

Museums Revisited / A Museum Capacity Building Programme for the EU

Executive Summary



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Museums Revisited is a forthcoming Programme led by the **British Council** to build capacity and connectivity across a network of museums in the UK and European Union countries at a time of such technological, social and political change. With Covid, museums are in a structural and financial crisis. With Brexit, UK museums face additional challenges: access to European funding is now largely unavailable; barriers to mobility (of people and collections) are adding cost, bureaucracy and inefficiency to operations; and longstanding relations and partnerships are imperilled by the UK's reduced and diminished political and thus cultural profile within the European Union.

The Museums Revisited Programme will work to create a stronger network among some key cultural institutions in the EU and the UK while exploring the changing role of museums in society. In year one of the programme, the focus will be on four EU countries: Greece, Poland, Romania and Italy¹. Ireland, Germany and Portugal will participate in core activities and join fully in year two. It is anticipated that future phases will involve more countries and intensify networks, exchange and shared development for a range of museums of different scales and types.

The Programme will offer intensive, professional development to facilitate sustainable change and development to the museum sector and will enable the dialogue between the UK – EU museums and cultural organisations. It will provide a platform for exchange, enabling museums to explore their shifting role, responsibility and opportunity across transversal development areas such as cultural, social and economic development and contemporary responses to the global challenges (e.g. climate change, Covid-19, gender equality and inclusive growth). Put simply:

“The programme will enable cultural exchange for international connections and lead to intercultural dialogue and mutuality between museums in the UK and EU countries.”
(British Council Terms of Reference for Museums Revisited).

The programme aims to:

- promote the use of museums to support wellbeing, inclusivity and a respect for diversity and encourage partnerships with other cultural and civil society organisations
- provide museums and cultural sector professionals with the opportunity to develop specialist skills and expertise
- promote the social power of museums, make new connections and facilitate dialogue and change
- promote cross-sectoral collaborations and nourish the development of surprising and “unexpected” synergies between museums and other organisations (hospitals, libraries, elderly homes, public parks/ gardens etc).
- foster working cultures which encourage openness, collaboration, innovation and allow for risk and failure
- respond to lack of innovation in some museums – from levels of inclusion to digital capacity

¹ It is understood Germany may also now be joining Museum Revisited in Year 1. Germany was not part of the study.

- respond to the lack of skills and lack of opportunities for career development for ²some museum staff and associated professions (e.g. artists and heritage professionals)
- raise awareness and influence policy change in relation to the role of museums and cultural heritage professionals in society, culture, economy, tourism etc - via engagement with regional/local authorities, education/research institutions, youth organisations and civil society.

The programme will be developed around 4 strands:

- Capacity Building and Training
- Digital Outreach
- Networking opportunities / Partnership Building
- Showcasing (exhibitions, festivals, conferences).

This report by Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy is based on an extensive qualitative research exercise which combined a survey which reached over 250 museums across Europe, focus groups and interviews. It provides a summary on the development needs and aspirations of a sample of museums and associated cultural organisations from across seven countries joining in year one and year two of the Museums Revisited programme: Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, Germany, Ireland and Portugal.

Headline Findings

“There has been a valorisation of museums in the pandemic. We have to see it as an opportunity – with a lot of museums closed, we have opened-up through digital, built new partnerships and connected with the public. Now is time to build a relationship with the communities who surround museums, especially with such reduced tourism”.

(Margarida Montenegro, Director of Culture at Santa Casa de Misericórdia).

Museums across Europe are desperate to connect and collaborate; they are committed to developing new skills and competencies as a survival requirement; and they are passionate about their moral purpose or value proposition as a force for good.

Museums today are beginning to recognise that they cannot just respond to change generated elsewhere and that it is not enough to simply document and present the world. Rather, they are priming themselves as activists, as responsible custodians and as providers of an alternative reality based on tolerance, inclusion, criticality and environmental sustainability. These elements provide the thematic architecture for a Museums Revisited programme that can help secure the future relevance of museums in Europe.

Capacity Building and Training

“The board and the director need guidance in understanding how the role of museums evolved and how it has to be a driver for change.” **Specialist museum, Italy.**

The development needs of museums varies significantly – by scale, type of museum, and country. However, there are some common needs. These include:

² www.tfconsultancy.co.uk

- The immediate need to develop capacity and expertise which enables the museum to enhance its relations with an increasingly diverse set of stakeholders. This includes working with partners in the education and health sectors – so the museum can play an impactful role in post-Covid recovery and co-design solutions at the heart of a new socially-driven approach to cultural provision.
- The practical need to enhance skills in digital tools – e.g. use of social media and approaches which enable the museum to broadcast content which complements the physical offer and which is relevant and accessible to audiences given the huge upsurge in digital content catalysed by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- An expressed need to build strategic, managerial and corporate capacity – to explore business models which are more multi-sourced, including opportunities to raise investment from other parts of the public sector (e.g. for education and health), from corporate sponsors and through the monetisation of different elements of the museum offer (e.g. crowd-funding, revenue generation via digital workshops and events etc.).
- The paramount issues of diversity and openness. Museums will need to work harder to ensure they are safe and inclusive spaces (both physical and digital), that they are open and accessible, and thus that they are trusted partners in a process of re-building.
- Museums in each of the surveyed countries face a new reality where a core segment of their audiences – international tourists – has not been able to visit museums. It is not certain how or whether, or over what duration international tourists will return. What is certain is that museums need to develop new strategies and skillsets which help to build local audiences and which cater for a new reality where the balance of international tourists and local visitors will be changed forever.
- The need to build environmental literacy across museums – so they are not just operating as environmentally sustainable institutions, but also as responsible environmental activists – capable of raising environmental awareness across their communities and playing a leadership role with regard to climate emergency.
- The strategic value proposition: museums require support, advice and training to enable them to both measure and describe their value proposition to partners in Government and the private sector. This includes support which enables museums to better evaluate, measure and describe their impact. This is vital to ensure museums are invested in as relevant and impactful organisations – for recovery and for future socio-economic development, innovation and wellbeing.

Digital Outreach

“We need more investments on technological tools and staff training...we want to involve users emotionally (e.g. through storytelling and gaming).”

Archaeological museum, Italy.

There is genuine appetite among museums across Europe to exchange knowledge and develop a more collaborative landscape for innovation and institutional development. This includes the use of digital tools – such as a shared platform on museum innovation which can include tools and best practice examples. It also includes structured exchange and learning activities such as workshops, talks and seminars – to ‘deep-dive’ on important issues for museum development.

Digital tools will help facilitate knowledge exchange and bolster a shared community of practice for museums. They will also help amplify existing platforms and networks – such as ICOM or in-country networks.

Networking opportunities / Partnership Building

“We are working on deepen the relationships with teachers who come to us with their classes, community organisations and NGO working with people with disabilities - we want to develop our network of organisations which have a better knowledge on needs of those groups to cooperate and exchange experiences”.

Art museum, Poland.

Museum managers across Europe are yearning for new and enhanced networking and partnership. Many have felt isolated during the Covid-19 pandemic and have struggled for visibility and voice in their local contexts and in national conversations on policy and investment. In part this is because so many museums have had to close their doors and staff have been either furloughed or are working remotely, which makes it difficult to strengthen networks and increase institutional profile. It is also in part due to the still low levels of awareness among many policy makers and partners on the role and value of museums – in a time of crisis and in recovery.

Museums Revisited can provide a very timely and much needed boost to the network capacity of museums across Europe. It can also facilitate purposeful exchange across networks of museums and help brokerage new types of partnership – e.g. between smaller and larger museums; or between museums and partners in education and health. There is also a hunger for museum exchange and support for museum staff residencies, shared commissions and touring collections. This will be additionally important for UK museums which are facing barriers on mobility and additional bureaucracy and costs due to Brexit.

Strategic Partnership and Value

“A museum today is more than a repository for collections. It is our job to be there for the people in the city and to make a contribution to future development.”

History museum, Germany.

Museum managers across Europe are keen to showcase the role and value of museums for a future Europe. Greece has been at the forefront of knowledge exchange on museum innovation and museum impact, with CoMuseum and the 3-year Transforming Future Museums capacity building programme raising agendas and connecting museums to share and exchange. In Italy, ICOM has been working in close partnership with museums across the country to promote the role and value of museums, building on the structure and focus provided by the National Museum System. In Romania, Germany, Poland and Portugal, there is expressed appetite to strengthen the profile of museums in the cultural policy landscape and to position museums as beacons for innovation in the social and creative economy. In Germany, museums are actively working to operate as catalysts for the creative industries, supporting networks of creative producers the local and regional economy. In Italy, smaller museums see the value of networks and partnership to boost their profile and capacity, given that so many museums are very small. In the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, museums are attempting to retain and develop a shared profile across the Island of Ireland – which, post-Brexit, will be so important to facilitate knowledge exchange and boost the case for museum investment overall. And in the UK, there is a sense of urgency that without shared platforms to showcase and exchange with museums across Europe, museums will lose their edge, influence and relevance.

This research for the British Council has affirmed that museums across Europe are desperate to connect and collaborate; they are committed to developing new skills and

competencies as a survival requirement; and they are passionate about their moral purpose or value proposition as a force for good.

Museums today are beginning to recognise that they cannot just respond to change generated elsewhere and that it is not enough to simply document and present the world. Rather, they are priming themselves as activists, as responsible custodians and as providers of an alternative reality based on tolerance, inclusion, criticality and environmental sustainability. These elements provide the thematic architecture for a Museums Revisited programme that can help secure the future relevance of museums in Europe.