to make to provide good experiences for mentees, apprentices or other participants. The current state of employability work in museums is probably best described as embryonic. Issues of scale in relation to resources need to be addressed. Here again a national strategy would greatly help individual museums to align their work with national policies in the most effective ways.

7.9 Conclusion

In a chapter on informal learning in museums in *The Cambridge Handbook of the Learning Sciences* [54], Crowley et al. argued that 'the real value of museum learning

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[49] Erickson, H.H., Watson A.R. Greene, J. P. (2021) 'Culturally Enriching Field Trips', The Journal of Human Resources, 59/3:879-904

[50] GEM provides case studies of activities to improve career paths in museums here: https://gem.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/GEM-Case-Studies-34.pdf

[51] Coles, R. & Thomson, P. (2017). *Circuit Qualitative Longitudinal Research,* University of Nottingham.

[52] See also: Brook, O., O'Brien, D., Taylor, M. (2020) Culture is bad for you: Inequality in the cultural and creative industries, Manchester University Press.

[53] Moss, R. & Provomaya, K. (2025) *Case Studies: Career Pathways in Museums, 34*.

[54] Crowley, K. Pierroux, P. and Knutson, K. (2014) 'Informal Learning in Museums' in Sawyer, R.K. (Ed) The Cambridge Companion to The Learning Sciences, Cambridge University Press.

revolves around distal [i.e. long term and distant from the actual experience, as opposed to the short term acquisition of information] outcomes such as fostering a passion for learning, promoting the growth of inquiry skills, learning how to observe, or learning how to talk about science, art, or history' (p.470). They also noted that these are 'outcomes that are not possible to achieve in a single museum visit', hence the emphasis in this paper on the importance of strategies for repeat visitation, especially amongst underserved audiences. If this analysis is combined with the research that suggests that for adults, learning in museums is about meaning making and identity development, it is clear that museums can contribute deeply enriching experiences to individuals, families and communities at every age and stage of life.

8.0 Spillover Impacts 1: The Economy and Placemaking

8.1 Introduction

Over the past 200 or more years museums have built up invaluable collections of millions of objects, preserved and re-animated hundreds of important historical buildings and created new purpose-built museums, both of which are often symbolic of local and regional identities. This stock of heritage assets[55] constitutes a foundational, irreplaceable part of what the British Academy has called England's 'social and cultural infrastructure'[56]. The Government has recognised the risks posed to these assets resulting from the decline of Local Government funding, mitigating them through programmes like the DCMS Museum Estate and Development Fund (MEND), the DCMS/Wolfson Fund and the Museum Renewal Fund (MRF). The ECMN acknowledges these invaluable investments with gratitude. They provide a foundation on which a longer-term asset maintenance and development strategy can be embedded in the new Local Government structures.

The Victorian founders of England's early civic museums would not have recognised recent debates about museums as a site of conflict between utilitarian and intrinsic value[57]. They believed that the intrinsic power of the experiences would trigger many desirable utilitarian benefits. They consciously promoted commercially important new sciences like geology and botany. They celebrated new technologies like steam and marine engineering, and new disciplines like design, because of their economic as well as their cultural importance[58]. Civic museums wholeheartedly embrace their roles in

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[55] DCMS (2021*) Valuing Culture and Heritage Capital: A framework towards informing decision making*. Available at: https://culturalplacemaking.com/document/valuing-culture-and-heritage-capital-a-framework-towards-informing-decision-making/

[56] British Academy (2025) *Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure*, Cambridge University, Bennett Institute for Public Policy

[57] For an overview see Belfiore, E., & Bennett, O. (2008) *The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History*, London, Palgrave MacMillan

[58] Greenwood, T. (1888) *Museums and Art Galleries,* London, Simpkin, Marshall & Co.

promoting inclusive economic growth especially through supporting leisure and business tourism, the Creative Industries, school, family and adult learning, and adding to the local economy through the supply chain e.g. local supplies and services. With the increasing threats to town and city centres, the role of museums as drivers of footfall in urban renewal has taken on a new importance in cities and towns already challenged by de-industrialisation.

8.2 The Economic Impact of Museums

While economic value of the stock of museums has not been quantified, estimating the economic spillover effects of investment in museums is a well-established field in urban regeneration, especially for post-industrial cities[59]. Economic impact studies typically measure the contribution of museums to Gross Value Added (GVA), which involves analysing direct (e.g. people employed in museums), indirect (e.g. businesses in the museum supply chain) and induced (e.g. employees of businesses which depend on the direct and indirect expenditure) expenditure. These studies use transparent, standardised, robust input–output models, grounded in official economic statistics. The shortcomings of these methods – substitution, claiming all tourism income for museums, and failure to analyse opportunity costs and cost effectiveness – are well understood and accounted for in the best studies.

There are no economic impact studies of Civic Museums as a separate group. There are however numerous studies which provide strong evidence that museums, galleries and heritage sites contribute significantly to local and national economies. In England, a 2015 report commissioned by ACE - *The Economic Impact of Museums in England* – concluded that: 'a crucial step has been taken to move from a position where museums are seen as a negative value in economic terms, to one which recognises the full contribution made by the way museums leverage income, in the broadest sense of the term. The value of the sector is clear – a contribution of £1.45bn in economic output and the generation of an estimated £3 for every £1 of public sector grant'[60].

According to the 2023 update for English Heritage on *The heritage sector in England and its impact on the economy* 'Libraries, archives, museums and other cultural services' had a Gross Value Added of £3.195 billion[61]. A peer reviewed study by a large team of economists from universities in Michigan found evidence to support 'museum studies

[59] For example: Selwood, S. (2003) ' What difference do museums make? Producing evidence on the impact of museums' *Critical Quarterly* 44/4:65-81; Sheppard, S.C. 'Museums in the neighborhood: the local economic impact of museums', in *Handbook of Industry Studies and Economic Geography* ,pp.191-204; Frey, B.S. (2006), 'The economics of museums', in Ginsburgh, V and Throsby, D. (eds), *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture,* Amsterdam: North-Holland, pp. 1017–47.

[60] (ACE 2015:27).

[61] CEBR - Centre for Economics and Business Research 2023) *The heritage sector in England and its impact on the economy,* London, CEBR. Cebr 2023:14).

which identify a regional multiplying effect that free entry museums have on regional economies, and that even museums which generate little direct revenue could be considered for their 'return on investment' in broader regional economic and cultural development'[62].

8.3 International Studies

A 2016 Oxford Economics report found that museums in the USA functioned as 'economic engines' for their localities and regions. contributing more than $50 billion in GDP and supporting 372,100 workers directly and 354,100 indirectly, either in the supply chains of museums or through the wage spending of those employed by museums themselves or those employed in the supply chain—totalling 726,200 jobs. Studies have found similar evidence in Sweden and Italy[63]. One of the most extensive and robust studies of the impact of museum visiting on regional economies is from Finland, in a book published by the University of Vaasa[64]. Over 6,500 museum visitors completed questionnaires about their spending . Recognising that visiting a museum has 'as is the case in life generally, many parallel targets' (p. 46), the study 'proportioned the spending according to the primary motive of the trip'. It produced a 'minimum' and a 'statistical' model which took into account, inter alia, 'the visitor's education, trip duration, satisfaction with the museum visit, the location of the museum [small or large town] and travel companions' (p.4). The results were: from the former model an average of €38 of increased demand per museum visit; and from the latter, €15.20 for day visits and €73.80 for those who stayed overnight– an average of €49.40 for all visitors. On this basis they estimated that a total investment of €75 million by Finnish municipalities in museums generated between €340 and €500 million in additional expenditure (p. 48). In his seminal study of *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain* (1988), Myerscough argued that museums have greater direct economic impact than other arts media (e.g. concert halls, theatres) because they have less leakage i.e. they spend less on visiting artists (p.99)[65].

8.4 The Economic Value of Non-market Impacts of Museums

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[62] Rhodes, M., Hannum, K., Burnau, M., Denison, V., Louya, K., Maue, G., McRoberts, M., Miller, R., Murphy, D., O'Connor, A., Rigby, N., Roth, E., Schapman, A., Swigart, W., Taylor, E., Trevino, C., Vaught, J., Vaught R. (2024) 'Museums, national resources, and the broader economic impacts of National Museum Wales' *Welsh Economic Review*, 30:1-9.

[63] Gustafsson, C & Ijla, A. (2017) ' Museums–A catalyst for sustainable economic development in Sweden', *Journal of Innovative Development & Studies 5/:1-14.* Pedrazzi, R. (2019) 'Culture in Italy: How much are our state museums worth? 27 billion euros'; Available at: https://notiziarte.com/2019/10/31/cultura-in-italia-quanto-valgono-i-nostri-musei-statali-27-miliardi-di-euro/

[64] Piekkola, H., Suojanen, O. Vainio (2014) *Economic Impact of Museums,* Vassa, University of Vaasa. See also Falk, J.H., Claudio, N., Myllykoski, M. (2025)' Towards a Valid Measure of the Economic Value of Museum Experiences: An Example from Finland', *Social Indicators Research* 177: 533–556 (2025). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-025-03518-9

[65] Myerscough, J. (1988) *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain,* London, Policy Studies Institute.

The DCMS Heritage Capital approach argues that these methods capture only a fraction of the complex impacts of museums and identifies methodologies that can monetise non-market impacts of museums[66]. These include benefits to users such as health and wellbeing, and benefits to non-users, such as existence value (valuing that a museum is there for other people to enjoy), bequest value (knowing that a museum will exist for future generations) and altruistic value (knowing that a museum is available for other people's benefit). Quantifying the value to visitors can be done with a number of methods. English Heritage recently piloted combining the Travel Cost Method with mobile phone data to put a value on individual visits. TCM 'works by analysing how total expenses, including travel costs and the value of visitors' time influence their decisions to visit a site... For paid sites, this shows the additional non-market value above and beyond their market value, whereas for free sites, this provides a value to sites otherwise not valued because there is no direct financial transaction. Using over 500,000 data points from English Heritage booking records and hundreds of thousands of anonymous mobile GPS data points, this research offers an improved understanding of visitor behaviour and site value'. On average they found that the experience was worth more than visitors paid - £5.31 more per person using mobile data and £5.75 using English Heritage Data[67].

8.5 Quantifying the Public Benefit of a Model Regional Museum

ACE has provided detailed guidance for museums on *How to quantify the public benefit of your Museum using Economic Value Estimates*[68], providing a very affordable means of estimating a museum's economic impact. The *Guidance* focuses on Regional Museums, which is defined as having a minimum of 200,000 visits per year, at least 25% of whom are from outside the city boundaries, based in a major city within its county, and has collections of more than local importance. It provides a worked example based on a notional museum in Manchester which receives 426,367 visits a year. Applying the Willingness to Pay methodology, the Guidance calculates that (at 2020 values) free entry had a user value of £6.16 per visit and the non-user value of £3.25. Aggregating these for all local (i.e. non tourist) visits gives a user value of £2,626,421 and a non-user value of £1,327,940, totalling £3,954361 – against an indicative annual museum operating cost of £1,978,146.

8.6 Valuing Benefits to Disadvantaged Groups

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[66] See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/valuing-culture-and-heritage-capital-a-framework-towards-decision-making/valuing-culture-and-heritage-capital-a-framework-towards-informing-decision-making

[67] https://historicengland.org.uk/research/current/social-and-economic-research/culture-and-heritage-capital/travel-cost-method-approach

[68] Lawton, R., Fujiwara, D., Bakhshi, H., Mourato, S., Arber, M., Davies, J. (2020) *Guidance Note: How to quantify the public benefit of your Museum using Economic Value estimates: A Resource for Understanding the Economic Value of Museums.* Arts Council England, DCMS

The answers people in Lower Socioeconomic Groups give in Willingness to Pay surveys may reflect ability rather than willingness to pay or other barriers such as transport or cultural relevance rather than lack of interest. Unless these factors are taken into account, WTP evaluations may underestimate the value of museums to their local populations. The DCMS *Rapid Evidence Assessment: Culture and Heritage Valuation Studies – Technical Report*[69] noted that 'An additional gap in the research is that we found no valuation studies that apply welfare weighting to the values estimated for culture and heritage assets'. In the Treasury's *Green Book Review 2025*, as well as noting 'insufficient emphasis on place-based objectives' (p.8), stated that in 'weighted analysis, the benefits of projects for low-income households are valued more highly than the benefits for high-income households, based on the principle of the diminishing marginal utility of income' (p.22). The *Green Book* suggests welfare weightings ranging from 1.3 to 2.4 (p.98). The worked example in the Guidance could be developed to estimate the number of visits from lower socioeconomic groups (LSEG) and the non-user value to the LSEG population, which would have increased the aggregate value significantly.

8.7 Valuing Digital Services

Exploratory research on the Digital services provided by museums, used by millions of people every year tentatively found a willingness to pay a monthly subscription fee for digital services provided by civic museums in Bristol, Derby and Newcastle averaged £3.85. They also found that people see the online use as different from an in-person visit, not a substitute[70].

8.8 Place-Making

Beyond visitor spending, museums can anchor urban regeneration and place-making initiatives. Almost half (48%) of Arts Council England's National Portfolio arts organizations (which include many museums) reported being at the centre of local regeneration plans in recent years[71]. Museums often occupy historic or iconic buildings and can transform derelict areas into cultural quarters. The National Waterways Museum at Gloucester Docks and Derby's Silk Mill are good examples of this kind of place-based development where museums are used as anchor attractions. By

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[69] Lawton, R., Fujiwara, D., Arber, M., Malde, J., O'Donovan, P., Lyons, A., Atkinson, G. (2020) *DCMS Rapid Evidence Assessment: Culture and Heritage Valuation Studies – Technical Report, London,* Simetrica Jacobs.

[70] DCMS (2023) Measuring the economic value of museums and galleries digital offers: an exploratory use of contingent valuation techniques. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/measuring-the-value-of-the-digital-offer-of-galleries-and-museums/measuring-the-economic-value-of-museums-and-galleries-digital-offers-an-exploratory-use-of-contingent-valuation-techniques

[71] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/embedding-a-culture-and-heritage-capital-approach/embedding-a-culture-and-heritage-capital-approach#executivesummary

increasing footfall and improving the local image, museums can help revive high streets and attract further investment.

8.9 The Lessons of the 'Bilbao Effect'

The Guggenheim Bilbao is seen as the archetype of 'museum-led' urban regeneration and city branding. Over 25 years, the museum reportedly generated around €7.7 billion for the Basque region, indicating a return of roughly 10:1 on public investment[72]. Many English cities, including Margate, Hull and Nottingham have been inspired to invest in landmark museums, while others have refurbished and extended historic museums or converted historic structures (e.g. The Baltic in Newcastle) to act as catalysts for economic development. The lessons of Bilbao are that museums can indeed catalyse regeneration and rebrand cities, but only as part of a broader urban improvement strategy (including transport, environmental cleanup, retraining programmes, refurbishment of historic town centres). Initial fears that the Guggenheim would overwhelm the local arts and heritage scene have proved unfounded. There has been no displacement of funding - local Authority, charitable and private sector investment in the arts and heritage has increased substantially, including in areas distant from the Guggenheim[73]. This reinforces the evidence that museums are most effective as economic and cultural engines of inclusive growth when they are integrated into wider strategies, and when gentrification is avoided.

8.10 Museums & Gentrification

Urban development museum projects have often been criticised for being complicit in gentrification which negatively impacts the very communities they are meant to be serving.[74] While 'Iconic' buildings can be striking, their local meaning may be very limited – 'the *raison d'etre* of a flagship development is not, ultimately, the programme/ activity it contains, but its presence itself'[75]. This is not a necessary outcome however – 'cultural regeneration, where cultural activity is fully integrated into regeneration plans alongside other considerations such as economic and environmental…can help create and maintain social capital, a key determinant of successful regeneration. Museums are well placed to play a part in this'. Lessons are emerging from practice around both culture-led and cultural regeneration, and relate to ensuring the integration of museums in planning from the earliest stages, and effective partnerships between

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[72] Plaza, B. (2006) 'The Return on Investment of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research,* 30/2:452-67

[73] Plaza, B., Tironi, M. & Haarich, S.E. (2009) 'Bilbao's Art Scene and the "Guggenheim effect" Revisited', European Planning Studies, 17/11:1711-1729.

[74] See for example: Pritchard, S. (2020). The Artwashing of Gentrification and Social Cleansing. In: Adey, P., et al. *The Handbook of Displacement*. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan; MacLeod, S. (2021) *Museums and Design for Creative Lives,* Abingdon, Routledge; Grossi, E., Sacco, P/L., Blessi, G. T. (2023) 'Cultural, creative, and complex: A computational foundation of culture-driven urban governance' *Cities,* 104437.

[75] Plaza, B., Tironi, M. & Haarich, S.E. (2009) 'Bilbao's Art Scene and the "Guggenheim effect" Revisited', European Planning Studies, 17/11:1724.

museum professionals and planners, regeneration professionals and engineers[76]. A peer-reviewed study in the *European Planning Studies* journal compared museum regeneration-led projects in Spain, France, Italy, Germany and Turkey and found that museums 'can play an important role in building up "social capital", creating networks between different professionals, groups, sectors and segments of society, bridging diverse social backgrounds, lowering coordinating costs for individuals and businesses, and increasing the capacity of firms to reconnect'[77].

8.11 Creative Industries

Museums have recently been renewing and reinventing their original function of inspiring artists, designers and other creatives. Research in this field is very limited and it is a priority area for further development. A global survey of Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) found significant interest in working with museums , with collections seen as opportunities for 'design students and CCI stakeholders learn to approach the past critically and creatively, create meaning, and co-create their future heritage'.[78] According to a recent *Phase I report - Museums, Growth, and the Creative Industries* - commissioned by The Association of Independent Museums (AIM), and the National Museum Directors' Council (NMDC) on the role of museums in the creative industries, 'four cross-cutting themes illustrate the range of museums' contributions:

- Innovation, R&D, and Digital Production
- Skills and Talent Development
- Placemaking and Reimagining
- Creative and Regenerative Ecosystems'

The report states that 'we can describe and evidence their contributions and impact although we can't yet quantify it economically'. It identifies a need for investment in digital infrastructure and capacity as high priorities. The commissioning group are working on a Phase II report which will look to quantify and monetize museums' contributions to CCIs[79]. The evidence in this area would best be described as weak but promising, not least because nurturing local talent and contributing to the local economy were part of the founding aims of many civic museums, and their collections were formed with that objective in mind.

[76] P. Bristow; Using heritage in regeneration: the role of museums. *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers* - Municipal Engineer 1 September 2010; 163 (3): 139–144.
[77] Heidenreich, M. & Plaza, B. (2015) Renewal through Culture? The Role of Museums in the Renewal of Industrial Regions in Europe*, European Planning Studies,* 23/8:1441-1455.
[78] Gaitán, M.; Villuendas, E.; Targa, L. Bridging Creative Industries and Museums: Collaborative Pathways for Sustainable Development. Heritage 2025, 8, 140. https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage8040140
[79] https://www.artfund.org/professional/news-and-insights/why-museums-matter-the-creative-industries-untapped-resource

8.12 Conclusion

According to the OECD, 'for local governments, museums become not only one of many actors in local development, but a driver of change'[80]. Museums have what might be called 'agency value' for local government – there are fewer constraints and greater opportunities for creative and effective initiatives than in many other areas of local authority responsibility. Because of their engagement with a broad public and their capacity to represent local cultures and identities, museums have unique capacity to generate synergies across the whole range of economic and social regeneration programmes. Their multiple direct and spillover impacts mean that what the CEO of Smartify, said about museums' role in his sector- "Museums are the connective tissue of the creative economy"[81] - is also true of urban renewal, public health and community development. The reform of local government provides an unprecedented opportunity to capitalise on the catalytic power of museums in a way that integrates local, regional and national objectives and strategies.

9.0 Museums, Health and Wellbeing

9.1 Context: Declining Life Expectancy and the Limits of NHS-Centred Policy

Healthy life expectancy has fallen for both men and women in England since 2011–13, while the gap between the highest- and lowest-ranked areas has grown by 22% (men) and 17% (women). England now performs worst among 20 comparator countries.[82] Non-medical, socioeconomic factors are the dominant influence on these outcomes. According to the NHS Health Economics Unit, 80% of health outcomes derive from 'non-health inputs', including the environment, education, social support, community infrastructure, leisure opportunities, and cultural access. Cuts to local government funding have directly affected health. A *Lancet Public Health* study found that each £100 per-person reduction in council budgets (2013–17) corresponded to 1.3 months reduced male life expectancy and 1.2 months for women, disproportionately affecting deprived areas[83]. The solutions to these structural inequalities lie primarily outside the cultural arena, and the ECMN, representing a small sector, is cautious about over-claiming in this area. However, museums, as publicly funded civic institutions, are part of the national social and cultural infrastructure and form part of the ecology of health determinants. Health impacts are included here as a 'spillover' effect, even though,

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[80] OECD (2019) Culture and Local Development: Maximising the Impact, A Guide for Local Governments, Communities and Museums. Available at https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/culture-and-local-development-maximising-the-impact_9a855be5-en.html.

[81] https://www.artfund.org/professional/news-and-insights/why-museums-matter-the-creative-industries-untapped-resource

[82] Office for National Statistics: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/bulletins/healthstatelifeexpectanciesuk/between2011to2013and2021to2023

[83] Alexandros Alexiou, Katie Fahy, Kate Mason, Davara Bennett, Heather Brown, Clare Bambra, David Taylor-Robinson, Benjamin Barr (2021) 'Local government funding and life expectancy in England: a longitudinal ecological study', *Lancet Public Health*, 6/e641–47

unlike their economic impact, the effects are direct rather than indirect. This is because, until very recently, health benefits were not an intended outcome of museum activities. But, as research shows that they do have a health impact, museums are well-positioned to contribute to a whole-system approach to building a "health-generating society". Research can reveal how this impact can be amplified and targeted and this is an important field for future experimentation. The main strategic approach museums can take in this context, is to reduce inequalities in museum visiting, so that those whose health is most vulnerable can benefit from the wellbeing impacts of museums.

9.2 Evidence for the Health and Wellbeing Benefits of Engaging with Museums

The explosion in research on the health and wellbeing impact of museums and other cultural institutions over the past 15 years is well documented[84]. The London School of Economics Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science are driving world-leading research into culture, health and wellbeing, part-funded by the Wellcome Foundation, with results to be finalised in 2026/7[85]. This seems to be aiming at a comprehensive account of the field (hundreds of articles have been published, but not a research strategy).

In general research falls into four main categories:

- Overview and scoping reviews
- Small-scale programme evaluations (e.g. museum sessions for people with dementia, loneliness or mild to moderate mental health issues)
- Tracking physical indicators of impact
- Epidemiological studies tracking statistical links between cultural engagement habits and health and wellbeing over time.

As with the other sections of this report, this is not a systematic review: instead it reports on the strongest, most relevant evidence – and the strongest, most relevant criticisms of the evidence and methodologies used in these publications.

9.3 Critiques and Limitations of the Evidence

Some scholars, like Belfiore, Bennett, and Mirza, argue that the cultural sector risks exaggerating its health benefits.[86] These critics highlight

- Inconsistent definitions of key terms. Oman notes that 'there is no single definition of wellbeing. The terms wellbeing, quality of life, happiness, life satisfaction and welfare are often used interchangeably' (p.41) even though these are used not just

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[84] See for example: Chatterjee, H. & Noble, Guy, (21013) , London, Routledge: Pennington A., Jones, R., Bagnall, A., South, J., Corcoran, R. (2019) , *Heritage and Wellbeing: The impact of historic places and assets on community wellbeing - a scoping review.. London: What Works Centre for Wellbeing.* See also: https://whatworkswellbeing.org/?s=museum and https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/ for further resources.

[85] https://wellcomeopenresearch.org/articles/9-356

[86] For an overview see Belfiore, E., & Bennett, O. (2008) *The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History,* London, Palgrave MacMillan

in the field of culture, but for tracking wellbeing at a national level, to inform a wide range of policies. She provides a useful history of how these terms have been mobilised to construct the field of culture and wellbeing, along with useful warnings about the limitations of the data and the frameworks used for analysis.

- Weak methodology in small scale studies, which usually lack control groups and long term follow up and are subject to confirmation bias. Despite these limitations, studies like these can give a qualitative sense of the museum experience, offering insights into how museums experiences may have short and long term benefits for visitors[87].
- Lack of critical appraisal in overview/scoping reviews, such as those carried out for WHO Europe and for DCMS by academics from the Department of Behavioural Science & Health, University College London.[88] Clift et al. [89] concluded that 'the arts and cultural engagement may have a part to play in promoting wellbeing, but whether or not they can have a substantial role in promoting population health and reducing social and health inequalities is yet to be demonstrated' (p.1).[90]

9.4 What the Critics Do Not Address

These critiques generally do not engage with high quality experimental museum interventions, notably those analysed by Helen Chatterjee and Paul Camic. Though admittedly few, their findings cannot be simply ignored on the basis of other, less rigorous studies. For example, in 'Effects of a museum-based social prescription intervention on quantitative measures of psychological wellbeing in older adults' the authors set out a clear experimental methodology and took effect size as well as statistical significance into account (see Text Box on statistics). They also raise the issues relating to delivery of the experiences at scale, which is essential for having a population level health impact, though the suggested method (training large numbers of volunteers) is untested. They conclude that 'the high levels of significance and effect sizes' imply 'that findings can be generalised more widely to other populations of vulnerable and lonely older adults at risk of social isolation and imply that provision of

[87] See for example: Local Government Agency (2022)

[88] Fancourt D. & Finn, S. (2019) *Health Evidence Network synthesis report 67, What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review. WHO Europe.* 9789289054553-eng.pdf. Fancourt, D., Warren, K., & Aughterson, H. (2020). *Evidence Summary for Policy The role of arts in improving health & wellbeing, Report to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport April 2020*. University College London. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/929773/DCMS_report_April_2020_finalx__1_.pdf

[89] Clift, Phillips & Pritchard (2021) and Grebowsz-Haring & Clift (20xx and Forthcoming)

[90] Similar criticisms are made of the *Culture for Health Report, Culture's contribution to health and well-being A report on evidence and policy recommendations for Europe,* in Kaasgaard M., Grebosz-Haring K., Davies C., Musgrave G., Shriraam J., McCrary .JM. and Clift S. (2024) 'Is it premature to formulate recommendations for policy and practice, based on culture and health research? A robust critique of the CultureForHealth (2022) report'. *Frontiers in Public Health 12:1414070*

socially prescribed museum-based sessions could be scaled up nationally to address social and cultural inequities'[91].

They also neglect experimental data from tracking physical indicators of impact. A 2006 study measured the stress levels of London City workers before and after a brief (30 minutes) visit to an art gallery, using the stress hormone cortisol as an indicator. They found that 'the observed drop in cortisol was rapid and substantial; under normal circumstances it would take about 5 hours of normal diurnal decline for cortisol levels to fall to this extent'.[92] A 2019 study of a heritage site in Italy found a similar drop in cortisol levels and concluded that 'aesthetic experience seems to have a noticeable impact on individual physical and mental health. In both dominions, cultural participation intensity is significantly correlated to the response' (p.4)[93]. Many of these studies focus on art galleries, but there is evidence that similar effects are experiences in different museum types.[94] While issues of the long-term impact of these experiences remain to be addressed, the clear evidence of physiological changes provides a firm foundation for the research field of museums and health.

Perhaps even more significantly, the critiques don't address the large-scale, longitudinal epidemiological evidence, which is methodologically stronger than programme-level studies and more relevant for policy. They often hold out Randomised Controlled Trials as the 'gold standard' for research, rarely acknowledging that RCTs are rarely feasible for long-term lifestyle patterns such as cultural participation, and that complex social interventions (like arts engagement) follow non-linear causation similar to physical activity or volunteering. Given this complexity and the resources available to museums, this is an example of the perfect being the enemy of the good. A key issue for museum research to resolve is which research methods deliver results that are robust enough to inform policy and that are realistic in relation to museums. The evidence for the impacts of museums is rapidly reaching the point where it is as good as that in other public policy areas, where RCTs may be carried out, but which don't necessarily account for key factors in the success or failure of interventions in complex social problems.[95].

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[91] Thomson, L.J., Lockyer, B., Camic, P.M., Chatterjee, H. J., (2018) 'Effects of a museum-based social prescription intervention on quantitative measures of psychological wellbeing in older adults', *Perspectives in Public Health, 138/1:28*

[92] Clow A & Fredhoi C (2006) Normalisation of salivary cortisol levels and self-report stress by a brief lunchtime visit to an art gallery by London City workers. Journal of Holistic Healthcare 3 (2) 29–32.

[93] Grossi, E., Blessi, G.T., Sacco, P.L. (2018) 'Magic Moments: Determinants of Stress Relief and Subjective Wellbeing from Visiting a Cultural Heritage Site' , *Cultural Medical Psychiatry 43:4-34.*

[94] Jeavons, C. Morse, N., Jiang, Y. (2025) 'The role of museums and galleries in promoting health and wellbeing' in Holt, N., Tischler, V., Corvo, E., Vougioukalou, S. *Routledge Handbook of Arts and Health,* London, Routledge.

[95] Stevenson, M.T. (2023) 'Cause, Effect, And The Structure Of The Social World', *Boston University Law Review,* 103:2001-2047. Davies, H. T.O., Nutley, S.M. *What Works?: Evidence-based policy and practice in public services. Policy Press.*

9.5 Epidemiological Research

Since 1996, hundreds of studies, published in peer-reviewed journals including the *British Medical Journal (BMJ), The Journal of Public Mental Healt*h, and *The Lancet* and international journals of equivalent stature, have found statistical evidence that cultural attendance improves health to such an extent that regular visitors live longer, in a manner akin to physical exercise, though through different mechanisms[96]. These studies are controlled for eight key variables: age, sex, education level, income, long term disease, social network, smoking, and physical exercise, implying that cultural attendance is a separate variable. These data do not refer to art therapy or participating in creative activities, simply attendance (O'Neill 2011)[97].

The first study, by Bygren et al. (1996) found that adults who frequently attended cultural events—including museums—had a 57% lower risk of mortality, even after controlling for income, education, long-term illness, smoking, exercise, and social networks. This used a Prospective design which reduced recall bias. With a large sample size (12,000 adults, randomly chosen) and a prospective design, this evidenced a robust association between cultural attendance and wellbeing. In 2001 Johansson et al. followed 3,793 adults for eight years and found that those who became less culturally active had a 65% higher risk of poor perceived health. Individuals who increased participation achieved comparable wellbeing to consistently active people, suggesting a causal pathway rather than mere association[98].
International studies echo these findings: Finnish and Norwegian cohorts associate cultural participation with reduced disability, better self-rated health, and improved cardiovascular outcomes[99].

The research suggests a wide range of credible mechanisms for the health impact of museums[100]:

- cognitive stimulation and novelty

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[96] For example: Bygren, L.O., Konlaan B.B., & Johansson, S. (1996) 'Attendance at Cultural Events, Reading Books or Periodicals, and Making Music or Singing in a Choir as Determinants for Survival: Swedish Interview Survey of Living Conditions', *British Medical Journal* 1996/313:1577–80.
[97] O'Neill, M. (2011) 'Cultural Attendance and Public Mental Health – From Research to Practice', *Journal of Public Mental Health* 9/4: 22–9.
[98] Johansson, S.E., Konlaan, B.B. and Bygren, L.O. *(2001) 'Sustaining habits of attending cultural events and maintenance of health: a longitudinal study, *Health Promotion International, 16/3:229-234*.
[99] Hyyppä MT, Mäki J, Impivaara O, Aromaa A. (2006) 'Leisure participation predicts survival: a population-based study in Finland'. *Health Promotion International* 2006, 21/1:5–12.Hyyppä M.T., Mäki J., Impivaara O., Aromaa A. (2006) 'Individual-level measures of social capital as predictors of all-cause and cardiovascular mortality: a population-based prospective study of men and women in Finland'. *European Journal of Epidemiology*, 22/9:589–97.
[100] Trupp, M.D., Howlin, C., Fekete A., Kutsche, J., Fingerhut J. & Pelowski, M. (2025) 'The impact of viewing art on well-being—a systematic review of the evidence base and suggested mechanisms', *The Journal of Positive Psychology,* DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2025.2481041. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2025.2481041

- affective and aesthetic experience
- social connection in shared civic spaces
- identity formation and cultural citizenship
- reduction in stress (tracked through physical biomarkers)[101]
- safe, welcoming public environments
- incidental physical activity (movement through galleries)

Museums located in parks or green estates, as many civic museums are (e.g., Leeds, Birmingham, Nottingham), combine cultural and environmental wellbeing effects.

The research shows that that cultural stimulation is a 'perishable commodity', similar to physical fitness, so that, for cultural participation to help maintain wellbeing, regular engagement is required. And, like sport and physical activity, the benefits can be achieved by starting participation at any age, and recovered after a period of inactivity. The team at the Department of Behavioural Science & Health, University College London who carried out the DCMS and WHO Europe surveys above, have also carried out a large number of statistical studies of cultural attendance and health and wellbeing, which will help address the issues with their surveys[102]. They are also working on understanding the mechanisms through which these impacts are generated, and breaking down the 'ingredients' of cultural experiences[103] This is crucial for understanding which aspects of museum activities are most effective in enabling the cultural experiences which generate wellbeing, learning and social impacts. Despite the critiques of some overview publications from this group of scholars outlined above, the overall programme is the most robust and comprehensive study of the health and wellbeing impacts of culture in the world, and seems likely to move the entire field forward when all its results are published and drawn together.

Parallel findings have been reported internationally. A large Norwegian prospective cohort study found evidence that 'frequently attending at least one cultural activity influenced longevity. Creative activities lowered mortality in both genders, while receptive activity benefits were mostly found for men. Thus, promoting and facilitating engaged cultural lifestyles are vital for longevity'.[104] An Italian study found that 'culture

[101] Clow A & Fredhoi C (2006) 'Normalisation of salivary cortisol levels and self-report stress by a brief lunchtime visit to an art gallery by London City workers'. *Journal of Holistic Healthcare* 3/2: 29–32. Grossi, E., Blessi, G.T., Sacco, P.L. (2018) 'Magic Moments: Determinants of Stress Relief and Subjective Wellbeing from Visiting a Cultural Heritage Site' , *Cultural Medical Psychiatry* 43:4-34.

[102] E.g. Fancourt, D. and Steptoe, A. (2019 'Cultural engagement and mental health: Does socio-economic status explain the association?' Social Science & Medicine 236:1-6. For further examples see publications by Daisy Fancourt - https://profiles.ucl.ac.uk/44526-daisy-fancourt/publications; publications by Saoirse Finn - https://profiles.ucl.ac.uk/92499-saoirse-finn/publications

[103] Warran, K., Burton A., Fancourt, D. 'What are the active ingredients of 'arts in health' activities?' *Welcome Open Research* 2022, April 29:7:10.

[104] Løkken BI, Merom D, Sund ER, et al. (2020) 'Cultural participation and all-cause mortality, with possible gender differences: an 8-year follow-up in the HUNT Study, Norway'. *Journal of Epidemiological*

has a relevant role as a determinant of individual psychological well-being' and that 'innovative, well-being focused public health policies' may be able to leverage 'the human and social developmental role of culture'.[105]

9.6 Social Prescribing: Bridging the Gap between Micro and Macro Impacts

Social prescribing has been described as 'a key component of the NHS's universal personalised care'[106]. It enables GPs and local agencies to refer people to a social prescribing link worker, who gives people time, focusing on what matters to them and developing a 'simple personalised care and support plan'. They connect people to community groups and statutory services for practical and emotional support. For some people that may be sports and exercise projects, or arts and nature-based activities. Social prescribing seeks to mitigate the impacts of wider determinants of health (such as structural inequalities in social, economic, and environmental conditions) which impact on an individual's wellbeing. Social prescribing can work well for those who are socially isolated or whose wellbeing is being impacted by non-medical issues, and routinely present to primary or secondary care as a result. Social prescribing activities are commissioned locally, utilising community assets often in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector[107]. As of the end of 2023, an estimated 9.4 million GP consultations in England have involved social prescribing codes, and 5.5 million consultations have specifically led to social prescribing referrals.[108] This is an extensive system which may play a crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness of museums wishing to nurture health generating communities.

Museums on Prescription demonstrated reductions in loneliness and improvements in subjective wellbeing among older adults[109]. Gallery-based sessions for dementia patients and carers improved mood, social connection, and quality of life (Camic et al., 2016). Recent studies show social prescribing can be an effective mechanism for sustained engagement with cultural institutions (Aughterson et al., 2024). A 2025 longitudinal study (Finn et al.) found that wellbeing benefits of cultural engagement were experienced equally across socioeconomic groups, suggesting museums may

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*Community Health,*O:624–630. The additional benefit for men is an anomalous finding and requires further research.

[105] Grossi, E., Sacco, P.L., Blessi, G.T., Cerutti, R. 'The Impact of Culture on the Individual Subjective Well-Being of the Italian Population: An Exploratory Study' *Applied Research Quality of Life* 6:387-410.

[106] https://england.nhs.personalisedcare/social-prescribing

[107] For an international survey of social prescribing see: Hotz, J. (2025)*The Connection Cure: A better Way of Thinking About Medicine and Healing,* Simon & Schuster.

[108] Bu, Feifei, et al. 'National Roll-out of social prescribing in England's primary care system; a longitudinal observational study using Clinical Practice Research Datalink data', *Lancet Public Health*, 20/11:e903=e911.

[109] Thomson, L.J., Lockyer, B., Camic, P.M., Chatterjee, H. J., (2018) 'Effects of a museum-based social prescription intervention on quantitative measures of psychological wellbeing in older adults', *Perspectives in Public Health*, 138/1:28

help narrow—rather than widen—health gaps. These interventions may have more lasting impacts because where the participants engage in an organised activity, even if this is time limited, because they are part of the CoP system, there may be follow-on or equivalent activities which enable people to sustain their engagement

Grebosz-Haring et al. point out that the 2020-2025 Strategy 'produced by Public Health England (before its demise) revealed no reference to the role of the arts in creative interventions in addressing priorities in promoting a smoke-free society, improving population nutrition, tackling the obesity epidemic and even in promoting mental health and preventing mental illness' (2025:4)[110]. This absence is at odds with the interest of many health boards in partnering with arts and heritage organisations and the massive investment in social prescribing. This may reflect the difficulty of the NHS in moving away from an illness treatment to a salutogenic or health generating service. PHE focused on the 'proximal' influences on health i.e. those closest to the cause of the particular disease (e.g. smoking) because there is a direct relationship. 'Distal' factors like poverty, whose pressures may be a partial cause of smoking, are seen as less significant because of their distance from the proximal cause, and their impact is dissipated across several different health outcomes. A strategic approach to health improvement has to address all the 'social determinants' of ill health. Frontline NHS workers are aware of limits of traditional treatment and health promoting strategies in an increasingly unequal, consumerist and individualist society and the need for new, more creative strategies for engaging people[111].

Given the importance of educational attainment, and especially the possession of a university degree, in predicting museum visiting, an important question is whether the absence of such qualifications prevents people from benefiting from cultural attendance. In a peer-reviewed longitudinal study in 2025, Finn et al. found that the associations between cultural 'engagement and mental and social well-being did not vary by these indicators in our findings. This suggests that older adults may experience the same mental and social well-being benefits from cultural engagement irrespective of their socioeconomic status' (p.7)[112]

9.7 Monetising Health benefits

[110] Grebosz, K., Clift, S. (forthcoming) 'The need for a critical perspective on arts and health research and evidence reviews' Routledge Handbook of Arts and Health.
[111] P. Hanlon, S. Carlisle, M. Hannah, D. Reilly, A. Lyon (2011) 'Making the case for a 'fifth wave' in public Health', *Public Health* 125/1:30-36
[112] Finn, S. Bone, J.K., Mak, H. W. (2025) 'Longitudinal Associations Between Cultural Engagement and Mental and Social Well-Being: A Fixed-Effects Analysis of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing', *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences,* 2025, 80/7:gbaf074.

A report by Frontier Economics study commissioned by DCMS estimates that 'the health and wellbeing benefits associated with an individual adult engaging with culture and heritage every few months or more (e.g. visiting a museum, gallery or watching a concert) are worth around £1,000 per year. At the population level, societal benefits, which include increased productivity due to better health, are worth just over £8bn per year'[113].

Wheatley et al. contribute to the understanding of the well-being benefits of time spent in ACS [arts, culture, sport], and in turn arguments for public funding, through estimate of the economic value associated with engagement in these activities using the life satisfaction valuation method[114].

9.8 Policy Implications: Reducing Health Inequalities

Museums and Health is a rapidly maturing field of research and practice. With the current state of research we can say that there is moderate to good evidence that museums should be recognised as:

- population-level health assets
- anchors of social cohesion
- safe and inclusive civic spaces
- contributors to mental resilience and cognitive health
- accessible environments for intergenerational engagement

The evidence strengthens the case for levelling up cultural participation because expanding access for disadvantaged communities has disproportionate benefits:

- lower-income groups experience greater gains from cultural engagement
- museums in deprived areas offer significant public health returns
- attendance data can be used to monitor equitable distribution of wellbeing benefits

Museums can support:

- NHS prevention strategies
- Integrated Care Systems (ICS)
- local authority public health teams
- community-level resilience and social capital building

[113] Frontier Economics (2024) Culture And Heritage Capital: Monetising The Impact Of Culture And Heritage On Health And Wellbeing. https://www.frontier-economics.com/media/2lbntjpz/monetising-the-impact-of-culture-and-heritage-on-health-and-wellbeing.pdf

[114] Wheatley, D. Bickerton, C. (2018) @Measuring changes in subjective well-being from engagement in the arts, culture and sport', *Journal of Cultural Economics 43:421-442*. See also Baldin, A. Bille, T (2023) 'The lost value for cultural users of cultural institutions during the COVID -19 pandemic: a life satisfaction approach', *International Review of Economics 70:257-281*.

Recognising museums as part of the social determinants of health framework would align culture with national wellbeing, prevention, and inequality-reduction agendas.

9.9 Conclusion

The weight of epidemiological evidence shows that regular museum visiting is consistently associated with improved mental and physical health, lower mortality risk, reduced loneliness, and enhanced cognitive resilience. Though individual effects are moderate, they are significant at population level and especially meaningful for disadvantaged groups. Small-scale programmes demonstrate short-term benefits and align well with social prescribing objectives and structures, but the strongest case for policy investment comes from decades of population-based research.

These health benefits are *additional* to the cultural benefits which provide a unique, irreplaceable, force in community life, and to the educational, economic and social impacts which are evidenced above. As the UK seeks to move from crisis-based treatment to a nurturing a salutogenic (health creating) society, museums should be understood as essential civic and public health assets. Ensuring equitable cultural access can contribute to reducing health inequalities, strengthening community belonging, and supporting a healthier, more connected society.

10.0 Evidence of Impact: Conclusion

While the quality of the evidence for the impact of museums varies across the five fields covered above, the strongest relates to the Spillover impacts of the economy and health and wellbeing. These are well-established disciplines with strong research methodologies. Research on cultural value, informal learning, civic identity and place making, which are the long-established objectives of museums are less well developed, but these are long established fields with strong research methodologies.

Looking across the five themes of this paper, it is apparent that there is a convergence in the findings. A *Research Digest: Lifelong Cultural Engagement* by Leeds University's Centre for Cultural Value, interprets the evidence for the wellbeing benefits of museum visiting and participation as evidence of museum lifelong learning impacts.[115] This reflects a widespread sense in the sector that 'wellbeing', amongst all the impacts of museum visits that are or might be measurable, is the best proxy for the rich, complex and varied meanings people make of their museum experiences and the impacts they have on their lives. Insofar as this is correct, the measures devised for measuring wellbeing impacts may also serve as proxies for lifelong education impacts[116]. Similarly

[115] https://www.culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Lifelong-Cultural-Engagement-Research-Digest.pdf

[116] See for example: Thomson, L. J., & Chatterjee, H. J. (2015). 'Measuring the impact of museum activities on well-being: developing the Museum Well-being Measures Toolkit'. *Museum Management and*

the UK Treasury uses life satisfaction as the anchor measure of wellbeing[117]. This convergence is also reflected in tourism studies, with Richards arguing that subjective wellbeing is the individual evaluation of quality of life, and basic output of placemaking processes should be improved quality of life for all (p.10)[118]. 'Those places that have more cultural and creative assets and activities tend to have a higher QoL, which will also tend to be attractive to tourists'. Blessi et al. argue that, after comparing the effects of contrasting levels of cultural provision in two Italian cities, conclude that the 'more culture becomes socially salient, available, and generally appreciated, the stronger its well-being effects and the more robust the social sustainability of cultural strategies' (p, 224)[119]. This implies a strong feedback loop, with cultural provision generating wellbeing effects, and increased wellbeing leading to greater cultural participation.

Thomson et al. in their peer reviewed analysis of the 'effects of a museum-based social prescription intervention on quantitative measures of psychological wellbeing in older adults', track six self-rated emotions ('absorbed', 'active', cheerful', encouraged', 'enlightened' and inspired') as markers of wellbeing. These overlap significantly with how visitors describe the experiences they value in museums, and with what the literature recognises as the mechanisms through which cultural engagement has an impact. The convergence of research on wellbeing and the lifelong learning/identity formation outcomes of museum visiting is most apparent in the recent publication by John Falk, one of the most influential museum scholars of the past 30 years. His 2021 book, The *Value of Museums: Enhancing Societal Well-Being*, recasts the types of value generated by museums as personal well-being, intellectual well-being, social well-being and physical well-being[120].

Museum experiences involve a rich interaction of individuals, families and groups, developing identities, memories and meaning making in the context of rapid social, economic and technological change, and of increasing inequality and polarisation. The ECMN is committed to developing a national evidence-based strategy which will

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Curatorship, 30(1), 44–62. The tool is available here: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/life-sciences/sites/life_sciences/files/ucl_museum_wellbeing_measures_toolkit_2013.pdf

[117] Social Impacts Task Force (2021) *Wellbeing Guidance for Appraisal: Supplementary Green Book Guidance,* HM Treasury.

[118] Pre-publication version of Richards, G. (2023). Place, culture, and quality of life. In Muzaffer Uysal, Richard Perdue & M. Joseph Sirgy (Eds) Handbook of Tourism and Quality-of-Life Research II: Enhancing the Lives of Tourists, Residents of Host Communities and Service Providers. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 37-48.

[119] Blessi, G. B., Grossi E., Sacco, P/.L., Pieretti, G., Ferilli, G., (2016) 'The contribution of cultural participation to urban well-being. A comparative study in Bolzano/Bozen and Siracusa, Italy' *Cities, 50: 216–226*.

[120] Falk, J. (*20210 The Value of Museums: Enhancing Societal Well-Being,* London, Rowman & Littlefield. See also: Morse, N, Lackoi, K, and Chatterjee, H. J (2016) 'Museums learning and wellbeing', *Journal of Education in Museums,* 37, p.3-13

enhance the positive impacts of these experiences, working with civic partners in health, education, tourism, urban development and community cohesion. A key priority is to ensure that people described as belonging to ‘lower socioeconomic groups’ derive the benefits of museum visiting in much larger numbers, contributing to levelling up cultural participation.

Visitor Experiences	Markers of psychological wellbeing/Learning	Mechanisms of cultural impact
• Aesthetic • Belonging • Challenging • Civic Pride • Educational • Empathy • Escapist • 'Flow' Immersion • Historical • Imaginative • Inspirational • Intellectual • Joyful • Learning • Meaningful • Personal • Relaxing • Restorative • Social • Spiritual • Tearful • Therapeutic	• Absorbed • Active • Cheerful • Encouraged • Enlightened • Inspired • fostering a passion for learning • promoting the growth of inquiry skills • learning how to observe • learning how to talk about science, art, or history	• cognitive stimulation and novelty • affective and aesthetic experience • social connection in shared civic spaces • identity formation and cultural citizenship • reduction in stress & • safe, welcoming public environments • incidental physical activity (movement through galleries)

To be more effective organisations, civic museums aim to combine values-based practice with an evidence-based understanding of What Works, to offer individuals more support in becoming 'reflective individuals and active citizens', and building the new forms of social cohesion needed in 21st century England.

Appendix 1: A Legacy of Cuts and Underfunding

The financial position of Local Authority (LA) museums has been worsening since 2009/10 and is now reaching crisis point. LA funding decreased in real terms by 37% and costs increased by 12% terms up to 2022/23 i.e. before the increase in National Insurance, minimum wage and utilities. This amounts to a real terms decrease in revenue of over 50%, reflecting what Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies called a 'staggering' reduction in spending on local services, including culture[121]. This amount is an average, with some museums doing better and some, much worse: Birmingham Museums Trust, for example has had a 70% real-terms LA revenue cut since 2009/10. While many museums have been very entrepreneurial, generating a greater percentage of their running costs, LA budgets continue to decline, as does commercial income: museum audiences remain 20% down on pre-pandemic levels, and spend per visitor on retail, catering etc is decreasing due to the cost-of-living crisis. Reserves are depleted and other sources of funding are reducing. LA budget pressures are likely to continue, as are sudden existential crises for museums precipitated by further council Section 114 bankruptcies. Museums have had significant staff reductions, losing crucial expertise and capacity, limiting their ability to attract audiences back after COVID, apply for funding (including NPO), and maintain environmental and security standards.

Appendix 2: Museum Governance in England: Anomalies and Inefficiencies

The Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) manages two very distinct museum governance systems, one directly funding museums which are Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs), and the other through Arts Council England (ACE) grants. The ALBs are national museums and a number of local museums in London (e.g. the Museum of the Home); these submit comprehensive three-year plans based on collections-focused and audience-focused targets agreed with DCMS. Since 2011, they no longer report data relating to visitor demographics and inequalities. ACE provides museum funding based on competitive applications and zero-based budgets, focusing primarily on public programming. Museums which secure National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status can win funding for three-year periods to support all museum functions. For the ALB museums, DCMS funds 16 branches of five national museums outside London, as well as all Liverpool's civic museums. While some of these funding arrangements were *ad hoc* responses to specific circumstances (e.g. a political crisis in Liverpool in the mid-1980s when central government attention was focused on the city) many are the results of an implicit policy of distributing resources from London to the regions (e.g. The Royal Armouries Leeds, Imperial War Museum North, Tate Liverpool) to support local cultural, economic and social regeneration. Considered in tandem with Renaissance in the Regions and NPO funding, Accreditation, Designation and Cultural

[121] P. Johnson (2023) *Follow the Money,* London, Abacus, p.246.

Gifts, and recent initiatives such as the Cultural Recovery Fund, the Museum Estate and Development Fund and the Museum Renewal Fund, there is a strong central government commitment to supporting civic museums. This implicit policy needs to be translated into an explicit strategy which can support museums in a structured, sustainable, and consistent way.

Appendix 3: Renaissance in the Regions, Accreditation and Designation

The current crisis is a recurring one, though of historic severity. The last root and branch review of non-national museums in England – Renaissance in the Regions (RiR) - in 2001 was a response to a crisis in local authority funding for museums which resulted from 20 years of the centralising drive of conservative governments and policies such as rate-capping and compulsory competitive tendering. RiR recognised that central government had a key role in maintaining the national infrastructure of museums in England outside London, not directly funded by DCMS, especially in the large conurbations, where the majority of the nation's population experienced museums as their main form of engagement with publicly funded culture. This mirrors the Government's Designation Scheme, which was introduced in 1997 to recognise collections of national and international importance held outside museums directly funded by DCMS and invests in their preservation and access. As of 2023, there were 163 Designated Collections in England.

While national ALBs are funded to tour and lend objects to local museums, the latter lend more to national museum exhibitions than vice versa, reflecting the very high quality of these collections. This imbalance also reflects the lack of civic museum resources to host major loan exhibitions or to borrow significant groups of objects from the nationals. Accreditation sets out the minimum standards a professional museum service should meet in relation to the whole range of its functions. The current review of Accreditation should be widened to include the full range of functions museums are undertaking and the new contexts of local government. Designation should be reviewed to include a wider range of collections and to take into account aggregated object groupings in the National Distributed Collection across individual museums.

Appendix 4: English Government Funding for Museums 2023-2026

The total annual revenue invested in museums in 2023/24 in England (i.e. excluding special projects and capital funds) was as follows:

National Funding	**Millions per annum**		**% of overall total**
DCMS ALB revenue		£423.0	59.9%
NPO museum grants	£37.6		
ACE sector support	£4.0		

Total ACE support		£40.5	5.7%
Total National Museum Revenue Support		£463.5	
Local Authority Funding			
Revenue Grants		£243.0	34.4%
Overall total		**£706.5**	100%

The 77[122] museum services with National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status were granted a total of £37.6 million for 2023-2026 - just 8% of the total ACE grant fund. In relation to the £423 million allocated to DCMS directly funded museums, it also represents 8%. It represents an addition of 15% to the total of £243 million invested by LAs in museums in 2023/24. This makes a huge difference to the 109 museums with NPO – about a fifth of the total network. Five sector support organisations were awarded IPSO (Investment Principles Support Organisation) status, with a total of £1m backing per annum The largest recipient is the Association of Independent Museums (£305,520). The others are the Collections Trust, GEM – Group for Education in Museums, Kids in Museums and the Touring Exhibitions Group. Annual funding to ACE Area Councils is c.£3 million.

Current funding inequalities exacerbate the challenge faced by civic museums: annual per capita public museum funding in London is approximately £45, compared to £5.90 elsewhere in England. Without intervention, regional museums will continue to deteriorate, undermining the Government's levelling up agenda limiting regional economic growth.

Appendix 5: Local Authority Museum Governance

Local Authorities in England own c.500 museums,[123] managed through a variety of mechanisms. Until the mid-1990s[123] most civic museums were run directly by the local authorities, which held the buildings and collections in trust for the public. A small number were run by independent archaeological, historical, arts or natural history societies, with significant LA funding based on a service level agreement. Prior to Austerity, many LAs made grants to independents museums which provided valued services to residents and visitors; this practice continues, but on a greatly reduced scale. After that date, financial pressures and the need to innovate led many Local Authorities to transfer the management (but not the ownership) of museums and collections to a variety of management structures, most commonly an independent

[122] These calculations do not include data on 15 museums in Hampshire, West Cheshire and Bournemouth who receive NPO funding as part of cultural and leisure trusts, as these are not published separately

[123] Mapping Museums Project, University of London https://museweb.dcs.bbk.ac.uk/home

charitable trust. The aim was to drive modernisation by benefitting from the expertise of independent board members, the tax efficiencies afforded by charitable status, and to enable increased efficiencies and income generation from the relative autonomy of not being part of a large local authority. While a significant percentage of museums are now run by trusts, a many are still run directly by Parish, County and District Councils. The configuration of trusts varies. Some manage only museums, others include most or all of the authority's cultural facilities (such as theatres, concert halls and arts centres); others still include sport and leisure as well. Other arrangements include LA collaborations, such as in Museums North East, where a single service manages museums for five LAs. The complexity of this landscape causes inefficiencies in the distribution of funding. More broadly, in the context of Local Government Reform, and the creation of unitary and strategic authorities, there are significant opportunities for rationalisation and sharing of resources, as well as for developing the strategic shared outcomes approach advocated by this paper.

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Mark O'Neill, December 2025