

# Many UK museums face closure due to funding cuts

By Barry Mason  
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The National Media Museum (NMM) in the northern city of Bradford experienced a 40 percent drop in the number of visitors last year, compared to 2008, the time of the financial crisis.

In 2001, nearly a million people visited the attraction, but by 2012 this had more than halved. However, the museum is beginning to see a recovery in the number of visitors, recording an 11 percent increase for the year 2015/2016 compared to the previous year.

The NMM is part of the Science Museum Group (SMG), which also includes the Science Museum in London, the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester (MOSI), the National Railway Museum (York) and the National Railway Museum (Shildon). Overall, the SMG saw a 4 percent increase in the number of visits to its museums for the year 2015/2016.

Museums in the SMG group receive around two thirds of their funding from the government Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS). The previous Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government threatened to cut the budget for the group's museums, and proposals were made that one of SMG museums, though not London's Science Museum, would have to close. It triggered off a campaign in which each museum had to try to justify why it should not be the one to be closed. It also fuelled a reactionary north-south divide over the fight for dwindling cultural resources.

A campaign to save the NMM, which attracted the support of well-known figures such as Martin Scorsese, Michael Palin and David Hockney, led to over 40,000 signatures on a petition. The petition was handed in to the Science Museum in South Kensington. In the end, the proposed closure of one of the SMG museums was averted. The DCMS budget cut of 8 percent overall

went ahead, but the burden on museums was reduced to a 5 percent cut which came into effect in 2015 and has impacted staffing.

As part of the deal to keep the NMM open, it had to emphasise the science aspect of the exhibits and downplay its artistic character. A *Guardian* article on February 7 of this year noted that minutes of an SMG board meeting stated that "proposals to 're-vision' the National Media Museum began as long ago as September 2013. ... At the same meeting, trustees discussed changing the museum's name. The *Guardian* has since learned that Science Museum North is one of the names under consideration."

In line with this, it was announced at the beginning of the year that the NMM would no longer host the Bradford International Film Festival. In the past, this event attracted prestigious figures from the film industry, such as Kenneth Branagh, Alan Bennett and John Hurt, to the city. Film industry insiders fear that this could threaten Bradford's status as a UNESCO city of film.

Speaking to the Bradford local paper, the *Telegraph and Argus*, museum director Jo Quinton-Tulloch explained that the museum was developing a festival based on computer games.

She explained, "Film remains a very important part of our future plans, but the festival programme needed changes to make it more sustainable and aligned with the museum's new focus on the science and culture of light and sound technologies. ... [W]e are working towards a festival looking at games and gaming."

The announcement confirmed the fears of those who believed the cancellation of the festival last year was just the prelude to it being abandoned altogether.

The decision follows on from the earlier decision to move the 400,000 objects comprising the Royal

Photographic Society held in Bradford to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The collection includes photographs by the pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot, around 8,000 cameras and the first-ever negative image.

In a *Yorkshire Post* article of February 2, the renowned international photographer, Ian Beesley, whose works are part of the museum's collection, opposed the decision to move the collection:

“As a photographic resource it's second to none. It's well used by students across the north. ... I can't help but feel that once a museum starts shipping off its crown jewels, the end is really nigh.”

In line with the SMG's policy of narrowing the focus of the media museum, Quinton-Tulloch told the *Yorkshire Life* magazine, “This refocus means concentrating our resources on what we do best. ... In a time of limited resources and as we refocus our mission, we can no longer do everything we once did.”

The renewed threat to the NMM is part of the ongoing onslaught on museum and art gallery provision. Local Authority cultural resources are at the sharp end of this, as councils are faced with ever increasing government spending cuts.

An article on the Museums Association (MA) web site on July 6 was titled “Museums across the UK face closure threat—MA voices concern about ‘disturbing’ number of venues at risk.”

Highlighting just some of the museums under threat due to the government's cultural vandalism, it noted that Kirklees Council in West Yorkshire was proposing to halve the museums it runs, including the Red House Museum, which has connections with Charlotte Bronte and is featured in her novel *Shirley*. It also proposes to close the Tolson Museum, which houses world-class collections.

The article also mentioned the plans to close the Dudley Museum and Art Gallery in the West Midlands as well as plans by Shropshire County Council to slash its £800,000 tourism and museum budget to zero by next year.

The MA director, Sharon Heal, said, “While we recognise that local authorities are under pressure and have to make tough spending decisions, there is a danger that whole communities will be left without museums and the rich and diverse stories they can tell.”

Responding to the autumn statement in November of

last year by then-chancellor George Osborne, the director of the Art Fund, Stephen Deucher, told the Museums Association, “Today's statement is just the beginning, as it is forthcoming local authority settlements that will determine the fate of the majority of the UK's museums and galleries—the hundreds of installations across the country that are already under-resourced and vulnerable. ... [W]e must work hard to ensure the survival of free cultural provision on everyone's doorstep—beyond the protected nations museums and galleries.”

In a commentary on the future of what museums should look like in 2020 in a *Guardian* article dated March 2015, cultural historian Robert Hewison noted: “National museums are now having to absorb cuts of a third in public funding. Some of those funded by local authorities are suffering even more. Some may not survive. ... [T]he outlook is bleak. ...”

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