



Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

COVID-19 and the UK Cultural Sector: The Case of National Museums Liverpool

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Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

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Key takeaways

1. When the world changes and people feel isolated and unsure, many crave cultural interaction. Art, literature, history, drama, music; things perhaps taken for granted, and which people might not have engaged with for a while, become more important, providing touch points of past context and human empathy as well as distraction.
2. COVID-19 has radically changed how the cultural sector engages in and thinks about the country's cultural offer and how it can deliver on the strategic ambitions of the UK Government. During this time, National Museums Liverpool (NML) has implemented a significant shift towards digital provision and made collections accessible online – a move particularly successful in engaging children.
3. Culture has been used by the UK to develop international partnerships and increase tourism. While in the short term both of these domains will be difficult, the foundation already laid with our international working and development places us in a strong position to recover these relationships and soft power initiatives.
4. However, success over the last 10 years in making cultural organisations such as NML more resilient by focusing on diversified income generation (beyond public investment), could now ironically threaten the sustainability of the sector, given the loss of other revenues and the projected reductions in visitor numbers due to travel restrictions and social distancing.
5. While immediate government support through emergency funding and the work of the DCMS's Cultural Renewal Taskforce are welcome, current business models are not sustainable and further investment will be required for museums and other cultural organisations to survive (and thrive) into the future.

1. Introduction

In 2016, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published *The Culture White Paper*, setting out its ambition and strategy for the UK cultural sector. It was the first White Paper published on the subject of culture in 50 years, and only the second ever, following the publication of *A Policy for the Arts: The First Steps*, authored by Member of Parliament Jennie Lee (HM Government 1965). The 2016 White Paper illustrated the “nourishing effects of culture”, but noted that cultural bodies had a duty to extend these benefits to a more diverse audience and workforce. Equally, the sector needed to bolster its resilience and increase its ability to be more independent financially, while also extending its involvement in international

working and contribution to the UK's soft power initiatives.

In a matter of weeks, COVID-19 radically changed the way we engage in and think about the country's cultural offer and how we deliver on these objectives. Even when lockdown is fully lifted, social distancing and the potential of a second wave of infections mean that things will not simply go back to the way they were. The pandemic will be felt by the cultural sector for a long time to come. This briefing reviews the impact of COVID-19 on the four principal aims of *The Culture White Paper*, approaching from the perspective of National Museums Liverpool (NML). The pros and cons of what we have learnt over the last four months are discussed, and the need for continued investment from government underlined.

Figure 1. Key targets from NML's 2030 Strategic Vision



- Be more representative ■
- Partner and influence ■
- Provide memorable experiences ■
- Be more self-sufficient ■
- Engage and empower ■

(Source: National Museums Liverpool)

2. The impact of COVID-19 on cultural sector priorities

The White Paper sets out four aims for the cultural sector in the UK:

- everyone should enjoy the opportunities culture offers, no matter where they start in life;
- the riches of our culture should benefit communities across the country;
- the power of culture should be used to increase our international standing;
- the need to grow cultural investment, resilience and reform.

Below, each aim is considered in turn, referencing the impact of COVID-19, and illustrated by NML’s recent experiences.

Enjoying the opportunities culture offers

There are a number of outcomes that the DCMS wants to see in terms of increasing diversity and participation in a wide range of cultural activities. For example, it asks the sector to focus on engaging groups

traditionally less likely to take up cultural provision, such as communities from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as well as encouraging organisations to consider their recruitment practices and talent development.

The aim underlines that “publicly funded culture should reflect the diversity of our country”; something with which we wholly agree at NML. Indeed, as part of our [2030 strategic vision](#) we have set ourselves a range of targets, many of which are focused upon these very aims (see Figure 1). We still have a long way to go to achieve them, as our [2017/2018 baseline figures suggest](#).

Whether COVID-19 will have a significant detrimental impact on this work is probably too early to tell, but there has arguably been a positive impact on one of the other objectives under this aim: “culture should be an essential part of every child’s education both in and out of school”. Sadly, before COVID-19, a decreasing number of hours were dedicated to arts subjects in schools, with a reduction of 23% from 2010 to 2018 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Hours taught by subject in England’s secondary schools

	2010	2016	2017	2018	% change, 2016-2018	% change, 2010-2018
History	153,400	182,000	185,700	190,873	+5%	+24%
Geography	138,700	170,100	172,700	176,241	+4%	+27%
Design & Technology	119,900	86,500	76,300	68,126	-21%	-43%
Music	92,700	83,600	80,200	79,305	-5%	-14%
Drama	95,000	82,900	80,800	80,819	-3%	-15%
Art & Design	159,800	136,500	133,500	133,713	-2%	-16%
All arts subjects	467,400	389,500	370,800	361,963	-7%	-23%

(Credit: [Cultural Learning Alliance](#))

However, since schools were shut and home schooling became the norm, there has been a renewed focus on the value of arts and culture. The range of offer and engagement has been broad. We have seen children painting rainbows to show support for the NHS; major broadcasters focusing on new content, highlighting creative activity such as Grayson Perry's Art Club on Channel 4; BBC Bitesize delivering creative writing, drama, art and design lessons; social media streams giving "how to" creative lessons; and museum websites providing parents and carers with much desired content for children at home.

At NML, we launched [My Home is My Museum](#), an online project that has given children the opportunity to curate their own exhibition and encourages them to learn what museums and galleries do on a day-to-day basis. Children were asked to put together a list of up to 10 items or artistic creations that represent their life and the important people in it. They then had to write a short description about the objects or artworks and why they were chosen, as well as a description of the exhibition as a whole, before designing an eye-catching poster and uploading a "promotional" video to social media saying why it would be a must-see exhibition. This project has just been nominated for a [Kids in Museums Family Friendly Museum Award from Home](#) in the "best social media activity" section. We have also been providing daily activities for children on our Instagram feed.

Benefiting communities across the country

The second aim of the White Paper focuses on community benefit, stating that "the riches of our culture should benefit communities across the country". Two objectives under this aim have been significantly impacted by COVID-19. The first is the intention to "promote the role

that culture has in building stronger and healthier communities". Museums and other cultural organisations have long demonstrated the value of cultural activity in supporting community wellbeing. However, since the start of lockdown in the UK, a number of additional funding opportunities focused on using culture to support healthier communities have emerged from national government.

The focus of these new initiatives is digital provision, which is probably the area that has changed most in the cultural sector since the outbreak of COVID-19. The White Paper stated that "technology is expanding the way in which we make and experience culture". This has never been truer than during lockdown. We may be unable to visit our usual cultural organisations in person, but the need for a cultural fix has not gone away, and people are turning in increasing numbers to the many excellent digital outputs available. At NML – Figure 3 – we have experienced an increase in use of our social media channels by 149% since lockdown began, and our virtual tours have proven popular with an audience who cannot physically access our buildings. We have also published more editorial content online as web visitors to our stories pages have increased by over 300%.

A quick online search of "culture from home" highlights the quantity of digital output now available. While digital provision will never replace the real thing, it has proven just how much can be reproduced, made accessible and interpreted in this format for all, 24/7, around the world. Unfortunately, for the cultural sector such online access does not support our business model, and while it is positive that people can tour galleries from home, or watch a production from the National Theatre, they are doing so without purchasing a ticket, leaving a donation or even buying a drink in the café or bar. The sector will need to consider this carefully post-COVID: is digital

Figure 3. Digital activity and usage of NML during first 3 months of the COVID-19 lockdown

Initiative	Description	Engagement
Virtual tours	3D scanned digital tours of our exhibitions and galleries, with embedded audio and video elements from curators or learning staff	36,258 web visits in total <i>Breakdown:</i> Homepage – 8,737 ISM – 9,843 Dinosaurs – 6,992 World Cultures – 4,489 AELW – 4,225 Taki – 1,393 Challenging histories – 579
My Home is My Museum	A social media initiative to encourage children to create their own home museums	9,935 web visits
Ancient Egypt mini documentary series	A mini documentary series with our Ancient Egypt Curator talking about facts, objects and the history of ancient Egypt	32,823 views across all channels
Pre-Raphaelite mini documentary series	A mini documentary series with our art gallery curators exploring the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, their importance and legacy, little known facts and stories	55,320 views across all channels
Video chat backgrounds	Creation of NML virtual backgrounds that can be used on Zoom or MS Teams	742 downloads
Black Lives Matter	NML's response to Black Lives Matter included creating a new resource page, support and advice on how to engage	450 web visits
Stories	An increase in Editorial output since lockdown, with stories and opinion pieces that people are accessing online	24,263 web visits, up from 5,439 the previous quarter

(Source: National Museums Liverpool)

provision an additional offer or can it become core and support the business model?

International standing and soft power

The third aim of the White Paper states that “the power of culture can increase our international standing”. Building on the UK’s leading position in soft power initiatives (Portland 2019), the government recommended more emphasis be placed

on the opportunity for the cultural sector to promote and support inward investment, trade, export and cultural exchange. The importance of culture to diplomacy was also highlighted. For instance, the White Paper referenced the work of the British Council and the [GREAT campaign](#) set up in 2011 to progress opportunities afforded by the London Olympic Games of 2012.

Many cultural organisations already operate internationally, sharing skills, sharing collections, sharing performances.

NML has significant strands of international work – loans, research, exhibition tours, skills sharing, partnerships and activism – that not only bring benefit to the organisation in terms of knowledge, common understanding, profile and income, but also encourage tourism and support wider economic growth. International loans to Asia, the USA and continental Europe highlight the quality of NML's and Liverpool's cultural offer.

The most significant of these have been the major group loans linked to cultural exchange years, resulting in major exhibitions for the Liverpool City Region including [Mayas: revelation of an endless time](#) (2015) and [China's First Emperor and the Terracotta Warriors](#) (2018). The highly successful [My House of Memories](#) app, supporting dementia care, has been licenced to organisations in the USA and Singapore, bringing benefit to older communities, while supporting a significant strand of museum activity. The latter programme is recognised as a UK cultural heritage exemplar in supporting inclusive growth (British Council 2018).

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 will impact negatively on some of this work in the shorter term. Delays to programmes, the rising cost of and difficulty of international travel, falling revenue of cultural organisations and revised priorities, will all take their toll. In the short term we will likely see fewer international loans and blockbuster exhibitions requiring significant international collaborations. However, the strong international network already established by NML, and a desire for mutual support in these difficult times, will ensure recovery at some future point.

The many digital initiatives during the pandemic, alongside those pre-existing, will also help to maintain international access to Liverpool's outstanding cultural offer, laying the seeds of future international partnerships. We live in a

global society with fellowships, exchanges and residency opportunities open to artists, guest curators and other cultural professionals around the world. Many of us have already caught the travel bug. Technology and ease of travel has made the world feel smaller and increased our curiosity of other cultures. Museums will continue to partner and produce exhibitions to physically display with international collaborators.

Investing in the cultural sector

Finally, the fourth White Paper aim focuses on cultural investment, the primary objective of which is to "continue to invest in our growing cultural sectors", while at the same time "helping cultural organisations develop more mixed funding models". Since 2016, to some extent, both elements of this objective have been achieved. While there has been a reduction in public funding for cultural organisations over the last ten years, national government still invests in our cultural ecology via the Arts Council or directly through DCMS. At the same time, our cultural organisations have developed their funding models to increase income from ticket sales, secondary spend in venues and donations.

However, the moment cultural organisations were instructed to close their doors during lockdown, this new funding model was severely challenged. For NML, roughly 40% of turnover comes from earned income through a mix of different streams, all of which rely on us being open and trading. For others, the picture is much worse, with many independent museums 100% reliant on generating their own income from ticket sales and similar. Theatres and music venues also have a very high percentage of self-generated income. Our funding ecosystem is such that the protection of world class collections and the production

of cultural content is reliant on cultural organisations being able to trade.

In lockdown our cultural sector lost 100% of that trade and this will not be fixed simply by re-opening the doors. At NML, we are forecasting a 70% reduction in our visitor figure for the rest of the 2020/21 financial year due to social distancing and loss of the international and national tourism market. This means that the successes of the last ten years to make museums and other cultural organisations more resilient, with a focus on increased income generation beyond public investment, could now be the very thing which threatens the sustainability of the sector most.

3. Anticipating continued government support

As the Chancellor of the Exchequer [announces £1.57bn to protect the cultural sector](#), it appears that the UK Government is hearing sectoral appeals and understands the challenges posed by loss of trade. While this is a significant support package and investment in our sector, one we are truly grateful for, the impact of COVID-19 will be felt for a long time to come. This funding will enable the sector to partly weather the immediate storm, but NML and other museums and cultural organisations will be looking to the likes of the DCMS's [Cultural Renewal Taskforce](#) to effectively support and voice the needs of the sector over the coming years.

Tourism numbers, and therefore museum visitor figures, will not rebound overnight, and the sector will need to adapt to whatever our new normal is. This will take time and continued investment will be required. NML opened the doors of two venues on the 15th July (World Museum and Walker Art Gallery), and while it is encouraging to be open and see people enjoying our spaces and collections again, our offer is not currently financial

sustainable. As we open the rest of venues through August and September, the pressure on our finances will only increase. The additional funding provided by the UK Government will help us to survive this year but, for our museums and other cultural organisation to thrive into the future, we have a lot of work ahead of us.

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Laura is Director of National Museums Liverpool (NML), a group of very different and wide-ranging museums and galleries that were established more than 150 years ago as a complement and counterbalance to the museums in London. Brought together in 1986 as a nationally-funded group, NML comprises eight exceptional museums and galleries, sharing important stories from ancient times to today through its collection of more than four million objects. Laura received help and support from various colleagues within the team in producing this brief; particularly Sandra Penketh, the Executive Director of Art Galleries and Collections Care.

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