

Devastating cuts to museum funding across the UK

By Dennis Moore
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The future of many of the UK's museums is seriously threatened due to the austerity cuts of more than £100 billion that were announced in the government's Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010.

A report published July by the Museums Association, "The Impact of Cuts on UK Museums", describes the impact as "devastating". The Museum Association has 600 institutional members encompassing 1,500 museums in the UK.

The study includes information taken from 161 respondents representing 140 museums across 200 sites in the UK. The respondents were asked to compare current services with that of services in April 2010.

A fifth of museums have had their funding cut by at least 25 percent in the past nine months and 58 percent of all respondents to the survey reported reductions to their overall budget. Some 29 percent have had to decrease the number of events, activities and outreach services that they provide. In excess of 60 percent have had to reduce their public events. Half of the respondents reported that they have had to reduce opening hours and 86 percent have had to make cuts in staffing. Nearly 50 percent of all respondents said they believed the quality of their service will worsen in the coming year.

Some museums have already had to close, including Stamford Museum in Lincolnshire, which shut in June. The Russell-Cotes Museum in Bournemouth has introduced an entrance fee to generate income.

Many of the respondents to the survey reported that cuts are being rushed through without any consideration or public consultation. An assistant curator at a Yorkshire museum commented, "An external consultant was brought in to restructure us who was not a museum professional, who had not even

visited the museum until his last day."

Lack of funds has been a general problem in the last decade but it is expected to get worse as the austerity measures worsen. Funding to purchase new acquisitions is an easy target when reductions in budgets/cuts are being considered. The Museum Association commented, "However, we believe that museums are currently slipping dangerously near to the point where they are collecting so little that they are becoming etiolated. Museums are now missing out on acquisitions that are crucial to the strength and vitality of their collections, leaving the nation's cultural heritage seriously impoverished".

Under half of all local authority museums surveyed were looking at Trust status as a way of trying to resolve funding problems. This entails adopting a business model and being able to demonstrate financial future viability, including entry charges.

The overall impact is an attack on access to culture and education that millions of people, particularly the young, are dependent on.

The potential closure of many important museums comes at a time when the number of people visiting such institutions across the UK has been on the increase. Between August 2009 and August 2010 there were over 42 million visitors to the UK's national museums, up by 11 percent. Museums funded by the Department for Culture Media and Sport saw an increase in admission numbers with the introduction of free entry—rising by 41 percent in the nine years from 2001 to 2010.

More than two-thirds of children aged 5-11 years visited a museum outside of school last year and 1.9 million children under 16 took part in formal learning sessions in museums 2008-2009. Some 80 percent of parents interviewed in a poll conducted by the market

research firm Ipsos MORI, thought that museums and galleries are among the most important resources for educating their children.

The Stamford museum in Lincolnshire that closed in June this year shut because the running costs of just £107, 000 a year could not be found to save it. In light of the more than £1 trillion bailout of the UK bank, this amount is a drop in the ocean. Museums face a future in which many will close or be forced to impose charges to stay open. The looting of vast amounts of public wealth is why museums and every other vitally needed resource used by the population are being stripped to the bone.

The sword of Damocles hanging over museums and access to art and culture in general cannot be allowed to continue. They are a fundamental component of a healthy society. The resources must be made available so that every museum and cultural institution is secured and maintained to the highest standards. To enable all working people to have full access to art and culture requires massive public funding. Decisions on subsidies and grants for museums and the arts must be taken out of the hands of big business politicians and placed under the democratic control of committees of artists, musicians and other cultural workers.

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