



NI
Museums
Council

Museum Trends
2023

Local Museums'
SWOT Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of the Museum Trends Survey was to provide focused quantitative and qualitative data about local authority and independent museums to enable NIMC to 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)

Twenty-two of our accredited museum members spent much time and effort filling in our Museum Trends survey questionnaires and ten of them went even further and filled in their 'Museum Impact Statement' document at the end of 2023.

The purpose of the museum impact statement as an addition to the survey questionnaires was to allow NIMC the chance to gather qualitative as well as quantitative data on the broad range of museum operations and allow further detail around programming, resource, priorities, achievements and challenges. This type of detail would help position NIMC to make strong and evidenced arguments about the day-to-day operations and reflect on the experiences of all staff, including casual and temporary staff and volunteers.

Variances in the way different museums collect their data means that quantitative data can be used as a baseline with an understanding that some areas may be underrepresented. However, the information gathered points towards themes which run cross the sector.

While this data does not encompass the entire local museum sector, it offers a representative snapshot of its successes and challenges, providing insights that are broadly applicable across the field.

The data from the Museum Impact Statements was combined with the data from the SWOT analysis each museum was asked to fill in from the general survey. This was then compiled, and a SWOT analysis of the sector was devised. This report is the results of this analysis. Each section is examined in greater detail individually and the conclusion looks at potential priorities for NIMC moving forward.



Armagh Robinson Library © NIMC

Summary of Major Stated Strengths

The local museum sector across Northern Ireland presents a compelling array of internal strengths that position it as a vital cultural, educational, and heritage resource. These strengths span institutional capacity, human capital, collections, community engagement, and visitor experience, collectively contributing to the museums' resilience, relevance, and reputation.

Institutional Distinction and Strategic Positioning

At the heart of the sector's success is its unique positioning. Several museums occupy central urban locations making them highly accessible and attractive to both local and international visitors. Many sites are part of a cluster of attractions, enhancing their appeal through shared footfall and joint marketing initiatives. Purpose-built or historically significant buildings, including listed heritage sites, further reinforce their cultural value and architectural integrity.

Accreditation and recognition play a pivotal role in institutional credibility. Museums within the sector have prestigious designations, such as four-star ratings from Tourism NI and/or full accreditation status. These accolades not only validate the quality of service but also facilitate access to funding and partnerships. Strategic alignment with broader cultural policies ensures that the museums remain responsive to evolving societal needs and governmental priorities.

Passion and Professional Expertise

Our museums benefit from a highly skilled and dedicated workforces. Staff members possess expertise in management, conservation, education, collections care, and digital engagement to name a few. Their enthusiasm and adaptability are evident in their ability to horizon scan for emerging trends and respond to the changing needs of local councils and communities. Leadership is reinforced by committed Boards of Trustees and Councils who guide strategic development and operational excellence.

Volunteers form an essential part of the passion of the sector, contributing to front-of-house services, educational programming, and community outreach. Friends of the Museum groups and school placement opportunities further enrich the museums' social fabric, fostering loyalty and intergenerational engagement.

Collections, Exhibitions, and Research Capacity

The museums house diverse and significant collections with local, national and international relevance. These include extensive photographic archives, contemporary acquisitions, and globally recognised heritage items that attract researchers from around the world. Collections are well-documented, digitally catalogued, and stored on-site, ensuring accessibility and preservation.

Exhibitions are thoughtfully curated, ranging from beloved permanent displays to dynamic temporary installations. The ability to secure high-profile loans from national institutions and deliver award-winning exhibitions underscores the network's curatorial excellence. Research is supported through partnerships with universities, reference libraries, and archives, positioning the museums as hubs of scholarly inquiry and cultural discourse.

Community Engagement and Partnerships

Strong ties to local communities are a hallmark of the museum network. Engagement initiatives target diverse audiences, including under-5s, individuals living with dementia, and cross-community groups. Museums have cultivated sustained relationships with schools, offering curriculum-aligned educational programmes that contribute significantly to visitor numbers.

Partnerships extend across borders and sectors, involving local community groups, Councils, tourist boards, libraries, and other museums. Cross-border collaborations with institutions in Ireland and shared services with partner museums enhance operational efficiency and cultural exchange. The museums' inclusive ethos and neutral environments foster trust and accessibility for all visitors.

Visitor Experience and Outreach

Visitor experience is enriched through thoughtful amenities and programming. Free or subsidised admission, parking, popular cafés, and community-hire facilities make the museums welcoming and user-friendly. Accessibility is prioritised through virtual tours, multilingual promotional materials, and inclusive design.

Digital outreach is robust, with well-maintained websites and active social media channels that engage audiences locally and globally. Marketing efforts by education officers and council departments amplify visibility and drive attendance. Events and activities throughout the year ensure that the museums remain vibrant and relevant to their communities.

Impact on the Local Museum Sector and Potential Action Points

These self-assessed organisational strengths reflect a robust and dynamic local museum sector that plays a critical role in preserving and promoting cultural heritage. These strengths indicate that local museums are well-positioned to serve their communities effectively, offering educational, recreational, and cultural value. The emphasis on dedicated staff and volunteers, strong community ties, and strategic partnerships suggests a sector that is resilient and capable of adapting to changing needs and opportunities.

Potential Action Points

Enhance Collaboration:

Foster greater collaboration among museums to leverage combined resources, share best practices, and coordinate joint initiatives and events, enhancing the overall visitor experience.

Improve Accessibility:

Continue efforts to make museums more accessible to all visitors, including those with disabilities, through physical infrastructure improvements and inclusive programming.

Secure Funding:

Actively seek external funding opportunities to support maintenance, refurbishments, and new initiatives, ensuring financial sustainability and the ability to expand offerings.

Leverage Digital Technologies:

Utilise digital tools and platforms to reach wider audiences through virtual tours, online exhibitions, and digital archives, making collections more accessible globally.

Focus on Community Engagement:

Continue to develop initiatives that engage local communities more deeply, such as community-curated exhibitions, local history projects, and interactive events that foster a sense of ownership and pride.



Ballymoney Museum © NIMC

Summary of Major Stated Weaknesses

Despite the cultural richness and historical significance embedded within Northern Ireland's museum landscape, a multitude of internal challenges continue to hinder the sector's ability to thrive, evolve, and serve its communities effectively. These weaknesses paint a sobering picture of an under-resourced and overburdened heritage infrastructure struggling to meet modern expectations.

Structural and Physical Limitations

Many museums operate within historic buildings that, while architecturally significant, pose serious operational challenges. Water penetration, deteriorating joinery, damp cellars, and inadequate rainwater goods are common issues that compromise both the preservation of collections and visitor experience. Accessibility remains a persistent concern, with physical barriers restricting inclusive access. The lack of adequate exhibition and event space further curtails the ability to showcase collections or host educational programming, while offsite storage facilities often lack climate control and rational organisation.

Staffing and Volunteer Challenges

A recurring theme across institutions is the scarcity of permanent, full-time staff. Many museums rely heavily on part-time employees, casual staff, and freelancers, creating instability and risking burnout. The loss of institutional knowledge due to restructuring and pandemic closures has exacerbated this issue, with succession planning largely absent. Recruiting skilled volunteers and trustees remains a struggle, limiting the ability to open collections to the public and maintain consistent engagement. In some cases, operations are sustained by just a handful of individuals, placing unsustainable pressure on a few key personnel.

Financial Constraints and Funding Dependencies

Budgetary limitations are among the most pressing concerns. Many museums operate as discretionary services within councils, lacking legislative protection and influence over long-term investment decisions. Reliance on government grants and a single large funder creates financial fragility, especially in the face of cost-of-living crises and shifting council priorities.

The absence of dedicated fundraising roles and marketing budgets further restricts growth and visibility. Without increased core funding, institutions struggle to maintain basic supplies, invest in conservation, or plan strategically for the future.

Collections Management and Research Limitations

The management of collections is hampered by documentation backlogs, poor database systems, and legacy cataloguing practices dating back to the early 20th century. Over 90% of collections remain in storage, with limited capacity to digitise, catalogue, or rotate displays. Research access is constrained by part-time staffing and slow archival systems, while online resources remain underdeveloped. The absence of dedicated collections staff and education spaces further restricts the museum's ability to serve academic and community audiences.

Visitor Experience and Engagement

Visitor routes in some museums can be confusing as signage can be inadequate, and the overall site layout can be disorienting. The lack of a café, shop, or coach parking diminishes the appeal of museums as full-day destinations.

Primary school workshops are oversubscribed in some museums, and audience demographics overall skew toward older age groups in others, revealing a need for more inclusive outreach. Limited opening hours reduce accessibility, while joint-ticketing schemes dilute revenue streams for individual institutions.

Planning and Governance Challenges

The ability to plan proactively is stifled by financial uncertainty and competing priorities across Council departments. Maintenance, signage, and cleaning services are often delayed or deprioritised. Governance structures are strained, with limited capacity to invest in partnerships or focus on individual projects. The absence of integrated security systems and the detrimental impact of car parking within heritage courtyards reflect broader issues of site management and coordination.

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.

Potential Action Points

Infrastructure Improvement:

Look to secure funding for audits and building maintenance and expansion to improve accessibility, and enhance visitor facilities.

Financial Diversification:

Develop strategies to diversify funding sources and applying for more grants to reduce reliance on Departmental funding.

Staffing and Volunteers:

Implement robust recruitment and training programmes for both staff and volunteers and explore succession planning and leadership programmes.

Enhancing Visitor Engagement:

Assist museums to invest in modernising permanent exhibitions and enhancing online resources to attract and engage a wider audience.

Community Involvement:

Develop training and grant programmes which foster deeper community connections through interactive programmes, local history projects, and volunteer opportunities, ensuring the museum is seen as an integral part of the community.

Collaboration and Networking:

Enhance collaboration between museums, cultural institutions, and educational organisations to share resources, knowledge, and best practices, and to coordinate joint initiatives that can attract larger audiences and funding.



Fermanagh County Museum © NIMC

Summary of Major Stated Opportunities

Northern Ireland's museums stand at a pivotal moment, rich with opportunities to reimagine their role in society, deepen public engagement, and secure their future as vibrant cultural institutions. While internal challenges persist, the external landscape offers a wealth of possibilities from strategic partnerships and funding streams to technological innovation and community-driven initiatives. These opportunities, if harnessed effectively, could transform the museum sector into a dynamic force for education, tourism, and cultural preservation.

Expanding Audiences and Visitor Engagement

One of the most promising avenues for growth lies in increasing visitor numbers. Initiatives such as free admission, improved signage, and enhanced accessibility can make museums more welcoming and inclusive. Events like World Book Day, St Patrick's Festival, and European Heritage Open Days offer platforms to attract diverse audiences and raise visibility. The development of tour packages, children's galleries, and interactive exhibitions can further enrich the visitor experience, especially for younger demographics.

The catchment area around museum sites presents a substantial local market for day visitors. Strategic marketing, including leveraging nearby attractions can amplify regional tourism and position museums as central destinations.

External organisations offer valuable insights into reaching new or underrepresented audiences, breaking down real or perceived barriers for migrant communities, SEND groups and those living in poverty amongst others. There are opportunities to learn from and collaborate with them.

Heritage Development and Interpretation

Museums have a unique opportunity to build on the rich heritage of sites like Derry's city walls, Downpatrick's Viking legacy or Bangor's early Christian heritage. Projects such as the Maguire History Gathering and the Lough Erne Pilgrim Way offer compelling narratives that can be woven into exhibitions and community programming. The development of gaol interpretation, the reimagining of historic railway lines or First World War trenches also provide fresh angles for storytelling and audience engagement.

Digitisation of photographs and archives and the introduction and upgrading collections management systems will enhance research capabilities and public access, while interpretive planning can modernise permanent displays and showcase underrepresented histories, including the more recent past and military heritage.

Strategic Partnerships and Collaborative Ventures

Collaboration is key to unlocking new potential. Academic institutions like Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University, and Trinity College Dublin can foster research, host conferences, and elevate the museum's academic profile. Partnerships with other museums both locally and across the UK through initiatives like the Art Fund Going Places scheme enable co-curation, shared exhibitions, and joint funding applications.

Working with council departments, cultural heritage libraries, and cross-border institutions strengthens regional cohesion and resource sharing.

Funding and Financial Sustainability

External funding remains a cornerstone of museum development. Opportunities abound through the National Lottery Heritage Fund and diverse grant schemes. Successfully completed projects provide a track record that can be leveraged for future bids. Sponsorship, income generation through hired spaces, and the development of online retail and tailored merchandising offer additional potential revenue streams.

The new NI Museum Policy will provide a strategic framework for aligning museum goals with broader policy objectives, while the potential of Accreditation opens doors to specialised funding and recognition.

Education, Outreach, and Community Engagement

Museums are increasingly recognised as spaces for learning and wellbeing. Expanding schools' programmes, outreach initiatives, and informal learning opportunities can deepen community ties and foster lifelong engagement. Projects like Global Voices, Local Choices and temporary exhibitions rooted in local history offer platforms for co-creation and storytelling.

Genealogy remains a strong draw, with daily enquiries highlighting public interest in personal and regional histories. Enhancing online resources, digitising collections, and offering training and grants for research can position museums as hubs of discovery and scholarship.

Opportunities exist to use collections and communities to explore current topics such as climate change and violence against women and girls, while also remaining flexible to tackle future issues of importance.

Innovation and Digital Transformation

Technology offers transformative potential. Interactive exhibits, online lectures, and virtual tours can broaden access and appeal to digital-native audiences. The planned opening of the DNA Museum in 2026 and the redevelopment of the Tower Museum signal a forward-looking approach to exhibition design and visitor engagement.

Improving the museum's online presence, including social media and collections websites, is essential for visibility and outreach. Digital platforms also facilitate collaboration, training, and resource sharing across institutions.

Impact on the Local Museum Sector and Potential Action Points

The opportunities identified suggest several strategic areas where the local museum sector can leverage its strengths to grow and enhance its services. By focusing on these opportunities, museums can increase their relevance, sustainability, and impact within their communities and beyond.

Potential Action Points

Maximize Visitor Engagement:

Develop relationships with organisations such as Tourism NI to enable the sector to participate in targeted marketing campaigns and programmes.

Foster Partnerships and Collaborations:

Strengthen existing partnerships and seek new collaborations with academic institutions, cultural organisations, and community groups. Leverage joint initiatives and shared resources to enhance programme offerings and operational efficiency.

Secure Diverse Funding Sources:

Explore alternative funding opportunities.

Expand Educational and Outreach Initiatives:

Develop programmes which enhance education and outreach through digital platforms, virtual tours, and online learning resources as well as experiential learning rooted in the NI Curriculum, which puts collections and stories at the forefront.

Utilise Digital Technologies:

Use grant programmes to invest in digitising collections and archives to improve access and engagement and incorporate interactive technologies in exhibitions to create dynamic visitor experiences.

Improve Infrastructure and Facilities:

Explore grant funding for capital projects to enhance museum facilities, improve accessibility, ensure adequate storage and conservation facilities for collections.



Somme Museum © NIMC

Summary of Major Stated Threats

Northern Ireland's museums, while rich in heritage and cultural significance, face a daunting array of external threats that jeopardize their sustainability, relevance, and public engagement. These challenges ranging from economic instability and political shifts to environmental pressures and competitive cultural landscapes demand urgent attention and strategic resilience. Without proactive measures, the sector risks losing its foothold as a vital custodian of history and community identity.

Economic Pressures and Funding Instability

The broader economic climate presents a formidable challenge. Rising energy costs, inflation, and the cost-of-living crisis have strained museum budgets, while public funding continues to decline. The withdrawal of Ministry of Defence support and the loss of EU funding opportunities post-Brexit have narrowed financial lifelines. Increased competition for limited grants and sponsorships intensifies the struggle for survival, especially as museums are often deprioritised in council budgets.

Low staff numbers negatively impact the ability of the sector to dedicate time and resources to external funding applications, or to take on bespoke projects and evaluations such as these funding streams require.

The introduction or increase of admission and workshop fees risks alienating visitors, particularly schools and repeat audiences. The economic downturn also affects disposable income, reducing footfall and visitor spending. Without a dedicated acquisition budget, museums struggle to enrich their collections, as donors increasingly recognise the financial value of historical objects.

Environmental and Infrastructure Vulnerabilities

Climate change poses a growing threat to museum sites and collections. Fluctuations in temperature and humidity risk mould and deterioration in artefact and archives collections. Many buildings lack insulation and efficient heating systems, leading to unsustainable maintenance costs. Leaks in newer structures and unresolved defects in public areas detract from the visitor experience and compromise the integrity of the sites.

The risk of fire and flood damage is intensified as many museums are situated in historic properties with aged infrastructures.

Storage facilities are often inadequate, lacking environmental controls and space for public engagement. The inability to implement necessary upgrades due to funding constraints exacerbates these vulnerabilities, putting collections and infrastructure at continued risk.

Staffing, Capacity, and Operational Strain

Staff retention and recruitment remain critical concerns. Many institutions rely on part-time or casual staff, limiting operational capacity and continuity. The loss of key personnel threatens institutional knowledge and service delivery, while rising workloads and stress levels contribute to burnout. The inability to recruit panel, committee or Board members hampers efforts, and the time required to learn new IT systems adds to the administrative burden.

Dependency on externally funded projects creates instability, with staffing and programming often contingent on short-term grants. As service demands grow, museums face the dual challenge of meeting public expectations with shrinking resources.

Audience Shifts and Cultural Competition

Changing audience preferences and demographic shifts pose existential questions for museums. An aging visitor base, coupled with the rise of alternative cultural experiences, can lead to declining footfall. Misunderstandings about museum services and a lack of public profile further erode engagement. The interpretation of contested histories risks alienating specific groups, while the focus on digital tools may exclude older, less tech-savvy audiences.

Nearby attractions and new cultural developments present stiff competition, drawing visitors away and fragmenting the cultural landscape. A cost-of-living crisis means that the public must look for value for money and be discerning with where they direct their income. Museums must contend with the challenge of remaining relevant and distinctive in an increasingly crowded field.

Political and Social Instability

Political instability at the regional level threatens access to decision-makers and disrupts long-term planning. Shifting council priorities and reduced support for heritage initiatives undermine funding and strategic alignment. Crime and antisocial behaviour can deter visitors and tarnish the museum experience.

Legal risks stemming from past personnel issues and the potential for litigation add another layer of uncertainty. The inability to secure national loans due to rising costs and resource limitations further restricts growth and innovation.

Impact on the Local Museum Sector and Potential Mitigation Strategies

The threats identified highlight significant challenges that can impact the sustainability, visitor engagement, and operational efficiency of museums. Addressing these threats requires proactive planning and strategic initiatives.

Potential Action Points

Financial Stability and Resource Management:

Diversify funding sources to reduce reliance on a single funding stream from the Department for Communities.

Enhancing Infrastructure and Facilities:

Supply grants and funding specifically for infrastructure improvements and environmental control and monitoring systems.

Visitor Engagement and Audience Diversification:

Develop targeted programmes to attract diverse and younger audiences and enhance visitor experiences through emerging digital technologies.

Strengthening Organisational Capacity:

- Explore the development of succession plans to reduce dependence on key individuals
- Enhance staff retention through professional development opportunities including Leadership training programmes
- Explore more support for volunteer programmes.

Adapting to External Factors and Environmental Challenges:

Engage with local councils and political bodies to advocate for continued support and funding. Assist museums to develop contingency plans to address environmental disruptions and ensure operational continuity.