

Museums Association Response to Programme for Government 2024 – 2027

About the Museums Association

The Museums Association (MA) is a dynamic membership organisation that campaigns for socially engaged museums and a representative workforce. We are the only organisation for all museums in the four nations of the UK. Our network includes over 10,000 individual members working in all types of roles, from directors to trainees, and we represent more than 1,500 institutional members ranging from small volunteer run local museums to large national institutions. We work ethically and sustainably and collaborate with partners where we have common aims and values.

Priority – Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy

The MA agrees with the priority to grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy. However, the role of museums in achieving this priority is missing. Museums play a key role in supporting national and local economies and driving tourism and the visitor economy. For example, in 2024 the Museum of Free Derry had an [estimated economic impact](#) of over £8 million on the local economy. Museums are also geographically spread across Northern Ireland, therefore, providing regional balance of employment opportunities and access to culture. The MA believes everyone should have access to a high-quality museum service near to where they live.

Priority – Safer Communities

We also agree with the priority of safer communities but we believe it should recognise that museums are safe and welcoming spaces for communities and can help us to understand and negotiate the complex world around us, encouraging us to reflect on contemporary challenges. Museums can increase our sense of wellbeing, help us feel proud of where we have come from, and inspire, challenge and stimulate us. In 2023, the MA secured funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to undertake targeted [research](#) to capture data about museums and social impact in Northern Ireland. Our survey found that 70% of respondents are engaged in social impact work that purposely benefits people and communities. Museums can provide meaningful participation and volunteering opportunities which promotes wellbeing and self-confidence and can broaden the horizons of participants, the museum and the public. They can use their collections to support learning and engagement and nurture the next generation to play an active role in shaping the future of society.

Priority - Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment

The MA supports the priority to protect the environment and we welcome the suggested actions of creating an Environment Strategy and Climate Action Plan. However, the role of museums and wider culture sector in achieving climate action must be recognised in these documents. Museums are working to tackle the climate and ecological crisis through using their collections and programmes to raise awareness of the climate crisis, working with communities and partners to champion change in their local area, and embedding climate action through committing to targets for reducing energy, waste and carbon emissions.

For example, [National Museums NI](#) has undertaken a baseline carbon footprint assessment to develop an action plan for carbon reduction and [North Down Museum](#) has used its exhibitions to engage the local community with the issue of climate change and inspire them to take action.

Many museums are in old historic buildings which are not very energy efficient so a dedicated fund for museums to ensure that their buildings and collections are sustainable would be welcomed. This would support museums to continue to support communities to be more sustainable and take action for climate justice.

Missing Priority – Culture

While the MA agrees with the priorities set out in the Programme for Government 2024 – 2027, we are disappointed that culture has not been identified as a priority. As illustrated above, museums can deliver against other government priorities and investment into museum infrastructure would support museums to continue to do socially impactful work. We welcome the Department for Communities commitments to publish a new Museum Policy and create a Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy so we would have liked to have seen these commitments included in the Programme for Government.

Strategic investment in Northern Ireland's museums is needed. Art Fund's Museum Directors Research found that museums in Northern Ireland are facing an extremely challenging funding context, with two thirds of museum directors concerned about future funding. An enquiry into regional museum funding and long-term funding commitments for museums would unlock their potential and further enable museums to grow local economies and serve their communities.

Missions

The MA agrees with the missions set out of people, planet, prosperity and peace but would have liked to have seen how museums and the wider culture sector can help achieve these missions included. Strategic public investment in museums would support them to contribute towards realising these missions.

People

Museums are an essential part of the fabric of society, are loved and trusted by the public and are a key part of our cultural and social infrastructure. Museums are also at the heart of civic life, helping to make our villages, towns and cities vibrant and inclusive places to live, work and visit. Museums work with communities to improve life opportunities through volunteering and learning and engagement programmes.

Planet

Museums are working to decarbonise their buildings and operations. They are working in partnership with communities and using their collections to explore sustainability and climate justice and to support work towards net zero.

Prosperity

Museums can help attract tourists and drive economic activity as well as providing a sense of local pride for communities.

Peace

Museums use their research and collections to challenge assumptions, foster debate and motivate people to contribute to positive change in the world. Museums can create a fairer society and have an important role to play in promoting good relations.