Art Fund_ the CULTURAL POLICY UNIT

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MUSEUMS WELCOME GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCEMENT OF FREE ADMISSION FOR ALL

Celebrating the 25th Anniversary of Landmark Labour Policy



Tate Modern, 2015. © Tate Modern Photography

For press images, please visit: https://tinyurl.com/FreeAdmissionForAll

The Directors of the UK's National Museums and leading figures across the cultural sector have warmly welcomed the government's announcement today that entry to the 15 national museums will remain free to everyone and admission charges for international visitors will not be introduced.

The announcement was made by Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Lisa Nandy at an event hosted by Art Fund and The Cultural Policy Unit at Tate Liverpool, a museum celebrated for sharing the best of the national art collection with the North of England, and which will reopen to all for free next year following a major transformation.

Universal free entry to the UK's National Museums, which came into effect on 1 December 2001, will celebrate its 25th anniversary later this year. This landmark cultural policy is an outstanding

public good which remains one of the great achievements of the Labour government, emphasising a core belief in the value of access for all. Upheld by successive governments, it recognises that our national museums and galleries are pillars of education, inspiration and cultural exchange. Holding world-class collections and founded on a unique public ethos, they are the envy of the world.

The policy has dramatically boosted visitor numbers, encouraged enterprising business models, and driven economic growth through cultural tourism alongside international research and global partnerships:

- Visits to the 15 national museums have risen by 96% - from 22.77m in 1999/2000 to 44.67m in 2025/26 - a long-term growth in attendance.
- Free national museums are among the country's leading visitor attractions: six of the ten most visited ALVA (Association of Leading Visitor Attraction) member attractions in 2025 were national museums, with between six and eight free national museums in the top ten list since 2004.
- Data on inbound tourism to Britain from overseas in 2024 shows 11.82m trips included a visit to a museum or gallery, representing 30.3% of all inbound visits. These visitors spent £12.66bn across their trips. For those holidaying in London, 57.9% visited a museum or gallery.
- Free entry is the strongest commercial model for the national museums, driving high footfall (including 19.4m overseas visits in 2024/25) which has allowed them to generate significant income through exhibitions, retail, catering, donations, and unlocking major giving. Self-generated income across the 15 national museums was £563m in 2024/25, according to The National Audit Office.

The 15 National Museums are: British Museum, Horniman, Imperial War Museums, Museum of the Home, National Gallery, National Museums Liverpool, National Portrait Gallery, Natural History Museum, Royal Armouries, Royal Museums Greenwich, Science Museum Group, Sir John Soane's Museum, Tate, V&A, Wallace Collection.

Lisa Nandy, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, said: *"Our museums are the places that light up the world. They remind of us our shared history, and enable us to step outside the confines of our lives. There is something incredibly special about that.*

"That's why they must be free, forever, for everyone to access. I'm delighted that we're continuing that transformative policy pioneered by the last Labour government, opening up access to our excellent museums for generations."

Jenny Waldman, Director, Art Fund, said: *"The national museums' collections belong to everyone. Keeping free entry for all will ensure nobody is put off at the door. 25 years of free entry has seen huge benefits in increased visitors, tourism and economic impact - we congratulate the government for committing to maintaining it."*

Alison Cole, Director, The Cultural Policy Unit, said: *"This is one of the landmark cultural policies of our times - one that has established itself as a universal public good. It is wonderful that the Government has recognised not only its economic merits, but also its power to express our values and shape how we engage with the world."*

Laura Pye, Director, National Museums Liverpool, said: *"We're delighted that universal free entry is being maintained. It keeps our collections accessible to everyone and helps national museums continue to draw visitors from across the UK and around the world, supporting tourism and bringing real benefits to our cities and communities."*

Karin Hindsbo, Interim Director, Tate, said: *"The UK's cultural collections, and the model that permits anyone to access them, are a source of envy and admiration around the world. These rich artistic holdings are integral to the UK's national identity, fostering a genuine understanding of art, culture and heritage that has the power to bring us all together."*

Nicholas Cullinan, Director, British Museum, said: *"When the British Museum was founded as the world's first public national museum in 1753 it was to be free for 'all persons.' Since then, hundreds of millions of people have benefitted from that elevated idea and endeavour. So, we are delighted by the Government's announcement that free entry for all will be maintained. This will allow everyone to enjoy and have access to our great museums across the nation as one of the things this country does so brilliantly."*

Sir Gabriele Finaldi, Director, National Gallery, said: *"Free entry to national museums is one of the UK's greatest cultural assets: it enables millions to visit, enjoy and learn. Thanks to free entry our museums are a deeply integral part of national life and free entry to museums is widely admired among our museum peers internationally"*

Sir Tristram Hunt, Director, V&A, said: *"The V&A knows the huge difference which free entry to our national museums makes: transforming visitor numbers; opening up the collections; celebrating our heritage of democratic access to art. It is a critical part of what makes the UK a cultural Superpower. I am delighted that the Government has re-committed itself to this foundational Labour Party policy."*

Victoria Siddall, Director, National Portrait Gallery, said: *"For 25 years, free admission to national museums has opened up art, history and culture to millions of people, becoming a source of inspiration and opportunity as well as great national pride. The impact of this is reflected in the extraordinary creativity that enriches our society and economy today. We are delighted to continue welcoming everyone through the doors of the NPG to experience the history and culture of the UK through portraits of the people who shaped it."*

Dame Bridget Riley, artist, said: *"It is wonderful news that the National Museums Collections will maintain free entry. One cannot overestimate the immense value of being able to drop in to look at a painting and refresh the mind and spirit. We have done the right thing."*

Dame Rachel Whiteread, artist, said: *"Art and museums without question enable people to think about creativity, history and culture. This is what makes us human. During these unprecedented times of political unrest and the looming presence of AI, we need access to great art more than ever in our lives. This is a very welcome decision to continue this tradition."*

Bernard Donoghue, CEO, ALVA, said: *"This is a hugely welcome confirmation that the Labour Government's inspirational policy decision 25 years ago to give free access to our national collection of museums and galleries will continue. Free access is not just a gift to the people of the UK but to the world."*

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NOTES TO EDITORS

- Statistics quoted were collated in September 2026 by Baker Richards, commissioned by Art Fund and The Association of Leading Visitor Attractions.
- The Baker Richards research shows that visits rose much faster at the formerly charging museums. The seven museums that dropped charges in 2001 grew 58.9% by 2005/6, against 27.1% for those who were already free.
- The Value of "Free for All", a report by The Cultural Policy Unit on maintaining universal free entry, can be read here.

Art Fund
Art Fund is the national charity for museums and galleries. For over 120 years, it has helped institutions across the UK to develop and share their collections, invest in people and expertise, grow their audiences and inspire the next generation.

Art Fund connects museums and people with great art and culture through funding, advocacy and initiatives, because access to art is vital for a healthy society. It champions the sector through the prestigious Art Fund Museum of the Year award - the world's largest museum prize - and supports museum professionals through dedicated training and grant programmes.

Independent and people-powered, Art Fund is supported by 148,000 members who buy a National Art Pass, as well as generous contributions from individuals, trusts and foundations. The National Art Pass offers free or discounted entry to over 1,000 museums, galleries and historic places in the UK, 50% off major exhibitions, a subscription to Art Quarterly magazine and Art In Your Inbox newsletter.

www.artfund.org

The Cultural Policy Unit

The Cultural Policy Unit is focused on developing effective policies that will enable the arts and cultural communities to thrive, support the growth of the creative industries, and preserve – and enhance – the UK's unique cultural ethos.

The Cultural Policy Unit (CPU) builds on the influential work it undertook at the Fabian Society, which helped inform Labour's Arts and Creative Industries 'Sector Plan' Creating Growth(March 2024) and Labour's Manifesto. The Unit's key proposals were published in the Fabian pamphlet Arts for Us All (July 2024), which garnered widespread support from the cultural sector.

Led by Alison Cole, the Cultural Policy Unit will build affiliations with think-tanks, organisations and individuals who can help shape and deliver the best proposals to support – and where necessary challenge – government, change-makers and legislators, as well as be an asset to the arts, cultural and creative industries sectors.