

# Museum Directors Research 2026

## Key Findings



A visitor at Brighton Museum  
and Art Gallery, Brighton &  
Hove Museums © Will Hartley  
/ Art Fund 2026

# About the Research

This mixed methodology research includes 329 survey responses from museum directors, four focus groups and individual interviews. The sample is UK-wide covering national, local authority, university, and independent organisations from those with more than 500 staff to those that are volunteer-run. Throughout this report we have used the term 'museums' to include the breadth of organisations including galleries, arts organisations, historic houses and archives.

## Key findings

Undertaken every two years, the 2026 Museum Directors Research finds greater optimism in the sector than has been seen previously, reflecting the new areas of investment and increased demand for what many museums offer. However, revenue costs are the sector's Achilles heel, particularly with increasing wage bills. Ever-increasing costs, strain on infrastructure, and diminished capacity, seem to be having a particularly acute effect on organisations' ability to care for, manage, present and interpret their collections. Following the political shake up in the May 2026 elections in some parts of the UK, the focus is on how to make the strongest case for the instrumental and intrinsic value of museums at a time of change.

### Income has increased but has not kept pace with rising costs

- In the last financial year 45 per cent of museums have driven up earned income, and 41 per cent of museums have seen their funding from public sources increase. Museums have welcomed this additional public support.
- However, funding has not kept pace with increased overheads, particularly wage increases and employer National Insurance contributions.
- 31 per cent of museums have seen their local authority funding decrease or stop completely.

### Partnership working and community engagement are thriving

- 62 per cent of museums are working in partnership to develop exhibitions, up from 46 per cent in 2022.
- Engaging communities with collections has risen in prominence steadily over the past few years and is now a regular activity for the vast majority of collections-holding organisations.

## Lack of staff is the number one challenge for the next financial year

- The top three challenges for museum directors are lack of staff/capacity, funding shortfalls and building maintenance.
- 69 per cent of directors say that looking to the new financial year staff capacity will be a key challenge, with long-term declines in the number of staff posts putting immense pressure on the remaining team.
- There is a long-term decline in core collections activity. Lack of staffing capacity to carry out cataloguing and digitisation directly impacts decisions about how to use collections, develop them, and dispose of them where appropriate.

## Demand is often exceeding capacity

- There is strong demand for museum learning programmes, but participation is significantly constrained by the cost of coach hire. Where museums offer access schemes to targeted areas, they are frequently oversubscribed.
- 44 per cent of museums have seen their overall visitor numbers increase in the last year. While there is a continued upward trajectory in the sector, this is at a slower rate than was seen in 2024. A fifth of museums have seen audiences decline and growth in international visitors remains the smallest growth area at just 22 per cent.
- Despite increases in visitor numbers, 41 per cent of museums have reduced the number of exhibitions created each year and 36 per cent have reduced opening times as direct consequences of insufficient funding and staffing.

## Museums' role as trusted civic spaces presents a major opportunity

- Directors spoke passionately about advocating for the increasingly rare value that museums hold in society as a 'public good', describing them as shared civic spaces and places of authenticity, safety and trust.
- Directors are keen that Art Fund plays to its unique strengths as an independent organisation to encourage museums to be bold, progressive and innovative.