

Museums Association response to Birmingham City Council Budget Consultation 2015

1. About the Museums Association

The MA is an independent membership organisation representing museums and galleries in the UK and the people who work for them. It has over 6,800 individual members and 600 institutional members. It was formed in 1889 and is a not-for-profit charity that seeks to inform, represent and develop museums and the people who work for them in order that they may provide a better service to society and the public.

The Museums Association will hold its annual conference – the largest museums conference in the UK – in Birmingham in November 2015.

2. The Benefit of Museums

Museums are places of learning, inspiration, innovation and heritage. They play a vital role in our civic life, delivering a broad range of benefits to society and to our communities. These benefits are highly appreciated by the public – museums enjoy widespread public support. Research carried out by Britain Thinks in 2012 shows that museums enjoy a high degree of public trust¹, while steadily increasing visitor numbers over the past decade show that museums are now a destination of choice for most members of society – 52% of people in England visited museums in 2013².

Some public benefits of museums can be measured in financial terms or visitor numbers. Many other benefits are less tangible, but no less important. Indeed, the social impact of museums is an increasingly important part of their role in society. While many of these benefits will seem obvious, it is nevertheless useful to remind ourselves why museums are important.

Museums make a real contribution to local economies:

- Museums attract international and domestic tourists
- Museums attract mobile professionals and new investment
- Museums generate an increasing proportion of their own income
- Museums employ highly-trained professionals
- Museums offer high-quality training for volunteers
- Museums help to develop scientific, engineering, cultural and creative skills

There is a growing appreciation and understanding of the wider benefits successful museums bring to individuals and communities. The Museums Association's Museums Change Lives campaign³ highlights these benefits:

- Museums are good for wellbeing. They have the power to inspire, educate and enlighten

¹ <http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=954916>

² <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/02012013-participation-reaches-record-high>

³ <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives>

- Museums connect people with local heritage and help people to understand their place in the world
- Museums promote learning and education at all stages of life
- Museums promote debate and help challenge prejudice
- Museums are increasingly offering specific services to support the wellbeing of disadvantaged groups, including homeless people, and those with dementia or learning difficulties
- Museums are open to all – they engage local communities and help to build community cohesion

3. The Case for Birmingham Museums

The current financial predicament of Birmingham City Council is clearly a difficult one. The Museums Association appreciates the tough decisions that the Council had made in previous budgets and is continuing to make in this round of cuts. In this context, we were pleased with the decision of the Council to accord cultural services a high priority when assessing where new cuts could be made⁴. We also appreciate that all services will suffer some kind of cut during the current budget process.

Nevertheless, it is worth restating the many benefits that Birmingham's museums bring to the city – and what is at risk when they suffer budget cuts such as the current proposed 15% cut.

Birmingham museums have collections of truly global significance – and the recent launch of the Staffordshire Hoard galleries in Birmingham museums can only add to the cultural wealth of the city. These collections, and the learning and outreach programmes built around them, are a major part of what sets Birmingham apart. They attract people to visit, work and live in the city.

Birmingham's museums have – like almost all local authority-run museums – taken steps since the beginning of the economic crisis to become more resilient. The city's museums have lost staff, changed their opening hours, increased their commercial offer and engaged with audiences in new and innovative ways.

The most radical change in the recent history of the museums service was the establishment of Birmingham Museums Trust in April 2012, which removed eight museums from direct local authority control. This change in status was designed to make the museums more independent and allow them to diversify their income streams.

Real progress is being made in this area, but the Trust is still in its infancy. It has only recently appointed a Chair and a Director. The sudden withdrawal of council funding is likely to damage not only the short-term ability of the Trust to deliver existing museums services, but also the ability of the Trust to ensure the viability of all of its museums in the long-term.

We are delighted to be holding the Museums Association conference in Birmingham in November 2015, which will bring over a thousand culture professionals to Birmingham over three days. We are looking forward to the opportunity to highlight the region's exceptional cultural heritage, and

⁴ <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/birmingham-city-council-pledge-protect-7981277>

believe that Birmingham's museums have an exciting, and increasingly independent, future ahead of them.

However, we are concerned that the proposed reduction in funding for the eight museums and country houses of the Birmingham Museums Trust puts their very future at risk. In this context, we ask you to maintain the high priority you have accorded to Birmingham's cultural offer, and to reconsider your budget proposals.

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