



NI
Museums
Council

Museum Trends 2023 Results

Summary of Major Stated
Weaknesses



www.nimc.co.uk

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NI Museums Council
153 Bangor Road
Holywood
Co. Down
BT18 0EU



info@nimc.co.uk

Cover photography NIWM gallery, courtesy of NIMC.

1. Background

Our accredited museum members spent much time and effort filling in our Museum Trends survey questionnaires and developing their 'Museum Impact Statement' at the end of 2023.

The purpose of the survey was to provide focused quantitative and qualitative data about local authority and independent museums so that NIMC can argue effectively for their social, cultural and economic value and help to secure the resources they need collectively. The Museum Trends Survey offers NIMC an opportunity to discover what museums are doing well, and to celebrate that. It also offers an opportunity to discover what is not being done, and why that might be, which is key to advocating for increased provision.

The survey was divided into three themes mapped to the UK Accreditation Standard:

1. Organisational Health (workforce, finance, infrastructure, strategic outlook)
2. Managing Collections (collection scope, development and management)
3. Users and their Experiences (audience / digital engagement and impact)

As part of the survey, museums were asked to provide a SWOT analysis to put their environment into context. This second paper focuses on the WEAKNESSES museum's face.

2. Identified Weaknesses in the Museum Sector

The Museum Trends 2023 survey revealed several common weaknesses across participating museums, highlighting areas that require strategic attention and support.

Physical Limitations and Infrastructure

Many museums are constrained by inadequate physical spaces, including limited exhibition and storage areas. Historic buildings, while culturally significant, often suffer from deterioration and are costly to maintain. Accessibility remains a challenge, with some sites lacking essential visitor facilities such as car parks, restaurants, and dedicated education spaces.

Financial Constraints

A recurring issue is the limited financial capacity of museums. Many rely heavily on government grants or external funding, which restricts their ability to expand services, maintain infrastructure, or invest in new initiatives. This financial fragility can hinder long-term planning and innovation.

Staffing Issues

Staffing challenges are widespread. Museums often operate with insufficient permanent staff and rely heavily on volunteers. Recruiting qualified volunteers and trustees is increasingly difficult, and the sector faces a growing risk of staff burnout. In some cases, operations depend on a small number of key individuals, creating vulnerabilities in succession planning and institutional resilience.

Operational Challenges

Operationally, museums frequently struggle within larger council structures where they are considered discretionary services. This status can limit their influence over staffing and investment decisions. Coordination with other departments is often problematic, and many museums face backlogs in cataloguing collections and managing databases effectively.

Visitor Engagement and Public Perception

Engaging visitors remains a challenge for many institutions. Outdated permanent exhibitions, limited dynamic online content, and difficulties in shifting public perceptions contribute to reduced engagement. Physical signage and wayfinding within museum premises are also areas needing improvement.

External Factors

The lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect visitor confidence and operational stability. Additionally, geographic location poses challenges for some museums, limiting accessibility and visitor numbers due to remoteness or lack of transport links.

3. Impact on the Local Museum Sector and Potential Action Points

The self-assessed weaknesses highlight significant areas where the local museum sector needs improvement to enhance sustainability, visitor engagement, and operational efficiency. Addressing these weaknesses is crucial for ensuring that museums continue to serve their communities effectively and preserve their cultural heritage.

4. Potential Action Points

Aim	Action
1. Infrastructure Improvement:	Secure funding for building maintenance and expansion to address physical space limitations, improve accessibility, and enhance visitor facilities such as cafes, car parks, and education spaces.
2. Financial Diversification:	Develop strategies to diversify funding sources, including increasing private donations, exploring commercial ventures, and applying for more grants to reduce reliance on government funding.
3. Staffing and Volunteer Recruitment:	Implement robust recruitment and training programs for both permanent staff and volunteers. Develop succession plans to ensure organizational knowledge is retained and reduce burnout risks.
4. Operational Efficiency:	Strengthen relationships with council departments to streamline processes and improve support for services like maintenance and signage. Increase internal efficiency through better database management and regular cataloguing of collections.
5. Enhancing Visitor Engagement:	Invest in modernising permanent exhibitions and enhancing online resources to attract and engage a wider audience. Improve on-site signage and create clear visitor pathways to enhance the visitor experience.
6. Marketing and Outreach:	Increase marketing efforts to boost visibility and attract more visitors. Develop targeted outreach programs to engage underserved communities and expand the demographic reach.

Aim	Action
7. Crisis Management and Adaptation:	Develop plans to adapt to external challenges such as pandemics, including measures to boost visitor confidence and ensure operational continuity.
8. Community Involvement:	Foster deeper community connections through interactive programs, local history projects, and volunteer opportunities, ensuring the museum is seen as an integral part of the community.
9. Collaboration and Networking:	Enhance collaboration with other museums, cultural institutions, and educational organizations to share resources, knowledge, and best practices, and to coordinate joint initiatives that can attract larger audiences and funding.

By focusing on these action points, the local museum sector can address its weaknesses, leading to more resilient, dynamic, and community-focused institutions that continue to thrive and serve their missions effectively.

5. Potential Action Points for NIMC Corporate Plan 2026–2030

Aim	Action
1. Infrastructure Improvement	Advocate for and secure capital investment to upgrade museum infrastructure to improve physical accessibility, enhance visitor experience, and future-proof museum facilities.
2. Financial Diversification	Support museums in developing diverse income streams to reduce dependency on public funding and increase financial resilience.

Aim	Action
3. Staffing and Volunteer Recruitment	Strengthen workforce sustainability through recruitment, training, and succession planning to build a resilient, skilled, and supported workforce.
4. Operational Efficiency	Improve internal systems and external partnerships to streamline operations which can enhance museum effectiveness and reduce administrative burdens.

If you require this plan in an alternative format and/or an alternative language, please contact the NI Museums Council.