NI Museums Council

Museum Trends 2022/23

Survey Results

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Introduction

The purpose of the Museum Trends 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)

Methodology

In March 2023, a comprehensive review of previous NIMC Museum Trends surveys was undertaken to inform the development of the latest iteration. This review focused on refining the survey's framework and identifying the key structural elements and target data required for meaningful analysis.

Building on these insights, NIMC staff designed a revised questionnaire which was refined following a close consultation with the museum sector. From the outset, the intention was to capture both quantitative metrics and qualitative narratives. To strengthen the qualitative dimension, a Museum Impact Statement and accompanying guidance documents were created and distributed alongside the survey.

The Museum Trends Survey 2022–2023 was officially launched in September 2023 via the online platform Citizen Space. It aimed to evaluate the 2022–23 financial year (April 2022 to March 2023). The Museum Impact Statement was issued separately to ensure focused reflection on institutional impact.

Twenty-three accredited museum members participated, dedicating significant time and effort to complete the survey. While the responses do not represent the entire local museum sector, they offer a valuable and indicative snapshot of its achievements and ongoing challenges, yielding insights that resonate across the broader landscape. The data collected has been carefully compiled and analysed in this report. Each section explores specific themes in depth, with conclusions and recommended actions highlighting potential priorities for NIMC as it looks ahead.

1. Organisational Health

The survey looked primarily across four areas of organisational health– opening hours, cost of admission, workforce and income.

Due to inconsistencies in the available income data, it proved challenging to verify its reliability or use it confidently for future planning or as a clear understanding of the sector's financial resources. As a result, this information has been excluded from the report.

The numbers provided in the accompanying charts throughout this report are based on the figures provided by each museum and have not been independently verified.

Respondents

Of the 23 museums who responded to the survey, 11 were Accredited Independent Museums, 1 was a non–Accredited Independent Museum and 11 were Accredited Local Authority Museums. The geographical spread of respondents was across nine of the eleven local authority areas.

Opening Hours
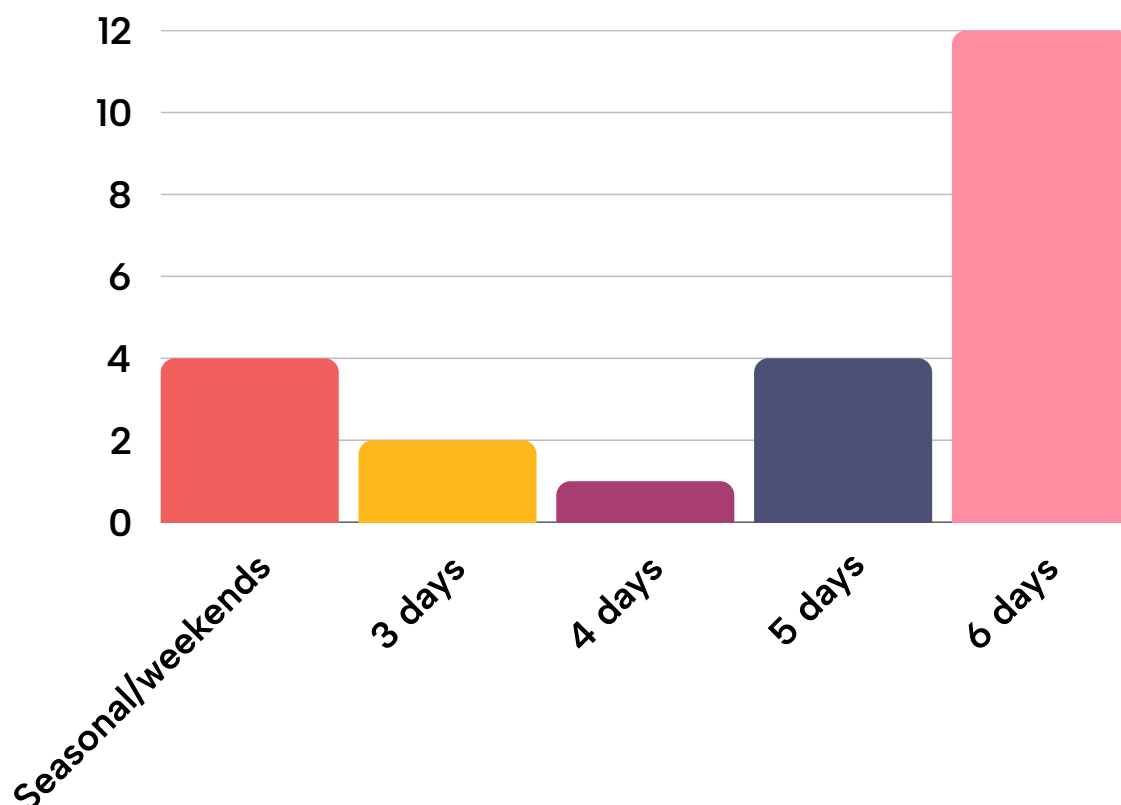
Charging Admission

Of the museums surveyed, 14 offer free admission and 9 charge fees for entry. The average fee those charging is £6 for an adult £2.90 for a senior or child.

Workforce and Volunteers

Local museums serve as vital custodians of cultural heritage, nurturing community identity and offering inclusive educational opportunities. At the heart of their exhibitions and programmes is a committed team comprised of both professional staff and volunteers who ensure the smooth running of daily operations. While paid staff contribute strategic leadership, curatorial expertise, and institutional continuity, volunteers enrich the museum environment with enthusiasm, local insight, and hands-on support across all areas of work.
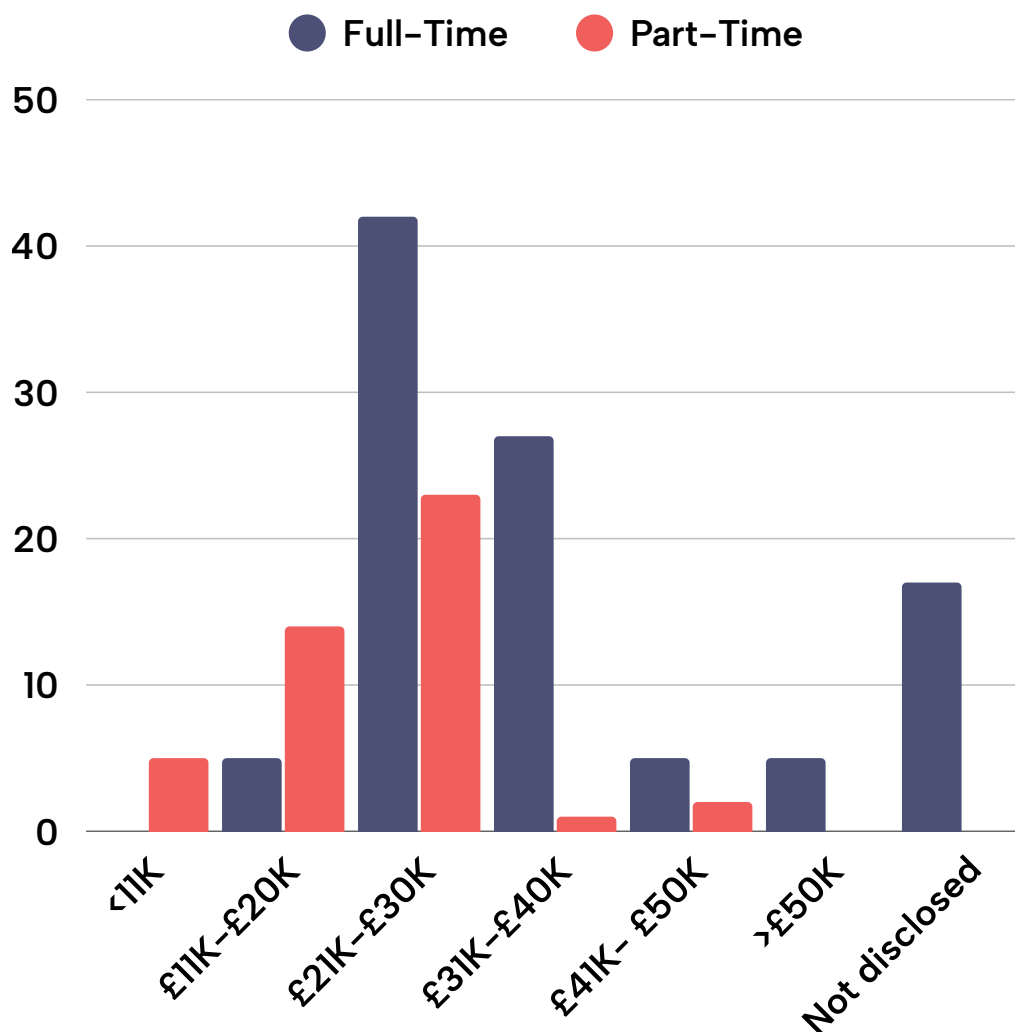
Temporary/Seasonal Staff
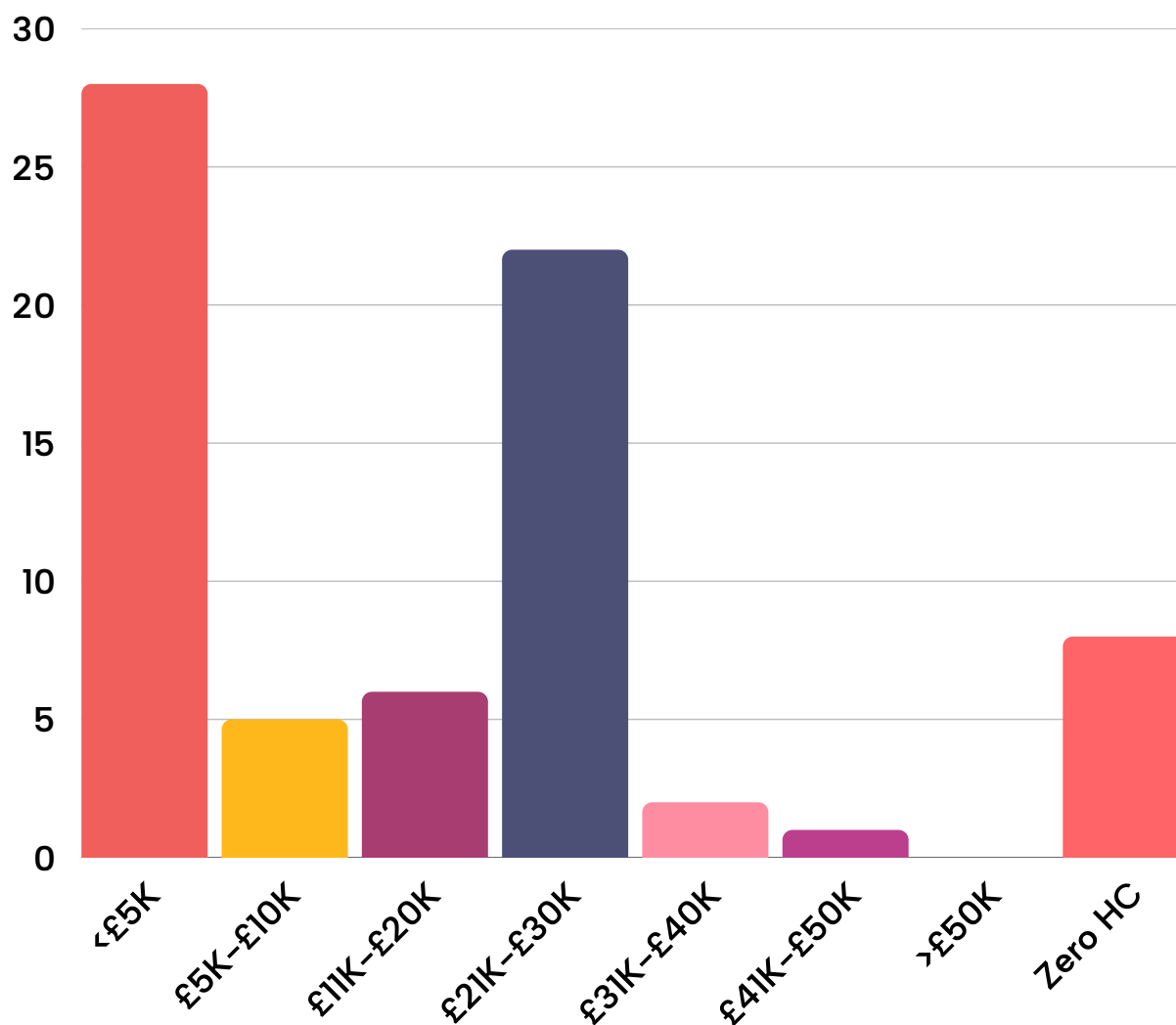
Museum Trends examined staffing and volunteer numbers across local museums to benchmark workforce capacity and volunteer engagement. This collaborative dynamic is central to shaping the effectiveness, resilience, and community impact of these institutions.

Of the 23 museums who responded, there were:

- 101 full-time employees working over 30 hours/week
- 45 part-time staff working under 30 hours/week
- 72 temporary or seasonal staff employed
- 408 Volunteers

Volunteers

The total number of volunteer hours for 2022–2023 was over 40,000.

Volunteers often cover many aspects of museum work, but our museums generally classified them under the following categories–
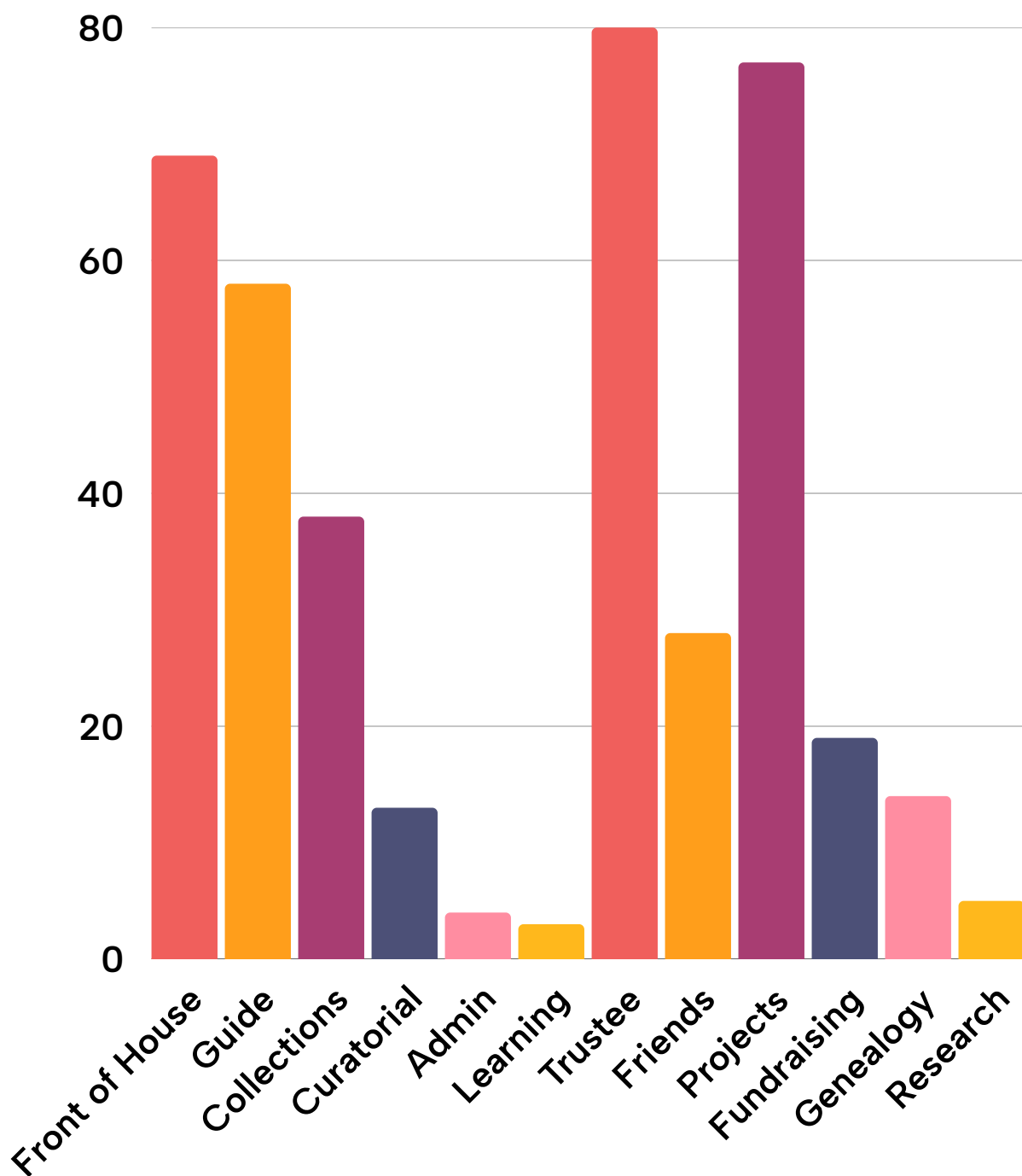
Aims and actions NIMC could take to help staff/volunteers

1. Professional Development & Training

- Expand annual training programmes to include digital skills, community engagement, and inclusive practices
- Create mentorship schemes pairing experienced professionals with emerging talent

2. Advocacy & Representation

- Lobby for sustainable funding to ensure museums can retain and support their staff and volunteers

3. Community & Wellbeing Support

- Facilitate peer networks for museum staff and volunteers to share challenges and solutions

4. Innovation & Future Planning

- Invest in leadership development to prepare the next generation of museum professionals
- Use data and feedback to continually refine support strategies for staff and volunteers

2. Managing Collections

The size, scope, and scale of museum collections across Northern Ireland represent a rich and diverse tapestry of cultural, historical, and scientific heritage. Understanding the full extent of these collections through comprehensive data gathering and analysis is essential for informed decision-making around conservation priorities, public access, digitisation strategies, and resource allocation. This data-driven approach enables institutions to identify gaps, highlight strengths, and plan for sustainable growth.

Equally vital is the role of data in collections management, where accurate, up-to-date information underpins every aspect of stewardship from cataloguing and condition reporting to loans, storage, and risk assessment. Robust data systems enhance transparency, support compliance with ethical and legal standards, and enable institutions to respond swiftly to emerging challenges. By investing in digital infrastructure and training, museums can unlock the full potential of their collections, ensuring they are well-managed, accessible, and resilient for future generations.

The Size of Collections in Northern Ireland's Local Museums
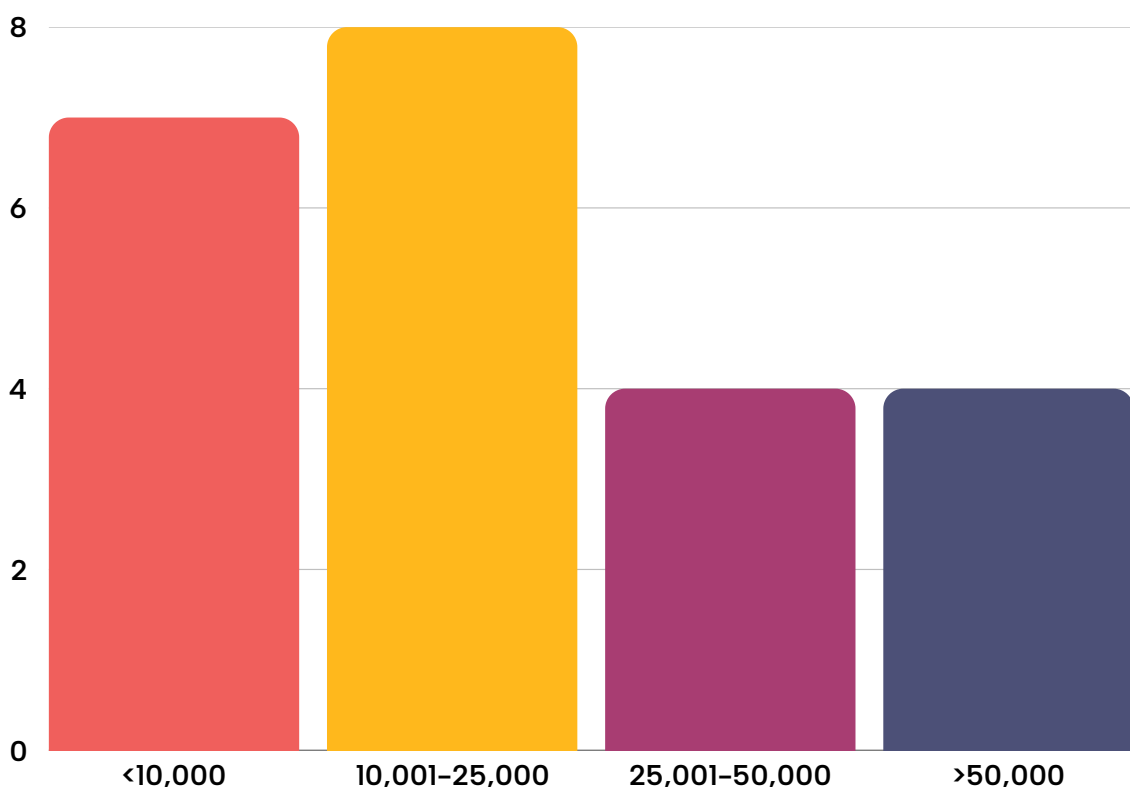
Based on responses from 23 participating institutions, a clear picture emerges of the remarkable size, scope, and scale of museum collections across Northern Ireland. Collectively, these museums steward hundreds of thousands of artefacts and archival materials, reflecting the depth and diversity of the region's cultural heritage. This data provides a vital foundation for strategic planning, resource allocation, and sector–wide initiatives aimed at enhancing access, preservation, and public engagement.

% Digitised

Digitisation continues to pose significant challenges for museums, particularly under current resource constraints. Limited funding, staffing, and technical infrastructure often hinder the ability to systematically digitise collections at scale. As a result, many institutions struggle to meet growing public expectations for digital access, preservation, and engagement. Addressing these barriers is essential to unlocking the full potential of collections and ensuring their relevance in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

81–100%
13%

None
8.7%

61–80%
4.3%

1–20%
43.5%

21–40%
30.4%
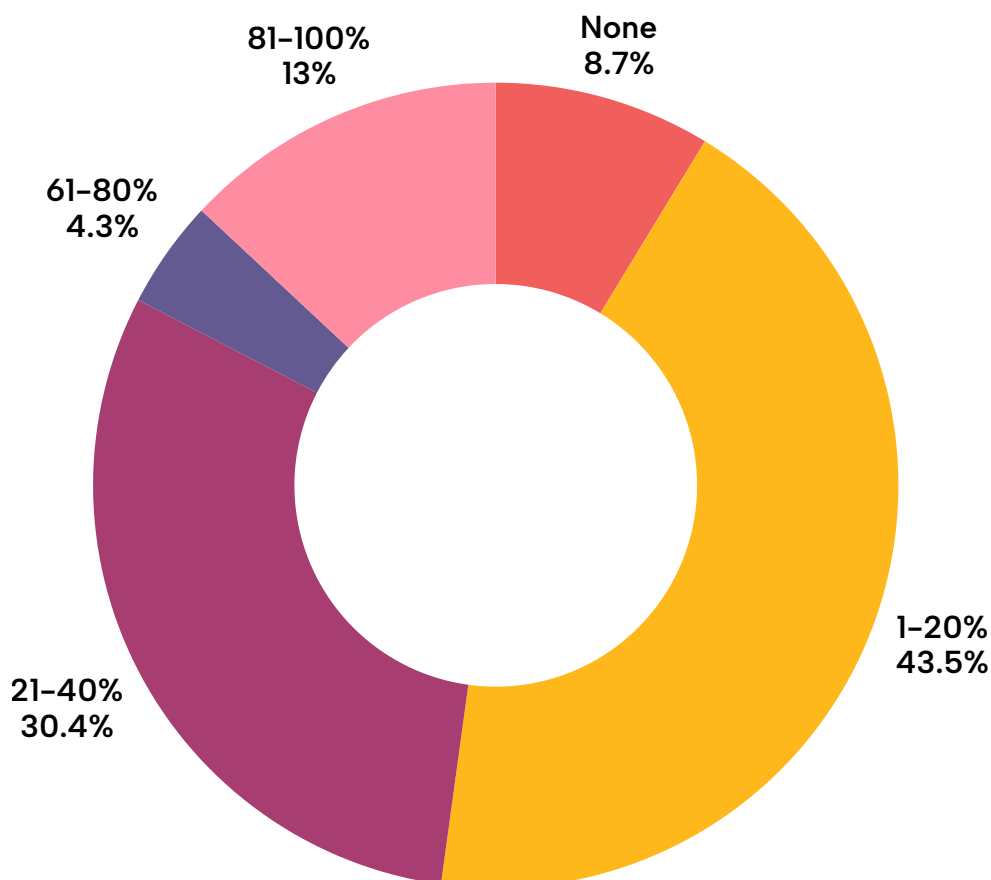
New Acquisitions and Disposals

Museums are continually acquiring new items for their collections. This is primarily done through donations, but purchasing artefacts does take place, especially when museums have an acquisition budget.

Museums only ever dispose of a small number of items from their collections. Disposal has an important role in collections management, but policies and procedures are strictly followed if an item leaves the collection for any reason.

Deaccessioned
0.3%

Purchased
18.8%

Gifted
80.9%
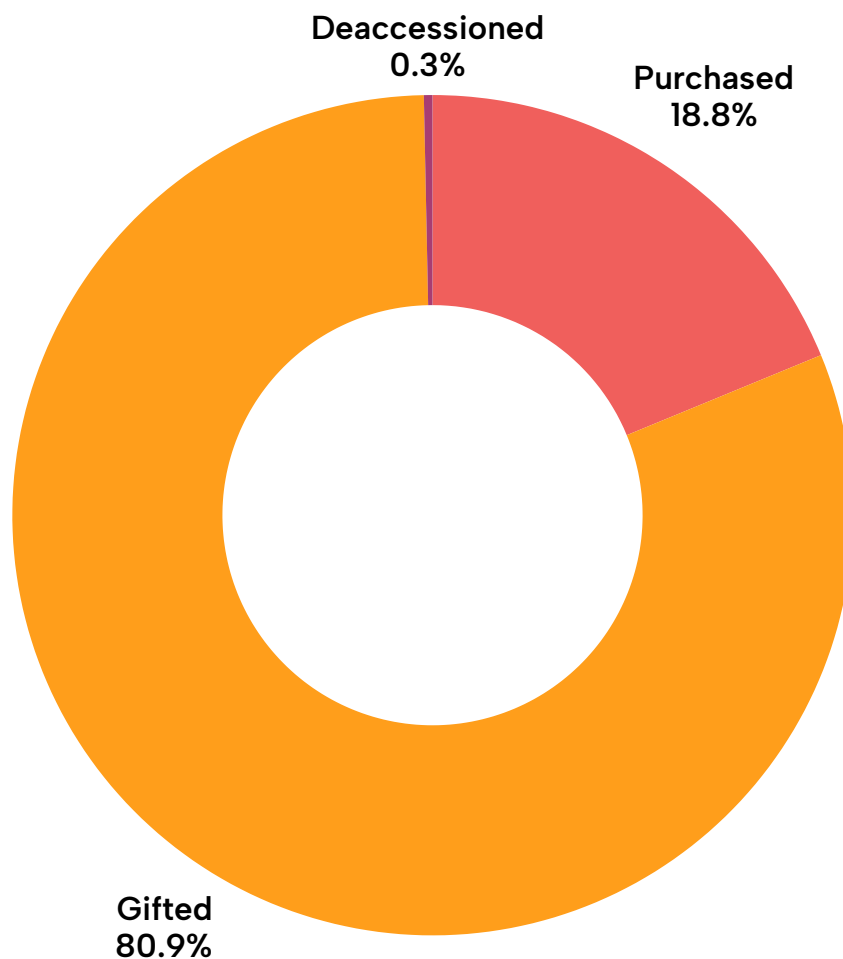
Loans

Museum loans play a vital role in expanding public access to collections, fostering collaboration, and enriching interpretation. By lending and borrowing objects, institutions can tell more inclusive and dynamic stories, support research, and reach new audiences. Loans also allow museums to showcase rare or regionally significant items that might otherwise remain in storage, maximizing the public benefit of collections.

However, the process is not without its challenges. Loans require meticulous planning, documentation, and coordination. Institutions must navigate complex logistics such as transport, insurance, conservation requirements, and legal agreements. Resource constraints can make it difficult to manage loans efficiently, particularly for smaller museums. Long-term loans also raise concerns around object care, provenance clarity, and sustainability, especially when lending to non-museum venues.

Despite these hurdles, well-managed loans are a powerful tool for cultural exchange and sector-wide impact. As the Museums Association puts it, "borrowing and lending are the lifeblood of our exhibition and outreach programmes".
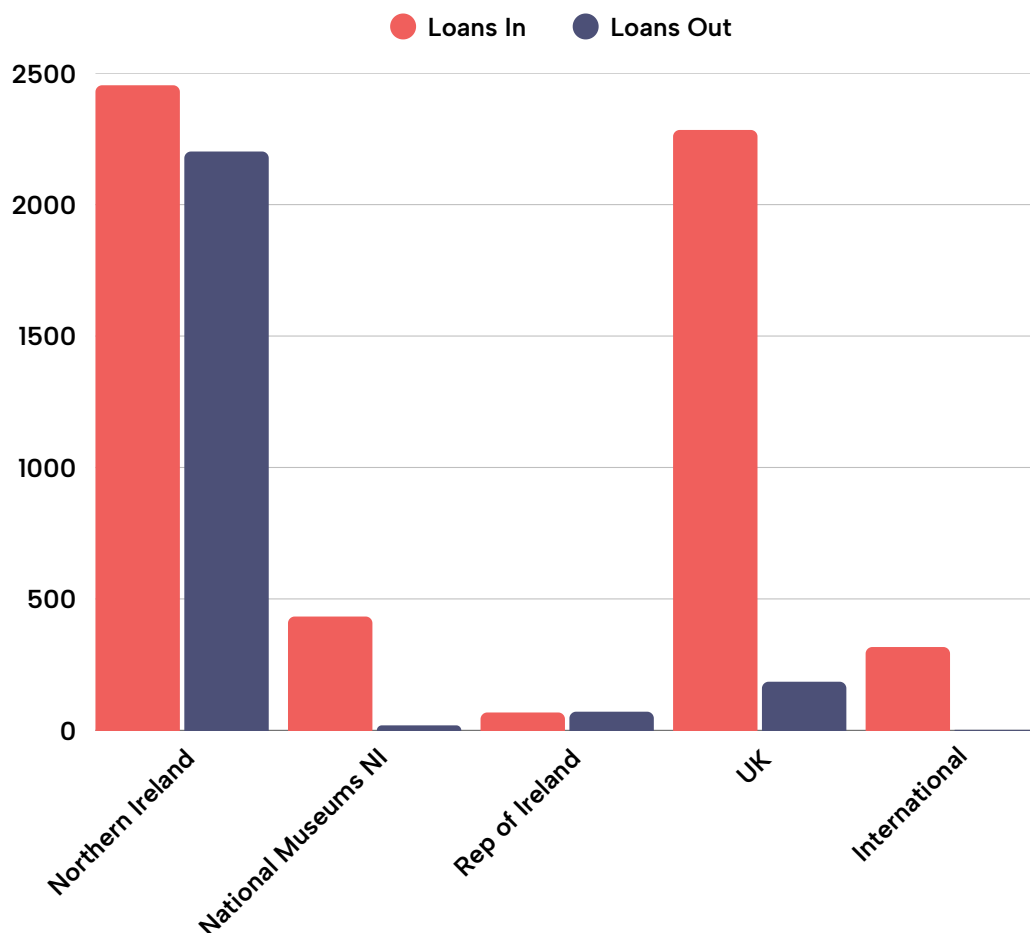
Collections Management

Collections management refers to the comprehensive process of overseeing, documenting, preserving, and making accessible the objects held within a museum, archive, or cultural institution. It ensures that every item from artefacts and artworks to archival materials is properly cared for, accurately recorded, and strategically used to support the institution's mission.

The figures presented in the accompanying charts in this section are based on data submitted directly by individual museums. These numbers have not been independently audited or verified and should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive. As part of the data collection process, museums were also asked to self-assess their current level of development in key areas, providing valuable insight into sector-wide capacity, challenges, and opportunities.

The key areas included in the survey were:

- Documentation
- Environmental Monitoring and Control
- Housekeeping and Collections Care
- Security and risk assessment
- Storage

At the conclusion of each section, the collective strengths and weaknesses identified across the survey responses were analysed and grouped to provide a sector-wide overview.

This was followed by a targeted assessment of potential actions that NIMC could take to address identified gaps, support capacity-building, and guide the sector toward best practice where needed. These recommendations are designed to be both responsive and strategic, ensuring that future initiatives are informed by real-world challenges and opportunities.

Documentation
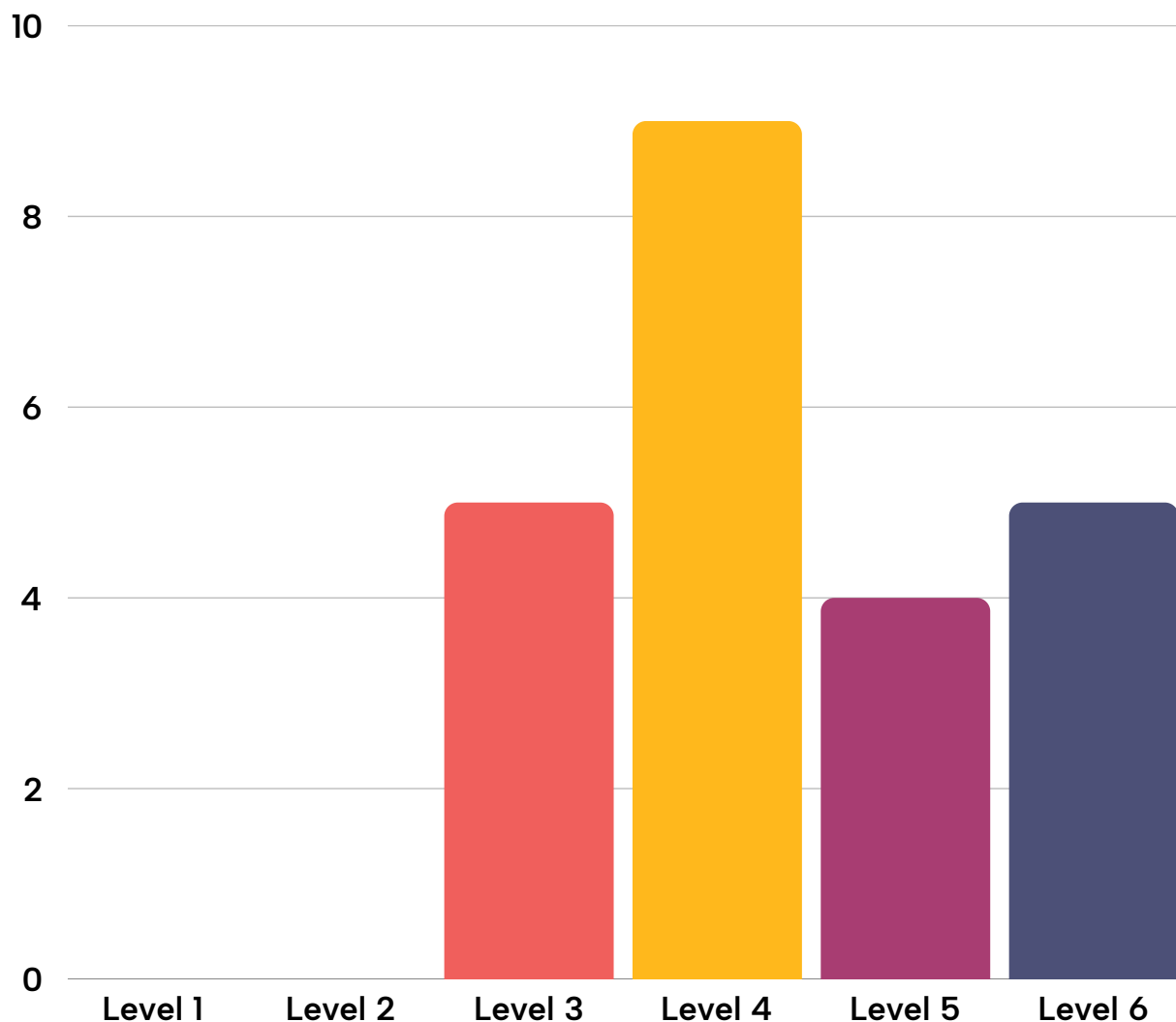
Level 1 Basic inventory of objects

Level 2 Basic understanding of documentation (some SPECTRUM procedures in use e.g., marking & labelling, entry records) Awareness of major backlogs

Level 3 As above, plus: Core SPECTRUM in use (requirements for Accreditation) Staff trained in SPECTRUM procedures. Plan to address documentation backlog, with allocated budget and staff time

Level 4 As above, plus: Documentation procedural manual. New acquisition records kept up to date. Retrospective documentation at least 60% complete or if there is not a major backlog. All provenance and process information (e.g., conservation) correlated to accession information. Annual targets in documentation backlog plan are set and met.

Level 5 As above, plus: Annual targets in Documentation backlog plan are met. Materials and storage methods used for records are designed for long–term preservation. Wide range of SPECTRUM in use. Retrospective documentation at least 80% complete or if there is not a major backlog.

Level 6 As above, plus: All 20 SPECTRUM procedures followed where appropriate. Full and complete documentation. Documentation systems and software regularly reviewed.

The responses indicate that museums are meeting the documentation requirements for accreditation. This ensures the importance of the preservation of knowledge, provenance and ownership is recognised and acted upon. This helps museums to comply with collections management standards which promotes transparency and accountability.

Good documentation helps museums understand the scope and strengths of their collections which informs strategic planning decisions about acquisitions, storage needs, and resource allocation.

Strengths:
- All museums have the core SPECTRUM procedures in place
- All museums have policies and procedures in place and staff are trained to implement them
- Five museums have achieved full documentation, and the others have plans in place to complete backlogs
- Some digitisation is in place

Weaknesses:
- Not all collections are documented 100%
- Most museums do not have a dedicated Documentation Officer, so the responsibility falls within the job description of other staff
- Database upgrades or new technology could impact documentation levels
- New staff need to be trained
- Not enough digitisation of collections which can be used to grant public access rather than for documentation purposes

To upgrade all of our museums to achieve Level Six, NIMC must look at the following improvements for the sector.

1. Staff Training & Capacity Building

- Ensure ongoing professional development in documentation standards and software.

2. Documentation Systems & Software

- Support the sector to use robust, scalable documentation software that supports all SPECTRUM procedures.

3. Retrospective Documentation

- Explore funding that could allow museums to allocate dedicated staff time and budget to complete retrospective documentation.
- Develop case studies around documentation issues as well as those around museums' that no longer have a backlog.

4. Record Preservation & Storage

- Supply grants for the purchase and use of archival-quality materials for storing physical records.
- Explore funding projects which promote digitising records programmes which include secure digital backups.
- Supply grants which help maintain environmentally controlled storage for physical documentation records.

Environmental Monitoring and Control
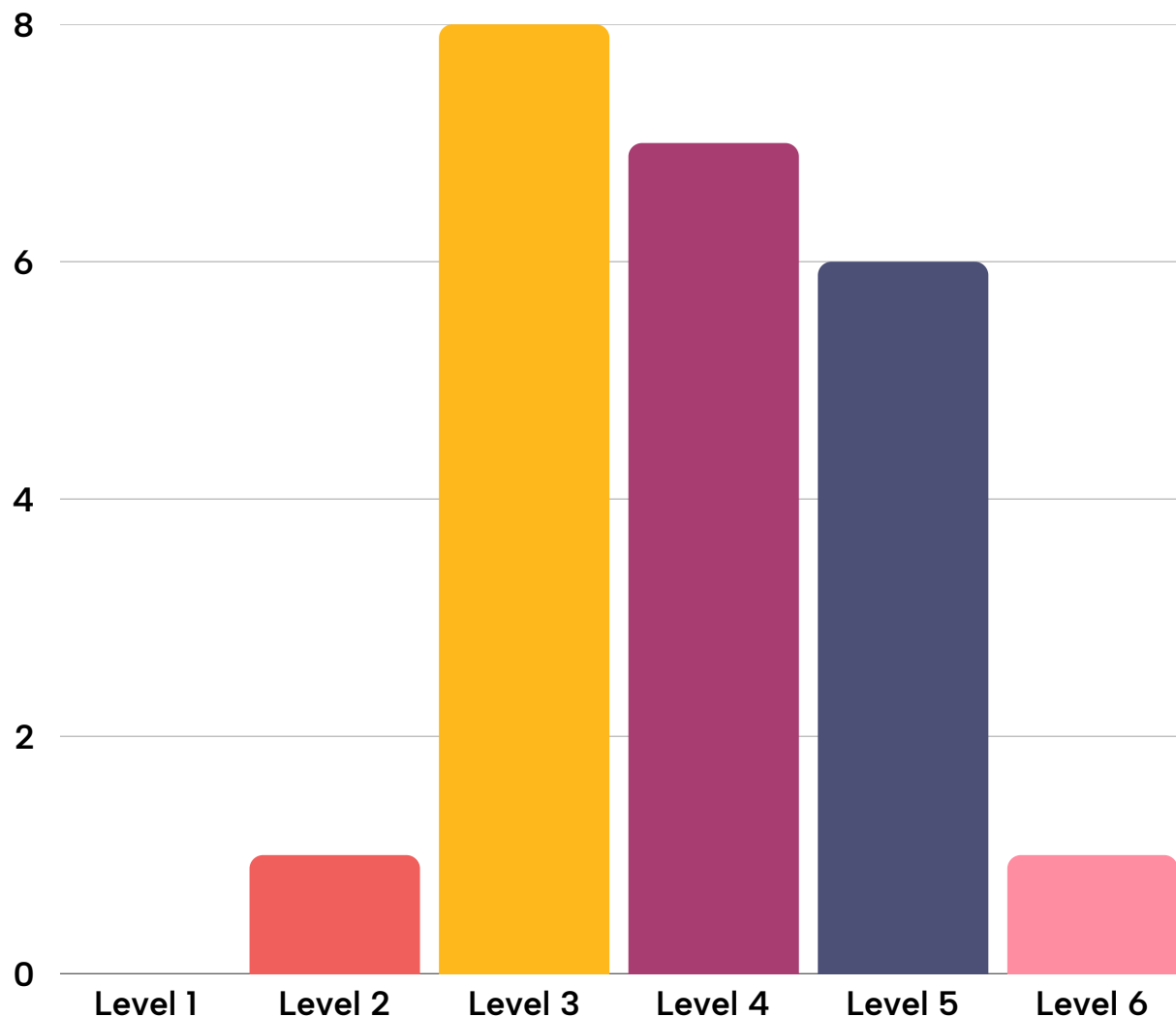
Level 1 Awareness of preservation of collections as a basic function of museums.

Level 2 Basic knowledge of the environmental factors that can damage museum objects. Monitoring of some of these factors / occasional monitoring. Measures taken to prevent severe damage.

Level 3 As above, plus: Basic understanding of museum environmental issues. Basic monitoring and recording of relative humidity, temperature, lux and UV levels. Monitoring equipment stored and calibrated appropriately.

Level 4 As above, plus: Continuous monitoring devices used in parts of the museum. Data recorded with associated information e.g., outside weather conditions. Control maintained 50% of the time. Conditions required for specialist collections identified.

Level 5 As above, plus: Full monitoring programme for stores and galleries. Records routinely interpreted.

Level 6 As above, plus: Monitoring programme has planned reviews and upgrades e.g., use of pollutant monitors. Data informs planning and budgets. Control maintained 90% of the time. Assessment of potential pollution risks and spot checks.

The responses indicate that, with the exception of one museum at Level 2, the majority of museums demonstrate a solid understanding of the importance of environmental monitoring and control. Most are operating at or above the basic standard, providing a strong foundation for NIMC to establish a baseline. This baseline can be built upon through targeted awareness campaigns, staff training, and strategic investment.

Strengths:
- Museums are actively using monitoring systems and, where possible, responding to the data collected.
- Regular calibration and replacement of monitoring equipment is taking place.
- Staff training is being undertaken to support environmental management.

Weaknesses:
- Some museums still rely on manual checks, limiting the consistency and reliability of monitoring.
- Existing equipment is often outdated or prone to failure, with upgrades hindered by procurement rules or contract limitations.
- Off-site stores are not monitored to the same standard as main sites.
- Budget constraints and limited staff capacity restrict the ability to implement improvements or respond to issues promptly.

In order to upgrade all of our museums to achieve Level Six, NIMC must look at the following improvements for the sector.

1. Upgrade to Continuous, Integrated Monitoring Systems
- Audit the sector to see if museums have fully implemented remote, continuous monitoring across all galleries and stores which includes light, humidity, temperature and pollutants.
- Grant programme to include the purchasing of new equipment such as meters and monitors or the replacement of outdated or failing equipment with reliable, automated systems.

## 2. Improve Environmental Control
- Grant programme to include upgrading or replacing items such as air handling units or dehumidifiers where needed.

3. Build Staff Capacity
- Training and case studies on the use of monitoring data to inform strategic planning, budgeting, and risk assessments.
- Training in environmental monitoring and collections care standards.

Housekeeping and Collections Care
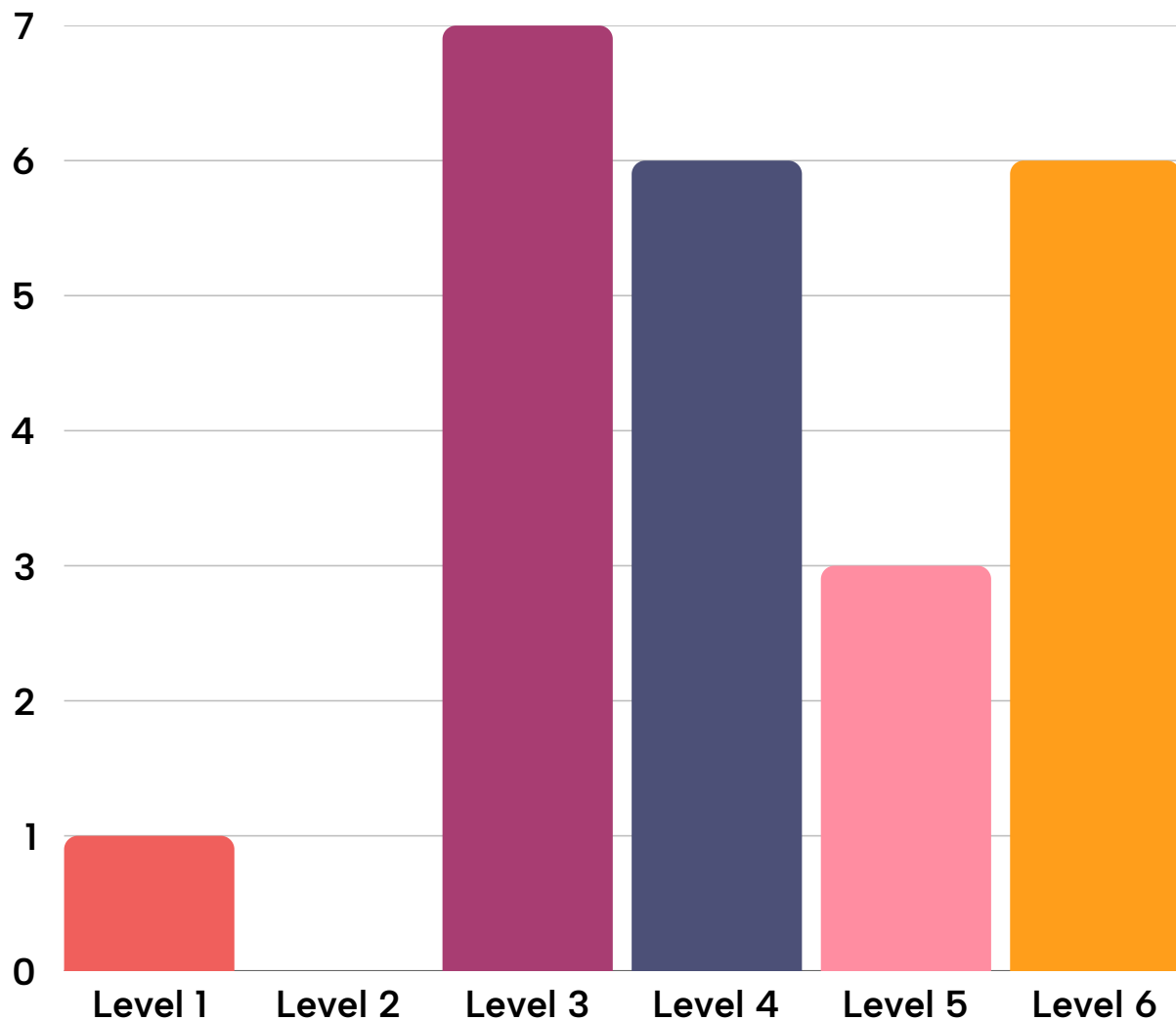
Level 1 Some cleaning of spaces or objects.
Level 2 Regular cleaning, primarily of public spaces. (– at least 'quarterly') Occasional inspection for well–known pests e.g., woodworm. Some understanding of handling objects.
Level 3 As above, plus: Regular cleaning, including dead spaces. (– public spaces, corridors/offices at least 'monthly') Appropriate cleaning of objects. Knowledge of museum pests and how to spot their presence. Objects entering the building inspected for any signs of infestation. Staff trained in object handling.
Level 4 As above, plus: Regular cleaning programme. (– all three areas should be cleaned) Staff trained in basic object cleaning following specialist advice from a conservator. Member of staff has responsibility for a pest monitoring programme.
Level 5 As above, plus: Integrated cleaning/care programme. Objects requiring special care when being handled or moved are physically identified (label, box etc). Isolation area to house all items entering the building prior to investigation for pest infestation.
Level 6 As above, plus: Integrated housekeeping and pest management programme. Handling of objects undertaken in accordance with prevailing standards.

The responses indicate that, apart from one museum at Level 1, the majority of museums demonstrate a solid understanding of the importance of housekeeping and collections care. Most are operating at or above the basic standard, providing a strong foundation for the Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC) to establish a baseline. This baseline can be built upon through targeted awareness campaigns, staff training, and strategic investment.

Strengths:
- Daily cleaning of public spaces and galleries is common, and some museums have weekly or regular cleaning schedules for stores and objects.
- Regular pest checks are in place, often weekly or monthly and some museums engage external pest control specialists.
- Object handling procedures are widespread.
- Specialist advice from Conservators is sought when required.

Weaknesses:
- Routine object cleaning has ceased in some museums due to capacity and cleaning of stores is often done only on request or irregularly.
- Not all museums have a fully established cleaning programme.
- Limited budget restrict the ability to hire dedicated staff or specialists, and some museums acknowledge they cannot provide more than the current level of care.
- Dependence on external pest control or conservators may delay response times or limit internal capacity building.

To upgrade all of our museums to achieve Level Six, NIMC must look at the following improvements for the sector.

1. Training, advice, case studies and grants on the following areas:

- Housekeeping and pest management programmes.
- Object Handling including appropriate personal protection equipment and documentation procedures.
- Isolation/Quarantine Areas including inspection, documentation, and treatment of new acquisitions before they enter collection areas.
- Identification and Labelling objects requiring special handling or potential hazards.

Security and Risk Assessment

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
0	0	2	5	10	6
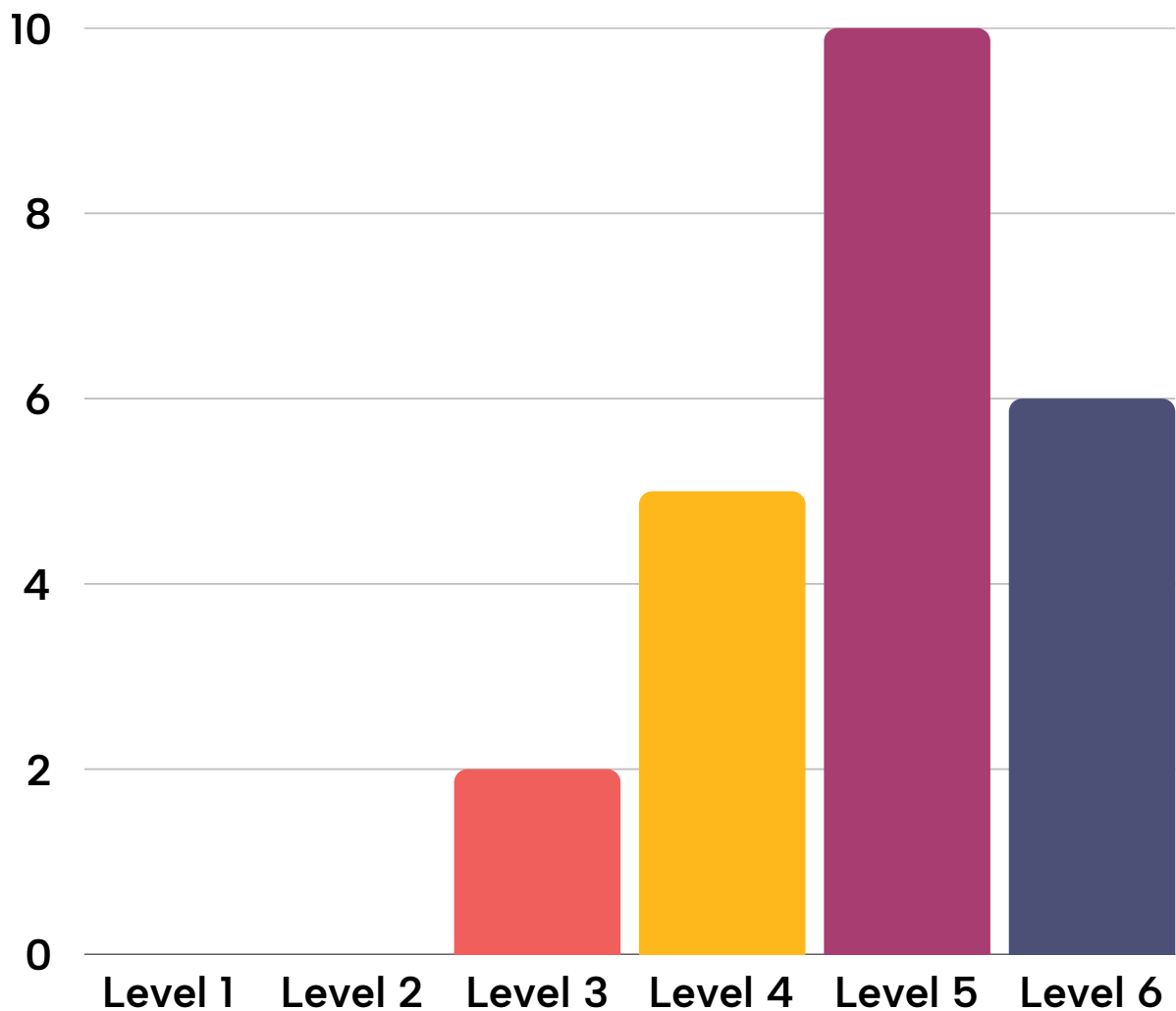
Level 1 Very basic security measures in place.

Level 2 Doors and windows locked and secured. Obvious security risks addressed. Some understanding of need to identify risks to property, collections, and personnel, and to access their probability.

Level 3 As above, plus: Appropriate physical and alarm measures in place. Internal risk assessment carried out. The need for emergency planning identified within museum policy documents. Emergency response phone list in place.

Level 4 As above, plus: Expert advice received on improvements to security. Plan for improvements to security costed and timetabled. Work in progress on Emergency Plan (some elements in place) or if the Emergency Plan is already in place.

Level 5 As above, plus: Emergency Plan in place. Regular risk assessment carried out routinely. Improvements to security in progress, with budget.

Level 6 As above, plus: Emergency Plan reviewed annually. Rehearsals carried out and regular training undertaken by all staff. All security recommendations in place.

This distribution reflects a sector that has largely moved beyond basic security measures, with most institutions operating at Level 4 or above. While a majority have established Emergency Plans and are actively improving security, only a smaller cohort has fully embedded rehearsals and staff training highlighting a key area for future development and support.

Strengths
- Accredited Security Systems in place in several museums.
- Regular Emergency Plan Reviews.
- Professional Security Assessments have been undertaken.
- Routine Safety Checks are undertaken.
- Commitment to Improvement and upgrades.

Weaknesses
- Lack of Rehearsals.
- Inconsistent Training.
- Emergency Plans still under development in some museums.
- Resource Limitations.
- Delayed Implementation of recommendations due to lack of resource.

To upgrade all of our museums to achieve Level Six, NIMC must look at the following improvements for the sector.

1. Deliver Sector-Wide Training Programmes and Case Studies
- Offer coordinated training in emergency response, risk assessment, and security protocols to build capacity.
- Share examples of high-standard emergency procedures and successful security upgrades to encourage peer learning and sector improvement.

2. Support Emergency Plan Development and Review
- Provide guidance and templates to help museums update or redevelop emergency and salvage plans, with annual review benchmarks.

3. Facilitate Access to Professional Security Assessments
- Create a funding stream or partnership model to enable institutions to commission expert security reviews and implement recommendations.

Storage
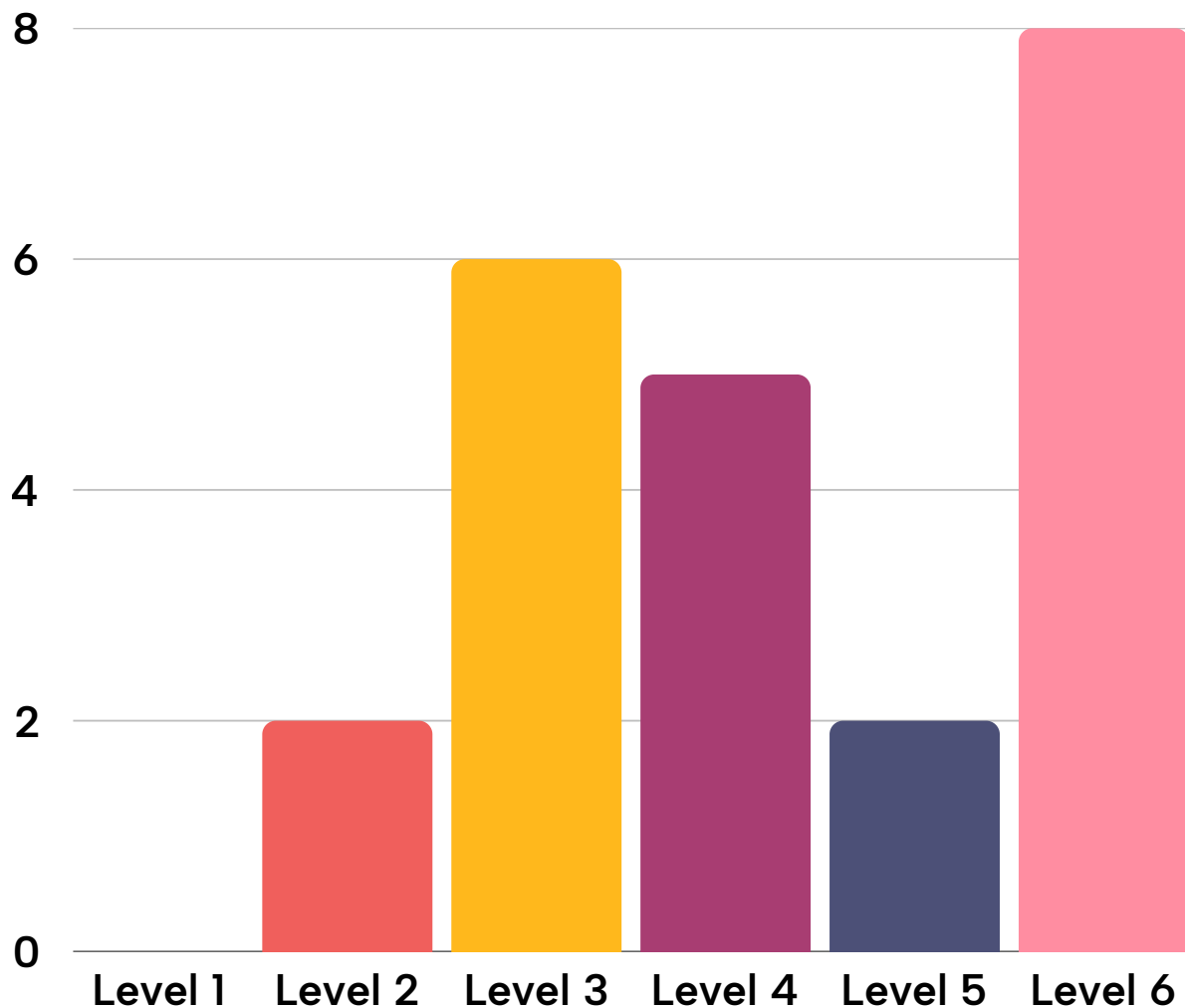
Level 1 Recognition of the need to find long-term storage for objects not on display.

Level 2 Security for storage area. Museum objects not stored with potentially damaging items e.g., cleaning materials. Some use of boxes, racking etc to avoid damage to objects. (0–25%) Awareness of problems or hazards.

Level 3 As above, plus: Store organised (planned approach to physical layout & visual identification marks), allowing safe access to objects. Conservation–grade packing for vulnerable objects. Simple environmental monitoring and control – e.g., daylight excluded, protection from dust. Controlled access. Objects stored in boxes or on racks (26–50%)

Level 4 As above, plus: Conservation–grade packing used throughout (& pallets for large objects). Store included in cleaning programme. Regular/random condition / pest checks. Objects stored in boxes or on racks (51–75%)

Level 5 As above, plus: Well organised and sufficient for current collection. Store location records and plan & well marked boxes so that individual objects are easily retrievable. Objects not stored on floors or in aisles. Integrating housekeeping/collection care plan involving systematic condition checks. Member of staff has responsibility for store.

Level 6 As above, plus: Materials used for store furniture and fitting out are inert. Objects stored in boxes or on racks (76– 100%) Storage areas covered by collections care plans and systems e.g., monitoring, security, cleaning.

The responses indicate that apart from two museums at Level 2, the majority demonstrate a solid understanding of the importance of looking after their collections held in stores. Most are operating at or above the basic standard, providing a strong foundation for the Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC) to establish a baseline. This baseline can be built upon through targeted awareness campaigns, staff training, and strategic investment.

Strengths:
- Many comments acknowledge current limitations (e.g., pest management, dissociation of objects, potential water ingress), which shows transparency and a willingness to improve.
- Many museums commented on improvements such as reorganisation and repackaging projects, new archival store creation, conservation plans and audits and plans for new general store and centralised storage.
- Locked access and limited staff access are noted, which aligns with best practices for secure storage.
- Comments mention museum-grade storage furniture, tiled floors, and appropriate packaging, which are positive indicators of care.

Weaknesses:
- Several comments admit to not fully meeting criteria for higher levels (e.g., not all objects boxed, not all conservation-grade packing used).
- Water ingress, non-inert shelving, and basement storage are significant risks that need addressing.
- Overcrowded stores and lack of space are recurring issues, which can compromise object safety and accessibility.

In order to upgrade all of our museums to achieve Level Six, NIMC must look at the following actions to benefit the sector.

1. Risk Management & Benchmarking
- Provide training, case studies and grants focusing on storage risks, mitigations and preventive conservation.

2. Compliance & Capacity Building
- Create tiered roadmaps with shared resources where possible.
- Explore and highlight best practice and the possibilities around centralised storage hubs.

3. Recognition & Sector Progress
- Highlight success stories of stores meeting/exceeding standards.
- Track and publish progress metrics to showcase sector-wide improvement.

3. Users and their Experiences

Education and Outreach in our Museums

Museums are dynamic spaces for learning, engagement, and community building. Through education and outreach, museums fulfil their mission to make knowledge accessible, foster curiosity, and connect people with culture, history, science, and the arts. These functions are essential in ensuring that museums remain relevant and impactful in the lives of diverse audiences.

Due to variances in the methods and times that museums gather their data, it proved challenging to compile a complete overview of users and their experiences in the sector during the specified timeframe.

The figures presented in the accompanying charts int his section are based on data submitted directly by individual museums. These numbers have not been independently audited or verified and should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive. As part of the data collection process, museums were also asked to self-assess their current level of development in key areas, providing valuable insight into sector-wide capacity, challenges, and opportunities.

Museum Education: Fostering Lifelong Learning

Museum education plays a vital role in supporting both formal and informal learning. Many museums design their educational programs to align with the national curriculum through workshops, guided tours, and study materials that complement classroom instruction. These programs provide students with experiential learning opportunities that deepen their understanding of subjects ranging from history and science to art and social studies.

Importantly, museum education is not limited to school-aged children. It encompasses a wide range of audiences, including early learners, adults, and older adults. By offering age-appropriate and inclusive programming, museums cater to different learning styles and abilities, promoting lifelong learning for all.

Interactive and hands-on experiences are central to effective museum education. Whether through role-playing, artifact handling, or digital media, these activities engage visitors in active learning. Moreover, museums often evaluate their educational offerings through feedback and assessments, ensuring that programmes remain relevant, effective, and responsive to the needs of learners.

Museum Outreach: Building Community Connections

Outreach extends the museum's reach beyond its physical walls, bringing its resources and expertise into the broader community. This can take many forms, including offsite events, mobile exhibitions, and partnerships with schools, libraries, and community centres. Through outreach, museums engage with audiences who may not otherwise have access to cultural and educational experiences.

Digital outreach has become increasingly important, especially in the wake of global shifts toward online learning. Virtual tours, online workshops, and educational resources on museum websites allow people to engage with museum content from anywhere in the world. Social media platforms also serve as powerful tools for outreach, enabling museums to share stories, promote events, and interact with the public in real time.

Collaboration is a cornerstone of successful outreach. Museums often partner with educational institutions, cultural organizations, and government agencies to co-create programs and initiatives. These partnerships enhance the museum's impact and foster a sense of shared ownership and community involvement.

The Broader Impact

The combined efforts of education and outreach have a profound impact on individuals and communities. Museums promote cultural awareness and appreciation by exposing visitors to diverse histories, perspectives, and artistic expressions. They also serve as spaces for dialogue, reflection, and civic engagement, helping to build more informed and connected communities.

Furthermore, by supporting formal education and offering informal learning opportunities, museums contribute to the development of critical thinking, creativity, and empathy. These are essential skills in today's complex and interconnected world.
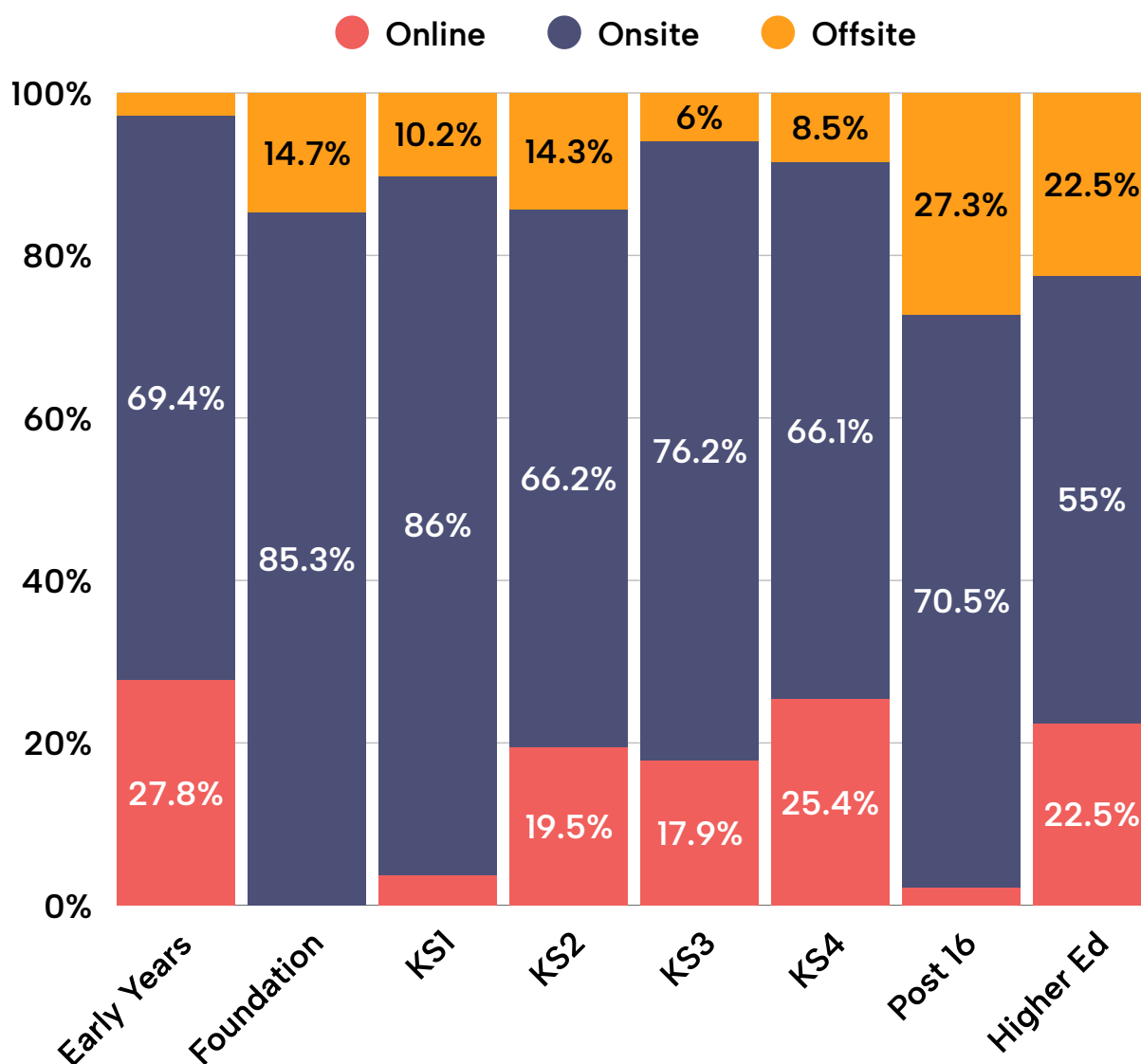
Museum education and outreach are fundamental to the mission of museums as institutions of public service. They transform museums into vibrant learning environments that inspire curiosity, foster understanding, and strengthen community ties. As museums continue to evolve, their commitment to education and outreach will remain central to their role as catalysts for knowledge, inclusion, and social change.

Museum Trends shows a snapshot of the audiences our museums welcomed through learning and outreach programmes during 2022/2023. With regard to learning and outreach the numbers overall are as follows–
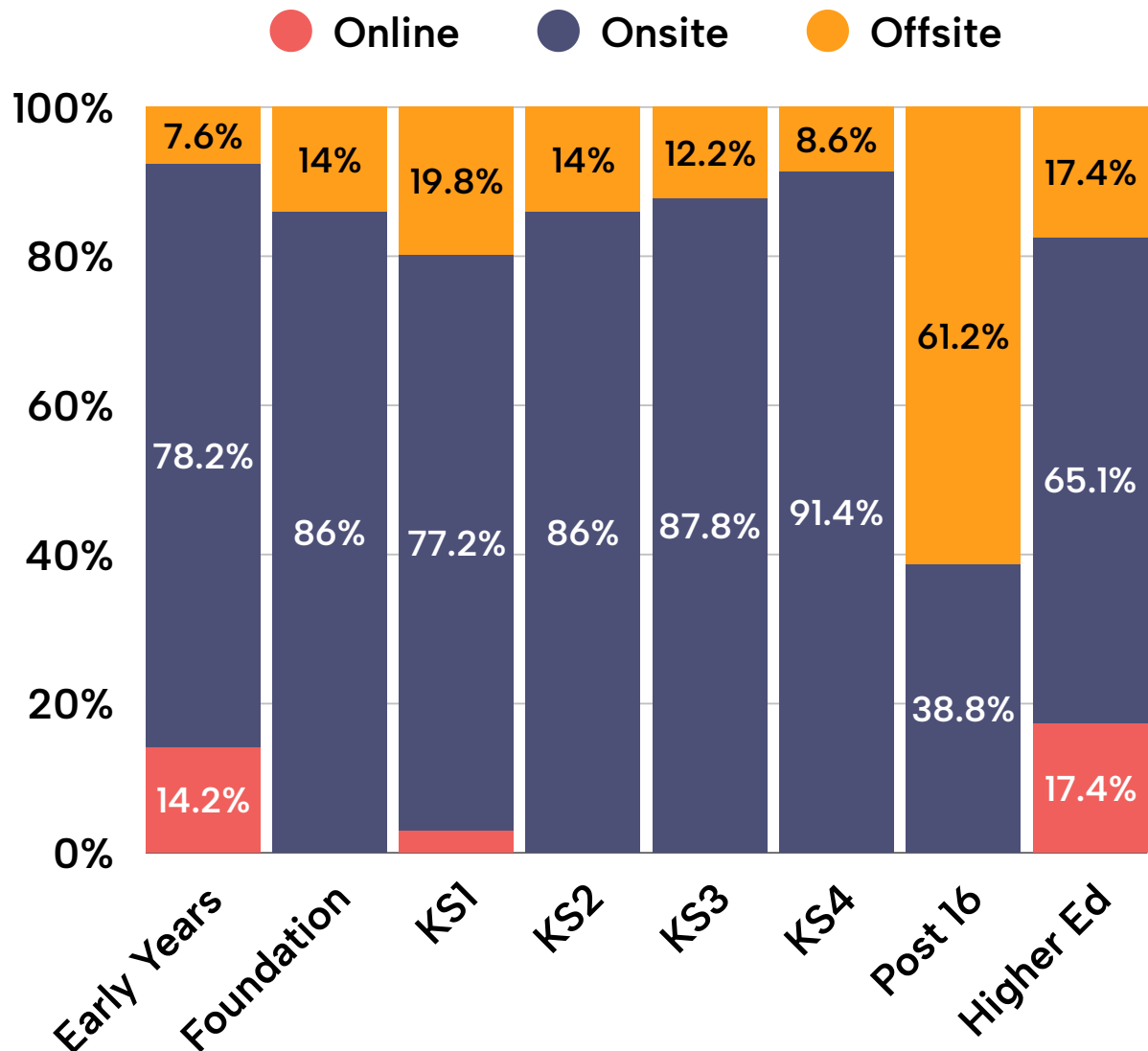
- Over 29,000 formal education visits from early years to university level.
- 1,149 informal learning events online, offsite or within our local museums.
- Over 500 young people from outside Northern Ireland participated in formal learning visits.

With regards to the cost for these programmes, just over half of the respondent's costs stayed the same, 34% did not charge and 13% increased costs. The impact this had on formal learning participant numbers was that 78% stayed the same and 17% increased their numbers.

Events Linked to the Curriculum

Participants linked to the Curriculum

Legend: Online (red), Onsite (dark blue), Offsite (orange)

| Category	Online	Onsite	Offsite
Early Years	14.2%	78.2%	7.6%
Foundation		86%	14%
KS1		77.2%	19.8%
KS2		86%	14%
KS3		87.8%	12.2%
KS4		91.4%	8.6%
Post 16		38.8%	61.2%
Higher Ed	17.4%	65.1%	17.4%

In total there were 121 events online with 685 participants. It is worth noting that numbers were not kept for KS2, KS3, KS4 and Post 16 so not included in the chart.

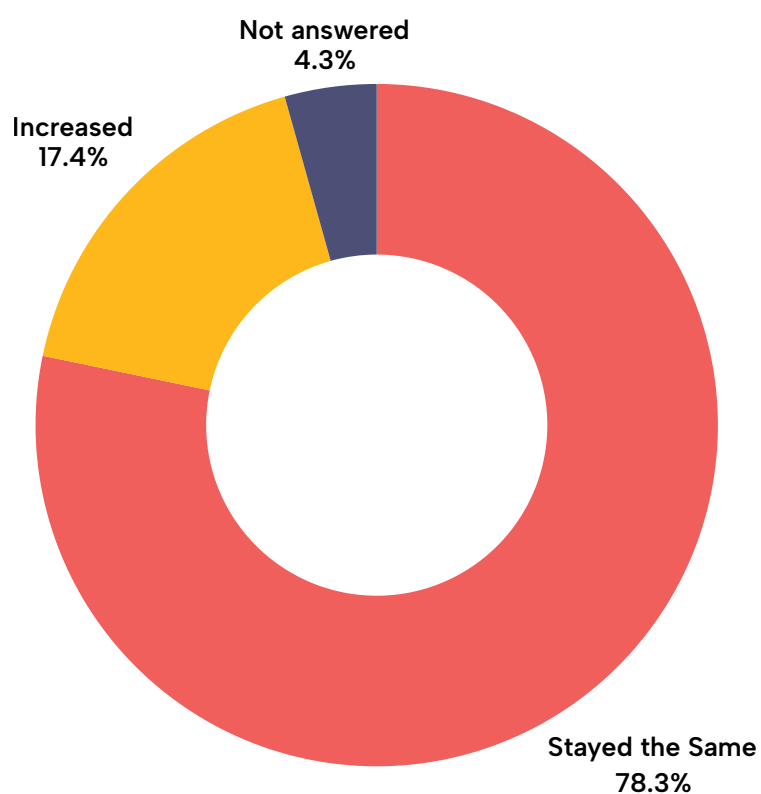There were 707 events held in museums with 23,457 participants.

There were 116 events held off site (i.e. schools, afterschool clubs) for 4,865 participants.

There were 13 formal education visits from outside Northern Ireland. Four from the Republic of Ireland, 3 from USA, 3 from Great Britain, 2 from Canada and 1 from the Netherlands.
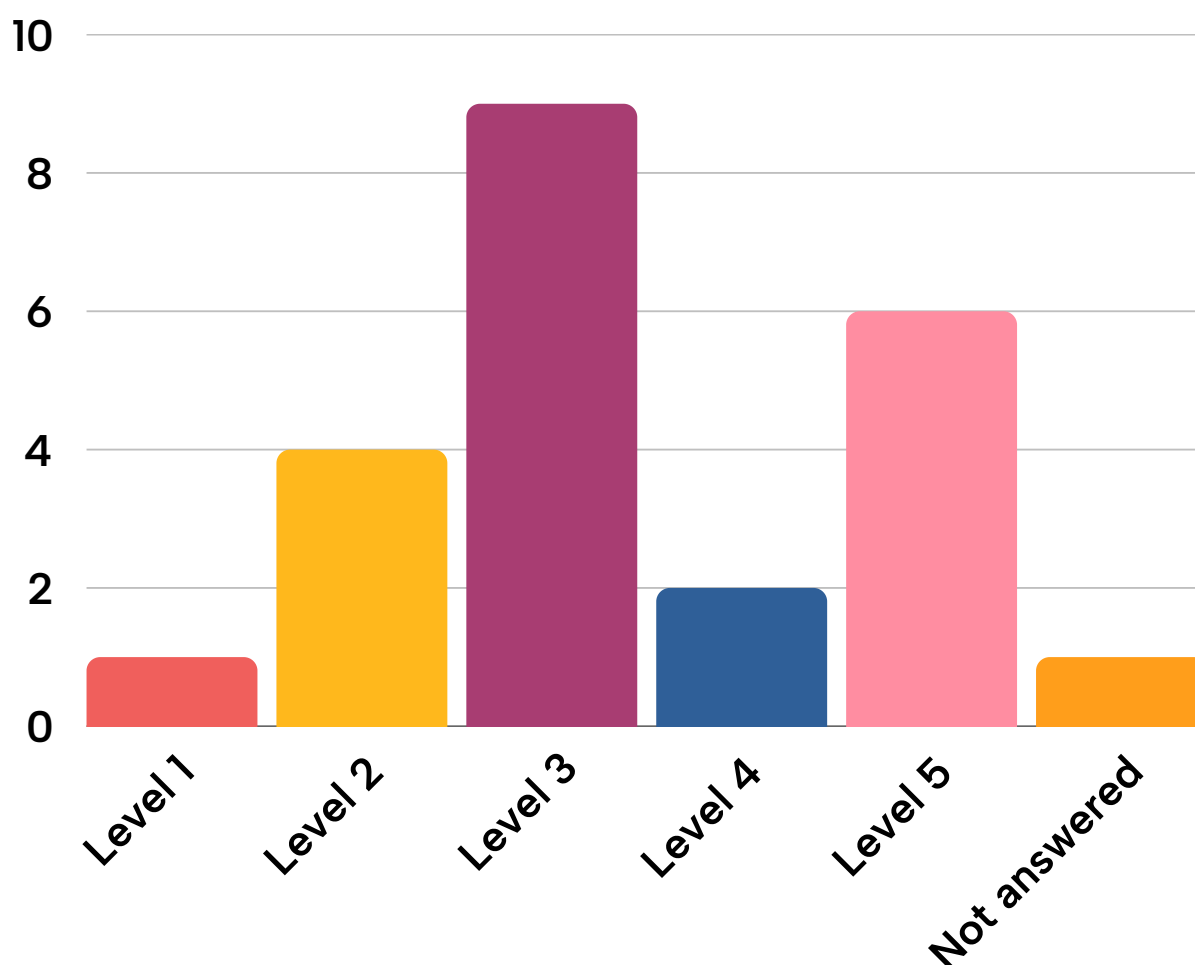
Did the costs of any of your formal learning programmes in 2022–23:

Increase
13%

Stayed the Same
52.2%

No charge applied
34.8%
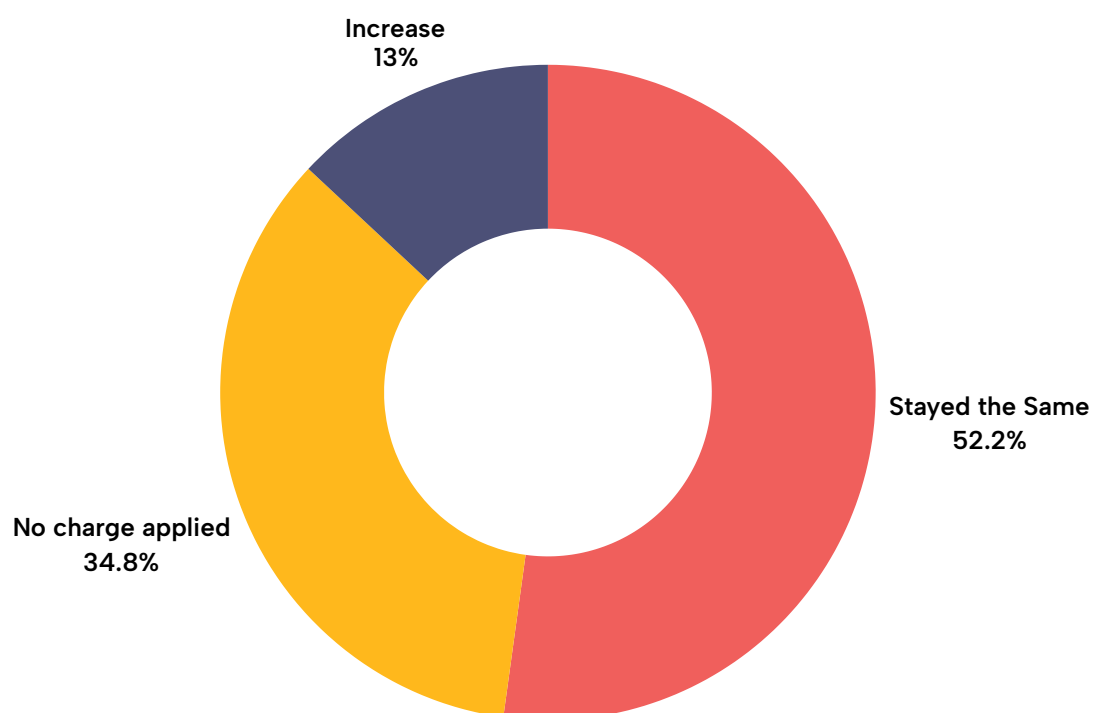
What impact did this have on formal learning participant numbers?

Not answered
4.3%

Increased
17.4%

Stayed the Same
78.3%

Statement level that best reflects the learning programme in place at your museum during 2022–23:

Level 1 No learning staff. No understanding of the NI curriculum. Requests from formal education sector could not be catered for.

Level 2 Formal learners were not actively targeted, but groups made independent visits. The museum has some understanding of the NI Curriculum. At least one of the following are available: 1. Electronic media including website; 2. Self–Guided tours, 3. Onsite activities including dress up stations/reading corners

Level 3 There is a designated member of staff who takes bookings and runs tours. All learning offers adhere to the NI curriculum. As well as the above, the following are also provided: 1. Facilitated workshops onsite; 2. Guided tours; 3. Study packs or worksheets.

Level 4 Programme of direct sessions catering for a wide range of ages, abilities, and learning styles. All sessions are evaluated. At least two of the following are also offered: 1. Loan Boxes, 2. Online learning resources, 3. Online videos, 4. Teachers packs, 5. Virtual Workshops, 6. Offsite Facilitated Workshops.

Level 5 As above plus. The designated member of staff from the museum has undertaken training to develop their knowledge and/or skills. Formal learning users are consulted prior to the development of any new resources or sessions. All new sessions/materials are piloted, and evaluation is carried out in house and/or externally. The museum actively seeks to participate in external festivals and events that appeal to formal learners.

An analysis of the responses given from each museum to clarify why they chose the level they did was undertaken. A condensed overview is listed below.

Strengths
- Majority of museums offer learning experiences that adhere to the NI curriculum, showing a strong commitment to formal education standards.
- Most museums have designated staff managing bookings and delivering educational content, which supports consistency and quality.
- Many museums offer a wide range of resources including facilitated workshops, online learning tools, study packs and loan boxes and virtual workshops.
- A smaller number of museums are piloting new materials, conducting evaluations, consulting formal learners during development and participating in external events and festivals.

Weaknesses
- Staffing Gaps– several museums lack dedicated learning staff or volunteers.
- Space Constraints– some museums cite lack of dedicated space as a barrier.
- Limited Engagement due to lack of resources for some museums.
- Underutilization of Evaluation.

In order to upgrade all of our museums to achieve Level Six, NIMC must look at the following improvements for the sector.

1. Strengthen Staffing and Capacity
- Look to secure funding for learning roles.
- Upskill existing staff in curriculum alignment, facilitation, and evaluation methods.

2. Improve Physical and Digital Infrastructure
- Utilise grant programmes to maximise existing space using mobile furniture or pop-up stations.
- Develop training and funding to develop digital learning resources.

3. Build Strategic Partnerships
- Encourage and facilitate collaboration between the sector and Education Networks.

4. Monitor and Evaluate Impact
- Support and training on simple evaluation tools to develop feedback and assess learning outcomes.
- Use data to demonstrate impact to funders, stakeholders and the wider community.

Outreach

Outreach is a cornerstone of modern museum practice, transforming institutions from passive repositories into active, community–centred spaces. It enables museums to extend their impact beyond physical walls, engaging diverse audiences through education, collaboration, and cultural dialogue. By reaching out to schools, community groups, and underserved populations, museums foster inclusivity and ensure that heritage is accessible to all.

Effective outreach also deepens public understanding of collections, making them relevant to contemporary issues and lived experiences. It supports lifelong learning, encourages civic participation, and builds trust between institutions and the communities they serve. Moreover, outreach provides valuable feedback, helping museums adapt their programming and priorities to meet evolving public needs.

The survey asked museums about the challenges they face regarding audience development and outreach. A compilation of responses is listed below.
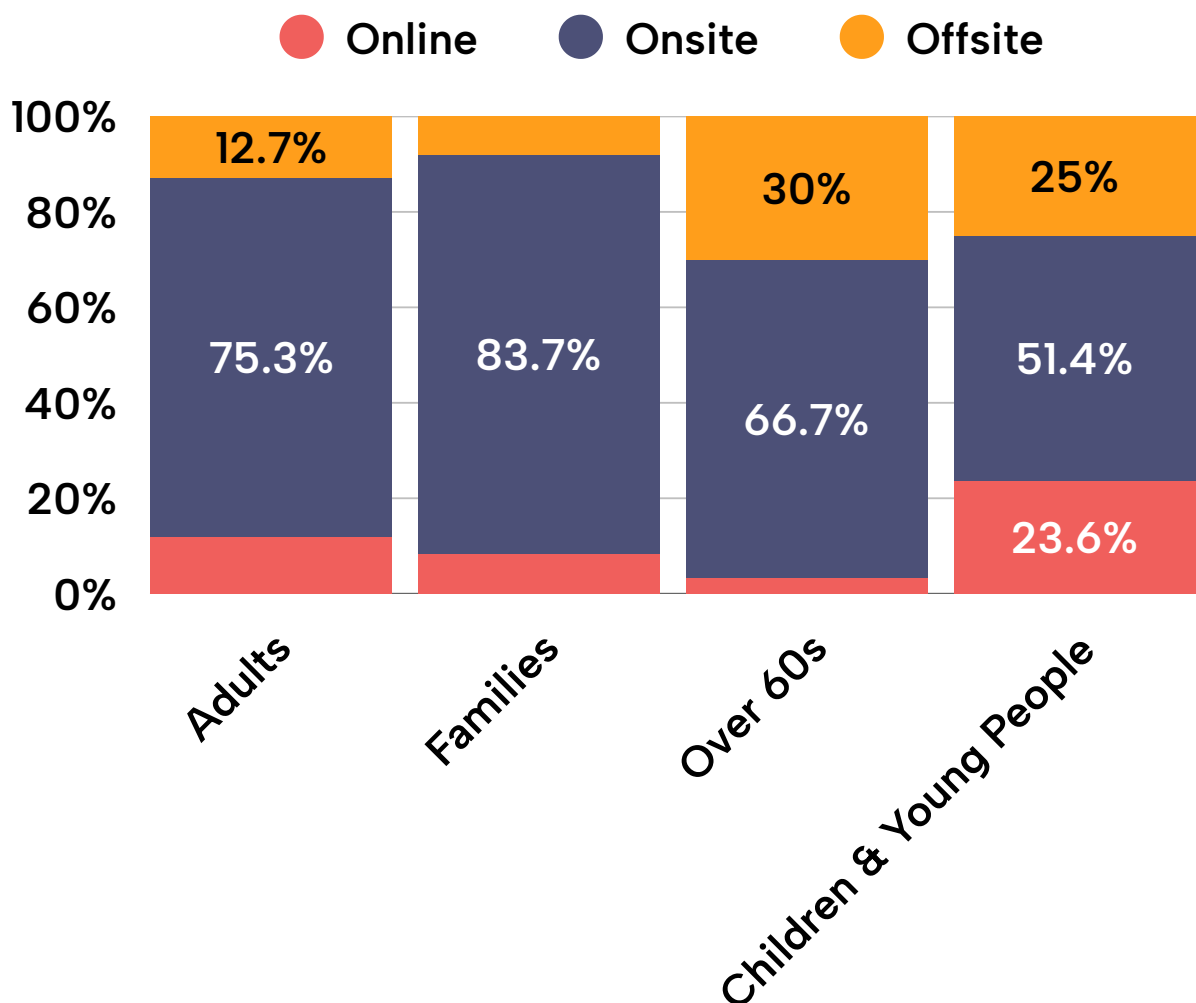
The survey asked museums about the challenges they face regarding audience development and outreach. A compilation of responses is listed below.

Key Sector Challenges

1. Staffing Shortages and Capacity Constraints
- Repeated references to lack of staff or volunteers, especially in education and outreach roles.
- Difficulty prioritising projects due to limited time and personnel.
- Staff turnover affecting continuity and institutional knowledge.

2. Insufficient Funding and Short-Term Financial Support
- Budgetary pressures limit long-term planning and sustained engagement.
- Reliance on external funding for outreach and audience development.
- Short-term grants do not allow for continued support or impact tracking.

3. Limited Outreach Capacity and Infrastructure
- Inability to accommodate outreach requests due to lack of space.

What Work have Museums Undertaken to Understand Audiences and their Needs?

Museums have increasingly prioritised understanding their audiences by engaging in a range of initiatives such as public consultations, targeted surveys, and in–depth research. These efforts help uncover visitor expectations, barriers to access, and cultural interests. Many institutions collaborate with academic partners, community organisations, and cultural groups to broaden perspectives and ensure inclusivity.

Focus groups offer valuable qualitative insights, allowing museums to refine programming, exhibitions, and outreach strategies to better meet the diverse needs of their communities.
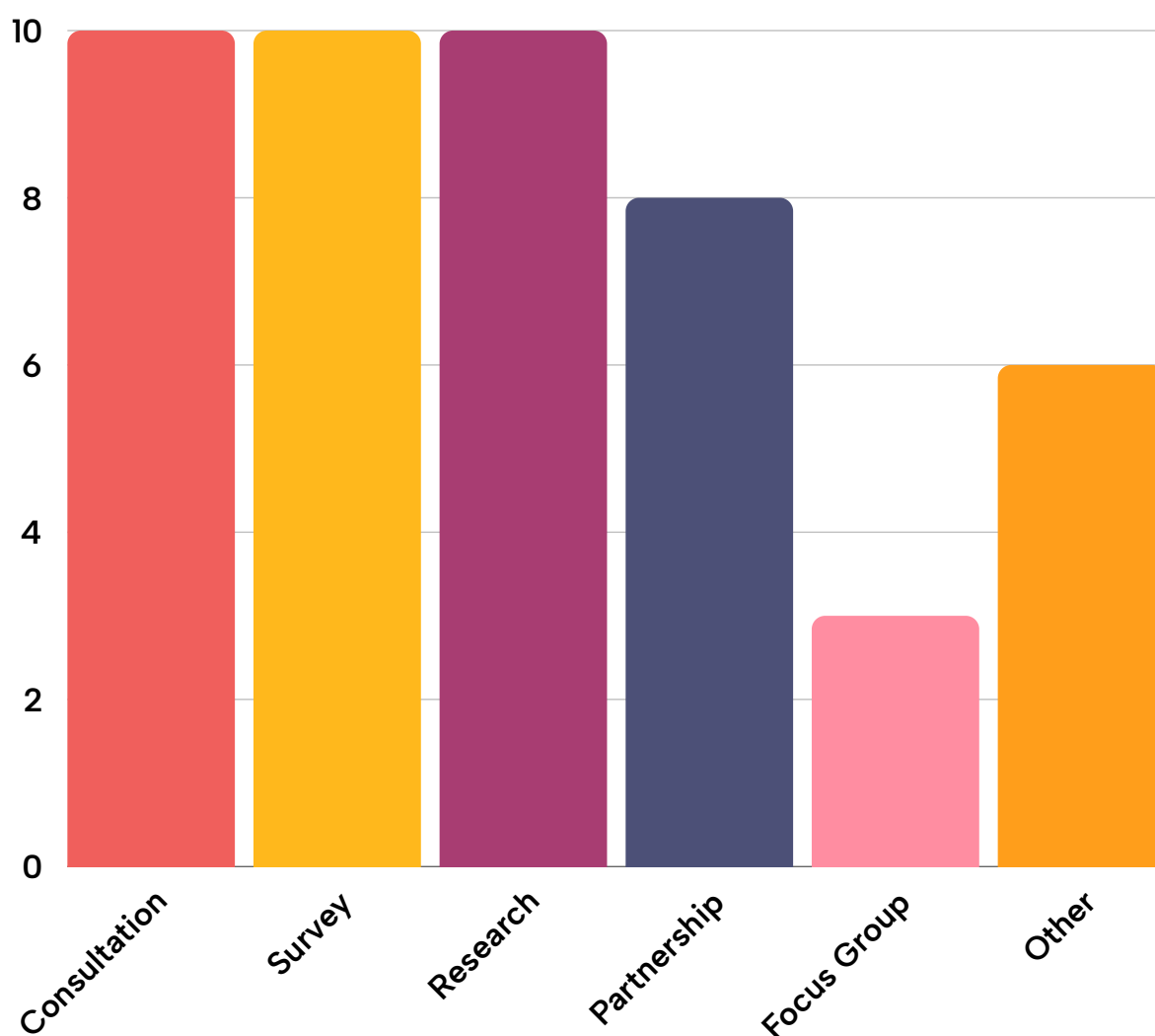
Temporary Exhibitions

Temporary exhibitions are vital to the cultural and educational dynamism of museums. They offer fresh perspectives, showcase contemporary voices, and allow institutions to respond to current events and evolving public interests. These exhibitions attract diverse audiences, encourage repeat visits, and often incorporate innovative formats that deepen engagement and learning.

However, the creation of temporary exhibitions is not without significant challenges. They demand specialised expertise from curators and conservators to designers and educators who must craft compelling narratives while ensuring the safety and integrity of borrowed or fragile objects. The financial burden can be substantial, with costs for transportation, insurance, marketing, and installation often exceeding initial projections. Additionally, the time required to plan and execute a temporary exhibition can span months or even years, placing strain on museum staff and resources.

Despite these hurdles, temporary exhibitions remain essential. They foster cultural exchange, allow curatorial experimentation, and keep museums responsive and relevant. Their limited-time nature creates excitement and urgency, reinforcing the museum's role as a living, evolving institution. Balancing their benefits with logistical demands is a complex but worthwhile endeavour that enriches both the institution and its public.

From the data from the survey, it appears that the importance of developing exhibitions is as strong as ever, but museums are doing more in-house or in partnership to achieve value for money.
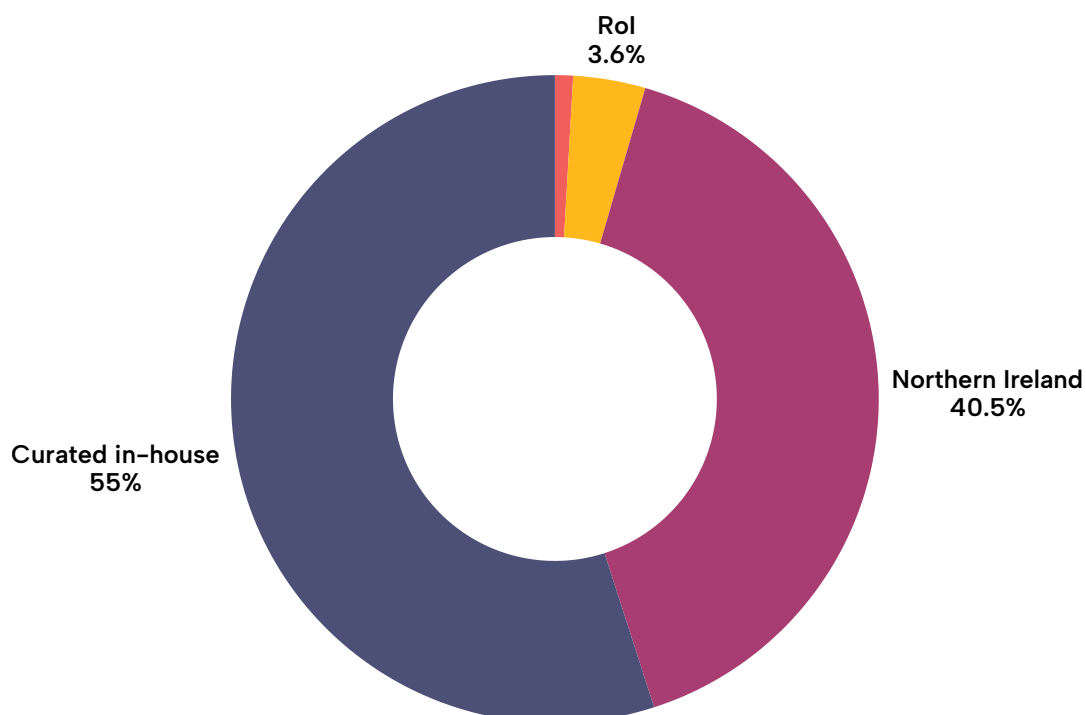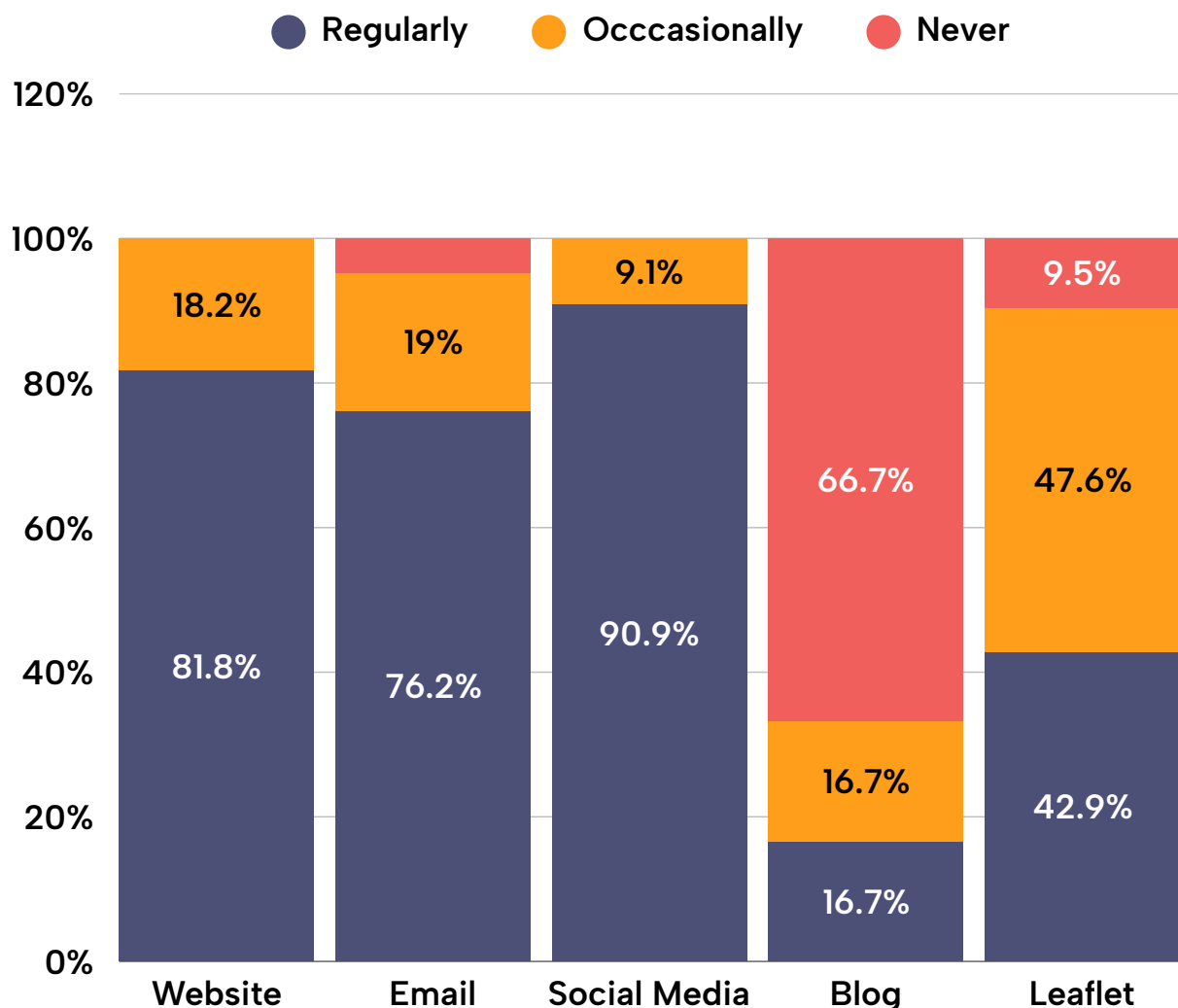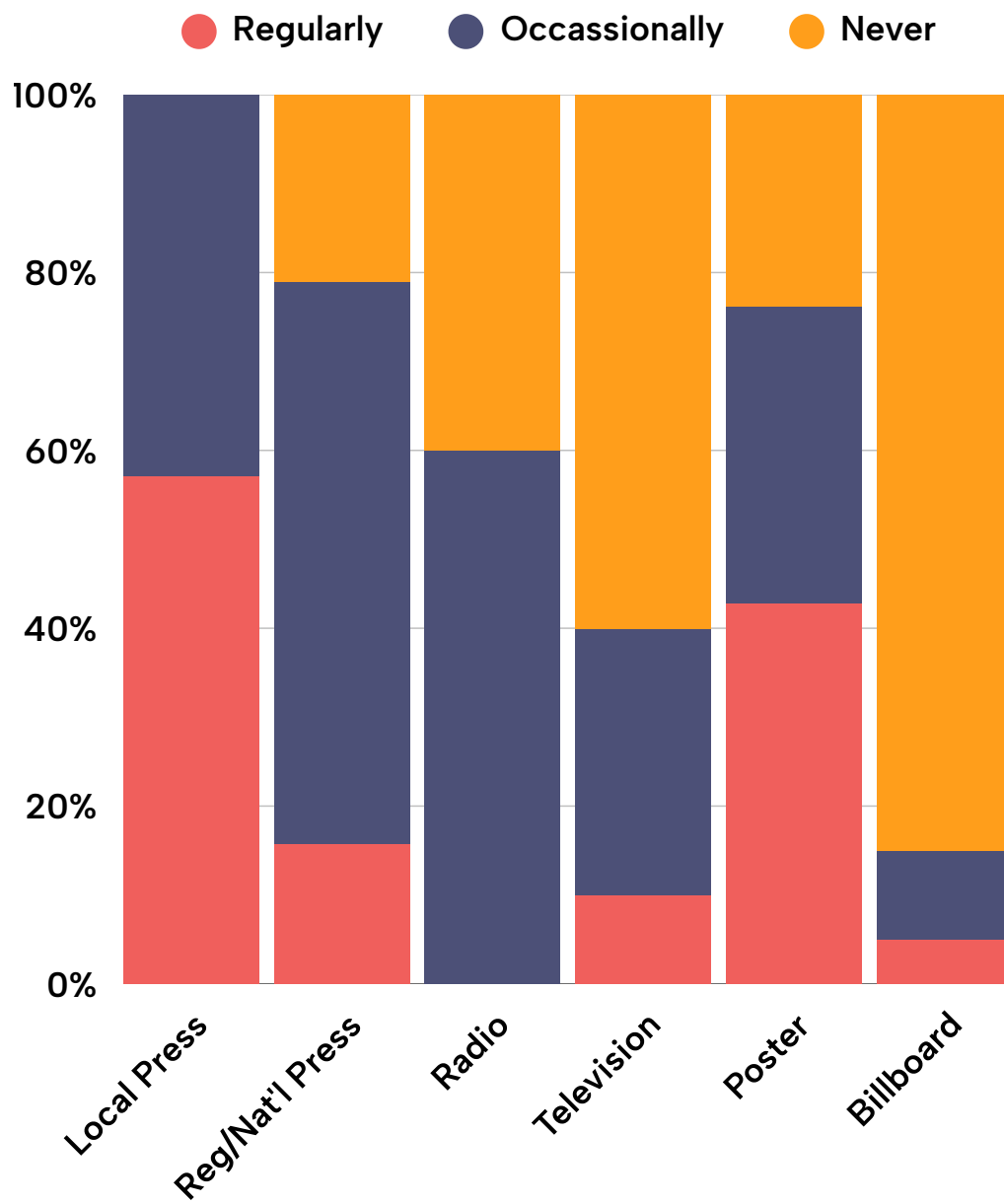
Marketing

Marketing plays a crucial role in the success and sustainability of museums. Far beyond advertising, it is the strategic process of understanding audiences, shaping experiences, and building lasting relationships. In an increasingly competitive cultural landscape, effective marketing helps museums remain visible, relevant, and financially viable.

At its core, marketing enables museums to identify and meet the needs of their visitors. It helps institutions communicate their value whether that's a compelling exhibition, an educational program, or a unique day out. By crafting clear messages and targeting the right audiences, museums can boost attendance, increase membership, and deepen public engagement.

In today's digital age, marketing empowers museums to tell stories in new ways through social media, video, and interactive platforms. This is especially important for smaller institutions, where resources are limited, and staff often juggle multiple roles.

● Regularly   ● Occcasionally   ● Never

	Website	Email	Social Media	Blog	Leaflet
Never				66.7%	9.5%
Occcasionally	18.2%	19%	9.1%	16.7%	47.6%
Regularly	81.8%	76.2%	90.9%	16.7%	42.9%

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Museum Trends Survey offers a valuable snapshot of the sector's current landscape, highlighting both areas of resilience and those requiring attention. By examining organisational health, managing collections, and user experiences, the survey identifies key strengths such as commitment to public engagement and professional standards, alongside challenges like resource constraints and uneven access.

The recommended actions provide a strategic roadmap for museums to strengthen capacity, deepen audience understanding and foster sector-wide collaboration. These insights will support NIMC to make informed decisions and drive meaningful progress across the museum sector. The findings will directly inform the NIMC Corporate Plan, shaping priorities and guiding strategic investment.

They will underpin training programmes to address skills gaps, enhance accreditation support, and refine grant-making to better target areas of need. Crucially, the data will be used to report to government and external funders, providing robust evidence of impact and challenges to help unlock further support.

NIMC will also use the results to advocate for museums at national and cross-border levels, ensuring the sector's needs are clearly represented to policymakers, funders, and strategic partners.