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**Museum Resilience: the Impact of the Covid-19
Pandemic on the Independent Museums in the UK**

by

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my loving parents.

Declaration

I hereby declare that except specific references to the work of others, the contents of this dissertation are entirely my own work and have not been submitted in whole or in part for consideration for any other degree or qualification in this, or any other university.

Lingjun Li

October 2024

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Lastly, I want to express that what I gained from this research surpasses the dissertation itself. Over the four years delving into the concept of museum resilience, I have realized that it has also been an exploration of resilience in my personality. Life presents everyone with ups and downs. During my PhD, I encountered some crucial life decisions. Instead of evading them as I might have done previously, I chose to face the challenges and take responsibility for the outcomes. I am profoundly grateful for this research as it has provided me with the opportunity to engage in the discussions about resilience with many individuals. I look forward to embracing an optimistic and resilient life.

Abstract

Since the coronavirus swept across the globe, the cultural and creative sectors worldwide have faced unprecedented challenges in terms of financial revenue, public safety and staff wellbeing, and museums are no exception. Therefore, the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the museums and strategies for navigating these institutions within such a shifting social environment has been the central concern within the UK museum sector. This thesis scrutinizes the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums in the UK and explores how the independent museum sector has responded to these challenges in the light of museum resilience. This thesis delves into both the conceptual underpinnings and practical applications of the concept of museum resilience in the context of the independent museum sector during the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023.

To capture data relating to the research question, this thesis has employed a multi-method qualitative research methodology, incorporating methods of secondary research, surveys, case studies, and semi-structured interviews. With the assistance of the Association of Independent Museums, this research received 207 survey responses from museum professionals across the independent museum sector in the UK. Additionally, thirteen distinctive independent museums participated as case study museums.

Inspired by the conceptual roots of resilience in ecological literature, this research adopts an ecosystem framework to analyse the research data. This ecosystem comprises diverse stakeholders such as

independent museums, governmental bodies, professional organizations, and museum communities. This thesis evaluates the functioning of each stakeholder within this ecosystem during the Covid-19 pandemic, investigating their interconnections. As a result, it furnishes a comprehensive perspective for understanding the dynamics of the independent museum sector in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In doing so, this research yields insights into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums and their responses, encompassing financial, institutional, and emotional dimensions. First, it details the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the financial stability of independent museums and then it explores the combined effect of financial pressure on institutional decision-making regarding operations, staffing, and long-term strategy. It also discerns the emotional impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on museum workers, such as worries, loneliness, and exhaustion. More importantly, this thesis provides numerous examples of efforts made by the independent museum sector to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, which involve a bundle of strategies to boost museum finances, re-engage museum audiences, and alleviate staff emotional stress. By analysing these responsive strategies, this thesis examines the notion of museum resilience within the context of the crisis induced by the Covid-19 pandemic, offering a more detailed interpretation of what it means for a museum to be resilient.

This thesis reveals that the lockdown caused by Covid-19 pandemic significantly reduced ticket sales, retail, and catering revenues for many independent museums in the UK. Although visitor numbers gradually recovered as museums reopened, these institutions continued to face financial pressure to

enhance online services and ensure on-site safety in the post-pandemic era. Thanks to the function of public grants, the financial impact of the pandemic did not lead to widespread permanent closures of independent museums in the UK. However, the loss of volunteers, the gap of digitalization between different museums, and the dilemma between promoting staff welfare and navigating financial constraints could pose future survival risks for these museums. Additionally, the pandemic took a toll on museum staff's mental health, leading to anxiety, loneliness, and fatigue, which may present potential challenges in the future. Moreover, external risks such as climate change, geopolitical instability, and inflation further exacerbate the challenges faced by the independent museum sector in the UK. Therefore, enhancing museum resilience has become more critical than ever.

This study, through analysing various cases, posits that museum resilience is a combination of the defensive ability to avoid destructive failure, consistency in upholding the museum's core mission, the flexibility to mobilize resources, and the progressive power to achieve greater goals. This research provides a forward-looking perspective for future museum management studies, as the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic may have diminished, but potential museum crises have not disappeared. Beyond its focus on museology, this research presents successful crisis response strategies, serving as a resource for professionals in the cultural sector. These professionals can enhance their understanding and draw lessons from the experiences of independent museums.

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Acronyms

ACE	Arts Council England
AIM	Association of Independent Museums
ALB	Arm's Length Body
BBC	The British Broadcasting Corporation
BCLM	Black Country Living Museum
CTB	Community Time Bank
DCMS	Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport of the United Kingdom
HLF	Heritage Lottery Fund
MA	Museum Association
SRQ	Secondary Research Question
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
WHO	World Health Organization

Chapter 1 Introduction

“Birmingham museums consult on job cuts due to Covid-19” —BBC News (2020a)

“Independent museums are ‘hardest hit’ by Covid-19 crisis” —Knott (2020a)

“UK museums turn to innovation to keep doors open in times of Covid”— Bakare (2020)

“The British Museum reveals Covid impact with 93% fall in admissions income” —Hardaker (2021)

“How will museums of tomorrow tell the Covid pandemic story?” —Cawley (2023)

1.0 Background of the study

The unforeseeable impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which surfaced in 2020, had touched every corner of modern life, spanning from health and well-being to travel and, of course, cultural institutions. This global public health emergency has directly or indirectly impacted most museums, posing threats to their financial resources, labour rights, and collaborative efforts (Redman, 2022: 116-118). With a touch of imagination, the above headings could form a micro-novel portraying the journey experienced by the UK museum sector in navigating the complexities of the Covid-19 pandemic. These headlines exemplify the headings for news, commenting articles and blogs regarding the museums in the UK in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023. They exude a sense of uncertainty, hinting at a “crisis” within the museum sector. The discourse on the crisis brought by the Covid-19 pandemic and the strategies for responding has been very prominent within both academic and professional circles (McGrath, 2020; Blackman, 2022; Luck and Sayer, 2023).

Driven by a strong curiosity about the changing circumstances of museums during the Covid-19 pandemic, I started to plan for my doctoral research to explore the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing issues within the museum sector in the UK and to identify what new challenges this public health crisis aroused. Before embarking on this research, I considered the feasibility of completing the research within the limited timeframe of this PhD program. In this context, the independent museum sector most directly reflects the impact of the pandemic on museum practices, as their revenue relies on museum visitors rather than on public funding. Consequently, independent museums in the UK might have a more urgent motivation to enhance their resilience compared to other types of museums, which underscores a broader scope of potential for developing insights on both challenges and innovative practices. In addition, following an examination of the nature of the museum sector in the UK, I noticed that independent museums constitute the vast majority of the overall museum sector in terms of quantity, and are very diverse in terms of distribution, themes and sizes, in terms of how they reflect features shared in the entire museum sector. Therefore, with a narrowed focus, this research explores the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums, with the aim of enhancing our understanding of museum resilience—a critical capacity for navigating the uncertainties of our rapidly changing world.

As the research unfolded, it became apparent that the significance of this study extends beyond examining the Covid-19 pandemic itself. The extensive discussion on the topic of “the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic” can easily create an impression that the challenges faced by museums in the UK,

including financial difficulties and a shortage of human resources, were solely attributable to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, although it interacted with preexisting challenges, Covid-19 is not a catch-all container for every negative issue. In fact, many of the problems for the museum sector in the UK, like the precariousness of the workforce, “are not new” (Museum Development UK, 2023: no page). Taking its departure in a moment of crisis, this research unfolded with timely relevance to review past museum practices and to explore potential directions for future museum studies.

Additionally, this research aims to offer insights into how museums and similar cultural institutions can better deal with potential future crises. As the research progressed, a significant milestone occurred on May 5, 2023, when the Covid-19 pandemic officially ceased to be a global health emergency (World Health Organization, 2023: no page). Therefore, this research comprehensively witnessed the Covid-19 crisis from its emergency phase to the long-term management phase. As the WHO Director-General remarked (*ibid.*), the virus “is still killing, and it’s still changing”. Covid-19 is not just a health crisis, it has profoundly changed society, resulting in millions falling into poverty and billionaires’ wealth soaring, exacerbating social fragmentation and challenging societal well-being (Luhby, 2021: no page). In addition, over the past three years, aside from the pandemic, numerous global events such as wars, conflicts, inflation, runaway global debt, and climate change have unfolded (Dimitrijevic and Arya, 2023: 3). Disruptions from various fronts served as reminders that the world was undergoing profound transformations.

In this context, this research was considered highly timely “at a time when the sector has limited capacity to adapt to this new world” (Museum Development UK, 2023: no page). The exploration of museum resilience resulting from the finding of this research brought both immediacy and experiential knowledge for confronting future crises. While the long-term consequences of the pandemic, coupled with other global disruptions, may continue to unfold over time and may not be entirely encompassed within the timeframe of this research, it nonetheless provides valuable insights into navigating an unprecedented crisis within the museum sector, especially for institutions with independent finances.

1.1 Research Questions

The research aim of this thesis was to investigate the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums in the UK and to explore the concept of museum resilience in this context. In order to realise this aim, the following research questions were generated:

The Primary Research Question:

In the light of museum resilience, what is the impact of Covid-19 on the independent museums in the UK?

When asking the question “what is the impact of something”, it is crucial to clarify the context in which the impact is being measured. In the context of this research, exploring the concept of museum resilience was intended to help museums maintain sustainability under various conditions. This aligns with the essence of museum management, which encompasses the museum practices to ensure the

running of museums, such as finance, security, staffing, marketing, and strategic planning (Desvallées and Mairesse, 2010). Therefore, it was considered highly appropriate to observe and explore the notion of museum resilience demonstrated by UK independent museums during the Covid-19 pandemic within the scope of museum management. Additionally, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the viability of the UK's cultural institutions has been widely investigated by various stakeholders (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2020; Art Fund, 2020; National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2020). However, the research focus of each organization varied significantly, mostly neglecting the institutional change and emotional state of staff and volunteers. The unique contribution of this thesis lies in its emphasis on both the institutional aspects and the well-being of museum staff. Considering these concerns, this thesis investigated the financial, organizational, and emotional impacts of Covid-19 on independent museums and examined what museum resilience is and how it can be fostered through the strategies that had been implemented by these independent museums in response to the pandemic.

Specifically, the primary research question will be investigated through the lens of four secondary research questions (SRQ):

1. Impact: What financial, organizational, and emotional impact does this crisis have on the independent museums? (SRQ1) How do they respond to it? (SRQ2)

2. Museum Resilience: What is museum resilience? (SRQ3) How does the concept of resilience apply in independent museums in the context of managing their responses to the pandemic? What sort of limitations and potentials do the independent museums experience now in terms of developing their resilience? (SRQ4)

1.2 Significance of the Study

Firstly, the exploration of resilience as a concept dates back to the 1970s, originating in ecology and subsequently extending into various disciplines. “Resilience” has been a buzzword, prominent in multiple realms, including ecology, engineering, management science, computer science, and psychology (Fraccascia *et al.*, 2018:1). Likewise, the notion of resilience has also been utilized frequently in the cultural sector. For example, Arts Council England (2013: 39) made a ten-year strategic framework, *Great Art and Culture for Everyone*, and one of its goals for 2010-2020 stated: “the arts, museums and libraries are resilient and economically sustainable”.

This study holds significance in addressing a research gap in the realm of resilience within the context of independent museums in the UK, specifically following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. It contributes to the conceptualization of resilience in the museum context and serves as a critical examination of applying the concept of resilience in museums in the first decades of the 21st century.

Secondly, this research gathered substantial evidence of the impact the pandemic has had on the independent museum sector and how these museums responded to the crisis. Undoubtedly, this global

public health crisis profoundly affected numerous museums and heritage sites worldwide, jeopardizing their financial stability, public outreach, workforce well-being, and community services amidst the lockdown period (Nightingale, Owens and Blunt, 2023). However, different types of museums appeared to have been affected in distinct ways. According to the result of the Covid-19 Impact Survey (Art Fund, 2020: 6), during the pandemic independent museums and trusts, especially those largely reliant on ticket income, were in desperate need of financial assistance and 74 % of associated staff were worried about the future of their organizations, which is higher than the figures for Local Authorities (61%). The independent museum sector did not receive proportional attention in reports from various professional organizations and research institutions, neither in terms of its majority proportion of the whole sector nor the severity of the impact it had experienced due to the pandemic. This point will be subjected to a more detailed discussion in Chapter 3. The primary focus of this thesis is to document the experiences of staff in terms of financial, institutional, and emotional perspectives on addressing the Covid-19 pandemic within the independent museum sector in the UK from 2020 to 2023.

Thirdly, this thesis provides new insights from the UK's independent museum sector to the body of research on financially independent cultural industries, like independent theatres and craft studios, offering valuable lessons for other sectors pursuing sustainability. Independent museums play a substantial role in the cultural landscape of the UK, offering significant contributions to cultural services and economic impact across the country (Association of Independent Museums, 2019). However, there has been a scarcity of dedicated investigations into the independent museum sector,

which has the effect of homogenizing museum studies (Candlin, 2012). This thesis also explored the nature of the independent museum sector, investigating its current state of survival, structural advantages, and disadvantages. By doing so, it aimed to broaden the perspective of museum studies, providing insights from the standpoint of independent museum institutions into how such museums navigate through the common challenges, such as volunteer shortage, digital lag, and rising operational costs. Numerous examples of museum practices within the UK's independent museum sector were incorporated, serving as valuable references for other institutions or regions seeking to understand this operating model. These findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on alternative museum operation models, particularly for countries exploring diverse structural options.

Fourthly, in addition to theoretical discussions within the field of museum studies, this study involves a chapter showcasing recommendations on how to build a resilient museum. The insights derived from this research remain pertinent to museum studies and may also benefit independent museums and even a broader scope of cultural institutions.

In summary, the impact of Covid-19 on independent museums in the UK required more specific exploration with a focus on financial, institutional, and emotional perspectives. There was an urgent need to draw conclusions about the immediate impact of Covid-19 on independent museums in the United Kingdom and to ascertain potential long-term repercussions. Moreover, it was crucial to delve into the conceptual and practical application of resilience in the independent museum sector within the context of an unstable economic and social environment, giving rise to both immediacy and experience

in dealing with future crises. Furthermore, this research holds significant importance as it not only furnishes empirical evidence but also contributes to innovative thinking about the nature of independent museums. This thesis is also valuable for museum professionals as it provides recommendations for building resilience.

1.3 Overall Research Design

To meet the research aim, this study utilized a qualitative methodology to collect data on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the independent museum sector in the UK, their strategies to mitigate this impact, and insights from museum professionals about the notion of museum resilience. The research methods comprised secondary research, surveys, case studies, and semi-structured interviews. This section provides an overview of the research design, with further details and related rationales provided in Chapter 4.

First, secondary research was conducted using sources such as museums' annual reports, professional guidelines, and museum policies for an initial understanding of the independent museum sector and the research context. To obtain a sector-wide perspective that would inform the development of targeted inquiries through case studies, a national online survey about the impact of the pandemic on independent museums within the UK was carried out with the assistance of the Association of Independent Museums (AIM). This survey identified common challenges and differentiated impacts based on factors such as location and size, serving as a basis for selecting representative case studies.

As a result, thirteen case studies were undertaken, each featuring in-depth interviews with museum staff, ensuring a diverse selection across the UK in terms of geography, size, and type. A coding system was established to protect anonymity while maintaining analytical traceability: each interviewee was assigned a code (e.g. P1, P2...), along with role, interview date, and duration. These identifiers are referenced throughout the thesis and summarised in Appendix 5. The collected qualitative data were then categorised into thematic areas related to the impact of Covid-19, institutional response strategies, and reflections on museum resilience.

1.4 The Theoretical Framework: The Independent Museum Sector Ecosystem

The theoretical framework includes definitions and concepts from the chosen theory (or theories) that are pertinent to the specific issue, as well as the theory's notions and ideas that guide the understanding of and approach to researching it (Grant and Osanloo, 2014). In the context of this research, the independent museum sector involves multiple stakeholders, such as governmental bodies, museums, professional organizations, and museum communities. Therefore, a theoretical framework was employed to structure the interconnected museum stakeholders included in this research and make readers aware of the assumptions guided by this framework.

Brammal (2016) points out that, in the United Kingdom, the rise of resilience thinking coincided with the start of the global financial crisis in 2008, and the ensuing austerity measures implemented by the coalition government of the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats in 2014. One of the most important authors regarding the comprehension of resilience in the museum sector is Mark Robinson

(2010: 10), who established the interpretation of “adaptative resilience”. As a focal point of this study, the concept of resilience had only recently migrated to the museum domain over the last 20 years, and it had yet to establish a widely recognized theoretical framework in museum studies.

Therefore, this thesis began by delineating the core concepts encompassed in Chapter 2, including the definition of a museum, museum management, museum crisis, cultural policymaking, museum communities, and museum resilience. Figure 1.1 visually presents a word cloud generated from Chapter 2. As depicted in Figure 1.1, the concepts addressed in this research are extensive and encompass a wide range of ideas. In addition, these comprehensive concepts, or themes, can further extend into numerous sub-concepts. For instance, museum management encompasses everything manageable within a museum, such as finance, collections, and “shared values, strategy, staff, skills, style, structure, and systems” (Moore, 1994: 7).



Figure 1.1 The word cloud generated from Chapter 2

Ultimately, inspired by the ecological origins of the resilience concept (Holling, 1973: 6), the roots of this concept were traced, and a theoretical framework was established by conceptualizing the UK independent museum sector as an ecosystem.

As depicted in Figure 1.2, this thesis employed an “ecosystem” theoretical framework to display the UK’s independent museum sector into four distinct components: museum communities, governmental bodies, independent museums, and professional organizations. The advantage of this framework lies in its ability to compartmentalize various conceptual assumptions, given the multitude of different ideas and themes involved in this thesis. This strategic framing during the early and mid stages of research ensured that different conceptual assumptions were framed within well-defined domains, preventing the risk of disorder and confusion.

This theoretical framework not only guided the route of the literature review but also refined the scope during subsequent data collection. It enabled the comprehensive gathering of diverse reactions from various museum stakeholders in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. This framework serves as a guiding principle throughout this thesis and reappears in subsequent chapters.

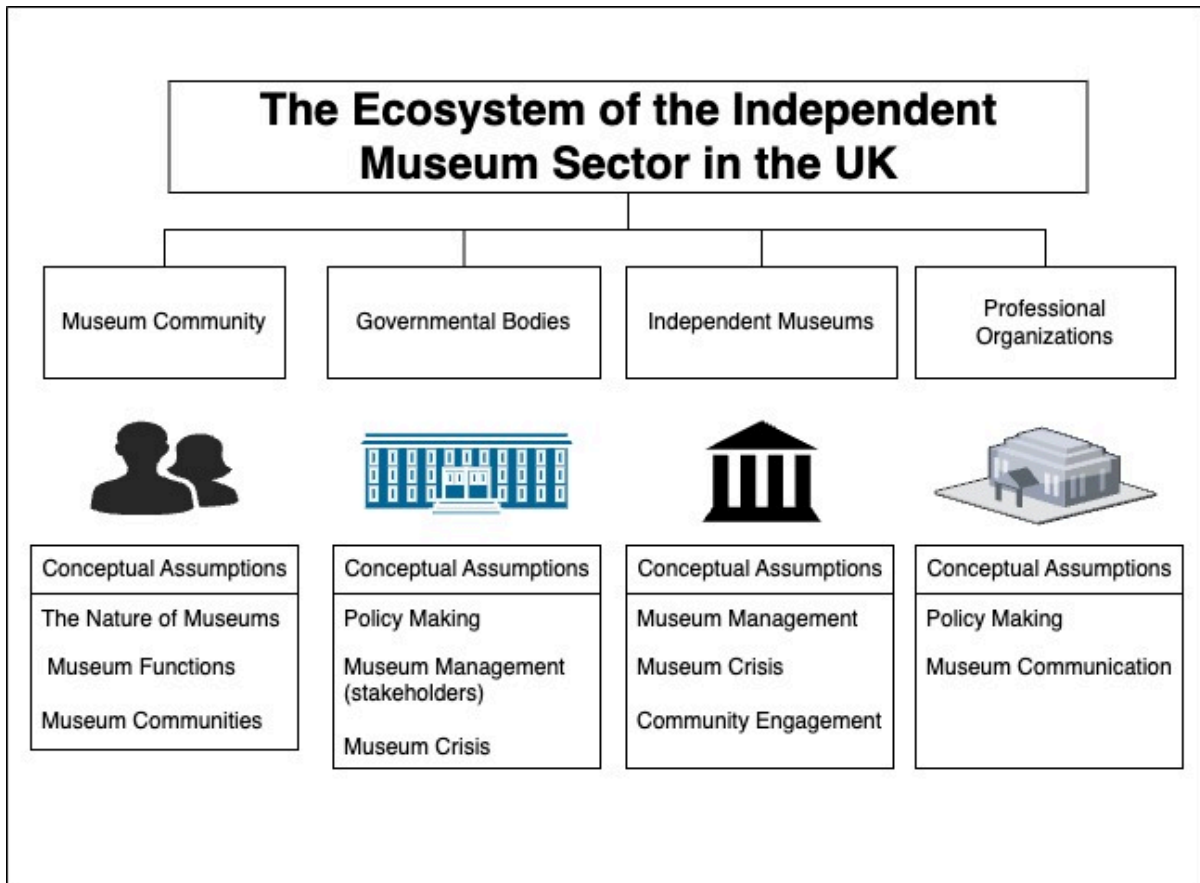


Figure 1.2 The ecosystem of independent museum sector in the UK

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

The main body of the thesis contains nine chapters. This section provides a brief introduction to each chapter.

➤ Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter serves as an introduction to the motivation and importance of this research: exploring the impact of Covid-19 on independent museums in the UK through the lens of museum resilience and identifying what needs to be done to help cultural organizations become resilient and sustainable in

the face of future crisis. It outlines the rationale behind the study, lays out the research aims and design, and presents an overview of the structure of the dissertation.

➤ Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews existing literature to establish the conceptual and theoretical background of this research. It starts with an exploration of fundamental notions about museums, including definitions, functions, and classifications, with an emphasis on the independent museum sector. As the thesis title indicates, this research is focused on two key elements: the perspective of resilience and the study of the impact caused by the public health crisis induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, Chapter 2 provides a broad theoretical overview of relevant topics, including the nature of museums, museum communities, museum management, and museum crisis. Finally, it examines theoretical debates on the concept of museum resilience and considers how resilience could be interpreted in the museum sector.

➤ Chapter 3: Research Context

This chapter introduces the essentials of the museum sector in the UK in general, the independent museum sector in particular, and the pandemic timeline in the UK. It lays the groundwork for the subsequent analysis chapters (Chapters 5-7), depicting the independent museum sector as navigating a complex “fog” triggered by various factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit, inflation, and the volatile global scenario. Its significance becomes apparent as it facilitates the reader’s comprehension of the rationale for why the independent museum sector experienced the short-term and long-term

impact of Covid-19 pandemic captured in Chapter 5, the reason why the impacted museums adopted the responses analysed in Chapter 6, and what resulted in the emergence of museum resilience, especially in the light of the independent museum sector.

➤ Chapter 4: Methodology

The methodology chapter is structured to provide a comprehensive overview of the research design, data collection procedure, research ethics, data analysis, and limitations of the study. First of all, the research methodology framework is elucidated, encompassing the research philosophy, approaches, strategies, methods, and time horizon. This section outlines the foundational principles and considerations that underpin the entire research process. Then this chapter details the data collection process, including secondary research, surveys, on-site observations, and semi-structured interviews. Each method is explored in terms of its purpose, application, and relevance to the overarching research objectives. Following this, the chapter focuses on research ethics, clarifying the ethical considerations of the data collection process. Then, it provides insight into the data analysis process, outlining the coding strategies and techniques employed to derive meaningful insights from the collected data. Finally, this chapter reflects the limitations inherent in the research design and execution. Providing a transparent discussion of the constraints and potential challenges that may impact the validity and generalizability of the findings.

- Chapter 5: Unexpected Disturbances: The Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Independent Museums in the UK

Chapter 5 aims at answering the SRQ1: what is the impact of the Covid-19 on independent museums in the UK? This chapter begins by providing the findings generated from data collection in terms of the institutional, financial, and emotional impact on the museums that took part in this research as well as evidence from other recent sector-wide investigations. It then goes on to analyse the unforeseen findings that come up from the open questions of the research survey and interviews. Next, it reflects on the concept of the independent museum ecosystem discussed in section 1.4 and examines how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected other stakeholders within this ecosystem. Finally, this chapter links the research findings, and the insights mentioned in Chapter 2, in seeking to broaden the interpretation of the museum crisis, especially in the context of the independent museum sector.

- Chapter 6: Bouncing Back: The Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic

The SRQ2 regarding how the independent museum sector responded to the Covid-19 pandemic is answered in this chapter. It exhibits how the independent museums and their stakeholders (as mentioned in the theoretical framework) tried to mitigate the institutional, financial, and emotional challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and how they seek for future success. Then it elaborates on the emergent findings from fieldwork. It also discusses how the ecosystem of the independent museum sector worked jointly to “bounce back from the crisis”.

➤ Chapter 7: Leaning into the Force of Bouncing: The Concept of Museum Resilience

This chapter is dedicated to addressing the SRQ3 pertaining to museum resilience: specifically, defining what museum resilience entails and exploring how this concept is manifested in independent museums as they navigate responses to the pandemic. Initially, it analyses the perspectives of independent museum staff who participated in this research, aiming to understand how they conceptualize and experience resilience. Next, it builds upon the challenges and opportunities identified in the previous chapter, which focused on the impact and response practices related to the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes an evaluation of the museum practices after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic—identifying good examples where they have proven successful and lessons where they may not have succeeded. Subsequently, this chapter discusses the relationship between austerity within the cultural sector and the pervasive adoption of resilience as a guiding concept. Moreover, this chapter gives the interpretation of the concept of museum resilience in light of this research. Next, this chapter analyses the roles of museum stakeholders in building museum resilience. Through this comprehensive exploration, this chapter seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of museum resilience in the face of the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

➤ Chapter 8: Bouncing Forward: How to Build a Resilient Museum?

This chapter presents a set of original, research-driven recommendations aimed at fostering the continuous development of resilience within the independent museum sector and, more broadly, across financially vulnerable cultural institutions. These proposals emerge directly from the findings of this study, grounded in an in-depth investigation of how UK independent museums responded to and

navigated the challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Building on the conceptual understanding of museum resilience established in Chapter 7, this chapter offers practical strategies informed by real-world practices and reflections shared by museum professionals.

➤ Chapter 9: Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the key findings of the research in relation to the research questions. It also outlines the contributions of this research to the field of museum studies. Additionally, this chapter briefly presents some questions arising from the thesis that would merit further investigation.

1.6 Conclusion

As an opening, this chapter delineates the focus and scope of the thesis, offering a systematic overview of the study's rationale and outline. It presents the research questions and framework that will lead the entire research process. Subsequently, Chapter 2 provides an exhaustive literature review to elucidate the conceptual context regarding this research, digging into the interconnected academic findings pertaining to the relevant concepts and themes.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical review of the literature underpinning this research on how independent museums in the UK experienced and responded to the Covid-19 pandemic through the lens of resilience. Rather than merely summarising existing work, it interrogates key debates, conceptual frameworks, and sector-specific discourses that inform the understanding of museums as institutions navigating disruption and uncertainty.

The chapter follows an hourglass-shaped thematic progression: it begins with the interpretation of the nature of museums in a time of crisis, then narrows to focus on more specific areas of scholarship, including museum communities, museum management, museum crisis, and museum resilience. In doing so, it draws on sources from museum studies, cultural policy, and resilience theory to explore how the meanings of key terms such as crisis and resilience have evolved in practice. At each stage, the emphasis is not on compiling fixed definitions, but on examining how concepts are mobilised, challenged, and adapted within institutional and disciplinary contexts. By critically engaging with these debates, this chapter lays the theoretical foundation for the empirical analysis that follows.

2.1 Understanding Museums in a Time of Crisis

Museums are not fixed entities but dynamic, socially embedded constructs, whose meanings emerge through ongoing interactions with the communities, values, and crises that surround them (Watson,

2007; Macdonald; 2009; Latham and Simmons, 2014). To examine how museums respond to crises, it is first necessary to understand how they interpret themselves under conditions of crisis. This section traces the evolution of museum definitions, with particular attention to how social, economic, and political pressures have influenced these shifts. It also considers the critiques and future-oriented perspectives offered by scholars in response to these changing definitions.

What is a museum today? Although numerous definitions of the term “museum” exist, there is no consensus among professionals who work in, with, and on museums about what constitutes a museum (Latham and Simmons, 2014: 4) What is a museum today? Although numerous definitions of the term “museum” exist, there is no consensus among professionals who work in, with, and on museums about what constitutes a museum (Latham and Simmons, 2014: 4)

A widely adopted definition comes from the International Council of Museums (ICOM), which is considered as an international standard and is used as a benchmark for internal policymaking and the allocation of subsidies (ICOM, 2020: 1). After the release of the 2007 ICOM definition, this edition faced criticism from museum researchers and professionals. Firstly, the use of certain terms overlooks the diversity within the museum sector. For example, the terms “non-profit” and “permanent institution” exclude financially independent and less stable institutions; the use of the term “enjoyment” was widely criticized for neglecting museums that focus on topics such as war and genocide (Mairesse, 2019: 157). More importantly, the 2007 definition was based on European museum models and no longer adequately addressed the significant differences across other regions (Brown and Mairesse,

2018). Consequently, ICOM initiated a revision of the definition in 2017, which led to intense debates due to the fact that “the points of intersection between museums and communities are continuously shifting” (ICOM, 2019: no page). These discussions underscore the sector’s strong commitment to both preserving the concept of the museum and fostering its development (Crooke, 2020: 308). The 2019 proposal marked a significant departure from the version established in 2007 (ICOM, 2020: 1). It foregrounds museums as active sites of social engagement, rather than purely as custodians of material culture:

Museums are democratising, inclusive, and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the future. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

However, the 2019 ICOM proposal quickly generated substantial criticism within the sector. First of all, it was deemed overly lengthy and difficult to operationalize (Villa, 2022). Secondly, its political language, such as “social justice,” “global equality,” and “planetary wellbeing”, was viewed by some as excessively ideological, potentially alienating institutions in regions with limited resources or

contested political climates (Gould, 2019; Robinson, 2021; Raicovich, 2021). Thirdly, critics argued that the content of the definition was excessively idealistic and insufficiently grounded in the realities of the new international economic and political order (Fraser, 2019; Jones, 2019). Therefore, the vote on this proposal was postponed, leading ICOM to initiate an 18-month review process (Villa, 2022). On August 24, 2022, ICOM adopted a revised definition that balances the sector's aspirational goals with practical considerations (ICOM, 2022: article 3, section 1):

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.

Although this 2022 definition retains the emphasis on “not-for-profit” status and “permanent institution,” it now explicitly incorporates “intangible heritage,” “accessibility,” “inclusion,” and “sustainability.” Phrases like “operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities” indicate that ICOM now not only focus on collections care but also on robust community engagement and social outreach. As Brown and Mairesse (2018: 525) assert, the museum definition “constantly evolves” in response to shifting intersections between institutions and their communities.

Looking beyond the debates, the continuous revision of ICOM museum definitions reveals an underlying anxiety within the museum sector about its capacity to remain relevant amidst accelerating social change. As nonprofit cultural institutions largely dependent on public visiting and governmental support, museums lack the autonomous revenue streams that might insulate them from external expectations. Consequently, each definitional update—from the stability-oriented language of 2007 to the activism-infused rhetoric of 2019 and the more pragmatic balance struck in 2022—can be read as a reactive measure to placate stakeholders and secure continued legitimacy. In other words, rather than reflecting a proactive, scholarly consensus on museums’ evolving roles, these revisions often respond to perceived pressures: calls for social justice, demands for digital accessibility, or the urgencies of global crises. This reflexive posture underscores a sectoral anxiety: if museums do not visibly adapt their stated mission to changing priorities, they risk losing public and governmental support. Thus, the very act of redefining “museum” becomes the first line of defence in times of crisis, signalling to stakeholders, policymakers, and visitors alike that the institution is ready to reshape its functions and priorities in service of emergent societal needs.

In light of this research, the anxiety revealed by the evolving museum definition prompts a critical question: when a destructive crisis occurs, independent museums may face even starker difficulties than publicly funded museums. Under such circumstances, an independent institution must decide whether to preserve its self-defined identity or to pivot its mission toward attracting emergency grants and official support. In the chapters that follow, this study will incorporate an examination of how the

Covid-19 pandemic has affected independent museums' mission realignment, exploring how these institutions balance their independence against the urgent need for financial survival.

2.2 Museum and Communities

The visitors are indispensable to the museums. As highlighted by Latham and Simmons (2014), without a visitor a museum is merely a repository or a storehouse. The Covid-19 pandemic has reframed how museums engage with their communities during periods of extreme isolation (Cobley *et al.*, 2020: 112). Before exploring how Covid-19 has altered the community engagement of museums, it is essential to define what a community is and explain why it is crucial for museums to maintain connections with their communities during crises. Therefore, this section reviews the literature relating to the concept of museum communities and the relationship between museums and their communities.

2.2.1 The Concept of Communities

A museum is not only a place for displaying, but also “an external consideration of the benefits it provides to the individuals and communities it seeks to serve” (Weil, 2003a: 42). Weil’s words are the ideal opening line for this discussion relating the concept of the “communities” to museums.

Early public museums in Western Europe—emerging in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—were founded in part to educate an increasingly urban population dislocated by industrialisation (Ames, 1985: 3). Consequently, museums are expected to provide benefits to their communities and have been

placed under evaluation, as they receive various forms of support from the communities, including entrance fees, donations, and government funding derived from taxes.

However, the concept of the ‘community’ that the museums are supposed to serve has not been clearly defined in the twenty-first century (Watson, 2007: 2), because the term “community” can adapt to various contexts much like a chameleon (Crooke, 2006: 173). One useful way to conceptualize communities is suggested by Hooper-Greenhill (2000: 78), who posits that communities are constructed by people who are “recognized by their common frameworks of intelligibility, interpretive repertoires, knowledge, and intellectual skills.” Such communities are flexible, and individuals can belong to multiple communities simultaneously (Watson, 2007: 4). To be more specific, Mason (2005: 206–207) identifies six distinct ways of recognising communities: first, some communities are defined by shared historical or cultural experiences, which shape a collective sense of identity and memory; second, others may be characterised by their specialist knowledge, often forming around particular interests or areas of expertise; third, communities can be delineated based on demographic or socio-economic factors, such as class, income, or education level; fourth, identity-based communities are also significant, encompassing national, regional, and local affiliations, as well as identities related to sexuality, disability, age, and gender; fifth, some communities are defined through their visiting practices, including how and when they engage with cultural institutions; finally, Mason highlights that certain communities are formed in relation to their exclusion from others, pointing to the importance of marginalisation and structural inequality in understanding community dynamics.

As such, Mason's methods serve as a good starting point to illustrate the difference between "communities", the "public" and "audiences". The term "community" is obviously multi-layered and complicated. The term "public" is too broad to accurately describe the people that museums aim to support, while the term "audience" portrays this group as overly homogeneous. Cooke (2006: 170) notes that the term "community" has increasingly taken the place of "audience", "public" and "visitor" in the museum literature, as "community" signifies a trend towards museums becoming more inclusive, welcoming and relevant to a wider range of people. Considering the context of this research, the next section will review the literature that discusses how communities are framed in the museum field.

2.2.2 The Segmentation of Museum Communities

According to the previous section, museum communities can be simply defined as the groups of people who have an interest in and concern for museums. So, who cares about museums? Latham and Simmons (2014: 113) offered a perspective that these people could be divided into the inner circle (museum workers as well as volunteers) and outer circle (visitors). There is no doubt that museum staff and volunteers care about museums, after all, it involves their working environment and professional connotations. However, the term "museum communities" is usually applied to museum visitors.

Visitor studies have been an academic interest since the 1980s, during which time the museum audience has been divided into two segments: museumgoers and non-museumgoers (Ellenbogen *et al.*, 2008). Gurt and Torres (2007) demonstrate that generally speaking, we must take into account the

features, circumstances, and frequency of use when determining whether or not to classify a certain segment of society as museum users. However, categorizing the museum communities solely based on their visitation frequency no longer aligns with the current museum mission that strives for inclusivity and diversity. As Crooke (2006: 182) suggests, museums must acknowledge the diversity within the communities they aim to serve. Even within the group of non-museumgoers, there exists significant diversity: some may not visit museums due to a lack of interest; others may feel alienated by the content presented, and some may be struggling on the margins of society, making museum visits less accessible.

Therefore, despite the various segmentation strategies, it is important to consider the diversiform of museum services available nowadays and to “build bridges to new audiences” (*ibid.*), thereby extending outreach to potential museum communities that could benefit from these services. Hooper-Greenhill (1994) points out that the “use” of a museum also encompasses several public functions that are typically not highly apparent, like using the museum for work experience, archiving materials, and other related purposes.

While it is unfeasible to research every potential combination of individuals who might visit museums, it is possible to look into the needs and motivations of the individuals and groups who visit museums most frequently (Latham and Simmons, 2014). Attending a physical museum involves significant potential costs in terms of commitment of time, money, and effort (Falk and Dierking, 2013). Following Falk and Dierking’s (2013) insights, if the cost of visiting a museum exceeds what the audience is willing to accept, it will affect their decision to visit. In the context of the Covid-19

pandemic, this excessive cost could also be the risk of contracting the virus. Investigating museum visiting has ignored the accompanying societal factors, including the development of tourism, growth of car ownership, spread of television and more recently the Internet (Black, 2016). In the context of this study, it is reasonable to assume that some changes in the social environment, such as the pandemic, will affect the way museum users visit museums and even affect the composition of the visitor group.

Although the museum sector is working to engage more people, it is clearly apparent that not everyone uses museums. For instance, Nick Merriman (1991: 78) displayed the partial result of a survey, which was undertaken by 1500 adults across Great Britain. As Merriman (1991: 78) stated, the non-visitors and those who rarely visit museums thought museums were just monuments of the dead, thus deterring visiting. Some scholars have considered the factors that influence people's visiting motivations. For instance, Gurt and Torres (2007) stated:

It is probably difficult to find people who show a specific wish not to use a particular museum, or museums in general, and who indicate a complete lack of interest in any museum activity whatsoever. A total lack of interest could be the result of this person holding a negative image of museums, or the consequence of being unaware of its programmes, but it is more likely to be due to the fact that these centres do not deal with matters in which the person is really interested.

Ambrose and Paine (2012) point out that the reason for not visiting museums could variously be physical, intellectual, cultural, financial, organizational, and sensory. Likewise, Cameron (1972: 194-195) highlighted two principal problems that have not been solved: firstly, the public was still being offered private collections but with a new name over the door, since the organizing and structuring was designed for well-educated users; secondly, the value system tended to be the value system of the middle class. According to Abd el Salam *et al.* (2017), the barriers may also differ depending on the area. For instance, in Egypt the government mainly regards museums and heritage as tourist attractions, so many Egyptians believe that museums and historic sites do not relate to them at all and that these are spaces for foreign tourists and scholars (*ibid.*). Latham and Simmons (2014) argue that barriers can be unconsciously placed or can exist as residual effects of social norms. Therefore, museums should be aware of these potential barriers and take action to welcome a wider range of users, especially those who do not visit due to external factors such as obscure exhibition labels or alienated community emotions rather than their own lack of interest.

2.2.3 The Relationship Between Museums and Communities

The relationship between museums and communities has never been set in stone. Weil (1997) concludes that the interaction between communities and museums needs to be viewed as a revolution in progress. As stated in the section about museum definitions, early museums acted more like treasure houses or cabinets of curiosities (Impey and MacGregor, 2017). With collections that expanded through colonial growth, imperial pillaging, scientific exchange, and governmental patronage, many of the early national museums sprang from private collections and cabinets of curiosity (Kratz and

Karp, 2006). In the 15th century, the public was at a disadvantage, since they were at best objects and not subjects of museum development and governance, and their needs as understood by themselves were not a priority. According to Weil (1997), the museum was founded as an aristocratic project with the goals of raising the public's consciousness, lifting visitors' spirits, and refining and uplifting the common taste. When it came to the twenty-first century, Weil (1997) claimed that the relative positions of the museum and the public have revolved a full 180 degrees so that communities gain the upper hand insofar as the key role museums is considered to be in their service. In contrast to Weil, Cameron (1972) summarised two major problems that occurred during this transformation: first, the public was still offered private collections and prevailing curation strategies, but with a new name on the door; second, the value systems that determined presentation selection tended to be middle-class values. Along the same lines, Latham and Simmons (2014) highlighted that barriers can be unintentionally constructed or exist as residual impacts of societal norms. In other words, despite current notions of community influence over museums, invisible boundaries still remain.

Consequently, museums face the challenge of keeping a balance between potent modes of authority and assessable public services. Several studies nonetheless underline that many museums unwittingly ignore the complexity of visitors' backgrounds (for example Weil, 1997; Falk, 2009). Karp, Kremer, and Levine (2013) point out that when people enter museums, they do not leave their cultures and identities in the coatroom, and they interpret museum exhibitions through their prior experiences and through the culturally learned beliefs, values and perceptual skills that they gain through membership in multiple communities. Therefore, the goal of community engagement activities should be based on

visitor-oriented considerations and not just the intentions of the museum staff (Falk, 2009). Along the same line, Smith and Emma (2009: 103) pointed out that the community engagement process should take the feedback of visitors into account. Although the work of adapting the museum to better serve the public's needs is far from successfully accomplished, the museum profession community shows signs that museums are attempting to implement these ideals (Weil, 1997).

Attempting to engage more communities means welcoming all kinds of voices as well. Karp, Kreamer, and Levine (2013) expressed their concern that visitors could always produce counternarratives, whether through different knowledge bases, resistance, or sheer miscomprehension. Unlike the situation in the past, the communities nowadays are more and more familiar with multiple communication channels. Over the years museums have also increasingly found themselves in fruitful and frustrating conversations and interactions with a variety of media, including cinema, television, video games, and other interactive forms like the social media (Kratz and Karp, 2006). Pulh and Mencarelli (2015) concluded that collaborative online trends can have beneficial effects by developing the visitors' skills and facilitating access to museums together with adverse effects by questioning the museum authority and identity and by disenchanting the museum experience. In addition, the message among members of the communities might spread both swiftly and extensively, including negative news. For instance, it made headlines when a former curator of the British Museum, Peter Higgs, stole 1,800 items from the museum and tried to sell them on eBay (Melley, 2023: no page). This has significantly damaged the museum's reputation at a challenging time as it seeks to raise funds for essential renovations (Titi, 2023: no page). Hence, the reputation of museums within communities can

be significantly influenced by a single issue - a well-known museum might lose its prestige due to a mistake, while an obscure museum may gain fame overnight because of one success.

According to Gurt and Torres (2007), it is essential to know how, and to what extent, museums serving the public lead to a reciprocal relationship between heritage and the people. Unlike the earlier limited focus on artifact studies, the emphasis of scholars tends to be diversely placed on the collection or museum itself, museum public services, the public appraisal of an exhibition, or scholarly inquiry (Latham and Simmons, 2014). Crooke (2006: 18) points directly that “the community group is defined and justified because of its heritage and that heritage is fostered and sustained by the creation of community”. In the digital age, museums collaborate “with” their communities rather than simply working “for” them (Bautista, 2014: 27). This shift means that empowered by digital technology, a more equitable and active relationship between museums and their communities has been established. In the context of this research, it is important to explore how the reciprocal relationship between museums and communities functioned during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly with the aid of digital enhancements.

Furthermore, reflections on knowledge and power have influenced thinking about the way in which museums function as social institutions and thus help us understand their relationship with communities (Watson, 2007). One well-known early study that is often cited in research on public culture space is that of Cameron (1972), *The museum: A Temple or the Forum*. It described the museum as a temple of the society which took the mission of community confrontation, interchange, and debate

(Weil, 1997). Here comes the question: what makes a museum outstanding among other institutions? Karp, Kreamer, and Levine (2013) explain that a range of institutions and associations besides those of the community form the “civil society”, including families, voluntary associations, ethnic groups, and other associations, educational organizations, and professional societies. Even though museums are just part of civil society, museums often justify their existence on the grounds that they play a major role in expressing, understanding, developing, and preserving the objects, values, and knowledge that civil society values and on which it depends (Karp, Kreamer, and Levine, 2013). Thus, the claim is that museums will become the irreplaceable platform on which the public could make their voice sound.

2.3 Museum Management

In the 1990s, as research on museums and communities flourished, several researchers recognized the significance of museum management (Moore, 1994; Fopp, 1997; Hudson, 1998). However, the application of management theories in the museum field has evolved as a gradual process. Orosz (1990:140) described the time between 1740 and 1870 as the “age of professionalism” in the United States, which developed the scientific roots that grounded museums as a profession. As Fopp (1997:1) states in his book *Managing Museums and Galleries*, in the United Kingdom it was not until the Museums Association Diploma was accepted as entry-level qualification in the 1930s that the importance of museum professional and management training was officially acknowledged. This section aims at reviewing the discussions relating to the concept of museum management.

2.3.1 Why: The Origin of Museum Management

There is a large volume of published studies describing the origin of managerial theories and practices in museum governing. As argued by Moore (1994: 1), the pressures and challenges motivating museums to focus on the managerial dimension of their operations can be divided into the political, the economic, and the social. First of all, by giving the example of the poll tax in terms of cutbacks and emphasis on efficiency in management within British public funding since the late 1970s, Moore concluded that political issues dramatically altered the operation and evaluation in the museum field. Peter Drucker, a well-known management thinker whose work has had a seminal impact on modern management theories, has famously stated: “If you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it” (cited in Coffeen, 2009: no page). Drucker’s words explained the reason why, as well as how museums became connected with accountability in new management theories. Museums are increasingly called upon not only to have a clear sense of purpose and direction but also to devise ways of assessing and evidencing the achievement of their goals (Sandell and Janes, 2007: 102). According to Ambrose and Paine (2012: 343), rather than rely on a simple subsidy or grant, it is often better for both sides to agree on a contract that sets out exactly what the museum will deliver over the contract period, in return for what money. As museums are part of the not-for-profit sector and depend on the government for up to 70% of their income, they must be seen to offer value to the government by attracting increasing visitor numbers (Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002). As already discussed in the section on different types of museums, it should be noted that the cases in other types of museums might vary because of the diversity of governance. It should be noticed that even though the authors above spoke more for not-for-profit museums as they are the majority, it does not mean that the existence of museum management in for-

profit museums is neglected. To a considerable extent, the use of museum management strategies in the for-profit sector could be taken more naturally as the concept of management strategies is generally accepted in the wider for-profit business world. According to Richard Sandell and Robert R. Janes (2007:102), in the for-profit sector, a considerable number of studies have been directed towards identifying the attributes and approaches to management that are shared by the most highly performing business corporations, in an attempt to distil lessons from which other companies might usefully learn. The growing significance of management in museums can be attributed to a range of factors, including declining public funding, the shifting expectations of audiences and other stakeholders, new forms of competition, increased pressures for accountability, and the emergence of new roles and priorities.

Moore (1994) suggests that management in the museum field is also the extension of a spread of managerialism in the local authorities as a whole. The managerial trends have gradually influenced every corner of organizations in society, no matter what they were. Museums, as mirrors of the past and present societies, show their progress and development, as well as their link with other societies influencing the world's development (Wood, 2000). Wood's ingenious metaphor reveals that museums, as part of the plural society, cannot escape the immense forces of the whole society. However, passively accepting management theories and practices under the pressure of political factors and managerialism ethos does not mean the museum staff was really convinced of museum management at the beginning. According to Allden and Ellis (1990), many curators and administrators remain sceptical about the motivation behind the introduction of mission statements, management information systems, output

indicators, and performance measures. This is understandable because most museum staff in the 20th century knew enough about their collections but few of them had professional management training.

Museum professionals have nonetheless long attempted to define and understand the essential elements of museum management, even if they may previously have understood the topic from different angles. G. Browne Goode (1895: 11), assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, USA, outlined that no museum can be established and maintained unless five essential provisions are in place. First, it requires a stable organizational structure and adequate financial support to ensure long-term viability. Second, there must be a clearly defined plan that is intelligently designed to align with the institution's opportunities and the needs of the community it serves. Third, a museum must possess or have reliable means of acquiring substantive collections or the resources to build them. Fourth, it needs a staff of competent curators and other professionals who can carry out its mission. Fifth, a suitable building is necessary to house both collections and activities. Finally, proper equipment—accessories, display installations, tools, and mechanical apparatus—must be provided so that the museum's work can be conducted effectively (Goode, 1895: 11).

Along the same line, Fopp (1997: 10) subsequently argued that in areas of financial decision-making, coupled with the availability of low-cost computer hardware and software, museum staff can apply quantitative techniques that would have increased the efficiency and accuracy of museum accounting. From this point of view, with the help of modern appliances like computers and related managerial hardware and software, museum management has been more accepted in the museums.

Above all, existing literature indicates that the professionalization of management in museum fields relies on factors including political pressure, industry competition, increasing cultural demands, popularity of managerialism in society at large, and improvement in management appliances.

2.3.2 What: The Contents of Museum Management

Lord *et al.* (2009:1) offer an explanatory definition of management purpose in museums: it is to facilitate decisions that lead to the achievement of the museum's mission, the fulfilment of its mandate, and the realization of its goals and objectives for all of its functions. Lord *et al.* (2009) divide the practice of museum management into collection management, public program management, facility management, and financial management. Other authors like Moore (1994) discuss this topic in terms of museum management (including staff, collections, architecture, and exhibitions), museum reputation management (including reputation in groups like visitors, media, local communities, and tourists), and management of relationships with patrons (sponsors, local authorities, trustees and awarding bodies). Fopp (1997: 7-33) offers another perspective from management studies, including quantitative management, classical approach management, human relations management, system management, and situational management. Thus, the existing literature does not have a settled and unified notion of the museum management structure. Obviously, regardless of the numerous "names" of management directions, we could conclude from the statements above that the contents of museum management cannot work without four elements: cooperation, resources, policies, and marketing. With the development of museum management studies, the new branches of museum management will be

even richer in the future. For example, maybe there will be a new notion of public health management after the pandemic.

Nevertheless, much published research has announced that museum management is facing increasing challenges and dilemmas (Ambrose and Paine, 2012; Choi and Kim, 2021). First of all, the cultural transformation from the classical museum concept to modern managerial strategies has caused conflicts. The trend of transforming from part of public services to civil society museum requires that its personnel must be continually involved in training and personal development, as the museum becomes as much as an educating organization (Lord *et al.*, 2009: 49). Hatton (2012) emphasizes that the conceptual roots of museums in classic times have underpinned most museum management dilemmas and continue to do so. More complicated for museum directors is the process of managing cultural change within a museum organization, especially where the museum culture has become conservative rather than innovative (Ambrose and Paine, 2012: 396). On the one hand, some authors suggest solutions to this problem. For example, Janes (2013: 375) demonstrates in his book *Museums and the Paradox of Change* that, in considering the role of museums as active agents of cultural change, he has three expectations of them as public institutions: (1) to be open to influence and impact from outside interests; (2) to be responsive to citizens' interests and concerns; and (3) to be fully transparent in fulfilling the first two expectations. On the other hand, there are people who have expressed their concern that it is dangerous for museums to chronically use solution models from commercial companies to deal with issues in the museums, since they are a completely different kind of organization. Robert K. Paterson (2013) uses the instructive example of an object auction held by the

Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, in 2007 to clarify the controversial practice of financial management in museums. Obviously, selling property to relieve financial pressure is acceptable in the commercial field, but ethically debatable in the museum world. This resolute attitude towards commercial practices in cultural heritage can also be seen in the ICOM Statutes (2021a: 3): “ICOM membership shall not be available to any person or institution (including its employees) that trades (i.e. buys or sells for profit) cultural property - including works of art and natural and scientific specimens - taking national laws and international conventions into consideration”.

2.3.3 Who: The Roles of Museum Management

Museums are governed, managed, and operated by people: they are inherently social institutions in which people work together to achieve and sustain the museum’s mission, mandate, goals, and objectives (Lord *et al.*, 2009: 13). Lord *et al.* (2009) also announced the three fundamental roles that people perform in the governance, management, and operation of museums: trustees, staff, and volunteers. What should be noticed here is that the staffing and job titles might vary among different scales of museums or even countries. Therefore, this section mainly focuses on reviewing studies into these three broadly perceived groups of people and specific related human resources management issues.

First of all, trustees have an obligation to manage the property of others (in this case, the public) with the same diligence, honesty, and discretion that prudent people would exercise in managing their own property (Lord *et al.*, 2009: 21). Secondly, the museum jobs concentrate in administration, collections,

conservation, education, exhibition, public relations, security, maintenance, visitor services, and research (Latham and Simmons, 2014: 98). Museum managers were defined by Ambrose and Paine (2012: 71) as any member of staff with responsibility for managing resources – people, collections, finance, buildings, or equipment. An excellent manager is someone who achieves superior results by consistently getting the best out of himself or herself, while releasing the potential of others so that they can make an even greater contribution to the organization (Tracy, 2014). Thirdly, volunteers are the people who provide practical support to museum staff on a voluntary basis (Ambrose and Paine, 2012:455). There are many factors that motivate people to volunteer in museums, above and beyond an interest in the subject matter or service to the community or broader society, including meeting like-minded people, staving off loneliness, using their expertise or adding to their own knowledge in a life-long education.

As indicated above, museums rely on highly skilled professional staff, working on creative projects, in an increasingly close relationship with all kinds of community groups and individuals (Moore, 1994: 8). Obviously, working in such a complex and labour-intensive organization, museum's paid or unpaid workers to varying extents face the challenges of dealing with communication problems and building healthy working relationship. The responsibility for innovative management is not only the purview of managers and executives but also extends throughout the museum at all levels of the organization (Janes, 2013: 359). Therefore, it is obvious that only when the museums operate as a whole, the efficacy of museum management may truly work.

In addition, workforce diversity and justice have been highlighted by many researchers (Moore, 1994; Kosut, 2016). In the historical definition of museum management given above, Goode (1985:10) by default assumes that the gender of museum staff is male. However, perspectives on museum management have changed significantly since these tentative thoughts on museum management were developed, and the current focus is on a diversified workforce. The realization of the problems inherent in the skewed composition of the museum workforce, particularly in terms of ethnicity, gender, disability, and class, and the need to develop effective equal opportunities policies and practices in light of this, is perhaps the most significant development in the sector (Moore, 1994).

According to Sandell (2000), based on his investigation across the UK's employment environment, the paucity of ethnic minorities in museum employment in the UK, particularly at middle and senior levels, is a product of, and is perpetuated by, outdated workplace cultures and structures. But the attempts to build workforce diversity and justice have made progress over the years. For example, the Museum Association in the UK experimented with a sector wide scheme called "Diversify" from 1998 to 2011 to increase the number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) professionals in UK museums (Davies & Shaw, 2013).

2.4 Museum Crisis

Coombs (2014:3) suggests that while a crisis entails unpredictability, this refers to the timing of the crisis rather than the likelihood of its occurrence. The pervasive nature of crises is evident from numerous examples, demonstrating that every era has considered itself to be living through "the age

of crises,” characterized by low probability but high-impact events (Rubens, 2023: 33-34). This understanding underscores Coombs’ (2014: 12) assertion that well-managed organizations must prepare for potential crises related to their business activities. Therefore, it is also of great importance to clarify the key concepts about museum crisis and look back to previous examples of crisis, since it is debatable whether the disturbances created by Covid-19 can be classified as a museum crisis. Therefore, this section will dig into the key concept of crisis and crisis management and will retrospectively synthesize previous museum crisis types experienced since the modern museums developed and examine the existing thinking on the related recovery process.

2.4.1 The Definition of Crisis

As we look back, crises have been a part of the personal, domestic, and international landscape from time immemorial, from the ancient world to the twenty-first century (Pfaltzgraff, 2008). During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the medical concept of crisis was adopted to describe and analyse society, standing for a state of uncertainty or a serious problem (Lagadec, 1993: 27). From the nineteenth century, the word was used in ambitious studies of cultural change which included ‘crisis of values,’ ‘crisis of civilization,’ and ‘spiritual crisis’ (Béjin and Morin, 1976). In addition to the transition of time, the interpretation regarding this term in different regions also reflects the divergence in philosophical thinking between cultures, especially between the East and the West. For example, in Chinese Mandarin, the definition of crisis depicts the double ideogram representing both danger and opportunity (Lagadec, 1993: 30). For example, the Covid-19 pandemic has triggered the deepest recession since World War II in many sectors such as transportation and tourism, while the gaming and

communication technology sectors have significantly benefited from the crisis (Amann *et al.*, 2022: 13).

A diverse set of definitions or clarification regarding the term “crisis” has been evoked from the nineteenth century, as the result of the interdisciplinary application of this word. Hermann (1963: 64) developed one of the earliest and most widely used models of crisis which includes three conditions:

- (1) threatens high-priority values of the organization goals
- (2) presents a restricted amount of time in which a decision can be made
- (3) is unexpected or unanticipated by the organization.

This model has been used extensively in many crisis analyses (for example Brecher, 1979; Billings *et al.*, 1980; Gouran, 1990), yet it tends to foreground decision-making speed and organizational values without fully accounting for the broader social context in which institutions operate. Karl Weick (1988: 305) suggested that crises are low probability/high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of an organization. Seeger *et al.* (1998: 233) further demonstrate synthetically that a crisis is “a specific, unexpected and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization’s high priority goals”. Although each of these definitions underscores the elements of possibility, urgency, and threat, they tend to understate the extent to which a crisis can permeate a museum’s social networks, community relationships, and cultural mission.

More recent scholarship underscores this sociological dimension. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, scholars across various disciplines globally have undertaken new and diverse crisis studies (Kartchner, 2021; Amann *et al.* eds., 2022; Xue, Zhang and Zhong, 2022; Rubens, 2023). This is because the Covid-19 pandemic has introduced more challenges, which have necessitated the learning of crisis in different disciplines (Amann *et al.*, 2022: 7). In contrast to earlier research, recent studies have increasingly focused on the impact of crises on the society.

Haefele and Storr (2020: 2) focus on the impact of crises on community equity and diversity, particularly concerning marginalized individuals and groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and the economically disadvantaged. If independent UK museums view themselves as stewards of local heritage, they must recognize that a crisis that disrupts museum services or forces closure may compound access barriers for these vulnerable populations. Xue *et al.* (2022: 27) emphasize the sociological definition of a crisis, stating that “a crisis must severely threaten the basic values and norms of a social system and involve and affect communities or social groups rather than business entities or individuals”, thereby shifting the lens from organizational self-preservation to the wellbeing of communities. Above all, for independent museums, particularly those reliant on public support and philanthropy, this sociological framing reminds that a museum crisis is not just an internal governance challenge but a phenomenon that can erode public trust, diminish community engagement, and undermine the cultural ecosystem at large.

2.4.2 The Types of Crises

Khodarahmi (2009) argues that understanding how crises are classified is essential for organizations to manage and control them effectively. Over time, scholars have proposed various taxonomies based on organizational characteristics, threat sources, and causal factors (Mitroff & Pauchant, 1988; Coombs, 2014; Meyers & Holusha, 2018). In their comprehensive overview of crisis management, Meyers and Holusha (2018) identify nine distinct crisis types:

- (1) crisis in public perception, which means a crisis in public confidence in the organization or industry;
- (2) sudden market shift;
- (3) product failure, which includes product recalls for minor defects and failures that harm consumers;
- (4) top management succession, which is usually caused by factors such as a sudden death, or even a planned retirement, power conflicts, uncertainty, and a loss of organizational direction;
- (5) cash crisis;
- (6) staffing crisis, such as strikes and job actions;
- (7) hostile takeover, which can lead to a jarring battle for organizational control;
- (8) adverse international events;
- (9) regulation and deregulation, which can create high levels of uncertainty.

Meyers and Holusha's nine-fold classification reminds us that crises can emanate from very different domains, and they often interact in ways that magnify their impact on an institution.

For an independent UK museum, a “crisis of public perception” might begin with an improper exhibition or a social media controversy, which might rapidly erode public trust and membership support. At the same time, a “sudden market shift”—for example, a decline in domestic tourism or the rise of competing digital entertainment—can exacerbate financial strains, leaving the museum scrambling to find new revenue streams. Meanwhile, if a key curator or director departs unexpectedly, a “top management succession” crisis can disrupt planning and undermine staff morale, compounding the museum's operational challenges. In some cases, independent institutions might be lost, where a larger local authority or museum trust offers emergency funding at the price of relinquishing control. The Covid-19 pandemic, as a quintessential “adverse international event”, illustrates how multiple crisis categories can converge, with international travel bans disrupting exhibition loans and overseas visitation, thereby compounding financial pressures and triggering a 'staffing crisis' as volunteers withdrew for health reasons.

By viewing these crisis types not as isolated incidents but as interwoven threats, we can more precisely map the challenges faced by independent museums. This holistic perspective lays the groundwork for targeted resilience strategies—such as diversifying income sources, investing in reliable digital infrastructure, and building flexible governance structures—that help independent institutions survive and adapt when multiple crises strike simultaneously.

2.4.3 Crisis Management

The term crisis management had its origins in the Cold War, referring to efforts to manage flashpoints with the Soviet Union so as to avoid escalation to nuclear conflict (Pfaltzgraff Jr, 2008). Since that time, scholars have elaborated models that guide organizations through preparation, response, and learning phases with models ranging from three to five stages (Mitroff and Pauchant, 1992; Mitroff, 1994; Coombs, 2014: 10).

Pauchant and Mitroff's original five-stage framework (1992: 43–76) begins by urging organizations to scan for “signal detection” and then moves into detailed phases of preparation, containment, recovery, and learning. In 1994, Mitroff distilled these ideas into a parallel five-stage outline (1994: 102), renaming the initial two steps “detection” and “prevention” to stress the importance of proactively addressing vulnerabilities before they escalate. More recently, Coombs (2014: 10) streamlined the process into three broad phases—“precrisis,” “crisis,” and “postcrisis”—thereby folding detection and prevention into a single preparatory stage, merging containment and early recovery into one acute response phase, and reserving “postcrisis” for the longer-term efforts at organizational learning and reputational repair.

Taken together, these models demonstrate that, despite variations in terminology and the number of steps, effective crisis management consistently hinges on three core activities: anticipating threats, responding decisively when disruptions occur, and reflecting afterward to strengthen future resilience.

Jordan *et al.* (2016) point out that these models have components that call for an organizational leader to be proactive, to understand what the organization may face, and to prepare for or prevent potential crises. Despite the varied management process, crisis management requires the integration of knowledge from such diverse areas as small-group decision making, media relations, environmental assessment, risk assessment, crisis communication, crisis plan development, evaluation methods, disaster sociology, and reputation management (Coombs, 2014: 1). Among these areas, specific explanations would be given to media relations and crisis communication, since the former one brings revolutionary changes to crisis management and the latter one has been regarded as something organizations have usually ignored.

Social media offers a new digital environment for crisis management, as there are new considerations for each stage of the crisis (Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith, 2010). For this reason, in the precrisis stage, organizations must now expand their issue management to their active social media platforms because problems or concerns of individuals may now go viral; additionally, within this stage organizations must now plan for crises born from the Internet; during the crisis, the time to respond is reduced as the event may become global in a matter of seconds; finally, postcrisis the organization must now manage the effect of negative publicity living on the Internet indefinitely (Jordan, Upright and Tice-Owens, 2016). Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith (2010) argue that the internet would act just like the mainstream media (print, radio, television) merely reflecting reality, although obviously in a much faster and viral way. However, Siah, Bansal and Pang (2010: 143) have noted the rise of social media platforms as a “double-edged sword”. On the one hand, social media can be an effective crisis management tool in

multiple areas (for example Dinardo, 2002; Perry, Taylor and Doerfel, 2003; Schroeder *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, social media can also serve as platforms where crises can be triggered on account of the features of social media including splitting information conveyance as well as lack of authentic check. Some specific situations must be handled with extreme urgency. Lagadec (1993: 10) provides a vivid metaphor to describe the drastic feature by comparing crisis management to firefighting: after one minute, you need a glass of water; in ten minutes, one truckful; in one hour, the whole fire station. Inaccurate or improper information will not only fail to demonstrate transparency but also cause serious consequences with the boost of exponential spreading speed.

As for crisis communication, many researchers have underlined the significance of effective crisis communication (Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer, 1998; Coombs and Holladay, 2012). Coombs and Holladay (2012: 20) introduce the functions of crisis communication in each stage of crisis. In precrisis, crisis communication revolves around collecting information about crisis risks, making-decisions about how to manage potential crises, and training people who will be involved in the crisis management process; crisis communication includes the collection and processing of information for crisis team decision making along with the creation and dissemination of crisis message to people outside the team; postcrisis involves dissecting the crisis management effort, communicating necessary changes to individuals, and providing follow-up crisis messages as needed (Coombs and Holladay, 2012: 20). Along the same lines, Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer (1998) believe that communication allows members to interpret the informational environment collectively, including the potential for and development of the crisis.

In conclusion, crisis management should not be just reactionary; it should also include preventive measures and reflection on potential crises. Effective crisis management may greatly reduce the organization's losses and even prevent events from developing into crises.

2.4.4 Learning from Previous Museum Crises

On International Museum Day, 18 May 2021 (ICOM, 2021), with the theme of “The Future of Museums: Recover and Reimagine”, professionals in the museum field gathered to discuss and share new thinking and creative solutions to existing social, economic, and environmental challenges and call on the museum world to treat the crisis as an opportunity and motivation for change. In that spirit, it becomes clear that museum crisis-management theories did not emerge in a vacuum but have grown out of hard-won lessons from actual emergencies faced by institutions over time.

To grasp how contemporary museums have learned to navigate disruptions, we must first survey the pivotal crises that have shaped the field's understanding of risk and resilience. The most instructive examples fall into five broad categories—natural disasters, economic downturns, armed conflicts, cultural reckonings, and other unexpected emergencies.

Natural Crises

For millions of years, life on Earth has always been threatened by various natural disasters. As the place to preserve collections, museums bear the obligation of preventing historical remains from being destroyed by natural disasters. Many researchers have outlined basic knowledge about what damage natural causes may result in and how museums should plan and react to natural disasters (Feilden, 1982; The Council for Museums Archives Libraries, 2003; European Parliament Policy Department, 2007; Benny, 2019). Natural disasters may cause destruction or damage to architecture, disappearance of moveable or unmovable collections, loss of assets, personal injury or reduction, and inability to access (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, 2016). Spafford-Ricci and Graham (2000) observe that there are unforeseen costs, such as the foregone rent on the closed facility, tourism revenue, and diverted employee time. The European Parliament Policy Department (2007) provides an elaborate introduction to the natural risks for museums, including floods, landslides, winds, earthquakes, fire, environmental changes, and other disasters like volcanic activities and land subsidence. Among these disasters, environmental changes, particularly climate change, stand out owing to their long-term influence (such as the increasing of sea level) and varied awareness in different areas (e.g. places in low altitudes are more likely to be concerned about rising ocean levels). Most importantly, museums perform crucial roles in communities, providing credible knowledge, presenting lessons from the past, navigating the present, but also raising questions about the future and stimulating the vision and imagination required for tomorrow (Decker, 2020).

Feilden (1982) attaches importance to the actions prior to the disaster, which include keeping records of the collections and property, developing connections with local authorities (like police, fire service, and hospitals), assessing potential risks and preservation priorities, making insurance contracts, and making emergency plans. Despite the destructive power of natural disasters, King and Wijesuriya (2008) suggest that disaster risks may be considerably decreased with suitable policies, practices, and effective preparation. For example, Hurricane Isabel made landfall on the east coast of the United States on September 18, 2003, resulting in half of the buildings on the Annapolis Maritime Museum's eighteen-acre campus flooding (Ferraro and Henderson, 2011). However, most collections and buildings were evacuated before the hurricane with the help of preventive measures, despite a few mistakes by omission due to the over-reliance on the plan and lack of flexibility (Ferraro and Henderson, 2011). In contrast, on September 2, 2018, a fire almost incinerated the National Museum of Brazil, due to a lack of adequate fire control financing and museum crisis management procedures (Culture Grrl, 2018). The comparison of these two cases highlights the need for crisis management in the face of natural calamities.

Economic Crises

According to Kayfman and Scott (2003), systemic risk is the concept that financial crises can spread from one institution to another, such as when a bank run spreads from a few to many, or from one country to another. For example, the 2007-08 financial crisis struck numerous nations at the same time, resulting in a global economic catastrophe unprecedented since the Great Depression (Huwart and

Verdier, 2013). In addition, the impact of the financial crisis reverberates diversely against different types of museums, especially among private museums and public museums. Also discussing the impact of the financial crisis, David (2013) demonstrated that public museums in Greece witnessed severe funding cuts for exhibitions, activities, cooperation, and employment. Poullos and Touloupa (2019) also focus on the museums in Greece but mainly compare the reaction of public museums and private museums. According to Poullos and Touloupa (2019), in order to fund their operational costs, public museums concentrated primarily on cutting expenditures rather than diversifying resources and pursuing additional revenue streams. On the other hand, private museums preferred to develop cooperation networks and attract visitors by improving service and renewing content (*ibid.*). Apparently, private museums showed more flexibility and efficiency in marketing under the condition of funding cuts.

Conflict Crises

Anthropogenic disasters including arson, acts of terrorism, and war are also of concern to cultural institutions around the globe (Powers *et al.*, 2019). It is obvious that most kinds of museums have no ability to prevent extreme violence. Wars, terrorist strikes, and other calamities would exacerbate danger in most museums. For example, if a war breaks out, valuable objects will become at risk of destruction, theft, and looting, exhibitions may need to be taken down and stored or evacuated as a safety measure, and museums may be forced to temporary closure (Pearson and Keene, 2017). Further, war causes direct or collateral damage not only through physical attacks, but also through spiritual

insults and blasphemy (e.g. Dayge, 1997), and attacks may be symbolically motivated, for instance as part of identity politics. At times, divergences in identity and cultural perspectives may precipitate a cultural crisis.

Cultural Crises

In recent years, museums have become targets or venues for protests and expressions of dissatisfaction, with the former usually revolving around anti-colonial ideologies and advocating political stances, while the latter often leverages the prominence of museums to convey their own messages to the public. For instance, in June 2020 in Bristol, UK, decolonizing protestors toppled the statue of Edward Colston—an eighteenth-century merchant complicit in the Atlantic slave trade—sparking intense debate about the colonial legacies embedded in public monuments and museum collections (Leyh, 2020). Critics such as Watson (2021: 5) note that these actions signal a backlash against a perceived “globalization” of Western narratives, while Løgstrup (2021) argues that Western-origin museums inherit an imperialist tradition that raises ethical questions when former colonizers curate objects obtained through plunder. However, whether decolonization protests count as a “cultural crisis” for museums must be evaluated from both sides. On one hand, viewed through a crisis lens, such decolonization acts pose a tangible threat to a museum’s reputation, drive up security costs, and create logistical burdens—rewriting exhibit labels or rethinking curatorial narratives can be both costly and disruptive. On the other hand, as Section 2.1 discussed, museums have a responsibility to promote diversity and justice in society; confronting colonial legacies can therefore be seen not just as a threat,

but as an opportunity for museums to update their mission, build stronger community trust, and demonstrate true institutional integrity.

Additionally, sometimes the initiators of conflicts do not mean to target the museum's contents or services but instead use the museum's architectural space and prominence to attract public attention. Protests are often meticulously planned and accompanied by photography to better visually disseminate the protesters' voices via social media (*ibid.*). For example, on October 14, 2022, two protesters from the "Just Stop Oil" organization, under the banner of climate activism, threw tinned soup at Vincent Van Gogh's famous 1888 work *Sunflowers* at the National Gallery in London (Gayle, 2022: no page). According to K.ho (2022), the videos of the protector talking about the Just Stop Oil action have been viewed on TikTok 1.7 million times and on Twitter 7.1 million times. In the context of museum studies, whether these protests are considered vandalism or a stimulator for dialogue and change (Durgun, 2023), such protests entail additional security and artifact preservation responsibilities for museum staff. Admittedly, museums are easy targets for protest and critique since they are supposed to be open to everyone, as indicated in the museum definition provided by ICOM. With new global dynamics and social changes bringing about cultural conflicts, coupled with the influence of social media, which is easily ignited by images and emotions, the potential operational costs faced by museums are quietly increasing.

Pandemic Crisis

Covid-19 is not the first pandemic in history. The plague that devastated Constantinople in the 4th century and the Black Death in 14th-century Europe are notable pandemics, with the former causing the death of a quarter of the population and the latter killing a third (Barrera, Bautista and González, 2022: 8). In historical context, the pandemic most comparable to the Covid-19 pandemic is the well-known “Spanish Flu”. Redman (2022: 21-27) reviews the impact of the Spanish Flu on the American museum sector in the first chapter of his book, *The Museum: A Short History of Crisis and Resilience*. Unquestionably, the pandemic had a significant impact on museums, affecting staff health and reducing visitor numbers (*ibid.*). However, the effects of the pandemic were quickly overshadowed by the First World War, other major events, and the economic prosperity of the 1920s (*ibid.*). The impact of the Spanish Flu on the museum sector can therefore serve as a crucial comparative case for this research.

In conclusion, various forms of crises cause assessment in terms of the museum’s managerial level, professional attitude, and social responsibility from multiple perspectives. We can also clearly recognize the lack of attention in some fields based on a review of the existing literature. Secondly, the ability to carry through the storm for individual types of museums may vary, thus the internal and external factors influencing the level of crisis management are worthwhile exploring further. Thirdly, although it is useful to make crisis emergency strategies, there is also a need to keep critical thinking and mobility in real practice. For example, in the example of crisis management during Hurricane Isabel, the staff relied on plans so strongly that they did not realize that mistakes were made in the

process. Fourthly, the respect for museum's mission and ethics is the precondition for all risk management methods. For example, the awareness of crisis management should not be disregarded simply because insurance is purchased. Insurance is a tool that can be used to protect cultural assets from calamities, but it cannot be used to commodify cultural property (Vecco and Imperiale, 2017).

2.5 Museums and Resilience

As previously mentioned, in Chinese Mandarin, the definition of crisis depicts the double ideogram representing both danger and opportunity (Lagadec, 1993: 30). Interestingly, this interpretation of "crisis" reflects similar philosophical thinking with those who understand resilience as the ability to use negative disruptions as fertilizer for growth during the recovery procedure (Clair, 2007; Hemel and Välikangas, 2003). As a buzzword applied in all kinds of disciplines, what does resilience look like in the museum sector? This section will review the historical background of the notion of resilience and then present the debates about its definition and application in the museum sector.

2.5.1 The Notion of Resilience

According to Fraccascia *et al.* (2018), the term "resilience" was coined in the 17th century from the Latin term "resiliere", which means "to jump back". The concept of resilience first emerged in the ecological literature in the work of Holling (1973) who describes it as the capacity to absorb and accommodate unexpected disturbances. Holling (1973) predicted that the notion of resilience could yield theoretical inspiration for management approaches. With the increasing adversity faced by societies and individuals toward the end of the 20th century, the concept of resilience has gained

significant prominence (Goldstein and Brooks, 2012). Apparently, this prediction goes beyond exactness: the notion of resilience has been discussed in a wide range of disciplines, such as urban studies, management science, international development, and psychology (Woodley *et al.*, 2018: 15). It is enlightening to see Holling's (1973) prediction coming true as this indicates the potential for this research to make a contribution by applying the outcome in the museum sector.

How to define the multi-disciplinary concept of resilience? This term is defined by researchers and organizations in diverse contexts (for example, Sutchliffe and Vogas, 2003; Walker and Salt, 2008; ACE, 2013). Among these definitions, there are two perspectives that are used to look at the notion of resilience: “bouncing back” thinking and “bouncing forward” thinking (Cunha *et al.*, 2013). The former refers to the ability to passively accept the external threat and survive through it. Sharp (2019: no page) provided a vivid definition of resilience as a kind of “ability to bend but not to break”. The latter perspective refers to the ability to actively use the environmental shifts as a springboard and jump higher – that is, to evolve. There is no superior or inferior status between these two perspectives, but differences in focus. In 2010, Arts Council England (2013: 31) provided an example definition of resilience in a strategic framework, “Great Art and Culture for Everyone”:

By resilience we mean the vision and capacity of organizations to anticipate and adapt to economic, environmental and social change by seizing opportunities, identifying and mitigating risks, and deploying resources effectively in order to continue delivering quality work in line with their mission.

As stated above, the definition of resilience by Arts Council England (ACE) emphasises maintaining original work and organizational survival. However, Woodley (*et al.*, 2018: 10) argued that the “bouncing forward” definition is preferable in the cultural sector because firstly, the mission of cultural organizations needs to be developed according to new circumstances; secondly, the adaptability is sometimes better than enduring hardship; thirdly this definition is about evolving in the long term. This research will provide the definition in the context of the pandemic caused by Covid-19, focusing on organizational resilience in museums.

2.5.2 Museums and Resilience

Why was the concept of resilience introduced into the realm of museums? As mentioned in the museum management section, the extension of managerial theories in the museum sector has instructed museums to be conscious of the ability to assess risks and react efficiently. The need of operating in such a risky world also urges most of organizations to consider the importance of resilience. Already more than two decades ago, Hamel and Välikangas (2003: 52) suggested that “the world is becoming turbulent faster than organizations are becoming resilient”. In a world of emergencies and disasters, where survival is always in doubt, the refrain made and heard is “become resilient” (Anderson, 2015: no page). Although the resilience discourse in cultural policies has been criticized for shifting financial responsibility from government to individual institutions (Newsinger and Serafini, 2021), no institution operates in isolation from its broader environment. In this context, a resilience-oriented policy, while potentially enabling sector-wide transformation, can also generate

new opportunities for individual organisations (Hall and Koupaei, 2024). From a governmental perspective, resilience is desirable because it preserves the overall functionality of society with minimal expenditure (Buheji, 2018).

Additionally, the government's call for austerity after the financial crisis of 2008 has prompted the application of the resilience concept. In this context, numerous scholars have observed that resilience seamlessly aligned with the UK government's neoliberal policy objectives, contending that the emergence of resilience discourse during this period primarily served to advance an austerity agenda since the commencement of the global financial crisis in 2008 (Mackinnon and Derickson, 2012; Brammal, 2016; Gupta and Gupta, 2019). Nevertheless, the term "resilience" quickly moved to the centre of policy discourse, even becoming a national catchphrase to "make the UK the most resilient nation" (Cabinet Office, 2021: 7).

In terms of the comprehension of resilience in the museum sector, one of the most important authors is Mark Robinson. Robinson (2010: 10) argues that resilience involves not only self-defence or self-preservation but also constant adaptation and redesigning in the pursuit of a main purpose, as well as acceptance of the understanding that change is both normal and important. Along the same line, he created the notion of "adaptive resilience", which has been displayed in the following:

Adaptive resilience is the capacity to remain productive and true to core purpose and identity whilst absorbing disturbance and adapting with integrity in response to changing circumstances (*ibid.*).

Through this formulation, Robinson reframes resilience as a positive and proactive capacity that enables museums to fulfil their missions amid uncertainty. Newsinger and Serafini (2019: 600), in their examination of the Robinson report, argue that the discourse of resilience in cultural policy operates performatively by “recycling damage into value”—recasting the losses and traumas induced by austerity as necessary catalysts for fostering a more commercially oriented and community-engaged ethos within cultural institutions. While such transformation may foster innovation, other scholars have warned that change is inherently ambivalent, carrying the potential for both success and failure. In the BOP Consulting report titled “Heritage Organizations and Resilience” (2012), it was suggested that organizations with robust and accountable structures tend to succeed more in competitive environments because they deliver reliable and consistent products or services repeatedly. Given the uncertainties introduced by the Covid-19 pandemic, the responses to this crisis provide a good chance to dig into the successes and lessons of the independent museums, thereby reframing the interpretation of the museum resilience concept.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has thoroughly examined the fundamental concepts crucial to this research, including museum definitions and classifications, as well as reflections on the role of communities and museum

management, and conceptualisations of museum crises and resilience within the museum sector. The detailed analysis of these topics not only clarifies the academic dialogue but also establishes a strong theoretical base for the entire thesis. While this chapter has set a theoretical foundation from an academic perspective, further investigation into the specific context of UK museums, especially the independent museum sector, and the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic itself is also essential. The next chapter will delve deeper into these aspects, providing a detailed exposition of the research context, which will enrich the understanding, and implications of the theoretical frameworks discussed here.

Chapter 3 Research Context

3.0 Introduction

A review of the literature may offer a snapshot of existing knowledge and related debates. However, it is missing a multidimensional coordinate system that addresses the research context across its specific historical, social, geographical, and disciplinary axes. To help navigate this research through a complex research background, this chapter serves as an introduction to the research context and groundwork for comprehensively exploring how these aspects interact. This context chapter contains a broad introduction to the museum sector in the UK, museum stakeholders in the UK, the independent museum sector specifically, and the pandemic context in the UK as well as related responses from these independent museums in the face of specific threats to their income, livelihood, and existence. The intention of this chapter is to provide an overview of the museum ecosystem in the United Kingdom that will be subjected to more in-depth analysis in later chapters, and to set the stage for arguing for the chosen methodology in Chapter 4.

3.1 The Museum Sector: A British Context

“We British people are proud of our history and culture” it is claimed in the country report *United Kingdom Country Review* (Countrywatch, 2021: 319). Such a statement no doubt generalises public opinion, and could be further qualified, but certainly, Great Britain is known for its heritage sites and

heritage industry (Hewison, 1987; Lowenthal, 1998; Wright; 2009). Tourism is a crucial sector of the UK economy, ranking as the 5th largest industry, and museums and galleries serve as major attractions that significantly contribute to drawing visitors and enhancing the British brand internationally (Panjwani, 2023). However, the sector's heavy reliance on tourism also renders the cultural industries particularly vulnerable to sudden disruptions, exposing them to sharp declines in revenue during times of crisis.

According to the statistics provided by UNESCO (no date), there are approximately 95,000 museums around the world. Taking the size of the population and territory into account, the presence of 2,500 museums in the UK (Museum Association, 2021a), which holds just an estimated 0.8% of the world population (Office for National Statistics, 2022) attests to a substantial British museum sector. Additionally, the United Kingdom is home to outstanding symbols in the museum sector: it has one of the world's best-known and most-visited museums – the British Museum (British Museum, no date); and it is the birthplace of some of the world's oldest public museums, such as The Royal Armouries – opened to the general public in 1660, as well as the world's first university museum, the Ashmolean in Oxford (Ashmolean Museum, 2017). To engage more people in using the museums, the government-funded museums in the UK have opened their permanent collections to visitors from around the world for free since 2001 (Art Fund, 2009).

It is relevant to consider the reasons why the museum sector in the United Kingdom has made its current achievements. Briefly speaking, from an economic standpoint, as a mature capitalistic country,

the United Kingdom has ample experience in assisting museums in fostering commercial operations. For example, Middleton (1998: 3) mentions that at the end of the twentieth century there was collaborations between museum professional organizations to improve the skills for business activities. Additionally, the United Kingdom attracts a vast number of international and domestic tourists and contributes £74 billion in economic output in 2019 (Panjwani, 2023: no page), which has also aided in the growth of the UK's museum and heritage sector. From the perspective of politics, it is a general tendency in the world to incorporate cultural services for the people into the governmental duties, so that most museums can gain support from the authorities. The International Council of Museums has highlighted that museums are established to pursue “the equal right and equal access to heritage for all people” (ICOM, 2020). In the UK, the museum and heritage sector has been enlisted by the government as a strategic tool to address social issues, with cultural institutions being directed to play a key role in tackling social exclusion and community breakdown (Crooke, 2006: 181). Besides, it could not be overlooked that the development of museums has also benefited from the intellectual support and personnel training afforded by various museum research institutions and universities. Based on BOP Consulting's (2016: 34) report about the museum workforce in the UK, the museum workers in the United Kingdom are highly educated, and even the overqualification of the museum workforce is gradually becoming a new norm. In sum, it should be noted that the achievement of the museum sector in the United Kingdom is rooted in a combination of multiple factors, including a strong economic foundation, a thriving tourism economy, encouraging policies in cultural services, and superior human resources.

Although the museum sector in the United Kingdom seems to be thriving according to the statements above, it does not mean the museums are developing at a balanced pace.

First of all, there are consistent geographical differences between England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (Candlin *et al.*, 2020: 30). As Figure 3.1 indicates, England clearly powers the most growth in museum figures. This geographical distribution maps onto the population density (Candlin *et al.*, 2020: 32). Extrapolated further, political governance and productivity could be the hidden reasons that influence the distribution of museums. The productivity difference determines the inequalities in local revenue (Agrawal and Philips, 2020:2), which indirectly supports the national or municipal museums. Political governance explains why some places do not have the most prominent population density or economic centralization of museums. According to the *UK Cities Economic Potential Ranking 2021* compiled by Investment Monitor (Davies, 2021), apart from the top city, London, bigger cities, such as Edinburgh, Bristol, Oxford, and Birmingham, have extremely close economic scores which are also reflected in the presence of multiple museums in these localities. Among these cities, in particular the capital city of Scotland, Edinburgh, indicates its predominance as a cultural capital, demonstrating that both political and economic factors play a role in the distribution of museums (Candlin *et al.*, 2020: 37). In the beginning of the millennium, Boylan (2006) predicted that the regional differences in museum growth would gradually decrease because, with intensifying need for history preservation and distinctive identity, people need carriers to display their own history and culture, and museums perfectly match this demand. However, this prediction did not foresee the economic impact of the economic crisis in 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic, both of which have led

to severe impacts on the museum sector, including closures. It should also be noted that the effect of the temporary closures necessitated by the pandemic during lockdowns impacts disproportionately across different museums, since a huge gap exists between large museums in big cities and small museums in rural areas in terms of digital skills and relevant facilities (Newman, Beetham and Church, 2020). Some large museums, such as the British Museum and Victoria & Albert Museum which have mature digital strategies can provide digital exhibitions or remote services, allowing them to maintain partial functions in the face of the lockdown that occurred during the pandemic.

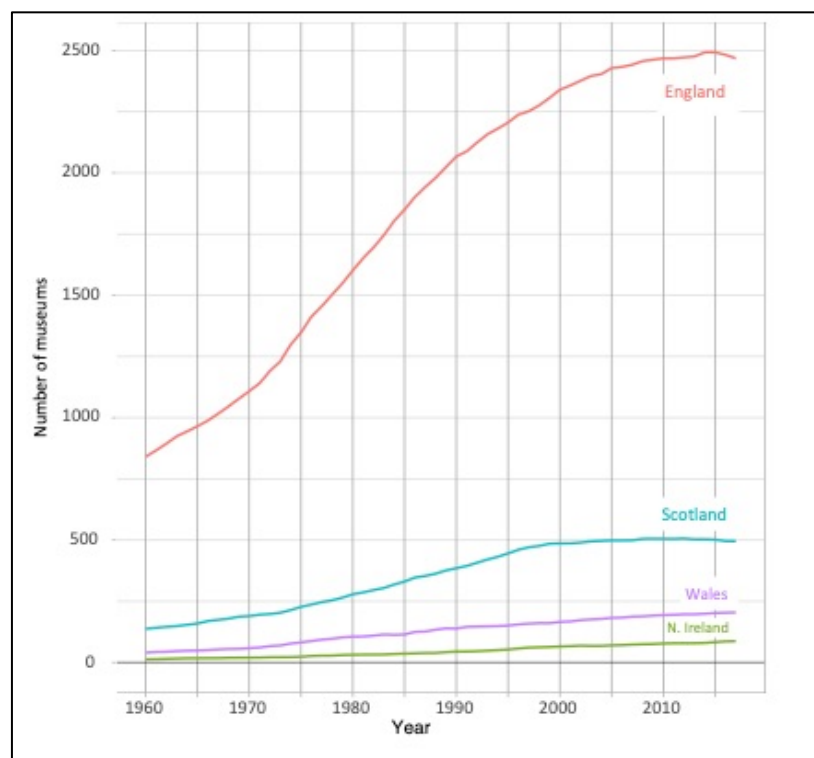


Figure 3.1 The number of museums over time according to nations in the UK (Candlin *et al.* , 2020: 31).

Another commonly discussed point centres on the differences between various types of museums in the United Kingdom. Despite the existence of multiple ways of categorising museums, the research

conducted by Candlin *et al.* (2020) mainly focuses on the museums classified by operation body, and this is likewise an important criterion of definition in this study. When classified by governance, the museum sector in the United Kingdom can be divided into national museums, municipal museums, university museums, independent museums, army museums, commercial company museums, and private museums (Ambrose and Paine, 2012: 8). According to a study by Candlin *et al.* (2020: 14), in 1960, there were 560 independent museums (53.7% of the country's museums), 419 public museums (40.1 %), 50 university museums (4.8%) and 12 other museums (1.2%). As time moved on, the total amount of museums reached 3,138 in 2020: government museums almost doubled between 1960 and 2020, from 419 to 786, while the figure for independent museums quadrupled from 560 to 2,352 (Candlin *et al.*, 2020: 16). Geoffrey D. Lewis (2018: no page), the former president of ICOM, provides an insight into this remarkable growth distinction between publicly administered museums and independently administered museums: while public or national museums are sharing a finite amount of public funding with diverse ministries making provisions for functions such as national defence, education, and social care, independent museums are more flexible in absorbing all kinds of revenues, so that they have prominently increased since the 1970s. Lewis (2018: no page) explains that independent museums could tackle the opportunities of applying for public revenues as well as earning an income by commercial activities, including renting wedding space and promoting retail, so that the direct income can be used in museum operation rather than being returned to the public purse.

Candlin *et al.* (2020)'s figures are larger than those in the statistical report conducted by ACE (2019: 4), which indicates that there are 1,742 accredited museums in the United Kingdom, including 1,072

independent museums, 73 national museums, 77 university museums, local authority museums, 31 English Heritage governed museums, and 11 Historic Environment Scotland governed museums. When comparing these statistics, why are nearly 600 museums identified by independent scholars in their research not counted by ACE and the Museum Association? This is because ACE applies the UK Museum Accreditation Scheme (ACE, 2021), which aims at ensuring that all museums are viable, focused, and trustworthy, inspiring public confidence as well as financing and governing authorities. According to the accreditation entrance introduction (ACE, no date a: no page), a successful applicant for the status of an accredited museum must meet a series of criteria (see Appendix 8). Therefore, museums that do not fulfil the conditions listed in Appendix 8 will not normally be considered eligible for the UK Museum Accreditation, such as virtual museums, private museums, or heritage centres without long-term collections (Museum Accreditation, 2019: 6). At first glance, this seems to be a comparison of statistical methods, but it is really a hidden interpretation distinction in the museum definition. Although some museums are blocked from the status of accredited museums for certain reasons, their existence as a part of the museum sector cannot be overlooked. More importantly, it is worthwhile to address within the context of this research whether distinctions in the standards of museums will influence resource allocation within the museum sector, which is crucial during times of financial difficulty for some museums.

3.2 Museum Stakeholders in the UK

More importantly, the disparities in museum accreditation among different stakeholders reflect their differing goals and missions. To better understand the strategic decisions made by different

stakeholders in the UK museum sector, it is necessary to first understand these key players and their mutual relationships. In order to underpin the following chapters, this section aims to introduce the main stakeholders concerning the research and then draw a map of the key protagonists in the museum ecosystem in the UK.

If the UK's museum sector is considered as an ecosystem, then the dominator of the ecosystem must be the UK government. According to *The Culture White Paper* (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2016: 42), the government should take the guiding role in enhancing UK cultural soft power, which can benefit the international standing and economy of the UK. Specifically, the government is responsible to manage the significant cultural policies, with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) of the United Kingdom being largely involved. It should be noted that besides DCMS, there are two governmental departments also have close relationships with the museum sector: the Ministry of Defence sponsoring the military museums, as well as local government supporting local authorities (GOV.UK, 2018: 4). As a specialized government body, DCMS is responsible for the culture and sport in England, the building of a digital economy, and some aspects of the media throughout the UK (GOV.UK, 2017). The priorities of DCMS (GOV.UK, 2023: no page) include:

...help to drive growth, enrich lives and promote Britain abroad. We protect and promote our cultural and artistic heritage and help businesses and communities to grow by investing in innovation and highlighting Britain as a fantastic place to visit. We help to give the UK a unique advantage on the global stage, striving for economic success.

In terms of the mission in the museum sector, DCMS has overall responsibility for museum policy-making, funding Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) to deliver the services for museums, and direct management of 15 museums and galleries (GOV.UK, 2018: 4). Besides, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland each have their own independent cultural departments (for example, Historic Environment Scotland, Arts Council of Wales, and the Northern Ireland Department for Communities) that oversee cultural and art matters in their respective regions. However, this decentralised structure means that museums in different nations cannot enjoy the same level of policy support, funding allocation, and strategic guidance.

Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) is a term used to describe public bodies that include non-ministerial departments, non-departmental public bodies, executive agencies, and other bodies, such as public cooperation (Cabinet Office of the United Kingdom, 2021: 5). According to the Cabinet Office of the United Kingdom (2021: 3), the government relies on ALBs to carry out a range of important functions to deliver governmental strategic objectives. Creating arm's length bodies fulfils the departmental objectives within a clear, refined, and comparable system (Cabinet Office of the United Kingdom, 2016: 3). Linking with the research topic, this section will explain the role of two relevant ALBs under DCMS - Arts Council England (ACE) and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

ACE, set up in 1946 by the Royal Charter, is a national development agency for the arts, museums, and libraries in England, distributing public money from government and the National Lottery (ACE,

no date c). As ACE stated on their official website, “we invest public money from government and the National Lottery to make sure everyone’s creativity is given the chance to flourish, and we all have access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences” (ACE, no date b). Similarly, HLF is also a non-departmental public agency that distributes money raised by the National Lottery and non-lottery funding to support the UK’s heritage organizations (HLF, 2022a). It is easy to notice that ACE and HLF have some overlaps in the work, which are acceptable and desirable as the overlaps arise from complementary working processes. As the key members of the family of cultural organisations and funders sponsored by the DCMS, ACE, and HLF have a wide range of common strategic interests and they have formalised their deep cooperation through a Memorandum of Understanding (ACE and HLF, 2016: 3) to maintain the harmony during the cooperation period 2018-2021. However, there have been reports in private channels of these institutions continuing to sign cooperation agreements after 2021. Although they share common features, ACE and HLF focus on various scopes in terms of museum definitions: ACE is committed to helping the accredited museums in England while HLF funds programs across the United Kingdom regardless of the accreditation (*ibid.*).

In addition, professional associations like the Museum Association (MA), International Council of Museums in the United Kingdom (ICOM UK), and Association of Independent Museums (AIM) play a crucial role in enhancing the academic discussion and professional communication within the museum sector in the UK and even around the world. ICOM UK is the national branch of ICOM, which aims at promoting the practice of preserving the heritage in the UK as well as contributing to

the global agenda of the UK museum community. AIM, founded in 1977, is a registered charity and limited company, led by a council of museum directors (AIM, no date a). AIM works to support and champion independent museums, galleries, and heritage organizations across the UK -assisting them in achieving their goals “to be resilient and to prosper” (AIM, no date c: no page). However, different museums in the independent museum sector will receive differentiated services depending on whether they have set up memberships. As of May 2024, AIM has a total of 1,036 museum members (AIM, 2024). According to the introduction of AIM membership, museums need to pay variable membership fees depending on their size (for example £71 per year for a small museum with up to 20,000 visitors) in order to have access to exclusive consultations or resources from AIM (AIM, no date d). No matter how these professional associations are operated, receiving funding from external bodies, or charging membership fees, they compose an important part of the museum ecosystem, working independently to bring individual museums together and make sure the voice of the sector is being heard.

To sum up, the main stakeholders of the museum sector in the UK could be divided into four layers: the first layer, UK Government, develops the major cultural policies; the second layer, consisting of the governmental departments, notably DCMS, manages the delivery of policies and the supporting resources; the third layer includes the public bodies distributing the funding, professional organizations; the fourth layer encompasses museum themselves.

3.3 The Independent Museum Sector in the UK

Ambrose and Paine (2012: 8) classify museums into seven distinct types according to their operation bodies: government museums, municipal museums, university museums, independent (charitable trust) museums, army museums, commercial company museums, and private museums. Within the context of this research, the focus is primarily on three major categories classified by their governance: governmental museums, independent museums, and university museums. The following Table 3.1 provides a clear explanation of what constitutes an independent museum, especially in the UK, and how it differs from the other two types of museums.

Governance Category	Description
Governmental Museums	Governmental museums encompass institutions managed by local authorities and national museums. As public service entities, they are accountable to UK taxpayers. National museums, like the British Museum, receive direct funding from DCMS and preserve high-value collections.
Independent Museums	The ownership of an independent museum could be broad and diverse, allowing them to receive flexible support from organizations such as English Heritage, Historic Environment Scotland, the National Trust, and the National Trust for Scotland, as well as from non-profit entities like charities, community interest companies, and unincorporated associations, or from individuals and non-charitable organizations. An independent museum can be jointly governed by one or more organizations or individuals. This flexibility enables them to serve both special interest groups and domestic communities.

University Museums	University museums are institutions that are owned and operated by universities, serving not only as educational resources for students and faculty but also as public-facing entities that contribute to the cultural and academic life of the institution.
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Table 3.1 Summary of UK museums by governance (Ballatore and Candlin, 2022: 224-225).

According to MA (no date a), independent museums refer to museums “owned by registered charities and other independent bodies or trusts. They are not usually funded directly by the state but may receive support through government programmes. Some may have funding agreements with local authorities”. However, this definition “raises some grey areas”, since it creates an awkward situation for museums operated by non-charitable organizations, such as those managed by individuals or private families (Woodham, 2018: 30). According to the MA’s definition, many independent museums in the UK should not be called museums but rather “museum-like institutions”, which clearly does not align with the context of this research. Therefore, the independent museums discussed in this research should refer to the heterogeneous group with diverse governance structures described in Table 3.1.

The founder of the European Museum Forum, Kenneth Hudson (1998), concluded that most independent museums have three common characteristics: they are economically independent; they are small organisations with fewer than ten paid employees; and they exhibit subjects outside of traditional museum disciplines such as archaeology or geology. Does the independent museum sector in the United Kingdom reflect Kenneth Hudson’s (1998) description? Or does it have its own character?

First of all, are independent museums in the UK really “independent” in all aspects? Cossons (1984: 84) noted that “a crude definition of independent museums might be those that are not administered directly by any central or local government agency or authority”. The Museum Association (no date a) defines independent museums as charitable institutions funded by registered charities and other independent bodies or trusts. These definitions concentrate on financial reliance, which requires that independent museums be directly funded by neutral organizations rather than governments. However, Stephen Weil (1999: 230) questioned the notion of independence based on the fact that even private museums receive a significant amount of public funding. In fact, Stephen Weil’s query is right: the notion of independence does not mean that independent museums cannot receive benefits from the public purse. Some museums could have tax relief and apply for funding or seek cooperation with local authorities and funding councils, like the ACE, DCMS, and the National Lottery Community Fund (Candlin, 2015: 26-31). However, Candlin (*ibid.*) also points out that it is difficult to secure public funding for some small independent museums since they are not qualified for the objectives or requirements set by the authorities. Therefore, the independent museums in the UK are relatively “independent” compared with the governmental museums.

Aside from financial reliance, the concept of “independence” also refers to the capacity to make decisions without being swayed by others. Likewise, the financial independence of the independent museum sector shapes their perception of independence. Unfortunately, there has not been much research into the “independent” nature of UK independent museums in decision-making. However, it could be associated with the commercial practices of some independent museums. “They [independent

museums] range from widespread activities, such as venue hire and retail, to the more unusual, such as commercial partnerships in computer gaming, model making, and filming”, Tanner (2015: no page) states. Governmental museums have clashes between the allocated revenue and flexibility in commercial practice. For example, former director at Beamish Museum, County Durham, Peter Lewis (1991: 45) indicates that governmental sponsorship provides as much tension as support for the social mission: a mission-driven museum concentrates on teaching the public what the museum believes that they need to know but a market-driven museum is focused on attracting audiences by providing what they want. Peter Lewis’s opinion perfectly explains why some independent museums still look attractive among the various leisure-time choices. As Falk and Dierking (2013: 39) stated in their book, *The Museum Experience Revisited*, compared with entertainment which aims first and foremost to amuse the audience, e.g. theme parks, more and more people nowadays prefer seeking opportunities to understand the world and expand their horizons. Following the same logic, the independent museum sector, a type of public place where people can embrace education and joyful experience, has comprehensive advantages compared with both classic leisure attractions like theme parks, zoos, aquarium and solemn national museums.

Secondly, the independent museum sector has a diverse mix of small independent museums and large independent museums. Candlin (2015: 31-32), stresses in her book, *Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums*, that some small independent museums are operating at an extremely tight budget, forcing them to cut corners. Candlin (2015: 33) illustrates that some small museums are even arranged in private properties to save the site fees. Nonetheless, a number of independent

museums have considerable dimensions in space, visitor numbers, and employee numbers. For example, Beamish Museum, an open-air museum located in County Durham and set across 350 acres, employs around 500 staff and 400 volunteers while preserving the traditional north-country immovable remains (Whitfield, 2021; Beamish Museum, 2024). Beamish Museum received a Capital Kickstart award of £975,500 from the Culture Recovery Fund in 2021 (Beamish Museum, 2021). It is evident that large independent museums can gain vast support from the government, as they qualify as important accredited museums according to requirements regarding size, structure, mission and, impact on the public. However, in accordance with the Siphon-Up theory in economics (Wood, 2014), large independent museums with superior congenital conditions will fetch more and more financial inflows that small independent museums cannot imagine, which thus aggravates the disparity within the entire sector. In fact, the DCMS museum team has recognized the long-standing imbalance in the museum assessment regulations and has started to seek solutions (DCMS Committee, 2016).

Thirdly, although some exhibition subjects in UK independent museums might look incompatible with the classic academic disciplines of the past, they are now involved in the disciplinary parameters of both research and heritage. Candlin (2015: 8) exemplified that “sports celebrities and computer games now come within the remit of academic study, indeed given the flexibility of the disciplines almost anything could come within a scholarly orbit”. Therefore, Hudson’s (1998) three characterisation parameters for independent museums are not suitable to describe independent museums nowadays. The independent museum sector in the UK spans a wide range of subject areas, including, inter alia, industry, transportation, archaeology, arts, local histories, sport, military, the sea, science, leisure, and

communications (Candlin *et al.*, 2020: 22). Having such a heterogeneous range of interests, independent museums in the UK make a great contribution to the diversity of exhibitions for the entire museum sector in the UK. Obviously, the characteristics of the independent museum sector in the UK are far more than the three mentioned by Hudson (1998), since the museum sector in the UK has developed a lot since he made his judgement in 1998.

According to AIM (no date a), independent museums in the United Kingdom account for more than half of the entire museum sector in the UK and cover various subjects. But the proportion of independent museums varies in different nations in the UK. In order to make comparisons, Candlin *et al.* (2020: 35-37) provided statistics relating to the proportions of museums by nation in 1960 and 2017. Table 3.2 demonstrates clearly from 1960 to 2017, the proportion and absolute number of independent museums in England, Scotland, and Wales saw a significant increase. Conversely, there is an outlier, Northern Ireland, which saw a 5% decrease in its sector share and a 13% increase in its proportion of government museums. Possible explanations for these discrepancies include the failure of documentation and the late starting baseline of museum numbers (Candlin *et al.*, 2020: 37). In terms of distribution, museums in the UK are primarily located in England, followed by Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

Nation	1960	2017
England	464 museums (55.2%) were independent, and 329 museums (39.1%) were government museums.	1,809 museums (73.2%) are independent and 549 (22.2%) are government museums.

Scotland	65 museums (47.3%) were independent, and 60 museums (43.5%) were government museums.	326 museums (65.8%) are independent and 133 (27.1%) are government museums.
Wales	16 museums (40%) were independent, and 22 museums (55.1%) were government museums.	125 museums (61.2%) museums are independent and 64 (31.3%) are government museums.
Northern Ireland	8 museums (57.5%) were independent, and 3 museums (25%) were government museums.	45 museums (51.7%) are independent and 33 (37.9%) are government museums.

Table 3.2 Numbers of UK Museums in 1960 and 2017 according to governance, by nation (Candlin *et al.*, 2020: 35-36).

When examining the geographical distribution, as illustrated in Figure 3.2, independent museums are more widely dispersed compared to government museums and are less reliant on urban areas. This reflects the previously mentioned characteristic of the UK's independent museum sector, which aims to provide unique and diverse cultural and recreational activities. Visitors can explore museums not only in cities but also in rural areas and even along remote coastal regions of the UK. However, this wide dispersion also means that many independent museums operate with limited access to public access and visitor footfall, intensifying their vulnerability and raising questions about how effectively national policies address their sustainability needs.

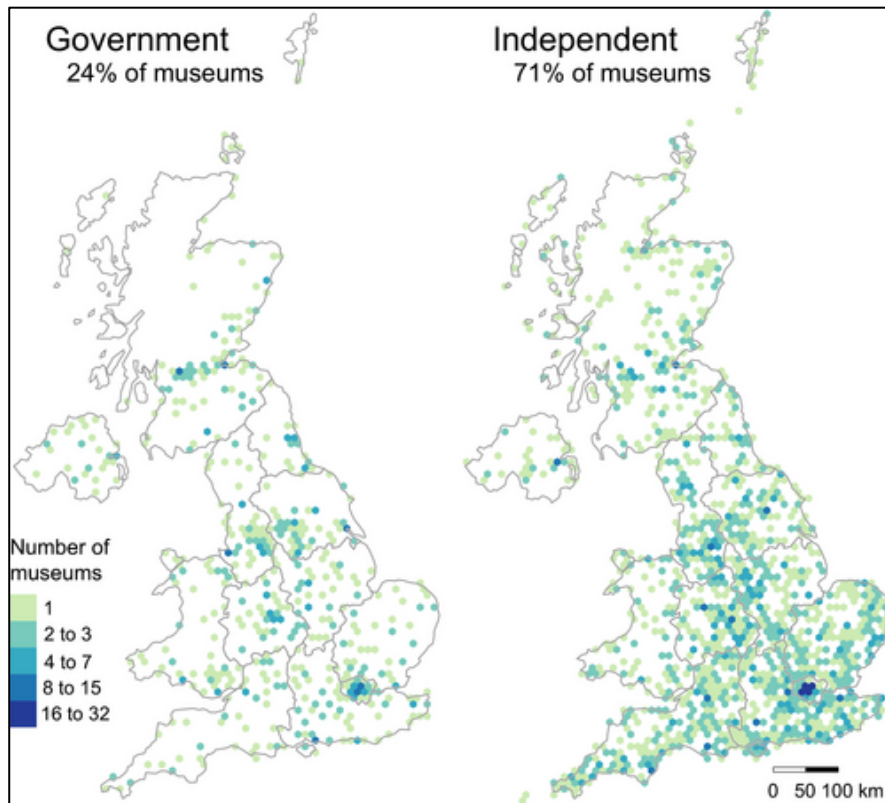


Figure 3.2 Geographical distribution of UK museums by governance and English regional borders as of December 2017 (Ballatore and Candlin, 2022: 225).

Therefore, due to the broad distribution, many independent museums in the UK are distinguished by expansive outdoor spaces and diverse architectural types, which enables them to offer a more varied range of services compared to governmental museums. As summarized by Woodham (2018: 31),

The physical spaces that many independent museums occupied also often differed from traditional museums, extending beyond the four walls of the museum building, encompassing, large outdoor areas, workshops, and mixed indoor–outdoor spaces.

Moreover, independent museums in the UK create and deliver incredible influence on the museum sector and even the local economy. In 2019, AIM published a summary report, '*Economic Impact of the Independent Museum Sector*', which shows that prior to the pandemic, independent museums attracted more than 24 million visitors per year, which brought nearly £440 million in income (AIM, 2019: 1). According to the statistics provided by DCMS (GOV.UK, 2021), DCMS-sponsored museums and galleries attracted 47.6 million visitors in 2019/2020 and generated 315 million in self-generated income. When comparing the performance of independent museums and DCMS-sponsored museums in visitor numbers and income, it is easy to understand that the independent museum sector is making great contributions to tourism earnings. However, while tourism generates substantial earnings, a significant portion is captured by shops, restaurants, and accommodation providers, so museums themselves often receive only a modest share. Nevertheless, because independent museums are widely dispersed, they channel this revenue into remote and rural areas, bolstering local economies that might otherwise lack major attractions and helping to sustain community services and infrastructure.

Another characteristic is that a number of independent museums in the United Kingdom largely rely on economising on human resources. The report produced by BOP Consulting (2016: 22), which showed that 69% of museum workers in independent museums were hired with salaries below the UK 2015 average wage. Along the same line, it is not surprising to find that the proportions of short-term workers, freelancers, and volunteers in independent museums are often higher than the other types of museums (BOP Consulting, 2016). While this provides flexibility, it also shifts the responsibility for employment benefits—such as sick pay, vacation allowances, and pensions—along with associated

risks like the need for insurance, solely onto the worker, rather than distributing these responsibilities within an employer-employee framework (McAndrew *et al.*, 2024). This phenomenon of an insecure labour force brings severe potential risks to these independent museums because the part of human resources consisting of freelancers, volunteers, and short-term workers could be easily influenced by crises, including pandemics.

To sum up, the independent museum sector in the UK is characterized by several interrelated features. First, independent museums exercise greater autonomy in financial management and decision-making than their government-affiliated counterparts, which allows for innovative programming but also exposes them to market uncertainties. Second, this sector includes a wide spectrum of institutions—from very small local museums to large established museums. Third, independent museums collectively cover a broad array of exhibition topics, significantly enriching the diversity of cultural offerings available to the public. Fourth, as with the wider museum landscape, there are pronounced differences in the geographic distribution of independent museums across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, reflecting regional variations in policy support and resources. Fifth, although much of the region's tourism revenue is captured by peripheral services such as shops and hospitality, independent museums nevertheless contribute substantially to local economies—particularly by drawing visitors to less-visited rural and remote areas. Finally, because many independent museums operate with minimal staffing and rely heavily on volunteers, their human-resource-saving strategies introduce operational vulnerabilities, especially during periods of crisis.

3.4 The Pandemic Context: A Tough Challenge in a Complex Time

Since the beginning of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic swept across most countries in the world. To give a complete timeline of the pandemic in the UK, this section will introduce the UK's museum sector through the lens of the pandemic context.

3.5.1 Pre-pandemic Background

Looking back to the start of the millennium, austerity within the cultural organizations had already arisen because of the economic crisis, which became a global issue in 2008. Lindqvist (2012) noted that some museum funding sources, such as endowments and sponsorship, have obviously been harmed by the crisis, while others, such as visitor revenues and lottery money transfers, appeared to have escaped relatively unharmed. Even before the pandemic, encouraging maximization of fund use and fostering institutional resilience have been the main themes within the museum sector in recent years (Robinson, 2010).

At the beginning of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic swept the globe and attracted most of the world's attention. On January 31, 2020, the UK found its first confirmed case of Covid-19 (British Medical Association, 2022: 18). This public health emergency was so menacing that it interfaced with other current issues that had been there before the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of these factors were global, including the austerity introduced in the wake of the economic crisis, while others were specific to the UK. On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom held a national referendum in which 51.9% of voters chose to leave the European Union, which introduced significant change to the UK's political landscape,

economy, travel as well as immigration policies, and the emerging global order (GOV.UK, 2016: no page). Coincidentally, on the same day that the first confirmed case of Covid-19 was reported in the UK, the country officially left the EU and entered a transition period that lasted from January 31, 2020, to December 31, 2020. In the wake of this transition, it became a concern that the museum sector in the United Kingdom was being threatened by the “double whammy of Covid and Brexit” at the same time (Adams, 2021a: no page). Therefore, it is of great importance to make clear how Brexit influences the museum sector in the UK before attempting to establish how it interacts with the pandemic crisis. The ACE discovered that while the scale and character of Brexit’s consequences have been obscured by the Covid-19 pandemic, social and economic ramifications are being felt in the arts, threatening to weaken the sector’s diversity both locally and globally (Collins, 2021). More importantly, it was widely believed that the uncertainty surrounding Brexit could have a negative impact on the UK economy, which in turn may adversely affect the investments in the arts and culture sector (ACE, 2017: 14). However, it remained unclear whether funding cuts would be evenly distributed across cultural institutions, and independent museums—already operating on tight margins—were likely to bear a disproportionate share of any economic downturn. In addition, the restrictions regarding working permission resulting from the Trade and Cooperation Agreement hindered the international recruitment of workers within the museum sector, forcing some museums to raise their salary packages (Adams, 2021a). In fact, as Brexit has progressed, more uncertain affecting museums or cultural industries have emerged.

3.5.2 Outbreak of the Pandemic

On 31 Dec 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission in China reported a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, Hubei Province (World Health Organization, 2020). A new coronavirus was then finally discovered. Coronavirus disease (Covid-19), a contagious infection caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, may cause respiratory discomfort, sickness, and even death (World Health Organization, no date). On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) made the assessment that Covid-19 could be characterized as a pandemic. By December 13, 2021, information provided by the Office for National Statistics (2024) indicated that the outbreak and spread of Covid-19 in the United Kingdom had already resulted in 230,000 deaths.

3.5.3 Museum Lockdown

On 16 March 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson imposed restrictions aiming at encouraging social distancing, advising people to avoid unnecessary interaction with others and to work from home whenever feasible (GOV.UK, 2020a). This statement officially announced the beginning of the closure. After this announcement, the museums and galleries across the UK closed in a week. On 23 March 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson delivered a national TV address announcing strict new measures to protect people from the coronavirus outbreak, which involved significant restrictions on movement and the closure of non-essential businesses and services to curb the spread of Covid-19 (BBC News, 2020b: no page).

After the government announced a nationwide lockdown, museums in the UK also closed to the public. However, this did not mean that all museum staff could take a break. During the lockdown, many members of staff, including maintenance personnel, particularly curators, cleaners, and security staff, continued to remain at their posts (Gillett, 2021). In addition, many museums endeavoured to assist museum communities in adapting to their online services or to help families in need achieve parent-child education at home. For example, National Museums Scotland offered printable online guides for families to design a dinosaur or mammoth (National Museums Scotland, no date). This example illustrates how, in the broader research context, museums' rapid shift in institutional priorities and resource allocations during lockdown highlighted the need to examine staff responses across different roles. Consequently, the research methodology needs to consider how staff in different museum roles adapted their practices during the pandemic.

It can be reasonably estimated that maintaining museum operations in an unprecedented manner posed a significant challenge for museum staff. During the closure of museums, tensions and worries permeated the museum sector, especially those independent museums that largely rely on visiting income, worrying that a lengthy period of closure might force some museums to permanent closure due to loss of income leading to insurmountable budget deficits. As BBC News (2020c: no page) indicated, "this would be a disaster – many communities would lose vital cultural resources, staff would lose jobs, volunteers would lose opportunities, collections would be put at risk and many local tourist economies would suffer a serious negative impact well beyond the current crisis".

During this period, the UK government introduced the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (commonly known as the furlough scheme), which covered up to 80% of employees' wages—capped at £2,500 per month—for organizations forced to close or reduce operations due to Covid-19 (HM Treasury and HM Revenue and Customs, 2023). Museums, including independent ones, could apply to place eligible staff on furlough, thereby reducing payroll costs.

Critically, although the furlough scheme offered a lifeline—averting immediate redundancies and helping museums to retain key personnel—it also had unintended consequences. When the furlough scheme was implemented, only the staff responsible for safeguarding the collections remained in their positions (Crooke *et al.*, 2022b). Consequently, the scheme highlighted workforce-allocation tensions within museums, as leadership teams had to decide which roles were critical and which could be paused.

In addition to government-level measures, professional associations such as ICOM and the Museum Association researched and reported on the pandemic, by distributing sector-wide surveys and producing reports to call on policy and decision-makers to allocate relief funds immediately to save museums and their professionals, so that they could survive the lockdowns and continue their vital public service mission for future generations. Their calling obviously contributed to increasing the resolution of governmental bodies to help museums in the UK, for instance, ACE announced the Culture Recovery Fund to provide emergent, continuous, or repayable funding for the museum in England (ACE, 2022). Certainly, museums themselves tried their best to tide over the lockdown,

through working remotely, developing digital services, and raising donations within the community (Gillett, 2021: no page). However, different museums have diverse abilities or strategies to deal with the challenges: some museums were struggling, and others managed with comparative ease, regarding this as a rare chance to develop virtual exhibitions (*ibid.*). Although they may have wished otherwise, some museums, such as London's Florence Nightingale Museum, announced their permanent closure due to the impact of the pandemic (BBC News, 2021a). Considering its role in the sustainability both of individual museums and the sector at large, investigating the determining factors of the success or failure against the Covid-19 pandemic lies at the centre of this research.

3.5.4 The Process of Reopening Museums

From July 4, 2020, museums, galleries, and heritage sites were allowed to reopen under the guidance produced by DCMS in collaboration with Historic England, which outlined how cultural organisations in the UK could reopen to the public and economically recover (GOV.UK, 2020b). Although museums reopened gradually, they were coexisting with the changeable pandemic context since new Covid-19 variants, such as Delta and Omicron, were also identified in the UK (GOV.UK, 2020b). Therefore, the reopening guidance was being revised and updated frequently throughout the pandemic (National Museum Director's Council, 2022). On August 8, 2020, wearing face covering was legally required in museums, with exemptions for children under 11, those with health conditions, people experiencing severe distress, those communicating with lip-readers, and emergency workers (Department of Health & Social Care, 2022). Then, government regulations regarding face coverings remained in place but were slightly adjusted over time (Hobbs and Bunn, 2020). The uncertainty of pandemic policy

indirectly allowed many museums some discretion in enforcing mask-wearing as a condition for entry during the periods when the regulations were being revised (Adams, 2021b).

Additionally, during a particular phase after reopening, museums had to confront the reality that public perceptions and attitudes towards the pandemic had significantly changed since before the lockdown. The social distancing principle gradually became widely accepted, leading to prolonged impacts on the room renting businesses like wedding rentals. During this time, the risk of virus transmission posed a threat to museum staff and volunteers, which means that the working conditions have changed significantly. As stated in the context of the independent museum sector in the UK, it was difficult to recruit volunteers at that time (Atkinson, 2020). Thirdly, the gaps in digital services and remote working abilities between different museums have intensified the disparities within the sector. Faced with these challenges, the museum sector in the UK and beyond came together to discuss response strategies and approaches to building resilience (Cobley *et al.*, 2020). Independent museums dealt with the disruptions of the pandemic: some chose to seek donations from the public (e.g. Beamish Museum, 2021), some chose to establish virtual exhibitions (e.g. People's History Museum, 2021), and some were forced to indefinitely close in response to the financial pressures (e.g. Florence Nightingale Museum, 2021).

3.5.5 Post-pandemic Context

From 24 February 2022, people in England were not legally required to self-isolate if tested positive for Covid-19, similarly, Scotland and Wales also introduced this rule in late March 2022 (GOV.UK,

2022a). This is benefited by the high rate of vaccination in the UK population. According to the statistics provided by the UK cabinet office, on 16 February 2022, the vaccination rate had increased to 91% of the population over 12 years of age who had received a first dose, 85% who had received a second dose, and 66% who had received a booster dose (*ibid.*). Globally, the efforts of disease control systems around the world to combat the Covid-19 pandemic have begun to see the light of recovery. On May 5, 2023, WHO officially declared that Covid-19 no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern (WHO, 2023: no page). In this context, Figure 3.3 outlines the timeline of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, highlighting key dates relevant to this research as well as other national and international issues (British Medical Association, 2022; Aspinall, 2022; Office for National Statistics, 2024; Walker, 2024).

As shown in Figure 3.3, the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK is no longer an ongoing public health emergency. However, in the post-pandemic era, the UK continues to face significant social challenges, including the long-term effects of Brexit, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the increasing cost of living. Independent museums must contend not only with recovering from pandemic-induced losses but also with navigating these intersecting geopolitical and economic pressures, which may reshape funding priorities, audience behaviours, and operational models. This raises a critical question for the UK museum sector: How can the independent museum sector move forward in this new landscape? This thesis will provide insights into this issue through the analysis presented in the following chapters (5-8).

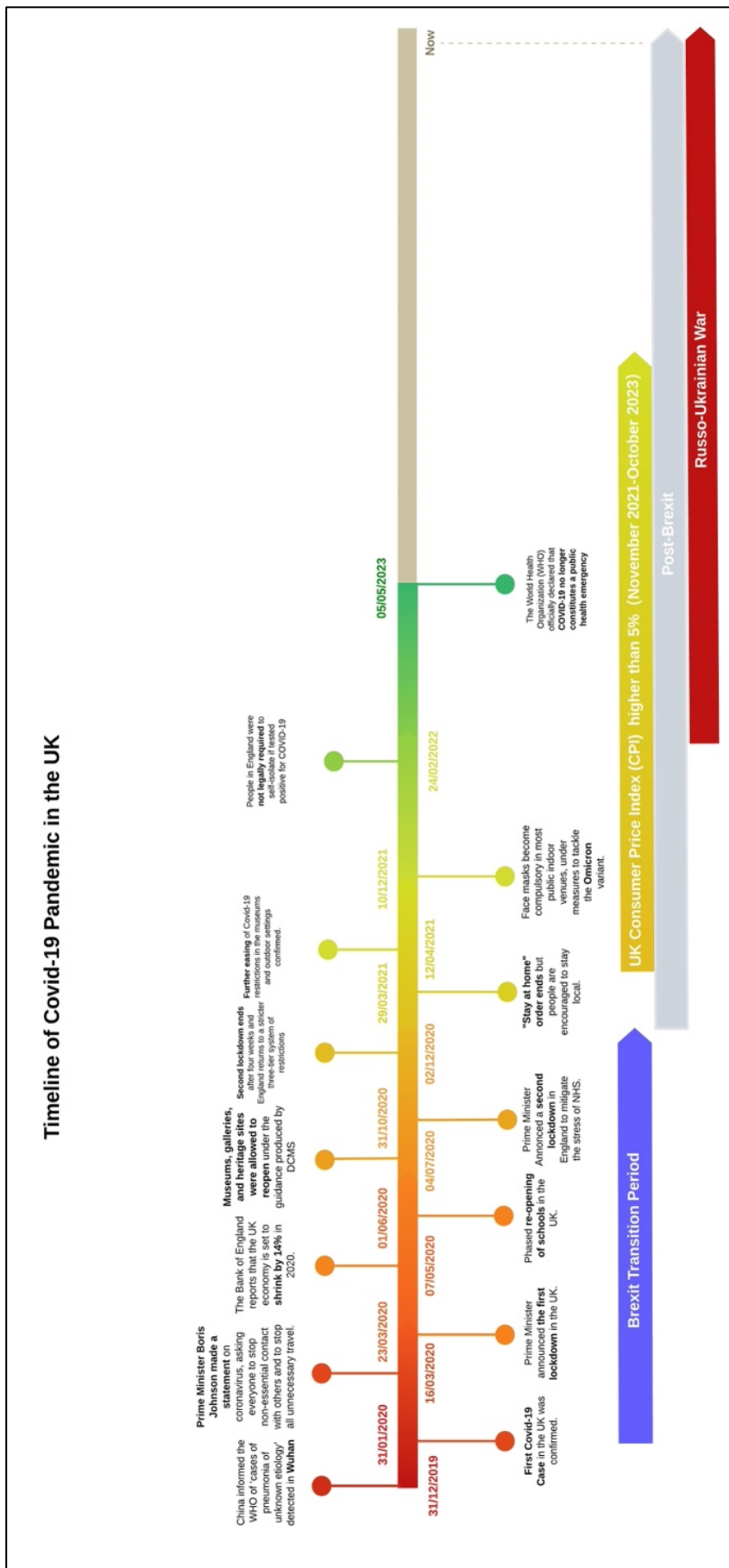


Figure 3.3 The Timeline of Covid-19 Pandemic in the UK with Key Dates Relevant to this Research and Global

3.5 Existing Surveys Conducted by Museum Stakeholders in the UK

Indeed, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK museums' survival and viability have been widely investigated by all kinds of museum stakeholders. However, owing to the heterogeneity of their institutional function and mission, the research focus of each organisation varies significantly.

Table 3.3 provides a snapshot of the pandemic impact research that has been conducted by different museum stakeholders.

Name of the Survey	Conductor and Sponsor	Year	Research Questions
Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS Sectors (DCMS, 2020: 3-4)	DCMS	2020	How was the Covid-19 pandemic affecting the sectors within the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports?
National Annual Museum Survey 2021 (South West Museum Development, 2021a)	South West Museum Development (Sponsored by ACE)	2020, 2021, and 2022	What impact has the pandemic had on museums?
COVID-19 Crisis (Art Fund and Wafer Hadley, 2022:3-4)	Art Fund	2020	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact the museum sector's work? 2. What do the museums need? 3. How could Art Fund best help the museums in the UK?
Joint Response to DCMS Committee Call for Evidence on the Impact of Covid 19 (MA, 2020:1-8)	Museum Association, National Museum Director's Council, Association of Independent Museums, Art Fund, The Heritage Alliance, The National Trust, The English Civic	2020	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the museum sector in the UK? 2. How effectively has the assistance provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

	Museums Network and the University Museums Group		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to meet upcoming challenges? 4. What lessons can be learnt from the way that the museum sector used to deal with the challenges brought by Covid-19 pandemic? 5. How might the sector change after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?
Economic Insight into the Impact of Covid-19 (National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2020:1)	Heritage Lottery Fund	2020	What is the economic impact of coronavirus on the heritage UK wide?

Table 3.3 Research into the impact of Covid-19 on the museum sector by key museum stakeholders in the UK

Table 3.3 reveals that each survey’s scope and perspective produce both insights and blind spots when assessing Covid-19’s impact on UK museums. The survey conducted by DCMS (2020) scrutinized government-level responses across all sectors (such as Sports and Music)—offering broad guidance on reopening and recovery—but only allocated cursory attention to museums, leaving sector-specific challenges underexplored. In contrast, the South West Museum Development survey (2021a) delved into museum-level impacts—tracking changes in opening hours, finances, digital provision, and staffing—but were limited to independent, local authority, and university-governed museums in England, thus omitting Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The Art Fund’s survey (Art Fund and Wafer Hadley, 2022) spanned all UK nations and institution types, aiming to inform funders and

policymakers, yet it captured only directors' and senior staff's viewpoints, neglecting frontline employees and volunteers. The joint response led by the Museum Association and its partners (2020) synthesized essential sector-wide problems and strategic reflections in direct reply to DCMS's call for evidence; however, it lacked granular, case-level detail about how individual museums navigated the crisis. Finally, the Heritage Lottery Fund (2020)'s brief economic impact summary highlighted overarching financial losses but did not probe operational or human-resource dimensions. As a result, each survey's commissioning organization began with distinct priorities. This divergence highlights that no single survey provided a complete picture of how independent museums actually operated and adapted during Covid-19. For this study, the implication is clear: this research must bridge those gaps by integrating existing survey findings with first-hand interviews across multiple staff roles and explicitly sampling independent museums across the UK.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter reveals that the independent museum sector in the UK shares some common features with general independent museums in the world, but it also contains individual characteristics, such as incredible economic contribution, economising of human resources, and ample diversity in subject, location, and size. Like many other places in the world, the pandemic has had a severe impact on the museum sector in the UK. However, the situation in the United Kingdom is complicated since there are other current disruptions including the long-term impact of Brexit, inflation, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Introducing the context of this research draws a clear picture of the independent

museum sector facing a tough challenge, the Covid-19 pandemic, in a complex time. The next chapter turns to demonstrate how this study builds on the presented context to address its research questions.

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted to explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums in the UK, with particular attention to the operationalisation of the two core analytical concepts: “impact” and “museum resilience”. It commences by detailing the process of breaking down the research question into data collection procedures and providing rationales for the research methodology. The difficulty lies in translating these abstract concepts concretely into appropriate strategies and methods while maintaining consistency with the research objectives and questions. Research methodology, as discussed in this chapter, is of great importance as it determines the nature of the data ultimately collected, thereby influencing the research findings.

To address this challenge, this chapter endeavours to “accurately measure what it intends to measure” (Price and Murnan, 2004: 66), by clarifying the rationale behind the chosen research methods, the purpose of data selection, and the inferences that can be drawn from the research data. Holliday (2007: 53) underscores the tendency of qualitative researchers to underestimate the importance of providing detailed procedural explanations in their work, thereby neglecting a crucial aspect of demonstrating methodological rigor. In response, rather than providing a general overview of research methods, this chapter focuses on the specific choices made in this study and their justification in light of the research objectives. In doing so, it addresses not only what methods were used, but why they were appropriate

and how they helped to generate meaningful insights into museum practices during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

As illustrated in Figure 4.1, this study has undergone nine pivotal steps. The objective of this chapter is to explicate the details and rationale underlying Steps 4 to 6 shown in Figure 4.1. The initial section of this chapter will underpin the methodological framework, including an exposition of the research philosophy, research strategy research design, and research methods. The next step involves presenting the data collection process. Particular emphasis is placed on the use of survey and semi-structured interviews, including question design, participant selection, and the practical implementation of interviews. Related to this, the chapter also includes a discussion of how this research addressed ethical issues during the data collection process. Next, this chapter will elucidate how relevant data is gathered and discuss the rationale behind the coding framework. Furthermore, as any research inevitably has limitations (Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2018: 155), this chapter delineates the limitations in the research design and implementation.



Figure 4.1 The flowchart of the research stages (image designed by author)

4.1 Research Methodology Framework

A well-conducted study must present its methodological decisions in sufficient depth and clarity to ensure that readers are inclined to “take the research outcomes seriously” (Crotty, 1998: 2). To achieve this, this research adopts “the onion model” proposed by Saunder, Lewis and, Thornhill (2009), which provides a structured, layered approach to articulating the rationale behind the selection of research philosophy, approaches, methods, strategies, and time horizons. The following sections (4.1.1-4.1.4) will unpack each layer of this model in relation to the specific research context. Each layer is considered not as a generic academic exercise, but as a set of deliberate choices grounded in the research questions, practical feasibility, and the conceptual complexity of “impact” and “resilience.”

4.1.1 Layer 1- Research Philosophy of this Research

“Everyone is a philosopher”, or in other words, everyone has his or her way of interpreting the world (Walliman, 2021: 15). Just as Collier (1994: 16) notes, even those who do not acknowledge their philosophical traits unconsciously apply their philosophy in science, politics, and everyday life. In this research, I recognise that the research question, exploring a notion within a certain context, determines that the research data is invariably influenced by the subjective judgments and personal visions of the research participants and the researcher. Furthermore, we seek knowledge first and foremost not for the rationalist objective of truth for its own sake, but for the sake of finding more effective ways to meet our purpose in life (Allemang *et al.*, 2022). The motivation for conducting this research also includes a practical desire to understand how cultural institutions like museums can better respond to real-world challenges. Acknowledging these premises, this section offers a reflexive articulation of the philosophical assumptions underpinning this research on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums in the UK.

By mapping my philosophical views onto established methodological frameworks (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2009; Walliman, 2021; Dudovskiy, 2024), I contend that this research is best situated within a hybrid philosophical stance, drawing primarily on Critical Realism, complemented by Pragmatism.

Critical Realism particularly aligns with the context of this research for several reasons. First of all, it supports the methodological decision to collect qualitative data from diverse perspectives within the

sector. As shown in Section 3.5, the surveys conducted by different organisations often reflect their own interests and responsibilities. From the perspective of a non-stakeholder, this research thereby is able to exhibit a more comprehensive portrayal of perceptions regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and museum resilience. In this research, the researcher acts as a “listener”, respecting the facts as seen by different people or organizations, and conducting an “abductive reasoning”, which is to understand “what things are, how they work – and how they might work better” (Haign *et al.*, 2019: 11). Besides, Critical Realism aligns well with what I mentioned in the previous chapter about the nature of the independent museum sector. The heterogeneous and fragmented nature of the UK’s independent museum sector means that disruptions can have vastly different impacts across different organisations. Critical Realism enables researchers to move beyond surface-level descriptions and identify overlooked or latent factors that may account for the divergent responses to the pandemic.

In parallel, the philosophical ideology of Pragmatism informs the research orientation toward application. As Allemang, Sitter, and Dimitropoulos (2022) argue, the value of research lies not solely in the pursuit of abstract truth, but in its capacity to generate actionable knowledge that serves a purpose. The outcome of this research involves providing practical recommendations on how to enhance museum resilience. These recommendations are essential as they serve the ultimate purpose of conducting this research, which is to aid museums and even broader cultural institutions in adapting to a rapidly changing world.

Therefore, this hybrid stance (Critical Realism and Pragmatism) underpins not only the methodological decisions made in this study—including data collection, participant selection, and analysis strategy—but also the broader objective of contributing to the museum field’s post-pandemic resilience discourse.

4.1.2 Layer 2- Research Approaches to Theory Development in this Research

Chapter 1 has established that this research aims to explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums in the UK through the lens of museum resilience. Rather than testing a pre-determined hypothesis -such as assuming that the pandemic harmed the UK’s independent museums- this research seeks to understand how resilience is perceived, defined, and enacted by different institutions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although abduction is often used to develop conceptual frameworks from surprising or anomalous observations (Blaikie, 2007; Reichertz, 2010), it is less applicable in this case, given that the concept of resilience serves as a central analytic focus from the outset. Aligned with the philosophical stance discussed in Section 4.1.1, the study investigates three interconnected dimensions of impact—financial, institutional, and emotional—without privileging any single explanatory mechanism.

An inductive approach is therefore more appropriate for this study. From the perspective of logic, with a known premise (the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted independent museums in the UK), this research explores the concept of museum resilience. In terms of generalizability, as mentioned in Chapter 3, independent museums, as self-sustaining institutions, are more dependent on their ability

to respond to crises and adapt to new environments during this global public health crisis. Generalizing the experiences and lessons learned from independent museums to a wider range of museums, and even to broader cultural institutions, represents a movement from the specific to the general paradigm. Regarding the use of data, the data in this research is used to construct a framework for the concept of museum resilience: to answer what museum resilience is and how to build museum resilience. This focus on meaning-making, rather than measurement, aligns with the study's critical realist foundation while also allowing for practical applications. From the point of time duration, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic cannot be captured by "one take", but only by long-term observation.

While the inductive approach is highly suitable for the research questions of this thesis, it carries a certain risk, which is the possibility of failing to formulate valuable theories or conceptual frameworks from qualitative data. To mitigate this risk as much as possible, careful attention was paid to ensuring methodological coherence from the outset. Each layer of the research design—from philosophical positioning to strategy and data analysis—was aligned to support the inductive development of a grounded and practically useful understanding of museum resilience.

4.1.3 Layer 3- Research Strategies of this Research

If the first two layers of "the research onion" pertain to the philosophical concepts and logic of the research design, then the third layer begins to address how these foundations are operationalised in practice. Several research strategies have been defined to describe the manner of realizing research: mono-method quantitative, mono-method qualitative, multi-method quantitative, multi-method

qualitative, mixed-method simple, and mixed-method complex (Zait and Zait, 2009: 907). While it may seem difficult to choose among them, the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research is very narrow.

Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009: 175) provided one method for distinguishing between quantitative and qualitative research, which is based on whether the data is numerical. Considering the research question of this study, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums cannot be measured solely by numbers, and the concept of museum resilience cannot be calculated with mathematical formulas. Therefore, this research chooses a qualitative research strategy and abandons the mixed-method design at the same time.

As discussed in Section 4.1.1, the study is shaped by a Critical Realism philosophy, which acknowledges the complexity and layered nature of social reality. This implies that no single method or data source can fully capture the nuances of phenomena such as institutional resilience. Consequently, although the research is qualitative, it follows a multi-method qualitative strategy, integrating different forms of qualitative data—including semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and selected digital traces (e.g. online reviews on Google Maps)—to approach the research question from multiple vantage points. By situating the research strategy within the broader philosophical commitments of the study, this section demonstrates how methodological choices are not merely technical, but conceptually informed and contextually appropriate. The next section discusses how data collection methods were selected and implemented to align with this strategy.

4.1.4 Layer 4-Research Methodological Choice of this Research

According to Melnikovas (2018), the research methodological choice may include case studies, surveys, ethnography, experiments, narrative inquiry, action research, archival research, and grounded theory. This section will evaluate the suitability of these methodological choices for this research and adopt the appropriate ones.

First, secondary research played a significant role in contextualising and triangulating primary data. This included the analysis of reports and policy papers from museum sector bodies, government sources, and professional networks, as well as grey literature such as blog posts and institutional newsletters. These materials offered insight into how resilience was being framed and enacted at the organisational level and helped to situate the case study findings within wider sectoral narratives.

In addition, the survey method was incorporated in the early stage of the research to gain a broad overview of sectoral challenges and priorities. Given the large number of independent museums in the UK—nearly 3,000 according to the Mapping Museums database—survey data provided a foundation for identifying patterns and selecting case studies. Although the survey did not aim for statistical generalisability, it was valuable in mapping diversity across museum types, sizes, and locations, thereby enhancing the purposive sampling strategy for subsequent qualitative work.

Among the available strategies, the case study method was adopted as a core element of the research design. Case studies are particularly well suited to answering “what”, “how” and “why” questions

within a real-world context (Yin, 2009: 4), and allow for an in-depth exploration of institutional practices, perceptions, and responses to crisis. In this study, case study research enabled the collection of detailed qualitative data from selected museums through semi-structured interviews, as well as the examination of institutional documents, policies, and communication materials.

The action research strategy focuses on investigating and addressing significant social or an issue alongside the individuals directly involved in practicing these subjects (Grogan, Donaldson, and Simmons, 2007). For this research, the researcher did not have sufficient time or direct access to an institution to engage in formal practice, thus on-site observation, although limited due to time and access constraints, was partially adopted where feasible. Site visits allowed for a grounded understanding of how museums implemented their resilience strategies in practice, especially in relation to visitor interaction, spatial adaptation, and staffing patterns.

Other methodological strategies were considered but ultimately not adopted. Ethnography, while valuable for deep cultural immersion (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019), was incompatible with the time frame and sector-wide scope of the research. Narrative inquiry was deemed unsuitable because the goal of the study was not to construct life histories or individual museum stories, but to analyse institutional responses to a systemic crisis. Grounded theory was also excluded, since the study did not follow an iterative cycle of data collection and analysis; rather, it worked from an established conceptual focus on resilience. Similarly, experimental designs and action research were considered

impractical due to the lack of long-term institutional engagement and the observational (rather than interventionist) nature of the research.

In sum, the combination of case studies, surveys, secondary research, and limited on-site observation provided a methodologically coherent and contextually appropriate strategy. Together, these approaches allowed the research to capture both the depth and diversity of independent museums' responses to the pandemic while remaining aligned with the study's epistemological foundations and practical constraints.

4.1.5 Layer 5- Time Horizons of this Research

Chapter 3 has already summarized the context of the Coronavirus pandemic from 2020 to 2022. The governmental policies regarding the Covid-19 pandemic were subject to frequent changes in this period. Therefore, this research had to expedite data collection to prevent any delays or disruptions due to pandemic policy changes in different nations in the UK and to collect the data on an unfolding pandemic. Secondly, during my initial contacts within the independent museum sector, I observed significant personnel turnover following the outbreak of the pandemic. Hence, I was eager to engage with museum staff who had first-hand knowledge of the independent museums' operation during the pandemic as early as possible. When designing this research, timeliness was prioritized. Thus, the study opted for a cross-sectional horizon resembling a "snapshot" rather than a longitudinal horizon.

4.1.6 Overall Research Methodology Framework Diagram

As explained above, the overall research methodology framework can be visualised by the “onion model” diagram in Figure 4.2. It depicts a circular diagram, structured into several concentric layers, illustrating a model for the research methodology of this research. Each layer, moving inward from the outermost to the innermost presents the selection of methodology as follows:

- Philosophy: Critical Realism (main) and Pragmatism
- Methodological Choice: Induction
- Approach to Theory Development: Multi-method Qualitative
- Strategies: Case Study, Survey, Secondary Research and On-site Observation
- Time Horizon: Cross-sectional

By mapping these choices onto the research onion structure, the model serves not simply as a visual summary but as a coherent expression of how philosophical assumptions, methodological choices, and practical constraints are interlinked in the design of this study.

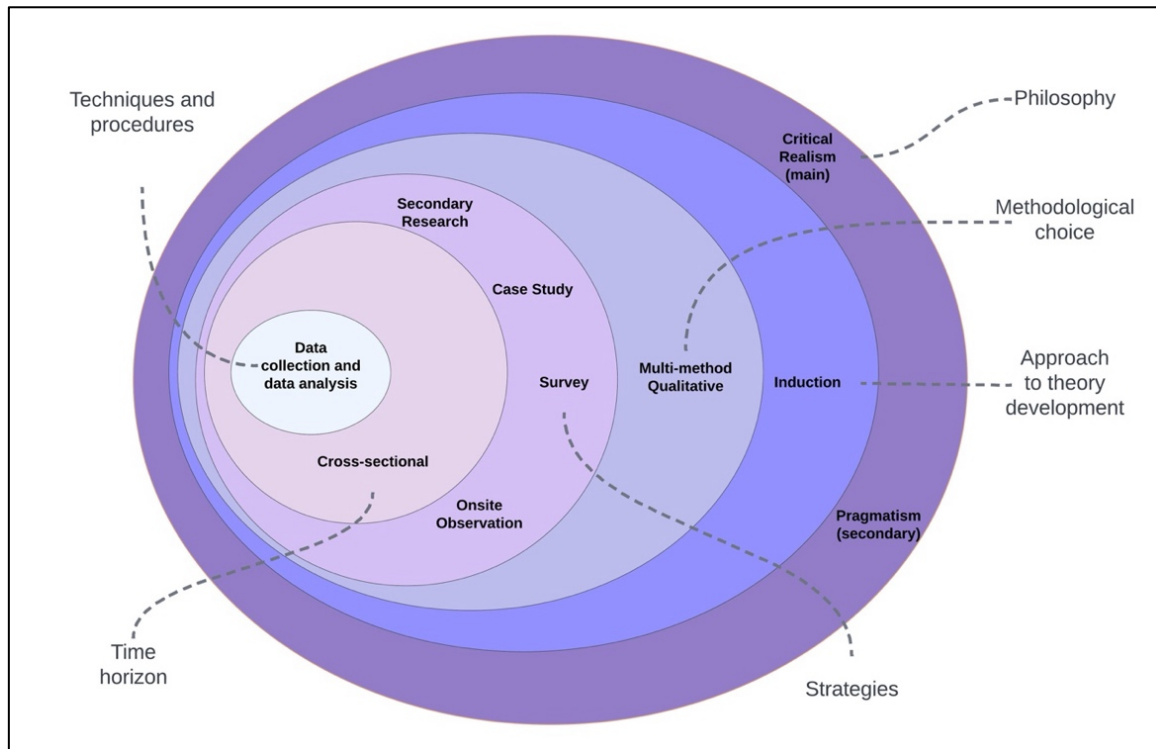


Figure 4.2 The “research onion” depicting this study (image by the author).

4.2 Description of the Data Collection Procedure

With a detailed methodology framework in place, this research conducted data collection by the methods of secondary research, survey, case study, and onsite observation research from October 2021 to August 2022. This section will introduce the data collection procedure of this study and explain how this research gained the data.

4.2.1 Secondary Research

Throughout the research period, I kept collecting documents and online resources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the context surrounding independent museums in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic and the discussions within the museum field regarding this global public health

crisis. I accessed various forms of textual records through the internet, including government policies related to museums during the Covid-19 pandemic, documents from major funding bodies supporting cultural institutions in the UK, reports from museum professional organizations, news articles, annual reports released by independent museums, personal blogs of museum consultants, and comments on social media platforms by leading figures in the museum field.

In addition to extensively searching for and reading secondary research data, I also diligently tracked subsequent reports and news about independent museums in the UK and updated my research database to document a continually changing landscape of policy and practice. Some institutions reopened after what had initially been announced as permanent closures and some government-led grants extended their application deadlines after the original cutoff. Therefore, I saved websites that I deemed valuable and regularly checked for relevant information. For certain museum professional organizations, such as MA and ICOM, I subscribed to their latest articles. This way, even if I missed the refresh of new information, I could still follow the recent discussions within the museum field regarding the Covid-19 pandemic through email notifications.

As the sources of collected data became increasingly diverse, influenced by my research philosophy, I constantly reminded myself to remain sensitive and not allow the viewpoints from secondary research data to “take the lead”. This is because the documents collected as secondary research data may not have been created for research purposes (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019: 195).

4.2.2 Research Survey

To gain a sector-wide perspective that can serve as a lens for developing and focusing targeted inquiry through case studies, this research conducted a national online survey on the impact of the pandemic on independent museums within the UK. To accomplish this task, three key points were addressed.

Firstly, the survey introduction was designed to evoke interest among participants to encourage them to complete it. Secondly, the survey questions needed to be efficient and easy to understand, which ensured the participants had the patience to finish the survey. Thirdly, during the distribution phase of the survey, efforts were made to ensure that as many independent museums in the UK as possible could notice this research survey.

Survey Introduction

As the first part, the design of the survey introduction aimed to capture the interest of potential participants in participating in this research through the following aspects:

Firstly, the textual introduction of the survey was written as straightforward and clear as possible. I began by introducing myself and my institution, aiming to establish a closer connection with potential participants. Then, I outlined the research questions of the study to give readers a basic understanding of this research. Next, I explained that the purpose of this survey is to “investigate how independent

museums experienced and responded to the impact of the pandemic”, thus informing readers of the survey’s objectives. Finally, a polite invitation was extended to readers to participate in the study.

Secondly, following a brief introduction, the survey included five notes to provide additional details. The first note specified the target participants as “individuals working for independent museums within the United Kingdom”; the second note informed potential participants that their personal information would be kept confidential to address privacy concerns; the third note further explained the withdrawal policy of the study; the fourth note informed potential participants of how to access the outcomes of the research; and the fifth note provided the researcher’s contact information for any potential questions from participants.

Thirdly, the visual design of the survey was kept concise (see Figure 4.3). I used a white text background to highlight the main content. At the same time, I added an image of a “crowd wearing masks” alongside the text background to evoke the context of the pandemic. Additionally, I included the names and logos of the department where I pursue my PhD to add formality to the interface.

Supported by the Qualtrics software, participants could access the survey either through a web browser or on their mobile devices. At the bottom of the survey introduction, participants had the option to tick the box “I confirm that I have read, understand, and agree to the terms and conditions in the Participant Information Sheet for enrolment in this survey” to proceed with filling out the survey. Alternatively,

participants can tick the box “I do not consent, I do not wish to participate” to decline participation and exit the survey.

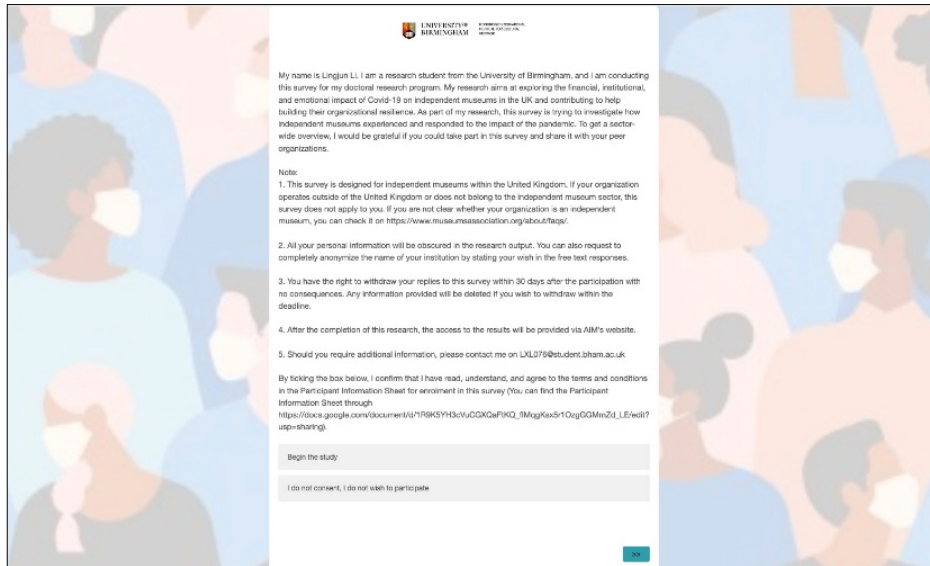


Figure 4.3 Screenshot of the survey interface published by AIM. Image captured by the author on 14 March 2024.

Survey Questions Design

The survey was structured into three sections (see Appendix 3). Firstly, participants were asked to provide background information about their institutions to facilitate subsequent data analysis. Secondly, participants were presented with multiple-choice questions aimed at assessing their perceptions of their institutions’ performance across three key dimensions—financial, institutional, and emotional impact due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, participants were invited to respond to open-ended questions, allowing them to provide detailed insights, perspectives, and experiences related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their institutions. A combination of free text questions on how each museum

responded to and experienced the impact of the pandemic and standardized questions with set options regarding the interactions among different layers within organizations on a Likert scale ensured a combination of experience-near data and easily processible input which provided a sector-wide overview.

Survey Distribution

To reach more target participants, I sought assistance from AIM and received a positive response. On January 28, 2022, AIM's official website published my survey participant recruitment (see Figure 4.4). Considering that most institution staff members who follow AIM website updates are likely from AIM member museums, I did not solely rely on AIM's platform. I accessed an open-source database provided by the Mapping Museum and identified 2,952 institutions registered as independent museums. I cross-referenced these museum names to obtain email addresses for 1,914 of these institutions through avenues such as search engines and social media. I grouped these addresses into batches of 50 and input them into the Qualtrics software, then sent survey invitation emails to them. According to Qualtrics statistics, a total of 207 users clicked on the survey, with 137 individuals completing all questions, resulting in a response rate of 11%.



Figure 4.4 The screenshot of the online survey participant recruitment published by AIM published by AIM. Image captured by the author on 14 March 2024.

4.2.3 Onsite Observation

Acting as a visitor to museums, I conducted on-site observations to immerse myself in the services provided by independent museums and to explore the measures implemented in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Before visiting the museums, I explored the museum's official website (if it has one) and conduct online research to gather information about the museum, including Google Maps' online reviews about the museum, articles, and news.

Upon entering the museum, I followed the guidance provided by the museum staff and proceeded to explore the exhibits and experience the services offered by the museum, such as workshops, guided tours, and interactive activities. I paid particular attention to the unique features and offerings that are often exclusive to independent museums. For example, at the Black Country Living Museum, I encountered immersive role-playing actors throughout the premises (see Figure 4.5), and at the

Cartoon Museum, I came across humorous caricatures of politicians (see Figure 4.6). Some independent museums that I visited are known for their entertaining and engaging exhibitions and activities, often eliciting laughter and amusement from fellow visitors within the exhibition halls.



Figure 4.5 The actors in Black Country Living Museums. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 18 May

2022.



Figure 4.6 The caricatures of politicians in Cartoon Museum. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 26

March 2023.

In addition to focusing on the services provided by museums, I paid close attention to the measures implemented by museums in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in comparison to pre-pandemic times. Before entering the museum, I would inquire about ticketing procedures and any restrictions on the number of visitors allowed inside the museum at one time. When I entered the museum, I observed whether enhanced hygiene protocols had been implemented throughout the facility and whether visitors were encouraged to sanitize their hands. Additionally, I noted the presence of signage reminding visitors to maintain physical distancing and wearing face masks, which was prominently displayed throughout the museum. I also observed whether interactive exhibits and touchscreens had been temporarily removed or replaced with hands-free alternatives to reduce the risk of virus transmission. Furthermore, through interactions with museum staff or volunteers, I tried to find out if they provided safety guidelines and addressed any questions or concerns, they may have had regarding the museum's Covid-19 responding measures. My observations of the museum's Covid-19 response measures as a visitor underscored the museum's commitment to prioritizing visitor safety and well-being while still providing an engaging and enriching cultural experience.

During my onsite observation at the museum, I documented my observations through handwritten field notes and with a camera. I recorded my spontaneous thoughts and reflections while exploring the museum, and captured images of exhibits, displays, textual descriptions, and facilities through photographs. When taking photographs, I made a conscious effort to avoid capturing individuals' faces and bodies whenever possible and sought consent from any individuals who might appear in the frame if necessary.

4.2.4 Case Studies and Semi-structured Interviews

The methodology of the case study is highly significant for this research, particularly due to its inclusion of semi-structured interviews which can assist in garnering more in-depth research data. It allows for targeted interviews while granting the researcher autonomy to explore important ideas that may arise during the interview process, thereby enhancing the comprehension of the research question (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021: 1358). This section will introduce the procedure of how this research selected the case study museums and conducted semi-structured interviews with the people in the museums.

Case Study

Utilizing the statistics provided by the Mapping Database (Mapping Museums Lab, no date) proved instrumental in simplifying the laborious tasks of filtering and identifying independent museums in the UK, enabling the creation of a dedicated dataset for this research. This dataset facilitated a more effective dissemination of the sector-wide survey. Furthermore, the distribution of the research survey received support from AIM, which actively promoted participant recruitment. As the research survey has reached as many independent museums in the UK as possible, there has been a significant response with museums willing to participate in the case study procedure. The interactions during meetings with museum staff have been very inspiring, yielding a wealth of interesting insights.

At the outset, this study planned to conduct case studies involving 10-15 museums. It was aimed to ensure that these museums, in terms of size, theme, and location, align as closely as possible with the overall nature and diversity of the independent museum sector in the UK. This approach is crucial for obtaining sufficiently representative data. To this end, secondary research data was reviewed, and it was found that the proportions of various types of museums could be calculated from the data provided by the Mapping Museum database. For instance, small independent museums constitute 49% of the independent museum sector in the UK, indicating that if this study were to include ten case museums, five of them should be small independent museums. However, this was merely an idealized preliminary plan during the planning phase of the case study. The actual sampling of case museums ultimately depends on the willingness of museums to participate. Therefore, efforts were made to maintain the proportion of museums with respect to each museum feature as closely aligned with the actual proportions in the sector as possible.

As indicated by question 31 in Appendix 3, a voluntary sampling strategy was employed to approach potential case study museums. It was encouraging that several survey respondents expressed interest in participating in the in-depth interview research, and some museum directors expressed their willingness to join this research as case study museums. The following museums participated in this research through voluntary participant recruitment via the research survey: The Borth Station Museum, Englesea Brook Chapel Museum, Black Country Living Museum, and National Emergency Museum.

Initially, visits were made to these four museums, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals at different levels within these institutions. After the interviews, respondents were asked if they could recommend potential interviewees from other independent museums. However, this snowball sampling approach yielded limited results. Subsequently, through the referral of my supervisor, contacts were established with the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, leading to successful interviews. Similarly, by leveraging connections with the Woodhorn Museum, which I had previously interned at, another case study was achieved.

Considering that not all independent museums are members of AIM, there was a possibility that they may not have encountered my survey. To address this, I introduced this research via email and invited the museums to participate in the case study. Eventually, support was obtained from the Cartoon Museum, Titanic Museum, Royal Air Force Museum, Benjamin Franklin Museum, and Jack the Ripper Museum. Positive responses were also received through face-to-face conversations with staff from the Florence Nightingale Museum and Blitz Museum, leading to a total of 13 case studies. Their basic information is given in Table 4.1. Appendix 4 provides a more detailed introduction to these museums.

Name	Size	Location	Nation	Subject	Accreditation	Year Opened	Demo geographic Area
Borth Station	Small	Cambrian Terrace, Borth, SY24 5HT	Wales	Transport and	Unaccredited	2011	Countryside Living

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Museum				railways			
Ironbridge Gorge Museums	Large	Wharfage, Ironbridge, TF87AW	England	Industrial Heritage	Unaccredited	1977	Urban Settlements
National Emergency Services Museum	Medium	The Old Fire Station, Sheffield, S38PT	England	Services	Unaccredited	1983	Large city area
Cartoon Museum	Small	35 Little Russell Street, London, WC1A 2HH	England	Art	Accredited	2006	Megalopolis
Black Country Living Museum	Large	Discovery Wy, Dudley DY1 4AL	England	Local histories	Accredited	1967	Large Town
Titanic Museum	Large	1 Olympic Wy, Belfast BT3 9EP	Northern Ireland	Disaster Memory	Unaccredited	2012	Megalopolis
Blitz Museum	Small	Bayley Ln, Coventry CV1 5RJ	England	Local History	Unaccredited	Uncl ear	Large City
Royal Air Force Museum	Large	Lysander Ave, Cosford, Shifnal TF11 8UP	England	Military	Accredited	1979	Small Town
Englesea Brook Chapel Museum	Small	Englesea - Brook Ln, Englesea Brook, Weston, Crewe CW2 5QW	England	Religion	Accredited	1986	Countryside Living
Woodhorn Museum	Medium	QE2 Country Park, Ashington,	England	Mixed	Accredited	1988	Countryside Living

		NE639YF					
Benjamin Franklin House	Small	36 Craven St, London WC2N 5NF	England	Person	Unaccredited	Late 20th centu ry	Megalopolis
Jack the Ripper Museum	Small	12 Cable St, Aldgate, London E1 8JG	England	Crime	Unaccredited	2015	Megalopolis
Florence Nightingale Museum	Medium	The Nightingale School, 2 Lambeth Palace Rd, London SE1 7EP	England	Person	Unaccredited	1987	Megalopolis

Table 4.1 The basic information of case study museums of this research

For a more intuitive overview, the case study museums and their respective locations are delineated in Figure 4.7. The case study museums involved in this research cover a wide range of themes, and their locations span the main types of geographical distribution within the UK museum sector. The case study museums include 6 small, 3 medium, and 4 large museums. According to data provided by the Mapping Museum Database (Candlin *et al.*, 2020), the proportion of small museums in this study is 46%, slightly lower than the actual characteristic of 56% across the entire UK museum sector. The proportion of medium museums is 23%, which closely matches the 27% characteristic of the UK museum sector. However, the proportion of large museums is 30%, higher than the sector's characteristic of 17%. The proportion of unaccredited museums at 61% and accredited museums at 39%

involved in this research aligns with the nature of the UK museum sector, which is 57% and 43%, respectively.

One shortcoming is that, according to the proportionate distribution of the UK museum sector across the different nations of the UK, in an ideal scenario, there should be 9 or 10 museums from England, 0 or 1 from Scotland, 2 from Wales, and 1 from Northern Ireland participating in this research. However, the actual numbers of museums involved in this research from England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are 11, 0, 1, and 1, respectively. The representation of museums from Scotland and Wales is relatively low. The specific reasons for this are detailed in Section 4.5, Limitation of the Research.



Figure 4.7 The map of case study museums. Photos taken by the author during the fieldwork from May 2022 to June 2023.

Semi-structured Interviews

Guided by the research philosophy of critical realism, this research adopted a case study design that involved interviewing individuals occupying different organisational roles within each selected

museum. These targeted interviewees encompass representatives from management, such as CEOs or directors, mid-level staff including finance managers, curators, and collection managers, as well as lower-level employees such as retail cashiers and cleaners. In scheduling interviews, particular consideration was given to the institutional structure and staffing capacity of each museum. To minimize disruption to the museum staff, preliminary communication with a museum manager, often with the director or CEO, was used to identify staff across various roles for potential participation. Participants were selected from among those recommended by the museum, with the aim of achieving diversity in roles and ensuring representativeness within each case. However, adaptability to each museum's unique circumstances was paramount. In some museums operated solely by volunteers, or where job roles were not distinctly demarcated, the recruiting of interview participants was more opportunistic, relying on the availability of individuals at the time of the visit. Appendix 2 presents the interview questions used according to the different roles of the interviewees in the museum practice.

Regarding the interview process, I first communicated with potential interviewees in person or via email to determine the time and format of the interview. The format of the interviews was determined by the interviewee's convenience. If it was not possible to arrange an in-person interview, remote interviews were conducted via Zoom, Skype online meetings, or phone calls. Face-to-face interviews typically took place in a private office, or, when unavailable, in a quiet and enclosed space to ensure confidentiality and comfort.

During the actual interviews, I revised the interview questions according to the interviewee's position and work contents. For example, for a temporary employee, I specifically asked the participant how many hours he or she works to determine the intensity of work. Semi-structured interviews helped me explore the positions of different interviewees and flexibly adjust interview strategies without missing key information. In some cases, for example, if the interviewee was particularly eager to talk about opinions or experiences that were not considered in the interview framework, I encouraged them to elaborate on these aspects, recognising the value of unanticipated insights. When some interviewees expressed during the interview that they were not sure about the answers to certain questions or could not find any helpful documents at that time, they were invited to follow up via email. This flexible and responsive approach led to the collection of a number of valuable supplementary materials after the initial conversations.

Throughout the process of collecting data, I always maintained respect and gratitude for the research participants. This extended beyond courteous communication to include strict adherence to ethical research principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. These issues are further detailed in the following section on research ethics. A more detailed explanation of how interview data were analysed, thematically categorised, and linked to the study's conceptual framework is provided in Section 4.4.

4.3 Research Ethics

Ethical integrity was fundamental to the design and implementation of this research, which involved direct engagement with individuals working in the independent museum sector. Given the qualitative and case-based nature of the study and its reliance on participants' personal and professional reflections during a time of crisis, attention to ethical considerations was sustained throughout the entire research process.

Before commencing fieldwork, full ethical approval was obtained from the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Committee. This ensured that the research adhered to institutional standards regarding risk management, data protection, and researcher accountability. As part of this approval, a detailed data management plan was submitted, outlining how confidentiality, storage, and withdrawal procedures would be handled.

Informed consent was treated not as a one-off procedural step but as an ongoing ethical relationship. Participants were provided with clear, accessible information sheets explaining the purpose and scope of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw without consequence up to 30 days after the interview. Most interviews were preceded by an email exchange, which also served as an initial moment of trust-building and clarification. Consent was obtained either in writing or verbally, depending on the format of the interview.

Confidentiality was assured through the anonymisation of all transcripts and the secure storage of audio files and related materials. Identifying information was dissociated from content during transcription, and pseudonyms were used in reporting unless a participant explicitly requested attribution. A small number of participants, such as museum directors who had previously spoken publicly on related issues, asked to be named and this was respected in accordance with ethical guidelines. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. No compensation was offered, and efforts were made to ensure that no undue pressure was placed on individuals to take part, especially in small institutions where hierarchical dynamics could be sensitive. The research was also designed to minimise the disruption: interviews were scheduled flexibly, often around participants' working hours, and took place in quiet, private spaces either on-site or online, depending on the participant's preference and availability.

In line with the principle of beneficence, potential risks to participants were evaluated carefully. Given the emotionally charged context of the pandemic and its impact on employment and well-being, the interviews were designed to be conversational, non-confrontational, and responsive to the comfort levels of each participant. Where necessary, follow-up communication was offered to allow participants to clarify or add to their responses, and in some cases, they voluntarily provided supplementary documents and reflections.

Finally, respect for participants extended beyond formal compliance. The research was premised on the belief that participants are knowledge-holders rather than mere data sources. Ethical conduct was

thus not only procedural but also relational and interpretive—an ethos that underpins the entirety of the study.

4.4 Data Analysis

The analysis presented in this study is based on multiple sources of qualitative data, including semi-structured interviews, responses to an online survey, institutional documents, and on-site observations. These data sets were triangulated to produce a holistic understanding of how independent museums in the UK experienced and responded to the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis process adopted a thematic orientation, grounded in the inductive and critical realist foundations established earlier in the methodology chapter.

A total of 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted between May 2022 and June 2023. Most interviews lasted around 30 minutes. A minority of participants had joined their institutions post-lockdown and were thus unable to provide detailed insights into the pandemic period, resulting in limited contributions to related interview questions. Participants were drawn from a range of functional positions within museums, including directors, CEOs, curators, education officers, collections managers, finance administrators, front-of-house staff, and volunteers. The sampling strategy was purposive, with the intent of capturing diverse institutional roles as well as varying museum sizes, themes, governance structures, and locations. In smaller or volunteer-run institutions, participants often held overlapping responsibilities, which offered valuable insights into multi-role resilience in practice.

The interview transcripts were analysed using a manual thematic analysis approach, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. After full transcription, each interview was read repeatedly to familiarise myself with the content and identify points of emphasis. Initial notes were made in the margins, and excerpts were grouped into preliminary categories reflecting issues such as financial instability, emotional toll, organisational flexibility, and digital transformation. These categories were not based on pre-set codes but emerged through an iterative, interpretive process, in which the themes were refined through repeated cross-comparison.

Although no qualitative data analysis software was used, this manual process allowed for a deep, reflective engagement with the data. Patterns were documented in a separate document, where theme development and analytical decisions were recorded systematically. A summary of the identified themes, sub-themes, and representative quotations is provided in Appendix 5. This table illustrates how patterns were constructed across interviews, and how individual narratives contributed to the development of broader analytical categories.

Alongside the interviews, this research incorporated responses from a Qualtrics-based online survey, which gathered both closed and open-ended feedback from museum professionals. The platform's built-in analytics tools were used to generate descriptive summaries, which served as a complementary lens against which interview findings could be validated or challenged.

Additionally, documentary evidence collected from museums—including annual reports, blogs, and web-based communications—was analysed to trace institutional narratives over time and examine how museums framed resilience in their own language. These documents were examined thematically and used to corroborate, contrast, or complicate the accounts provided in interviews. On-site observations, although limited due to pandemic-related restrictions, provided a spatial and sensory dimension to the dataset. Photographs taken during case study visits were annotated according to emerging analytical themes. For instance, signage related to social distancing—introduced after reopening—was coded under post-pandemic adaptation strategies, reflecting how physical environments were modified to comply with health protocols and reassure visitors.

In order to structure the findings and allow for systematic comparison, I developed a matrix based on five defining characteristics of each museum: size, location, thematic focus, accreditation status, and AIM (Association of Independent Museums) membership. This enabled a series of controlled pairwise comparisons to be carried out, in which one variable was adjusted while others were held constant. For example, the experiences of accredited and unaccredited museums were compared across otherwise similar cases to examine whether accreditation played a role in enhancing institutional resilience. The thematic insights from all data sources were eventually integrated and synthesised into the analytical structure presented in Chapter 5.

4.5 Limitations of the Research

Every researcher should be aware that the limitations of a study are often beyond one's control and may arise from a range of factors, including flaws in the research design, time frame, inaccuracies in data statistics, funding constraints, and unforeseen disruptions (Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2018). It is essential to acknowledge and point out these limitations as a philosophical commitment to truth and to provide guidance for future researchers conducting similar studies.

One limitation of this study pertains to the reliance on self-reported data from respondents, which could introduce potential biases and inaccuracies. Despite efforts to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants may provide responses influenced by social desirability bias or their own perceptions, leading to skewed or incomplete data (Connelly, 2013). The semi-structured interview sample may also be subject to self-selection bias. Participants who were willing and available to be interviewed were often those in leadership or public-facing roles, or those already engaged in sectoral conversations around resilience. This may have inadvertently underrepresented the voices of more marginalised staff, including part-time or temporary workers who may have experienced the pandemic in markedly different ways. Additionally, the sample size of survey participants may not fully represent the diversity of independent museums in the UK, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings. The number of AIM members is already considerable, with 1000 heritage organisations (AIM, 2024), and in addition to relying on the assistance of AIM to promote my survey, I have sent my research survey invitation via email to museums that are not AIM members. Thereby, the limitation in terms of my strategy for recruitment of survey participants does not severely impact the generation of research

findings, and the case studies approach can compensate for this, as it aims to closely reflect the nature of the overall museum sector in the UK. However, the use of online surveys may have excluded individuals or organizations without internet access or those less inclined to participate in online research, affecting the inclusivity and representativeness of the sample. As shown in Figure 4.8, the majority of survey participants held senior-level positions such as directors and CEOs. This skew likely reflects the dissemination method of the survey: many respondents were recruited via the AIM platform, which is more frequently accessed by those in leadership roles.

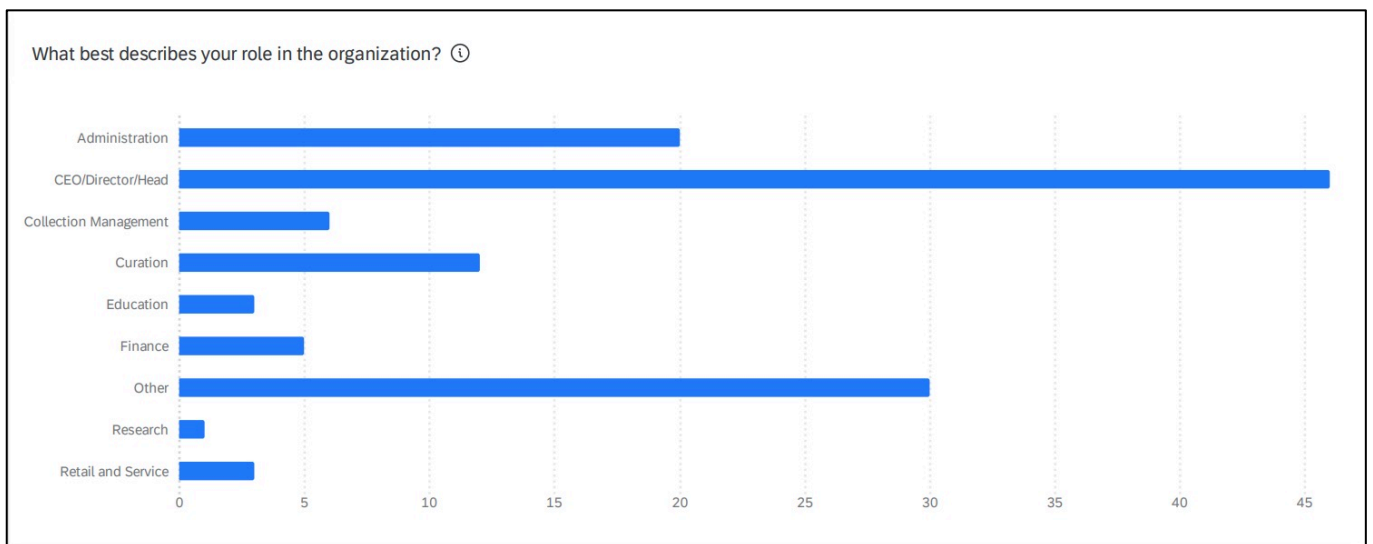


Figure 4.8 The job roles of survey respondents within their museum organisations

These limitations should be considered when interpreting the results and drawing conclusions from this study. To make up for any potential shortcomings in the research design and recruitment strategy, I tried to record the data provided by the case study participants as completely as possible without missing any useful information.

In this study case study museums in Wales and Scotland are underrepresented. This is primarily due to two reasons: firstly, the number of museums in these regions is fewer than in England, and many museums do not have their own websites or public email addresses, making it difficult for me to reach out to them. More importantly, I overlooked the regional differences in the UK that apply to many museums in the northern part of Scotland as they operate only for a few months due to cold winters. Consequently, my survey invitation emails sent in batches of 50 via Qualtrics were unlikely to be seen, as many employees of these museums were likely on holiday during the period when I conducted my fieldwork. The appropriate approach would have been to schedule data collection in the north of the UK separately from survey distribution in other regions.

The third limitation is the limited duration of this study, as the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic may not be fully captured within its timeframe. This could potentially impact the comprehensiveness of the study's outcomes.

These limitations do not invalidate the findings, but they serve as important reminders that qualitative research is inherently situated, interpretive, and shaped by both practical and epistemological conditions. Future studies may address these challenges through longer timeframes, and more targeted engagement with underrepresented museum roles.

4.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has provided a detailed overview of the research methodology employed in this study and outlined the rationale behind the choice of research design. This research constructed a methodology framework based on Saunter, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009)'s "Research Onion Model". To sum up, grounded in the research philosophy of critical realism(main) and pragmatism, this research employed an inductive approach to develop the theory and conducted multi-method qualitative research using secondary research, case studies, surveys, and onsite observation research within a cross-sectional time horizon. Furthermore, the chapter has discussed the process of data collection, highlighting the steps taken to ensure the validity, reliability, and ethical integrity of the research. By combining various research methods and leveraging diverse data sources, the research generated comprehensive insights into the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the independent museums in the UK and the broader discourse on museum resilience. This chapter has introduced how the research data is collected and analysed.

This chapter contributes to the methodological understanding of how to study crisis in the cultural sector. It demonstrates that a hybrid approach—combining critical realism with multi-method qualitative research—can effectively capture the complex and layered nature of museum resilience. By using thematic analysis alongside cross-case comparison, the research offers a practical example of how to generate in-depth insights without relying on a single method. The coming chapters will show what findings have been grounded from the data. The next chapter will first answer the research question concerning the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the independent museum sector in the UK.

Chapter 5 Unexpected Disturbances: The Impact of Covid-19 on the Independent Museums in the UK

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, the focus shifts to analysing the impact of Covid-19 on independent museums in the UK, drawing connections to the broader context of museum crises discussed in Chapter 2. It aims at answering the first secondary research question (SRQ1):

What financial, organizational, and emotional impact does the Covid-19 pandemic have on the independent museums? (SRQ1)

This chapter begins by discussing the institutional, financial, and emotional impact on the institutions that part in this research as well as evidence from other recent sector-wide research. It then goes on to analyse the unforeseen findings that come up from the open questions of the research survey and interviews. Next, it discusses the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the independent museum ecosystem. Finally, this chapter will link the discussions of research data and the main concepts mentioned in Chapter 2, in seeking to broaden the interpretation of the museum crisis, especially in the context of the independent museum sector.

5.1 Interpretation of the Data

To fully grasp the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the independent museum sector in the UK, it is necessary to adopt a critical, multi-scalar perspective that integrates institutional, financial, and affective dimensions. Drawing on interview data, this chapter employs a thematic analysis approach to interpret patterns of disruption and resilience. This section will summarise the research data and dissect the impact of Covid-19 on independent museums from three perspectives – institutional, financial, and emotional.

5.1.1 Institutional Impact

As widely recognized mission-driven institutions, museums, like other sectors, faced significant challenges in maintaining the functioning of their workplaces and workforces amid the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic (Julius, Abrams, and Baron, 2023: 2). As discussed in Chapter 2, the extent and duration of museum closures in the UK had immediate and long-term consequences, not only on institutional continuity but also on the careers of museum professionals. Therefore, this section will explore the institutional impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums by examining the areas of museum closures and staffing.

Closure

An institution is a physical agreement that human beings come together and sacrifice part of their freedom to meet their natural human needs or specific norms as members in society (Malinowski, 1994:

39). In other words, institutions are divided into two levels: primarily for biological demands, secondly for social needs. When the safety of humanity is being threatened, the museum sector which belongs to the secondary category would be set aside. That is why the museum sector was one of the industries that experienced the harshest institutional impact, as all the museums in the UK had to shut their door during the lockdown.

For most of the independent museums in the UK, the closure during the lockdown was temporary, lasting from March 2020 to July 2020. As announced by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson on 25 June 2020 (GOV.UK, 2020b), museums in the UK were legally able to reopen with recommended conditions after July 4, 2020. In fact, many independent museums, the majority from Scotland and Northern Ireland, already have long-term winter closures every year, which means that the closure during the lockdown had a more limited impact on them. For example, one director of an independent museum in Scotland (P08) said in an interview:

Opening a museum during the winter is unprofitable since the visitor number is not guaranteed but we have to pay scary heating bills. As a small independent museum, we must save every penny. During the winter closure in 2020, we just got a chance to fix the roof that was damaged by the wind.

This point reflects a fact of 'seasonal resilience', where winter closure is not merely a routine, but also a risk management mechanism in financially constrained institutions. However, it also highlights the

precariousness of operating models that rely on seasonal viability. Besides fixed seasonal closures, the types of museum closure also include “hard closure” (sale or disposal of all the collections and permanent closure of the museum) and “soft closure” (collections are preserved and the museum remains indefinitely closed until some future point where it is able to reopen in a new location or with a new form of operation and management). Drawing on an extensive tracking observation, Liebenrood (2022) points out that between 2020 and 2022, ten museums in the UK closed permanently, seven of which were independent museums. Synthesizing the observations of Liebenrood (2022) and the data of this research, the details of these permanently closed independent museums are listed in Appendix 6. These cases demonstrate that closure was not a binary process, but rather a spectrum of responses shaped by institutional conditions, external pressures, and individual circumstances. The most significant distinction can be observed between “hard closures” and “soft closures.”

As Appendix 6 indicates, several cases fall into the hard closure category. Fort Paull, The Commando Museum, and Pembrokeshire Candle Makers Centre, all of which lost their physical premises or retired due to private ownership without succession. Besides, there were two independent museums that end as permanently closed due in whole or in part to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Hall at Abbey-Cwm-Hir in Wales closed in July 2020 due to a financial crisis triggered by the pandemic (Sheehan, 2020). Similarly, Hull People’s Memorial Museum closed in June 2022 after a dramatic rise in operational costs, including rent and utility bills, rendered the institution financially unsustainable (Hull People’s Memorial Museum, 2022). Comparing this to the total figure of 2,352 independent museums in the UK (Candlin *et al.*, 2020: 16), at first glance it seems that many “deaths” of the

independent museums were not caused by Covid-19 pandemic but by other factors. Taking the West Wales Museum of Childhood listed in Appendix 6 as an example, the former operator (P03) responded that:

After learning that this place was no longer available, I did make some attempts to find a new address but failed. Coupled with the fact that I am very old, I thought maybe it is time to rest.

However, more independent museums announced indefinite closure during the Covid-19 pandemic. These pointed to impacts on a wider scale which were harder to assess with finality. In some cases, the end point amounted to permanent closure, while for other independent museums, in fact, indefinite closure with a view to reopening when it seems safe to do so appears to be a flexible strategic response to the crisis.

The Museum of Army Music became effectively homeless after the Ministry of Defence sold its original premises in 2016 as part of heritage rationalisation (Army Museums Ogilby Trust, no date). In 2023, two years after announcing its indefinite closure, the Museum of Army Music relocated to Gibraltar Barracks in Minley, where it now offers internal displays for students and staff of the Royal Military School of Music and Portsmouth's Alford Band School and awaits a new public exhibition venue (Museum of Army Music, no date). The Walton Maritime Museum also entered a period of soft closure in 2020 due to a steep rent increase imposed by the local council, which rendered continued

occupation of the premises unviable (Candlin, 2021). As of the submission of this thesis, the museum remains indefinitely closed. Other examples include the West Wales Museum of Childhood, Flame Gasworks Museum, and Ashworth Barracks Museum, all of which suspended operations indefinitely due to a combination of building-related, financial, and governance challenges, but were later confirmed to have closed permanently (Ashworth Barracks Museum Tripadvisor page, no date; Flame Gasworks Museum Facebook page, 2022; McManus, 2022).

Likewise, these cases point to some fundamental differences and difficulties in addressing the pandemic and its impacts at the institutional level, as well as responding to and understanding the exact nature of the crisis in sector-wide research. These cases are hard to determine by sector-wide surveys and research because these museums did not officially indicate that they were indefinitely closed. Most of the announcements of the closures were equivocal about future plans, like “the reopening date is being negotiated”. These museums remain closed even after the government allowed them to open. For example, the Guildhall Museum, Winkle’s Castle Folk Museum, the Falconer Museum, and the Museum of Childhood announce on their websites that they are temporarily closed because of the pandemic but do not have an exact reopening date. A director of a transport museum (P01) in Wales describes their temporary closure as “dormancy”:

I cannot decide whether to open or not, because the museum is completely run by volunteers...most of them are older people. I have consulted one of my friends who is

working for the British Museum about this, and his answer makes me believe remaining closed is better than opening at risk.

The opinion of this director is quite common among the small independent museums. Those independent museums that are 100% led by volunteers are incredibly flexible in making access policy. The temporary closure of these museums has been described as a form of “dormancy”, which can be seen as a beautified portrayal. In a more direct analysis from the Museums Association, this kind of closure was starkly referred to as “paralysis and survival mode” (Knott, 2021: no page). This raises critical questions about the visibility and recognition of institutional dormancy within sector-wide monitoring frameworks. The current systems of museum accountability tend to register institutions as either ‘open’ or ‘closed’, thereby overlooking those that exist in an in-between state—neither fully functioning nor officially dissolved—which has implications for policy intervention, funding eligibility, and public trust.



Figure 5.1 Volunteers at the Metherringham Airfield Visitor Centre have been shielding or were uncomfortable working alongside visitors (Knott, 2021).

Because they do not have paid workers, they can mostly afford the cost of closure. Compared to the big independent museums, volunteer-led museums are more relaxed in deciding on a reopening date.

In contrast, many large independent museums are more susceptible to crises. For example, the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, with its large number of paid staff, extensive building maintenance needs, and ambitious acquisition plans, faced serious concerns about its viability in light of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (Ironbridge Gorge Museum, 2020). This comparison refutes the standard assumption provided in Chapter 2, which suggests that organisations with robust and responsible structures tend to prosper better in competitive contexts because they deliver reliable and consistent products or services with continuity. Sometimes, maintaining “low cost” is the key to success for small museums.

Apart from permanently closed museums and indefinitely closed museums, most of the museums tried to maintain their fundamental institutional function during the lockdown-induced closure and the pandemic only caused temporary closure. In the research survey, there is a query on the extent to which “the museum where you work has maintained effective governance and normal functions during the closure and reopening of the museum caused by the Covid-19 pandemic”. 87.6% of the participants chose the “agree” or “strongly agree” option, and 12.4% of the participants chose the “disagree” or “strongly disagree” option. Similarly, most of the interviewees believe the museum where they work experienced a short period of disorder but soon entered a “new normal” for their operation with the help of all kinds of social media, remote working software, and online services. This suggests that, while the pandemic posed significant operational challenges, many independent museums demonstrated a level of institutional resilience that has often been underestimated in broader crisis narratives. However, the survey results may also reflect a survival bias—those institutions that

responded were, by definition, the ones that endured, potentially excluding the experiences of those that failed to adapt and have since closed.

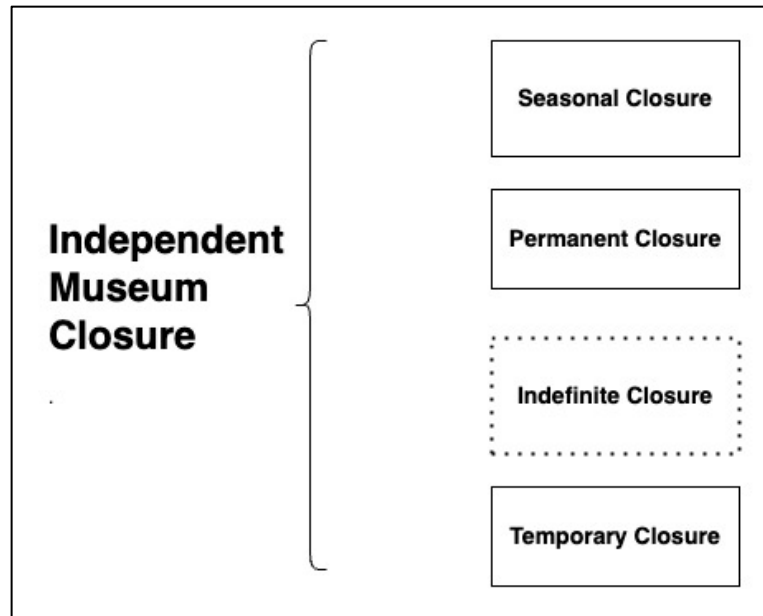


Figure 5.2 The types of independent museum closure between 2020 and 2022

In summary, the type of independent museum closure between 2020 and 2022 could be visually displayed in Figure 5.2. The Covid-19 pandemic did not cause any permanent closures but caused a lot of indefinite closures, which is a more insidious problem with long-term implications. During the indefinite closure, the public lost the physical access, and this is particularly problematic for some marginalized groups as the museums, as indicated in Chapter 2, have undertaken multiple social functions. As the Museums Association stated in their 2017 report ‘Museums Facing Closure’: “Closing a museum denies the public access to their heritage and significantly undermines the human right to culture” (MA, 2017:3). If those museums stay in prolonged dormancy, the communities could

not enjoy their cultural services, and the collections or heritage sites will also lack proper preservation. The longer the pandemic's effects persist, the more likely these indefinite closures will slide into permanent loss—representing a significant erosion of the UK's museum landscape.

Museum Staffing

A museum, as Griffin and Abraham (2000:17) highlight, is above all an organisation of people. When the institutions in an industry are forced to be closed, people who work for the institutions are definitely being impacted.

In 2020, numerous museums went through restructuring and made redundancies even if they had the support of the furlough scheme. According to a report by MA (2021: 2) regarding redundancy in the museum sector after one year of Covid, as of April 28, 2021, there had been 4,100 redundancies in the museum sector in the United Kingdom. The data of the MA (2021) shows that job losses could happen in all positions in the museum staffing structure, but redundancies are most likely to impact customer-facing roles like learning and engagement, front of house, retail, and catering roles, whereas backstage roles like digital, IT, finance, HR, and conservation roles are least likely to be affected.

Compared to other industries with more structured career paths, job progression in the cultural sector is often based on reputation (McAndrew *et al.*, 2024:15). This means that a laid-off senior museum curator may rely on the reputation and networks he or she has built within the sector to find the next

position, although low wages are already prevalent in the museum sector (Adams, 2022a). However, this pathway is less accessible to early-career professionals, particularly those without extensive connections or prior sector experience. This reliance on informal networks and personal visibility has created a highly uneven playing field, in which younger professionals and those from underrepresented backgrounds are disproportionately disadvantaged during periods of sectoral contraction. The situation is even harder for non-permanent staff, including fixed or short-term contractors, zero-hours contractors, regular freelancers, and agency staff. One senior finance director of a huge independent museum said proudly in the interview (P02), “the museum uses backstage data to figure out that museum visitors are almost gone after 4 pm, so they cut the working hours of temporary workers to save costs”. However, one of the temporary retail assistants complained to the researcher (P04), “it is difficult for me to pay the rent if they cut my working hours... this is a successful big museum, so I don’t think it really needs to save a cost for one hour or two”. This contrast between strategic cost-saving and personal livelihood reflects the tension between institutional financial sustainability and ethical responsibility in the sector’s pandemic response.

While job loss was widespread, re-entry into the museum field proved significantly more difficult. Some participants who just entered the museum field after the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic stressed that they found it extremely difficult to find a job in a museum after 2020, as there are fewer hiring opportunities than there used to be. One participant explained that she spent half a year to find her present part-time job, even though she holds a master’s degree in museum studies.

On the other hand, the shortage of volunteers has become the most intractable problem in some independent museums, especially those that completely rely on volunteers. For many small independent museums, their volunteer team is mainly composed of retirees living in the neighbourhood, and they are most vulnerable to be threatened by coronavirus. There is an open question in the survey, asking about what are “the greatest worries or challenges in your museum during the pandemic”. Nearly 48% of the answers mention the problem in recruiting volunteers. The importance of volunteers has never been so obvious before. This problem is also mentioned in the third investigation conducted by Art Fund regarding the impact of Covid-19 pandemic, “59% of respondents said they have fewer volunteers and 44% are having difficulty recruiting” (Adams, 2022f: no page).

The crisis underscored the previously underappreciated centrality of volunteer labour to the day-to-day functioning of many museums. More importantly, it exposed the fragility of a staffing model that depends heavily on unpaid and aging labour. This raises important questions about the long-term viability and inclusivity of volunteer-dependent operational structures in the face of demographic change and future disruptions.

5.1.2 Financial Impact

Before addressing the financial impact of Covid-19 on independent museums in the UK, it is necessary to review the funding sources of the independent museums, which could approximately be divided into the following types: ticket income, retail or catering income, public funds, donations, property rent, enterprise sponsors, local authorities support, and charity support. If an independent museum must

comply with an unplanned closure policy for months, the income brought by physical visits would reduce to zero, which may well amount to a devastating crush. Although almost every museum experienced financial impact, the extent of this impact varies widely from museum to museum. This variation reflects not only institutional differences in funding models but also deeper structural inequalities within the museum sector. The over-reliance on visitor-generated income among independent museums, often due to lack of access to core public funding, signals a systemic vulnerability that predates the pandemic but was made visible under crisis conditions.

First of all, the situation of museums with diverse sources of income are much better placed financially than those that greatly rely on a single type of income. As shown in Appendix 3, the survey includes a question investigating the funding body of the museum where the participants work in the research survey. The types of museum revenues generated from the answers to the research survey could be divided into the following categories shown in Figure 5.3.

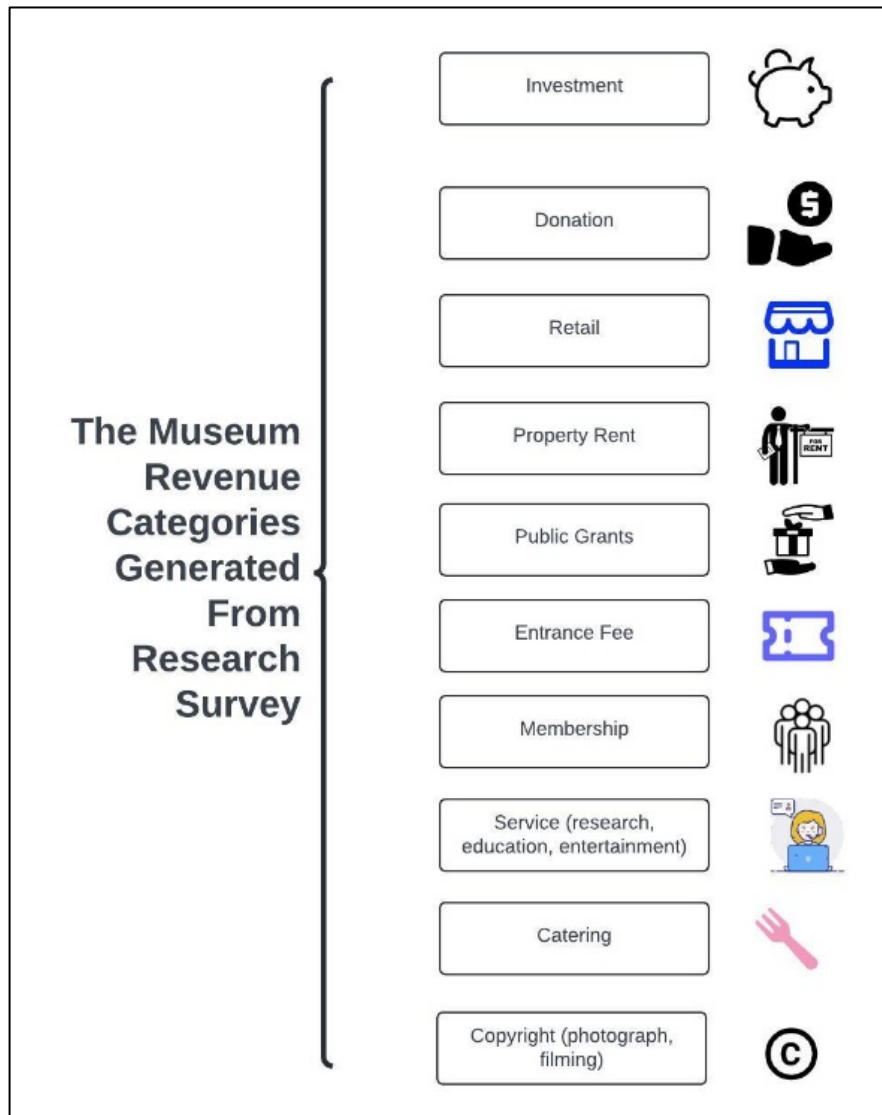


Figure 5.3 The museum revenue categories generated from the research survey

Figure 5.3 shows that the museums represented in the survey utilize a diverse array of revenue sources. Notably, although the figure summarizes numerous types of financial revenue, most survey participants typically report just one or two main sources, usually ticket sales and donations. A few income streams, like investment income and copyright royalties, are mentioned by only an extremely small fraction of respondents. Additionally, the data clearly indicates that many of the listed revenue sources are closely linked to visitor behaviour, suggesting that without a steady stream of visitors, the

financial sustainability of these museums could be at risk. In the research survey, 91% of participants indicated that their museum's revenue had been severely impacted, aligning with the findings of various surveys conducted by museum stakeholders in the UK (AIM, 2020; Art Fund, 2019; DCMS, 2020). A survey conducted by the Scottish Industrial Museums Association (IMS) revealed that cumulative losses in 2020 exceeded £300,000, doubling in 2021, which has raised significant concerns within the association regarding the sustainability of many museums, particularly independent ones (Grant, 2021). In 2022, the results of Art Fund's third survey on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic indicated that museum revenues across the country had recovered to 68% of pre-pandemic levels, compared to just 38% in 2021 (Adams, 2022f). However, despite these signs of recovery, 84% of survey respondents stated they had relied on emergency funding, and there was a fear that once this funding ceased, they might face a new financial crisis. This dependency on physical visiting exposes a misalignment between financial logic and public value: while independent museums often provide hyper-local cultural and educational services, their survival hinges on commercial metrics such as visitor numbers, which are easily disrupted in emergencies. This contradiction calls into question the adequacy of current funding paradigms in recognising the social value of museums beyond economic throughput.

The financial impact of Covid-19 pandemic is also reflected in the case studies. For example, a receptionist of the Jack the Rapper Museum in London (P17) explained that "our museum only relies on ticket revenue and a little retail profit. Now we can clearly feel that there are fewer tourists coming to London, and even fewer coming to us". In a similar vein, the Cartoon Museum in London has

illustrated during the interview that it has suffered a substantial setback by missing its crucial revenue period from Easter to summer—a time when most UK museums generate their highest income—leading to a staggering 75% loss of total revenue in 2020. These cases highlight the narrow fiscal margins within which many museums operate—where missing a single peak season can have existential consequences. The lack of financial buffer reflects the chronic undercapitalisation of the sector and raises questions about how risk is distributed and absorbed across institutions with vastly different resource levels.

Secondly, as stated before, it is not the case that the smaller the museum, the easier it is to be affected by financial problems. In fact, many small independent museums are resilient in finance, because they are flexible and quick. Two museum directors particularly highlighted in their interviews that independent museums must be quick and sensitive in making decisions in finance. A small museum director shared their experience of ordering face masks and gloves for staff and volunteers (P01), stating:

You must accurately estimate the demand and make decisions very quickly; otherwise, those masks will be sold in one second. I accomplished all of this very quickly because I was also in charge of procurement, which eliminated a lot of communication.

This example illustrates how minimal bureaucratic layering enabled rapid response at the micro level. However, this strength in immediacy is often offset by a lack of access to external financial resources.

Besides the direct impact of income reduction, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the gap between different independent museums. Independent museums with strong financial resources have the ability to absorb external funding. One medium museum director in West Midlands, who works part-time, introduced in the interview that they hired a professional expert to assist them in learning how to write an application for the Cultural Recovery Fund. Many small independent museums are not clear about the access to apply for public funds. Stephens (2023a: no page) points out that “museums are not only competing for the funding itself but also for the staff with the expertise to secure this funding”. The National Lottery Heritage Fund’s report (2020: 2) identified that small organisations are more likely to hold low levels of knowledge about government support, which in turn may impact their economy, with the potential for knock-on impact in other aspects of their operation. In this sense, Covid-19 did not create new inequalities so much as widen existing gaps between different institutions. Emergency grants, although well-intentioned, often reproduce disadvantages by rewarding those already equipped to navigate complex application processes.

As discussed in Chapter 2, museums, regardless of their size, are organizations managed by people. It is natural that museum staff would experience emotional influence when the institutions where they work face huge financial pressures. Beyond balance sheets, the crisis forced difficult choices around staffing, programming, and long-term vision—all of which have reshaped how independent museums understand and enact financial sustainability.

5.1.3 Emotional Impact

Most of the investigations conducted by museum stakeholders in the UK did not take the emotional impact of the pandemic into account. Although official institutions do not examine the emotional impact of Covid-19 pandemic on museum workers, museum colleagues can feel it deeply. As venues for interpreting and showcasing the histories of places and people, museums are effective spaces where their emotional influence helps shape our perceptions of both ourselves and others (Crooke and Farrell-Banks, 2024: 113). Therefore, understanding and addressing the personal emotions of museum staff and volunteers in the workplace is of great importance, as it significantly impacts both their own well-being and the experiences of visitors. Several museum directors in the UK are stressing the emotional health of people who have gone through the pandemic, especially those whose positions were believed to be at risk (Deakin, 2022). This section looks at the internal emotional impact caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Specific emphasis has been given to the survey questions to analyse the worries within the museums. 83% of the participants admitted that they were worried about being infected in the working environment. 56.7% of the participants were worried about their own future due to the risk of losing their job or reducing their salary, while 33.6% were not worried and 9.6% were not clear about this issue. The concerns about career paths are also reflected in the experience of the participants of the in-depth interviews. A senior curator of a medium size museum (P07) said that:

I was worried about my job because I knew this place well enough. I knew if I left here, my salary would probably drop, and it also meant that I might have to move to another city. I hated that.

In the survey and case study for this research, only a small number of participants disclosed that they had laid off contract staff or reduced salaries. This may be due to participants deliberately avoiding this topic or because the institutions' redundancy plans had not yet been announced during the data collection period. If the former, it is quite understandable. As Petzer (2020) points out, making redundancy is the worst decision, as it can cause long-term psychological stress for both the redundancy envoys and those who remain. Crooke and Farrell-Banks (2024) have provided findings from Northern Ireland, which revealed emotions of worry, anxiety, and resentment among museum employees facing job security issues, income loss, and staff changes. This suggests that emotional impact is not only personal but also collectively experienced, reflecting a shared sense of institutional fragility. Thus, discussing layoffs is highly sensitive for the museum staff involved in this research, which could explain the reluctance of some to disclose the details.

However, secondary research data indicates that the scale of layoffs in the cultural sector is much larger than reflected in the fieldwork. According to statistics provided by the Museums Association (2021), as of April 28, 2021, the UK museum sector had laid off 4,100 people, accounting for about 8% of the total workforce. The actual reduction in the museum workforce may be even greater, as employees on fixed-term contracts often do not have their contracts renewed upon expiration, and this number is not

reflected in the layoff statistics. While data for the independent museum sector is unclear, the scale of layoffs in many large, government-funded museums in the UK reflects the staffing crisis faced by the industry (Knott, 2020c: no page). For example, in August 2020, Tate Museums announced plans to lay off 313 employees in its commercial subsidiary (which handles catering, retail, corporate events, and publishing), accounting for nearly half of its entire workforce.



Figure 5.4 PCS Culture Group members protest outside the Tate Modern (image from PCS Culture Group Twitter).

More research participants indicated that the UK government’s Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme significantly alleviated the emotional impact of the job risk. The scheme, which was introduced on March 20, 2020, and ended in 2021, allowed employers to furlough staff with 80% of their wages covered (GOV.UK, 2020c). An employee from the Black Country Living Museum (P06) remarked, “although I lost 20% of my salary, I still feel extremely fortunate because retaining 80% of my pay

was incredibly ‘healing’ compared to being laid off”. Crooke and Farrell-Banks’s research (2024) also echoed this sentiment, noting that employees who received furlough payments felt a profound sense of relief, resulting in an unprecedented reduction of anxiety.

Another emotional impact comes from the workload. As mentioned, a shortage of volunteers is quite common among independent museums, which means museum staff must take responsibility. Too much work makes people feel stressed and tired. A museum receptionist (P17) said that “I am glad to see people coming back to the museum, but it is so understaffed right now that I often do not have a spare moment throughout the day”.

The tiredness and insecurity caused by excessive workloads became even more pronounced after museums’ reopening. As introduced in Chapter 3, museums were allowed to reopen from 4 July 2020 under the guidance provided by DCMS, which required that museums maintain hygiene, signage, and social distancing standards in accordance with government guidelines. Understandably, this resulted in a significantly increased workload for staff compared to pre-pandemic times. However, most museum staff involved in onsite observations demonstrated remarkable patience and dedication. A receptionist from a medium-sized museum (P05) remarked, “most of the time, I maintain a high level of enthusiasm, but I really dislike those who refuse to wear face masks or do not keep them on all the time as required. I see no altruism in them at all.” Visitor aggression also contributed to emotional strain. Adams (2021b) documented another instance of an unpleasant issue, where a museum worker reported experiencing abuse from visitors who refused to wear face masks and the management did

not back her up against abuse. As such, it is obvious that the “customer-facing” workers are more likely to be involved in confrontations which may impact their emotional health and well-being.

In addition, during the closure, people began to work from home. Several interviewees questioned their own and colleagues’ efficiency when they were working remotely and communicating through phone or computer. One participant (P07) complained:

Working at home means you must fight all kinds of disturbances and loneliness... I sometimes felt uncomfortable to stay at home. I wanted to talk with people in person.

The use of remote working software brings negative emotions among both young and older people. One elder interviewee who is not familiar with the usage of online meeting platforms expressed her emotion of distress when she did not know how to join an online meeting or share documents through shared cloud storage. From the point of young people, some of them were not satisfied with the workload division. One fresher taking the role of education assistant (P12) said:

I usually feel tired when I am assigned to deal with social media accounts, just because I am the only young person here. I understand, but I don’t like being judged by default.

An extreme loss happened in The Cartoon Museum – the 39-year-old front-of-house manager, who had worked for this museum for 14 years, passed away because of the Covid-19 infection. The entire

museum was in mourning over the death of a colleague. The museum was not able to open because of the great sadness for weeks. In 2022, The Cartoon Museum held a cartoon competition with the Alison Brown Award to commemorate this colleague (The Fitzrovia News, 2022: no page).



Figure 5.5 The Alison Brown Young Comics Maestro Award celebrates Cartoon Museum staff member Alison Brown, who passed away from Covid (The Fitzrovia News, 2022).

In sum, some of the emotional impact listed above is mostly temporary. Concerns about job continuity may subside if the financial conditions of museums improve, and the tiredness caused by heavy workloads may be alleviated by the return of volunteers. However, the long-term emotional impact is still worth noting. As mentioned in Chapter 2, museum staff in the UK are often highly educated and even overqualified. Under these circumstances, redundancies or lowered salaries may lead to a lack of trust in the long-term prospects for a career in the museum field, potentially affecting the industry's ability to attract a talented workforce. This also underscores a structural tension between the public mission of museums and the private toll borne by those who sustain them. Emotional resilience, often

taken for granted in cultural labour, is not an infinite resource—and its depletion may have lasting effects on staff retention, institutional memory, and future leadership in the sector.

5.2 Presentation of Emergent Findings

As indicated in the methodology section, the survey conducted for this study provides a great deal of space for open questions that seek to uncover potential research findings. This section presents the emerging findings addressing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums, as supplemented by interviews and survey respondents during data collection. This section is structured around three specific findings: firstly, the Covid-19 pandemic and other disturbances have a joint impact on independent museums; secondly, the most severe impact is felt by the elderly; and finally, the Covid-19 pandemic has a long-term impact on the museum ecosystem.

5.2.1 ‘When it Rains, it Pours’: Disturbances Usually Come Together

There is a proverb that states, “When it rains, it pours,” referring to situations in which many negative events occur simultaneously. Multiple disruptions, like the Covid-19 pandemic and inflation, have posed problems for independent museums in the United Kingdom. This part will examine the disruptions that come together with the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on independent museums in the United Kingdom.

Extreme Weather and Natural Disasters

As indicated in the literature review, natural catastrophes add significantly to the crises that museums may confront. According to reports on “The State of UK Climate 2020” (Kendon *et al.*, 2021: 4), at the same time as the museums were dealing with the first year of the pandemic the United Kingdom experienced severe floods, storms, and excessive heat, which caused varying degrees of damage to buildings, roads, people, and transportation. Notably, the unusual weather, such as heatwaves, floods, and wildfires, caused by climate change has become more frequent in Europe during summertime (European Environment Agency, 2024). Unavoidably, some independent museums have been harmed by these extreme weather conditions.

In February 2020, certain areas of the United Kingdom saw severe and widespread flooding as a result of the storms Ciara and Dennis (Kendon *et al.*, 2021: 4). As one of the case studies, Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust operates a total of 10 museums, located within a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Unfortunately, the flooding caused by the storm engulfed two museums managed by the Ironbridge Gorge Museums Trust: the Museum of the Gorge in Ironbridge and the Coalport China Museum (Mills, 2020). Ironbridge Gorge Museums Trust, a large independent museum with a long history, is situated on a site that, due to its complex geology, is prone to issues like landslides and periodic flooding from the Severn River, which runs through the gorge. Consequently, the museum has developed a thorough emergency plan for natural catastrophes, and its CEO, Mr. Nick Ralls, has extensive expertise in disaster response (*ibid.*). Reporting on this case, one interviewee clarified that the museum staff and volunteers relocated as many significant collections as they could to safe places when they got the advance alert from the Environment Agency. Nevertheless, as shown in Figure 5.6, the buildings and

interior facilities were immovable and thus badly damaged by the floodwater. This convergence of crises highlights a structural mismatch between the scale of external threats and the preparedness capacity of many independent museums. While some institutions like Ironbridge have developed robust emergency plans, others—particularly smaller museums—often lack the resources, infrastructure, or institutional memory to respond effectively to concurrent disruptions. This suggests that resilience planning in the sector needs to move beyond isolated crisis responses and toward integrated, multi-hazard preparedness frameworks.



Figure 5.6 A retail store at the Museum of Gorge in 2020 (Mills, 2020)

With an efficient emergency plan in place to respond to emergencies of this nature, the physical damages were limited to resources that can be renovated or replaced, rather than irreversible damage to irreplaceable artifacts and features of the site. Therefore, contrary to my initial expectations, the

interviews in Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust did not show extensive worries about the physical damage caused by the flood, but the staff are concerned about the double impact of the cost of flood damage as well as the revenue loss caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Rory Hunter, the trust's special projects director (cited in Adams, 2022c: no page),

We are at the beginning of our season, and we are launching new programming. We had forecast 2,500 visitors a day across the museums, but we are running at 25% of that. Our two biggest sites are still open, but nobody wants to travel.

The museum's expectations for a significant surge in visitor numbers after its re-opening have been shattered by the extreme weather. Moreover, if the new seasonal programming is ineffective, a substantial amount of money would be wasted.

One research participant (P22) added that:

In fact, we are conscious that the Ironbridge Gorge is located in a flood-prone area, therefore we conduct annual flood drills and reinforce flood defences every year. So, when the water arrives, we are all prepared. Nevertheless, what is worrying is that the timing of the flood coincides with the Covid-19 pandemic. The urgent architectural renovations required the closure of several sites, further reducing the number of visitors, who had already been diminished by the pandemic's impact.

Exactly as this interviewee described, the Ironbridge Gorge Museums Trust has been affected by the flooding disaster for three years since 2020 (Adams, 2022c). The enormous expense of restoration combined with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the trust's financial strain. Fortunately, the National Heritage Memorial Fund donated around £10 million to the Ironbridge Gorge Museums Trust as an endowment to rehabilitate the historic sites and secure their long-term recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic (BBC News, 2022). One interviewee said, "Unfortunately, we had to lay off some employees until we received this funding". Clearly, the simultaneous effect of the natural calamity and the Covid-19 pandemic gave this renowned museum trust formidable difficulties.

Particular types of natural catastrophes, such as floods and landslides, may be particularly prone to cause harm in certain regions, whilst others, like storms, may affect museums throughout the United Kingdom. In February 2022, a terrible storm named Eunice pounded the United Kingdom with gusts of up to 122 miles per hour, among the strongest since 1703 (Seymour, 2022). According to Seymour (2022), a number of museums have declared they would be temporarily closed due to inclement weather. Wight Aviation Museum, one of the case study museums, was established as a charity organization to honour the Isle of Wight's aviation history (Wight Aviation Museum Website, no date). The roof of the Wight Aviation Museum was blown off by Storm Eunice (as shown in Figure 5.6). Volunteers at the museum hurriedly fixed the broken roof and solicited donations from the public to meet expenses for repairs and prevent rain from destroying the aircraft.



Figure 5.7 The roof of Wight Aviation Museum (image provided by research participants)

Unlike these natural disasters that cause visible damage and hence an immediately obvious impact, extremely hot weather may cause hazardous storage conditions for museum collections and an uncomfortable environment for the people in the museum. In the summer of 2022, temperatures in the glass-fronted reception area of one museum in London reached 35 degrees Celsius, well beyond the acceptable operating temperature of 30 degrees Celsius (Adams, 2022e). Although there is no systematic evidence that air-conditioned museums are more attractive than non-air-conditioned museums, based on my personal observations, during heat waves museumgoers and overseas tourists prefer to visit spacious and air-conditioned museums. If an independent museum does not have air-conditioning system and updated infrastructure, it might have to close the door for the safety of the staff and visitors. One reception-based research participant (P05) complained that:

I am a volunteer at this museum, and my work is welcoming and signposting the guests. Long periods of time spent at the front desk reception desk once led me to get signs of heat stroke.

Cool though it is, the collection storage room and offices are not open to volunteers.

This is a dilemma from the standpoint of many independent museums. On the one hand, it is difficult to invest extra funds to install air conditioners and pay the cost of cooling for the heatwave under the financial pressure rooted in Covid-19 pandemic, and ironically doing so and thus adding to the energy consumption of the museums will also worsen the problem of climate change. On the other hand, health concerns related to repeated record-breaking heat waves in recent years have increased the need to install or update air conditioners. In addition, the dilemma of determining which museum departments require air conditioning, and which do not, has indirectly exacerbated disparities within the museums, which can have long-term negative effects on the mental health and well-being of museum staff.

Inflation Since Early 2021

This section's title, "When it rains, it pours," accurately represents the current predicament. In addition to climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic, inflation is one of the major concerns of museums in the UK. According to research examining the rising cost of living in the United Kingdom (Harari *et al.*, 2024: 11-12), there has been a general upward trend in the cost of living in the United Kingdom since the beginning of 2021: in October 2022, the annual rate of inflation reached 11.1%, marking a

41-year peak; however, it then began to decline, reaching 10.7% in November 2022 and 10.5% in December 2022. Price increases are being driven up by supply chain bottlenecks caused by the pandemic, strong consumer demand, the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and Brexit. In particular, the impact of the war between Ukraine and Russia has hindered the supply chain of resources such as food and gasoline, which has led to an increase in the cost and price of all commodities (GEP, 2022). Independent museums are obviously not immune to this inflation. Summarizing the secondary research data as well as results from fieldwork, the inflation since early 2021 impacts independent museums in three ways: museum personnel's living costs, visitors' spending, and museum operation costs.

First of all, numerous museum employees are struggling to meet rapidly growing energy and food expenditures, which have devastating repercussions on their physical and emotional health. Due to double-digit inflation and wage increases considerably below the rate of inflation, the real incomes of the museum workforce are dropping at the quickest rate in decades (MA, 2023). The average hourly wage for museum employees decreased by 9 percent from £14.86 (in today's value) in 2011 to £13.49 in 2021(Adams, 2022d). The enormous disparity between income increases and inflation makes museum positions even less desirable. According to research conducted by the Museum Association on museum salaries in the United Kingdom (MA, 2022), museum salaries in the United Kingdom are, on average, 10% lower than the market median, which is a significantly higher discrepancy than the figure from 2017 (7%), and 52% of research participants are having trouble recruiting staff.

Secondly, at a time when museums demand visitors to generate income growth, tourists are strapped for cash due to inflation. As noted by Major and Machin (2020), many middle-income families have had to scale back on expensive vacations and dining out as a means of passive savings or budgeting, while lower-income groups may find themselves barely able to cover essential living expenses, making it difficult for them to engage in cultural activities. According to the ALVA Public Sentiment Research, (ALVA, 2023), inflation has already affected people's consumption behaviour, with tourists being less inclined to pay for costly attractions while showing a greater interest in free attractions. Even museums with free admission are not immune to the impact, as rising transportation costs have also affected visitors. There appears to be an irreconcilable conflict, as many independent museums in the United Kingdom depend heavily on admission revenues. In the current financial climate, certain museums have even had to increase entrance fees to alleviate the financial burden of rising energy expenses. Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery in Carlisle, for instance, had to increase its adult entry ticket from £9 to £15 to cover for a 138% rise in its yearly heating expenses (Adams, 2022g). Such price increases have led to some negative feedback for museums. According to a review on Google Maps for the Blists Hill Victorian Town at the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, one visitor gave one star (the worst) and left the following comment after his visit in Aug 2024 (Google Maps Comments of Blists Hill Victorian Town, no date):

In 30 years, little has changed and very few of the attractions were showing any sign of Victorian life, the village had nothing going on, or anything to do other than walk around and go in a few old buildings. Parking is extra, which is ridiculous when it is £82 for a family

ticket. If you forget to pay when you leave you will get a £60 fine, which seems harsh as no one is going to use that car park, it is in the middle of nowhere and you would only be parking to visit the Bliss Hill Victorian Town.

Numerous other museums, like the Tullie House Museum, are experiencing the same problem of ever-increasing operational expenses. Energy expenses and supplier costs are the two primary contributors to overall operational expenditures. This is not hard to comprehend given the fact that museums typically have a high need for energy due to the preservation of collections, the heating of spaces, and the fact that many historic buildings are inefficient with regard to energy usage. The chair of Hull Remembers (permanently closed), Alan Brigham, explained that “rents; rates; insurance, water, heating, lighting, and all the other associated costs are, as everyone is aware, going through the roof” (Museum+Heritage, 2022: no page). The most notable increase is that of the cost of electricity, which has caused the bills of some museums to climb by as much as 400% (Adams, 2022g). The distinctive nature of Scotland’s industrial museums, which manage large machinery collections and intricate heritage buildings, has intensified the impact of the sharp increase in utility bills and maintenance costs (Adams, 2024a). Half of the interviewees agreed that the rising cost of energy has a negative impact on revenue. In terms of the cost of supplies, the challenges encountered in the supply chain and during transportation cause an increase in the price of supplies. Because shop merchandise and food products are particularly affected by inflation, the retail profit margins of museums are becoming increasingly thin.

In summary, the discussion in this section draws attention to an important point, which is that the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums in the United Kingdom does not emerge in a vacuum, but concurrently with the occurrence of the increasingly frequent impacts of a growing climate crisis and the impacts of political events beyond the control of the museums, such as the economic impacts of Brexit, and of armed conflict outside of the UK. Even these factors will influence one another, therefore the independent museum sector in the UK is facing a complicated situation.

5.2.2 The Most Severe Impact Is Felt by the Elderly and Those with Health Conditions

As discussed in Chapter 2, the mission of a museum is to make accessible to the general public numerous educational and cultural resources. However, the impact of the pandemic on the physical and mental health of the population was not even; certain groups, particularly those with preexisting health conditions, experienced more severe effects (British Medical Association, 2024). Individuals who are more likely to experience worsening conditions after contracting COVID-19 include the elderly aged 65 and over, those with preexisting health conditions, people without access to healthcare, individuals with disabilities, and many minority ethnic groups (U.S. Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Examining the “inequality” experienced by these groups within the context of this study is crucial, since some groups such as women and minority groups are always suffering during hard times (Redman, 2022: 127). Even though everyone was caught in the same storm, their circumstances varied greatly—some had shelter, others had umbrellas, and some had nothing. This section will explain how the findings of this study reveal the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the vulnerable museum communities, mainly people aged 65 and over.

Above all, it is essential to understand the elderly aged 65 and above in the museums. Elderly individuals within museum communities were not homogeneous. The aged population inside the museum can be segmented into distinct categories according to factors such as not only age, but also income, health status, and living circumstances. In addition, elderly people have a variety of reasons to enter museums. Some seek to be educated, while others visit cultural venues for leisure or to become involved in their communities (Hansen and Zipsane, 2014: 1). According to a study by Fitton (2018), over thirty percent of individuals aged 65 and older cite amusement as their primary reason for engaging with culture and art, with 22% of them spend their time in museums and heritage sites. Some seek leisure: People of retirement age are more prone than those of younger ages to spend leisure time in establishments such as museums and galleries (Fiction, 2018: 2). Some use museums as venues to communicate with others and reduce feelings of loneliness. The activities of the elderly at the museum allow them to form social interactions and improve well-being (Todd, 2017).

I interviewed a 77-year-old actor (P09) at the Black Country Living Museum who portrays “Mr. Hartwell” (see Figure 5.7), the bike shop mechanic in an open-air, nostalgic museum. “Mr. Hartwell” was so devoted to his profession that he stated,

I worked here for a total of seventeen years, three days each week. I love this job so much; I adore conversing with travellers, especially children, and extolling the virtues of the industrial revolution. I am not really worried about the coronavirus, because when you are

my age, you will know that everyone gets sick. I do not wish to stay cooped up at home, bored, awaiting death. If I die from this virus, that is my destiny.



Figure 5.8 Picture of “Mr. Hartwell”. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 18 March 2022.

Another elderly volunteer who worked at the Royal Air Force Museum Midlands shared his experiences in an interview. He had worked here for five years, two days a week. Similarly, he (P13) also valued his volunteer work so much:

Following my retirement, I came here to meet with some of my friends. As I was deeply interested in these aircraft and pieces of machinery, I decided to become a volunteer here. In

order to perform my role as a volunteer in the exhibition hall, it is necessary for me to have prior knowledge concerning these displays. The museum is an excellent resource for training, and it also gives me the opportunity to speak with a wide variety of aviation professionals.

Since many older people consider museums to be their spiritual homes (Grácio, 2020; Herron and Jamleson, 2020), their closure due to the pandemic had a damaging effect on them. While it did not drastically alter their livelihoods, the museum's closure exacerbated feelings of social isolation and psychological issues among marginalized social groups (Presti, 2021). As indicated by research participants, even when museums just reopened, there was only a slight improvement in the number of older people visiting the museums. Many of the museums in the research saw a decline in volunteerism, particularly among the elderly. They were once either quarantined for fear of infection or were infected and unable to return, but this is no longer the case. As the pandemic progressed, the issue of digital literacy among most older museum users became increasingly apparent (*ibid.*). This raises critical questions about the age-related digital divide and the extent to which current models of museum innovation have unintentionally marginalised the very communities they claim to serve. Without addressing the infrastructural and emotional exclusions tied to digital transformation, resilience efforts risk reinforcing social stratification within the museum public. From a positive perspective, the Covid-19 pandemic may serve as an opportunity to highlight the issue of elderly individuals being excluded from digital museum services, thereby prompting museums to reflect on their inclusivity plans, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

5.2.3 The Growing Threat to Museum Security

During the collection of secondary research data, I became particularly concerned about the escalating security threats faced by the UK museum sector. In February 2024, the National Waterways Museum in Cheshire, overseen by The Canal and River Trust, fell victim to a significant theft, with 11 treasured exhibits vanishing from its collection (Nevell, 2024). In March 2024, Historic England and the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) released research findings on heritage and cultural property crime in England (Historic England, 2024). Although the report does not provide direct data about the independent museum sector, it does indirectly shed light on some common industry challenges faced by these cultural institutions. NPCC's research has revealed that metal theft from historic places of worship increased during the lockdown periods of the Covid-19 pandemic; however, effective preventative and enforcement measures have since led to a steady decrease (*ibid.*). The rise of heritage crime between 2020 and 2023 may be attributed to the impacts of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis (Adams, 2024b).

This section is included here because the security crises facing the museum sector intersected with several previously discussed "impacts", such as museum closures, staff shortages, financial austerity, and inflation. More specifically, the direct effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, combined with other national and global disruptions, are creating "secondary disasters", such as the surge in crime within the heritage sector. These challenges are particularly pressing as the industry grapples with financial crises, with many institutions struggling to maintain operations and unable to allocate additional funds for security measures (*ibid.*). Consequently, relevant museum stakeholders have begun to focus on and

investigate these issues, which helps contextualize the specific difficulties encountered by cultural institutions.

5.3 The Impact of Covid-19 on the Independent Museum Ecosystem

This section seeks to analyse, from a macro perspective, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the whole independent museum ecosystem. This objective will be revealed by discussing the following: the changes in museum work mode brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact of the pandemic on the future museum workforce, and the pandemic's role in exacerbating disparities within the museum sector.

In the past few years, museums have formed some new working modes in the process of adapting to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. These changes could be found in for instance curation strategies that are increasingly locally oriented. For example, willing to concentrate on existing collections rather than external loans in a context of pandemic-induced uncertainty, Inglesby (2021) tried a new curatorial narrative at the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow by creating a sense of community ownership based on more local community engagements. Moreover, months of museum closure in 2020 have led many museums to introduce digital working methods. According to answers to one interview question, “Do you think the digital museum services and remote working methods have contributed to the museum resilience during the pandemic?”, the majority of the participants thought digital technologies are effective and they will continue their use. The Covid-19 pandemic has made

many museums realize the importance of having official websites and social media accounts. One director of a train station museum (P01) said that:

Having a website is essential for a museum. A good website needs to provide users with some key information, including operation hours, ticket prices, locations, introductions, contact information, and even donation channels. Yes, donation channels are very important. Our museum collected about £3,000 through our website last year, which is much more than the on-site donation box.

However, the shift toward digital resilience may not be equally accessible to all museums. Those without adequate funding, digital literacy, or personnel capacity may find themselves excluded from the benefits of this transformation. This raises questions about whether technological innovation, though framed as resilience, may actually deepen structural inequalities across the museum landscape.

Next, as indicated previously, inflation has placed museums in an even more embarrassing predicament. The museum industry in the United Kingdom may progressively lose its vitality in the future due to massive workloads and uncompetitive wages. Thistle (2015) critically points out that the prevalent “more with less” culture in the museum sector has led to rising job pressures for staff. As mentioned above, many museums faced severe financial pressure caused by Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in job cuts and hiring freezes, leading to operations with significantly reduced numbers of staff and volunteers. Crooke and Farrell-Banks (2024) note that museum staff work diligently both out of a

strong commitment to and passion for the museum field, and to retain their positions. However, with the rising cost of living, museum employees are increasingly confronted with the mismatch between inadequate salaries and increased job pressures. As illustrated by Stephens (2023a: no page), “the cost-of-living crisis is also having an impact on staff, with some struggling with their finances while others have left for higher-paid jobs or moved to new roles closer to home”. The Annual Museum Survey 2023 conducted by Museum Development England (2023: 9) indicates that the cost-of-living crisis has forced some museum employees to leave seasonal or low-paid positions in search of better-paid or closer opportunities. Meanwhile, some volunteers are returning to paid employment or finding it difficult to afford transportation costs to museums (*ibid.*). These findings suggest that the museum labour model—long reliant on underpaid and unpaid work—is reaching a breaking point under economic stress. The sector’s long-term sustainability depends on addressing these human resource vulnerabilities, not just technological upgrades or temporary funding.

Additionally, the financial crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic led many museums to cut costs, which has increased disparities within the museum sector. An anonymous museum volunteer of a medium museum in England (P10) said in an interview:

I have been a volunteer here for two years, responsible for sorting out the office documents.

Energy prices have risen sharply recently, and I hope the museum can give me some transportation subsidies, otherwise I cannot afford the travel expenses for this zero-paid job.

But my request was rejected by the leader on the grounds that there was no such precedent.

I feel very discouraged. I am obviously doing the same thing as regular employees.

This highlights the precarious position of volunteers who perform essential functions yet remain structurally excluded from institutional support. While museums depend on volunteer labour, they often fail to extend even minimal protections or recognition—raising ethical and sustainability questions for the sector’s recovery model. At the institutional level, disparities are reinforced by differences in museum size, accreditation status, subject area, and access to specialised staff. According to my observations, there are some patterns that these factors involve: large registered museums tend to be more favoured by governmental museum stakeholders; museums specializing in a specific subject, such as military museums, are more likely to receive support from related governmental bodies; special fundraising staff sometimes play a crucial role in applying external fundings (Stephens, 2023b). As one director of a medium size museum in Sheffield (P11) explained during an interview:

We were unsuccessful in the first round of applications for the Cultural Recovery Fund. After receiving the results, I consulted with a fundraising expert. We developed the skill to convey a solid museum brand narrative with his help and were successful in the second round of applications.

It can be observed that having dedicated fundraising staff can sometimes help the entire organization capitalize on opportunities at critical moments. However, not all museums have the financial resources to employ a special expert for fundraising. In short, the differences in the backgrounds of these museums have allowed some already strong museums to weather the pandemic calmly, while some small museums are even more vulnerable in this competition. This suggests that crisis funding mechanisms—unless explicitly designed to address inequity—may inadvertently reproduce it.

In sum, this section has explored how the Covid-19 pandemic reshaped the independent museum ecosystem not only through operational disruptions but also by amplifying structural gaps. While some museums adapted to digital innovation and strategic fundraising, others were constrained by limited resources, workforce precarity, and unequal access to support. These disparities raise concerns about the long-term inclusivity and viability of the sector. The pandemic has exposed the fragility of informal labour models within the independent museum sector—a fragility that is also likely to be present in other types of cultural institutions that largely rely on unpaid or low-paid staff. Without targeted interventions to address workforce instability and systemic inequality, the sector risks drifting toward a two-tier landscape in which only the most institutionally equipped can endure. A truly resilient ecosystem must be one that distributes capacity more equitably—technologically, financially, and socially.

5.4 A Crisis or Not?

As indicated earlier in Chapter 2, this research is tied closely to the notion of museum crises. This section will evaluate whether the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums in the United Kingdom constituted a crisis. To reach this objective, I must first specify a logic: it is necessary to first define the manifestations of a “crisis” and then compare them with the research findings. If all conditions are met, then the impact of this pandemic may be considered as a crisis for the independent museum sector in the UK; otherwise, it is not a crisis, or the present impact has not yet reached the level of a crisis. Following this logic, this section will first summarise the definition of museum crisis from the literature review, then utilise the results of this research as evidence to verify each criterion and finally evaluate whether the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums could be regarded as a “crisis”. It is worth noting that the concept of museum crisis described in this research pertains to the independent museum sector as a whole and not to individual independent museums.

The notion of a crisis has been the subject of scholarly inquiry in the management studies field for several decades (Hermann, 1963; Weick, 1988; Lagadec, 1993; Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer, 1998; Coombs, 2014; Xue, Zhang and Zhong, 2022). Based on a comprehensive review of the literature, the concept of the term “crisis” may be encapsulated as an unanticipated and unusual occurrence or series of occurrences that creates a high degree of uncertainty and a threat to an organization’s highest priorities and also defies the remedial measures. If this definition is dissected, then a crisis must satisfy five conditions: firstly, it is an unpredictable and unorthodox occurrence; secondly, it generates a very

high degree of uncertainty; thirdly, it must threaten the institution's highest priority; and fourthly, it resists effective remedies; and finally, a crisis is a systemic event with societal impact.

In point of fact, the concept of crisis retains some degree of relevance for the vast majority of organisations. Nonetheless, there would be incomprehensible errors if the notion of crisis as defined in the managerial field is applied without alteration to the sphere of museums. Being educational and open-access organisations, museums today play an essential role in society despite having historically been exclusive institutions that catered to a privileged group of wealthy individuals (Hooper-Greenhill, 2003: 1-8). Hence, the museum sector at large concerns the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage (ICOM, 2022) and making it accessible to the whole society. Furthermore, according to Weil (2002: 1-30), a museum is a special entity compared to an enterprise, which includes objects (collections), space (exhibition and architecture), people (audiences, staff, and volunteers), culture (history and memory), and emotions (the intertwined emotions among people and collections, and space). Therefore, when evaluating the impact of an event to the museums, the nature of museums should be taken into account. In addition, the timeframe of the analysis needs to be correspondingly extended. Vrdoljak and Bauer (2021) reviewed the pandemics in history and the texts documenting them, finding that these works were often created and published decades after the pandemics had ended. They observed that this delay allowed the authors to address deeper questions from long-term observation and reflection, which offer a more nuanced understanding of the societal, cultural, and psychological impacts of pandemics over time, rather than merely capturing immediate reactions or

events. As highlighted by Crooke *et al.* (2022b), it is unhelpful to broadly consider the impact of a crisis without acknowledging its varying immediate, mid and long-term impacts.

As a result, taking into consideration both the general understanding of the crisis in organisational management and the specific nature of the museum sector, I have outlined the six conditions that should be in place for an event to be characterised as constituting a crisis to the museum sector:

- It is an unpredictable and unusual occurrence that falls outside of the museums' emergency plans.
- It creates a high degree of uncertainty for the museums in any aspect, including collection, organisation, people, research, reputation, and community.
- It threatens institutions' highest priority, viability, and long-term development.
- It invalidates the internal remedy as well as external support from stakeholders.
- It poses a threat to the social environment surrounding the museum sector.
- It produces effects that last long enough to have serious consequences.

Next, I will summarize the findings from this research in order to determine whether the aforementioned six conditions are met by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

First of all, for the majority of museums, the Covid-19 pandemic is an uncommon occurrence for which no particular emergency strategy exists. According to the Accreditation Standard for museums and galleries in the United Kingdom (ACE, 2018: 4), museums are recommended to have clear,

workable emergency plans covering the safety of collections, people, and buildings. All the case study museums in this study reported that they have plans for natural disasters and theft but lack specific emergency strategies for infectious illnesses. A small number of case study museums indicated that they did not have any such plans prior to the pandemic.

Then, the Covid-19 pandemic did create severe uncertainty for the independent museum sector. As stated above, independent museums already had greater financial uncertainty than government-funded museums as most of them were financially reliant on audiences, but the Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated this structural feature. Several museums have demonstrated a profound lack of confidence in future development. After reopening, more than two-thirds of case study museum participants found it more difficult to attract the public. Moreover, many small independent museums, particularly those solely operated by volunteers have a severe volunteer shortage. “In the future, if the number of museum volunteers continues to decline, our museum has to declare temporary closure”, said one interviewee (P07). Moreover, the third and final round of the Cultural Recovery Fund officially closed to further Expressions of Interest on January 18, 2021 (Historic England, no date), which means the museum sector in the UK has entered a “vacuum period” without large-scale funding to address recovery in the wake of the pandemic since then, in spite of the continued effect of many of the pandemic’s impacts on their operations. Without emergency financial support from the governmental bodies, many independent museums had to confront the unpredictability of the post-pandemic era.

From a viability standpoint, it has to be admitted that the independent museum sector has already been experiencing “hard times” since 2010 (Woodham, 2018: 36). As mentioned in section 5.1.1, the number of independent museums that permanently closed due to the pandemic is relatively low and almost negligible according to its proportion of the entire independent museum sector. Given that many for-profit corporations are struggling for all kinds of reasons (Moran, 2024, cited in Adams, 2024 a), the current viability of the independent museum sector is not exceptional. However, the pandemic, combined with other disturbances (see Figure 3.3), could lead to a potential disruption affecting the long-term workforce sustainability of the independent museums in the UK. This signals an important paradigm shift: crisis should not be understood only in terms of institutional survival, but also through the erosion of workforce infrastructure, professional aspirations, and sector-wide staff wellbeing.

According to Knell *et al.* (2012: 75), the boom in the UK heritage sector which continued from 1960 to 2015 (Candlin, 2020) reflected the increasing prosperity of the middle class. Just like the “Mr. Hartwell” shown in Figure 5.8, many from the generation who were teenagers during World War II have now retired or are nearing retirement, possessing both the time and accumulated wealth to contribute financially or through volunteer work to public service (Woodham, 2018: 34). In the future, a key issue will be whether sufficient people will still be available to dedicate their time and money to the prosperity of the heritage sector after these older, affluent middle-class individuals pass away. Moreover, the pandemic has widened the gap between the rich and the poor, undermining the long-term financial stability of low- and middle-income families with lower levels of savings with limited savings and reduced cultural consumption capacity (The British Academy, 2021: 117-118). As

indicated in section 5.3, if issues such as “low demand [for early career professionals], low pay, and low recognition” (Historic Environment Forum, 2022: 5) are not addressed in the future, they could pose a systemic threat to independent museums and the broader cultural sector.

As previously indicated, museum revenues have declined while costs have grown. Even museums that were previously regarded as financially stable have been under extraordinary economic strain. The director of the HMS Unicorn Museum in Dundee, Matthew Bellhouse Moran, said that “after 20 years of steadily shrinking budgets, museums that have adapted [to the austerity of the culture sector] have become leaner, better-run organisations. And yet we still face closures and cuts” (cited in Adams, 2024a: no page). Due to the pandemic, the museum communities have put forward higher requirements for museums - not only for comprehensive on-site services but also requirements to better be able to provide rich and effective online services (Yun, Choi, and Kim, 2021). To fulfil this goal, the museums require a certain quantity of human resources and funding, which poses a significant challenge for an independent museum sector already impacted by financial austerity.

Both museums themselves and museum stakeholders made great efforts to combat the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. In March 2020, when museums in the United Kingdom were closed to visitors owing to a national lockdown, the stakeholders of the UK’s museum sector voiced deep fears for the sustainability of museums, stating that a large number of museums might collapse due to broken financial chains (Stokes, 2020). In the year following the outbreak, as Appendix 6 indicated, only a handful of museums have declared permanent closures due to the pandemic. From this point on,

museums in the UK have had collective success in navigating this difficult period. However, the Art Fund says that one-third of museum directors are still worried about the long-term survival of their museums, despite the fact that 88% of respondents have received emergency or recovery help in addition to the generosity of the public and charitable organisations (Deakin, 2022). Therefore, it remains to be seen how long the effects of the museum sector's efforts will last.

A deeper reflection is needed on the fifth criterion regarding museums' mission. Due to the impact of the pandemic, some museums have been affected in fulfilling their mission, for example, some museums were forced to close, some museums shortened their opening hours in order to reduce expenses, and some museums changed onsite workshops to online courses. In addition, as mentioned earlier in Section 5.2.1, rising costs have made museum visits increasingly expensive for many financially constrained families, potentially reducing the frequency of their visits (Mulberg, 2023). Fraser (2019: 502) raises a critical question: "If a museum is only used by a select class of people or their admission costs outstrip the capacity of a local group, can they really be considered inclusive?". It is still questionable if the independent museum sector can be able to provide the same or even better cultural services to the public than it did before the pandemic. More attention should be paid to the unseen changes that are affecting diversity and inclusivity in museums (Fryer, 2020).

Sixthly, this research emphasises the significance of long-term monitoring since the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the independent museum sector is ongoing and it needs time to "let the bullets fly". As aforementioned, even if the museums did not collapse on a wide scale, it is unknown how

many will risk bankruptcy when support funding runs out or loans come due. The founder of the Vagina Museum, Florence Schechter, said that (cited in Styles, 2020):

Reopening will be difficult as it's going to take a while for tourism to return to the levels it was before – meaning it will take a while for our income to return to its previous level. I am also very aware that our tax payments have only been deferred, not cancelled, which means we'll need to pay them at some point.

Such cases underscore the precarious position of museums that are heavily dependent on visitor-based revenue models, which are inherently vulnerable to external shocks such as pandemics, economic downturns, or political issues. The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the structural fragility of these models, particularly among independent museums lacking diversified income streams, investments, or long-term financial plans. While furlough schemes or emergency grants—offered temporary relief, they did not address the underlying systemic risk: that cultural institutions remain overly reliant on footfall and one-off funding rather than sustained operational investment. This raises urgent questions about how the sector conceives financial resilience—not merely in terms of weathering crises, but in rethinking the foundational economic assumptions of cultural sustainability. In this light, the Covid-19 pandemic should not be understood solely as a disruptive event, but as a stress test that exposed the sector's long-standing vulnerabilities.

5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter presents the findings about the multifaceted impact that Covid-19 had on the independent museum sector in the UK and critically evaluates whether or not the disruptions created by the Covid-19 pandemic could be regarded as a “crisis” to the independent museum sector in the UK. While the Covid-19 pandemic did not cause wide-spread permanent closure across the sector, it resulted in a significant number of institutions closing their doors indefinitely, which brought a great deal of uncertainty to the future of the independent museum sector. This form of “dormancy”, although less visible than outright shutdowns, represents a latent threat to public access, heritage preservation, and community engagement.

As for the financial impact, the case study museums in general reported a precipitous decline in income during the nationwide lockdown, but after the reopening, they gradually recovered to approximately 70% of their levels prior to the pandemic. Another cause for concern, in addition to the significant decline in revenues, is the rise in expenditures. As a result of the extremely infectious nature of the coronavirus that caused this pandemic, the museums provided all their employees with personal protective equipment (PPE) and set up remote working circumstances. Some museums also needed to pay for the services of having their web pages or ticketing systems kept up to date in order for them to be able to offer online services and encourage online payments. These costs were not merely logistical burdens; they symbolised a shift in museum operations that demanded digital and organisational adaptability—something not all museums were equally resourced to achieve.

Furthermore, as a result of the difficulties brought about by the pandemic, employees at the museum have demonstrated emotions such as fear, loneliness, exhaustion, and a sense of being out of equilibrium. This emotional toll—underexplored in many institutional reports—reveals the human dimension of institutional resilience and underscores how staff wellbeing is a core component of sectoral sustainability.

In addition, this chapter examines a number of unique discoveries that emerged during fieldwork. These include the compound effects of environmental disasters and inflation, the disproportionate impact on elderly individuals, and increasing risks to museum security. Such findings suggest that the pandemic did not act in isolation but intensified existing vulnerabilities and accelerated systemic imbalances within the sector.

Section 5.3 extended the analysis to the systemic level, exploring how the pandemic reshaped the independent museum ecosystem as a whole. The findings highlighted not only changes in work modes and curatorial priorities—such as increased localisation and digital engagement—but also exposed structural disparities within the sector. Larger, well-connected institutions were better able to adapt, while smaller museums—particularly those reliant on volunteer labour or without dedicated fundraising staff—faced greater precarity. In this sense, the pandemic was not merely a disruption but a diagnostic event that revealed and intensified long-standing inequalities within the independent museum sector.

The chapter concluded with a reappraisal of the notion of “crisis” introduced in Chapter 2. By applying a sector-specific, criteria-based framework, the analysis demonstrated that the Covid-19 pandemic meets the definitional threshold of a crisis—not because of immediate institutional collapse, but due to its long-term, compounding disruption of mission delivery, workforce sustainability, public accessibility, and operational stability. This conceptual clarification moves the conversation beyond simplistic metrics of closures or reopening and instead frames the pandemic as structural testing in the independent museum ecosystem.

Chapter 6 Bouncing Back: The Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic

6.0 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic triggered a range of significant challenges for the independent museum sector. In response to these unexpected obstacles, independent museums in the United Kingdom have implemented various responding strategies to mitigate the detrimental impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and seek potential solutions to ensure their long-term viability in the post-pandemic era. Additionally, other stakeholders within the “ecosystem” of the independent museum sector have implemented a variety of measures to support these severely impacted cultural institutions. This chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of these responses, thereby addressing the SEQ2 introduced in Chapter 1:

How did independent museums respond to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic
(SRQ2)?

By analysing the diverse responses of various museums, this chapter will pave the way for an examination of the concept of museum resilience, thereby presenting examples of the limitations and potentials to which museums must pay attention in order to strengthen their resilience.

Although most sectors of society have been profoundly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, there are several institutions that are not directly responsible for or involved in responding to its impacts, such as environmental protection organizations. In this light, it is essential to explain why independent museums need to take action in response to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. First and foremost, this is a matter of institutional continuity since there were a number of independent museums that were on the verge of shutting their doors for good. The findings of the Covid-19 Crisis Report (Art Fund and Wafer Hadley, 2022: 12), which interviewed 106 museum directors and 321 museum and gallery professionals in the UK, indicate that a reactive “survival mode” has been pervasive as a consequence of the widespread anticipation of catastrophic deficits and cash flow concerns.

Nonetheless, in the face of such a worldwide health crisis, the most pressing concern of practically all organisations is to re-establish the connection with museum users. This involves continually providing services to the museum users and boosting people’s well-being (Presti, 2022; Wheatley and Bickerton, 2022; Worsley *et al.*, 2022). In addition to this, the government of the United Kingdom issued a statement to all museums within this country, requesting that they take the necessary procedures to guarantee a safe reopening for the benefit of the health of both the general public and their employees (GOV.UK, 2020b).

Finally, despite the fact that the majority of museums aimed to “restore the visitor level prior to the pandemic” (Art Fund and Wafer Hadley, 2022: 36), a number of museums that participated in the research survey believe that it is impossible for an organisation to continue sustainable competitiveness

in the post-pandemic era without undergoing comprehensive self-evaluation and developing adaptive reforms.

This chapter will explain how independent museums in the United Kingdom responded to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, in terms of institutional, financial, and emotional responses and the reactions of the museum stakeholders in the UK.

6.1 Practices to Mitigate Institutional Impact

This section will describe how the museums that took part in this research and the museums included in the secondary research data reacted to the institutional impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, including a series of modifications to museum working patterns, operation practises, and long-term strategies. The narrative is organised in two phases: lockdown (from March 2020) and reopening (after July 2020).

Institutional improvements in museums are, of course, not a new concern induced by the pandemic alone, and prior research, for instance, related to “new museology” has been focusing on this issue (Harrison, 1994; McCall and Gray, 2014: 12). In a study conducted in 2013 to investigate the limitation of transition from “old museology” to “new museology” within 23 public-funded museums throughout the United Kingdom, McCall and Gray (2014: 3-5) have concluded that governmental policy, the requirements of accreditation from public funds and professional associations, as well as the shifting needs of the museum consumers, are driving museums in the United Kingdom to adjust their

operational strategies and accommodate a variety of expectations, thus providing the motivation for institutional adjustments in the museums.

Nevertheless, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the museums of the United Kingdom was far more severe and rapid than any of the pre-existing stakeholder expectations that McCall and Gray (2014) laid out. Although the museum and heritage sector in the United Kingdom has received a variety of general guidelines from the government, such as the New Guidance for Reopening of Museums, Galleries, and the Heritage Sector (GOV.UK, 2020b), and practical advice from professional organisations, such as “How to Make Outdoor Areas Covid-19 Safe” (Gilling, 2021a), the vast majority of these recommendations only provided broad guidelines. Their vagueness, combined with the challenges of day-to-day implementation, emerged as a major obstacle for front-line museum staff. A museum receptionist working in a medium size museum in England (P05) clearly demonstrates this point:

The reopening of museums will require visitors to adhere to a variety of government-issued Covid-19 guidelines. Although most people voluntarily scanned the NHS Covid-19 QR code, a small number of individuals wished to be exempt because they did not have their mobile phones with them, or their mobile phones had no battery.... Most visitors followed the rule at the entrance. But once inside, some pulled down their masks or ignored distancing. I was too busy to correct everyone.

This phenomenon illustrates the operational ambiguity that many museums faced. Despite the existence of national guidelines, the responsibility for interpretation and enforcement fell on individual staff, often without adequate support. This quote not only reflects staff burnout and enforcement fatigue but also demonstrates the institutional fragility exposed by the pandemic. Museums had to manage an evolving set of expectations from both government and visitors, without always having the resources to do so effectively.

Additionally, each agent involved in the process of policy formation possesses his or her own set of professional and personal beliefs as well as experiences that influence how the guidelines are put into practise. As Bowen (2020) puts it, it is possible that we are all in the same storm, but we all sit in separate boats. Across the UK, museums interpreted and applied pandemic responses in divergent ways, depending on local contexts and institutional capacities.

This section therefore aims to illustrate the varied and often improvised strategies that independent museums adopted in response to institutional pressures. It first discusses how independent museums altered their working patterns, then concentrates on the museums' practises, and finally detail how the museums will enhance their future tactics to respond to the opportunities and threats in the post-pandemic era.

6.1.1 Adjusted Working Patterns

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the way of working within independent museums comes mainly from three aspects: working hours, working locations, and personal protection against coronavirus.

First, some independent museums adjusted their working hours just after the outbreak of the pandemic. On the one hand, in order to reduce the risk of staff contracting the virus in the workplace, it became common practice to limit the grouping of essential museum staff to no more than two people, and on the other hand, institutions also shorten their opening hours to maximise efficiency. Inefficient opening hours mean few visitors for some museums and high heating costs for small museums in cold winter. By shortening museum opening hours in these cases, from the perspective of museum finance, it can help the museum to save on operating expenses although this will also cut the income of freelancers and part-time workers.

A particularly good example is the Black Country Living Museum. As told by an interviewee (P02), under the guidance of the government, the Black Country Living Museum introduced an online booking system into use after reopening. Analysis of visitor data revealed a significant drop in attendance after 4:00 p.m. on weekdays. In response, they chose to shorten the open hours, which can not only allow employees and volunteers to get off work earlier but also save operating costs. This case underscores how data-informed decisions were used to balance public access with institutional sustainability.

The independent museums also learned how to work remotely during the lockdown. Although the previous chapter mentioned the negative psychological effects of remote work on employees and volunteers, including loneliness, it is undeniable that remote work enhanced working efficiency for some people. This was particularly significant at a time when many volunteers were either unable or reluctant to return to front-facing roles. Sharp (2020: para. 4) stated that:

In physical volunteering, participants might provide generalised support such as reception work. At home, volunteers can take on specific research tasks and this can be an opportunity to match volunteers' aims to the institution's needs – but planning is paramount.

This shift highlighted not only new opportunities for remote volunteering but also the need for robust training, planning, and cybersecurity measures to ensure success. The large-scale popularization of remote volunteer opportunities still needs a process, and there are still many problems to be solved in this process, including the security of online databases and the establishment of volunteer training mechanisms.

Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic prompted the museums in the UK to install personal protection strategies against coronavirus. The personal protection against coronavirus at the museum matured from a chaotic state. During the lockdown that took place in March 2020, the Home Office certified that museum activities that required on-site presence to ensure museum security and collection care

were allowed (South West Museum Development, 2020a). At this time, the responsibility for the upkeep of the museums typically fell to a particular member of the museum personnel such as the director, curator, collection manager, security officer, cleaner, and conservator. According to the survey results, most of the staff of independent museums worked from home, and a few staff who were needed to maintain the operation of the museum did not perfectly maintain a social distance of 2 metres and replace medical masks in time. An interview participant at an archaeological museum in England (P14) stated:

During the lockdown, it was my duty to check the collection storage room for appropriate temperature and humidity, and for any insect infestations. Even when closed, pests continue their work. If we ignore them, it's hard to imagine the consequences. My colleagues kindly gave me gloves and masks from the conservation lab. I was very grateful, but I couldn't afford to change masks every two hours as recommended.

This reflects both the dedication of museum staff and the resource constraints they faced, particularly in smaller institutions where access to PPE was limited. The uneven implementation of protection protocols further illustrates the resource limitations of independent museums when navigating government expectations and health risks with limited institutional capacity.

The situation changed when the government of the United Kingdom declared that museums would be allowed to reopen under its guidance after July 4, 2020 (GOV.UK, 2020b). In addition to being required

to comply with restrictions issued by the government, museums at that time had an immediate and pressing need to establish an environment in which visitors feel safe returning in order to alleviate the significant financial strain that comes along with lockdown. Following the guidance from government and professional organizations (GOV.UK, 2020b; AIM, 2023b; Museum Development Yorkshire, 2023), the personal protection against Covid-19 virus in the museum sector could be divided into three aspects: personal protective equipment for both visitors and workers, indoor and outdoor environment management, and visitor experience support.

According to the Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations 1992, employers must protect workers from health and safety risks, which means employers must provide personal protective equipment (PPE) free of charge if a risk assessment shows it is necessary (Health and Safety Executive, no date). By summarizing the data from the survey and case studies, an overview of the PPE that independent museums have applied in the museums (staff, volunteers, and visitors) after the reopening is presented in Table 6.1.

Category	Usage
Face Mask/ Shield	From July 2020 to January 2022, face covering is legally required to be worn when people enter museums and galleries unless holding exemptions (GOV.UK, 2022b).
Viricidal spray or Wipes	Viricidal spray or wipes are usually placed next to the touch screen or learning room in the museums.
Hand Sanitiser	Hand sanitiser points are located around the building to be used by visitors and staff.

Perspex Screens (see Figure 6.1)	Perspex screens are used to block the droplets generated during the conversation between visitors, volunteers and staff.
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Table 6.1 Common personal protective equipment used in Independent Museums after March 2020



Figure 6.1 The perspex screens at the Black Country Living Museum. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 18 March 2022.

Particularly noteworthy are the varied layouts of the hand sanitizers at various museums. Due to the bigger space and greater number of visitors, the denseness of hand sanitizer stations in large museums was often significantly higher than in small museums, based on my observations in case study organisations. In addition, several large museums have customised automatic hand sanitizers with museum emblems and consider the appropriate height for wheelchair users and young children. As

shown in Figure 6.2, this hand sanitizer dispenser includes suitable signage and a tagline to encourage its usage. Compared with the Royal Airforce Museum, the hand sanitiser in National Emergency Services Museum, a medium size independent museum operated by a small group of employees, is much simpler (see Figure 6.3). This contrast highlights the disparities in institutional capacity and branding strategies between larger, well-funded institutions and smaller independent museums.



Figure 6.2 Hand Sanitiser in the Royal Airforce Museum. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 21

October 2022.



Figure 6.3 Hand Sanitiser in National Emergency Services Museum. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 30 June 2022.

In addition to personal protective equipment, maintaining a safe and hygienic museum indoor and outdoor environment was also important for reopened museums. Based on fieldwork observation, the practices regarding this aspect could be concluded as below:

- Signage: to remind visitors to maintain social distancing, particularly in smaller or more restricted areas and at admission queues.
- One-way systems: to ensure social distancing by avoiding any crossing over of the visitor flow.
- Ventilation: to reduce the risk of transmission via airflows.
- Contactless admission and retail services: cashless payment is encouraged to reduce transmission.
- Regular cleaning: to clean all touchable surfaces, admissions areas, staff areas and toilets on a regular basis throughout the day.

It is worth noting that many museums included the characteristics of the museum's subject matter as well as a sense of humour in their signage that serves as social distance reminders. The use of informal and engaging visual communication not only helped public spaces negotiate new behavioural norms with the public during a tense event but also effectively demonstrated the organization's attitudes towards the situation to the community (Douglas, 2021). As discussed in Chapter 2, museums need more compelling marketing strategies to keep up their development in the increasing competition between various leisure choices. The visual identity, usually presented as logos and representative images, can offer a museum a "personality", which helps the museum to distinguish itself from other museum (Hede, 2007: 154–157).

According to Richardson (2019), the museum's brand identity consists of the logo, colour palette, fonts, and other visual elements that it employs to present itself to the public. As a flexible tool, a museum logo could appear in multiple forms and in multiple places (Parry, 2018), including Covid-19 social distancing signage. Figure 6.4 depicts the one-way system signage that is displayed at the Woodhorn Museum, which is a medium-sized museum that exhibits the cultural heritage of coal mining in Woodhorn. This sign cleverly incorporates an impression of a boot print to conform to the museum's presentation on the lives of coal miners. Another example is provided by the Royal Cornwall Museum (see Figure 6.5). It features a striking Victorian-clad cartoon character to remind viewers to keep a safe two-step distance. These examples demonstrate how functional signage became part of the broader communication of institutional character, humour, and relevance during the pandemic.



Figure 6.4 The One-way system signage at Woodhorn Museum (Woodhorn Museum, no date b)¹



Figure 6.5 The social distancing signage at Royal Cornwall Museum (Museum Development Yorkshire, 2023: 5)

¹ The information about the “one-way system” has already been withdrawn from the Woodhorn Museum’s official website.

After the reopening of museums, in addition to the upgrade of the museum's physical facilities against Covid-19, museums were required by the government to take note of the visiting instructions and service, including providing pre-visit information, controlling the visitor number, and making friendly oral reminders on social distancing guidelines for the visitors. First of all, most independent museums with official websites specifically provide information about health and safety measures before visiting, including the conditions of admission related to Covid-19, the use of NHS tracking QR codes, etc (NHS, 2023).

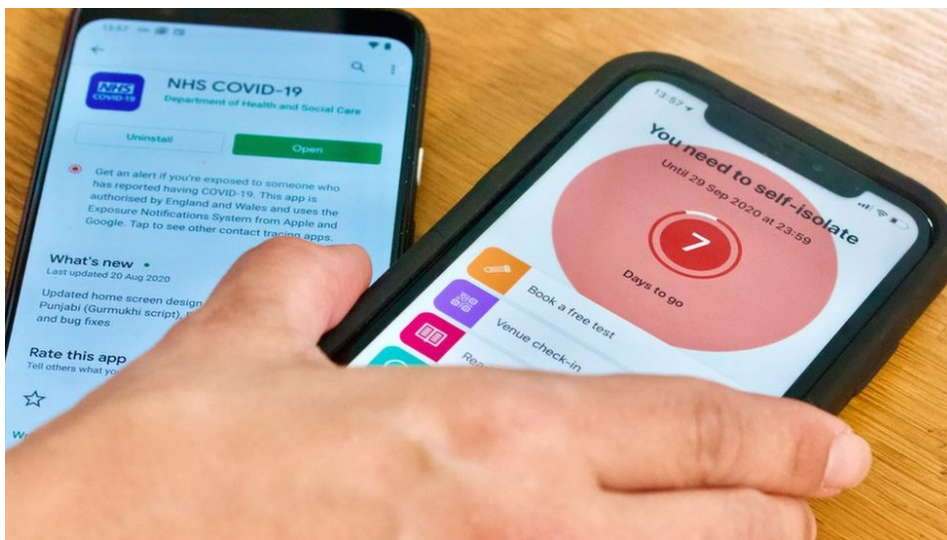


Figure 6.6 The NHS Covid-19 APP (Kelion and Jones, 2020)

This information provided the audience with a basic comprehension of the guidelines, helping to minimise confusion around the museum's reopening policy. The construction of online booking systems was a particularly useful instrument. It assisted museums in controlling the number of visitors each day and distributing health and safety instructions at the point of ticket reservation, therefore enhancing operational control and reducing the risk of face-to-face viral transmission between staff

and visitors. In addition, after the museum reopening, employees or volunteers were encouraged to greet the visitors with a warm greeting and provide social distancing-related reminders. Museum Development Yorkshire, a regional branch of the Museum Development Network, developed a series of detailed support resources for the museums regarding the Covid-19 pandemic responses (Museum Development Yorkshire, no date).

6.1.2 Reforming Museum Practices

The previous section explored changes to working patterns and the adoption of safety guides and PPE within the physical spaces of these institutions. This section, in contrast, provides a picture of how independent museums in the United Kingdom reformed their core functions, which means the practices that “make a museum a museum” (Davies, 2014: no page). This section will initially focus on the tactics that museums used to develop their digital services. After that, it will shift its attention toward the practises that museums used to engage with their communities, and it will provide findings about the new curation strategies after the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic.

Exactly as Noehrer *et al.* (2021: 1) argue, turning towards digital services was the only viable way for museums to remain “open” when museums had to be physically closed during the lockdown. As demonstrated by Crooke *et al.*(2022a), moving interactive and outreach activities online after lockdown enabled museums to maintain connections with existing audiences while also reaching new ones. These digital museum services encompassed the following formats: online collection portals,

social media accounts, virtual exhibitions, and online educational programmes such as curatorial talks and streaming workshops (Zuani, 2020: para.2).

However, not all independent museums in the UK were able to make this transition to digital smoothly. As stated in Chapter 2, due to the huge variation in terms of size, finance condition, and museum tactics, the independent museum sector has a substantial disparity in the “digital capacity”. This uneven “digital ability” meant that while some institutions adapted quickly, others struggled to digitise even basic content.

It is evident that a great number of studies have documented several advantages that digitised museum services may provide to museums themselves as well as the users of museums, including convenient web access, increased community engagement, and the possibility of online commercialization (Marini and Agostino, 2021; King *et al.*, 2021; Giannini and Bowen, 2022). Despite these benefits, many interview participants in the case study museums indicated that digitization is difficult to achieve in the short term. One museum director (P07) said that:

Transferring tangible collections and exhibitions to the digital realm of the Internet is not as straightforward as you might imagine it to be. You need high-quality photographs, accurate metadata, remote access, and a database to house everything. The fact that we only have ten employees at our museum makes it impossible for us to digitise the museum’s collections.

This statement highlights both technical and organisational limitations. Even when the will to digitise existed, the lack of infrastructure and human resources often rendered it impractical. According to statistics published by AIM (no date b), digitalization is one of the most expensive museum initiatives. For example, the rate for interactive design is £60 per hour and a 32” touchscreen with an inbuilt computer costs £1800 (*ibid.*: no page). Woody (2021: para 2) further identifies key cost areas of digitization: equipment, software, collections management systems, digital asset management systems, staff training, and consultants.

While some museums develop slowly due to insufficient preparation for digitization or high costs, some museum directors hold critical views on what they consider to be the excessive digitization of independent museums. Another museum director (P18) said that:

Although online museums and social media can bring a lot of online visitor numbers, such results are not good for independent museums like us. What we need are actual museum visits, which are important to our finances as we rely on admission fees. If social media and online museums have considerable monetization capabilities in the future, I will consider developing it at that time.

This comment underscores that without monetisation mechanisms, digital engagement may be popular but financially ineffective. Therefore, for many museums, digitalization serves as a kind of “electronic trial version”, aiming at reaching a broader range of audiences. Some digital services, even as simple

as museum posts on social media, can spark interest in potential visitors through a chance click. This presents museums with the potential for an increase of visitor numbers, although realizing this growth will require a more sustained effort over time. Because the pandemic confirmed the “stickiness” of tastes and consumption patterns (Feder *et al*, 2022; Bakhshi, di Novo & Fazio, 2023; McAndrew *et al.*, 2024: 13). Those who were not interested in arts, culture, and heritage activities before the pandemic did not engage when organisations switched to digital or deepened their existing digital offer. One education officer who was also responsible for social media management of a small independent museum held the opinion that the benefit of social media needs long-term recognition. She (P12) said:

Our museum has three social media accounts, respectively on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I update these accounts about twice a week...I usually post some photos of exhibitions and advertisements for our souvenir shop. Signing up for these accounts is free, and most of the postings are filmed on my phone. There are not many followers of the museum account now, but I think this is a long-term accumulation process.

This illustrates both the low-resource nature of digital engagement in many independent museums and the belief that long-term consistency, rather than immediate impact, will yield results. Yet, contrasting with this slow growth is the case of the Black Country Living Museum (BCLM), whose success on TikTok marked a rare example of viral fame within the UK museum sector. The actors of Black Country Living Museum filmed a video about a 1920s “yam yam” grandpa and other “bostin” characters in local vernacular, which became a viral video on TikTok (Richardson, 2021: no page). As

of September 2024, the TikTok account of the Black Country Living Museum has around 1.2 million followers and receives around 22.6 million likes (Black Country Living Museum TikTok, no date). During the in-depth interviews at the Black Country Living Museum, I asked the interviewees, in particular, what the success of social media has brought to the museum. One interviewee (P15) replied:

Our success on social media is not accidental. BCLM is where the BBC TV drama, *Peaky Blinders*, was filmed, so a large percentage of our followers are fans of the show. Our actors are professional and passionate about what they do. TikTok has given us international visibility and drawn in younger, non-traditional museum audiences. If we can get people to love museums through these videos, that's a huge win.



Figure 6.7 The TikTok actor of Black Country Living Museum (Nachiappan, 2020)

The success of the TikTok account of Black Country Living Museum highlights how specific assets—media affiliations, trained performers, and strong institutional branding—can create fertile ground for

digital success. However, such conditions are not easily replicable across the wider independent museum sector. The viral popularity of the Black Country Living Museum on TikTok, while impressive, is an outlier rather than a model. Its prior association with mainstream media (such as *Peaky Blinders*), its access to costumed interpreters with performance experience, and its capacity to produce compelling visual content in-house all represent advantages unavailable to most institutions.

This raises a critical point in the evaluation of post-pandemic digital transformation strategies: digital success is often platform-dependent and visibility-driven, favoring museums that can capitalize on existing cultural capital or audience familiarity. For most independent museums—especially those in rural or underfunded contexts—such digital momentum may be unattainable, not due to a lack of creativity or motivation, but due to structural limitations in staffing, budget, and audience reach. Therefore, while high-profile digital campaigns may generate optimism about the sector’s adaptive capacity, they should not be mistaken as universally achievable or sustainable templates.

Besides the shift in developing digital services, more independent museums realized the importance of community engagement. As discussed in Chapter 2, the museum community should be valued and engaged properly with all functions of the museum. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, many museums that used to largely rely on out-of-town tourists faced a sharp decline in visitor numbers since more and more people turned their attention to more nearby attractions (Hardaker, 2022a).

In the survey question asking, “what has been the most helpful factors and strategies in mitigating the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on your museum”, a significant number of respondents underlined the essentiality of reconnecting with museum communities. The director of one small independent museum located in a rural area (P08) said that:

During the most challenging periods, the museum’s cash flow was insufficient to support three months of costs. We can get through this simply because of the donations generated for us by our neighbours and nearby friends over the years. Our museum held a small thank-you brunch shortly after we reopened. My colleagues and I intend to make it a regular occurrence. Our museum’s personnel, volunteers, and audience could bolster their relationships via such events.

In addition, some museums invited museum users to join the process of museum practise. Susan Stewart (1999: 28) writes that the museum is “an institution that has elaborately ritualised the practise of refraining from touch”. However, as ICOM (2022: no page) puts it, the contemporary definition of museums nowadays is “open to the public, accessible, and inclusive; museums foster diversity and sustainability”. Welcoming members of the museum community to participate in the work of the museum can promote public understanding of the work of the museum, and the encounter of thinking between the public and museum staff can also trigger new thinking in the museum.

Roisin Inglesby, a senior curator at the William Morris Gallery in London, organised a participatory curation project from August 2020 to January 2021 (Inglesby, 2021). Inglesby (2021: para 5) stated that:

I also hoped to learn new skills, trial a model of working with the community, and challenge my own control over the curatorial narrative during a process in which the participants staged a gradual “take over” of the exhibition space.

Moreover, it is essential to consider how the Covid-19 pandemic shaped the implications of the basic museum functions. In the context of the post-pandemic era and ever-changing global geopolitics, it was crucial for the museums never to overlook their fundamental functions’ “unity and interconnectivity”, which means continuously updating and maintaining their core functions: collecting, researching, preserving, and exhibiting (Sandahl, 2019: 6). The semi-structured interview and survey question outlines of this research (see Appendices 2 and 3) did not specifically address issues related to collections and exhibitions. However, some participants mentioned that, in the year following the outbreak of the pandemic, their museums temporarily paused acquisitions and collection exchanges due to budget constraints and Covid-19 policies. Instead, they shifted focus to previously overlooked items in the storage room—such as those not catalogued, without images, or lacking research. Crooke (2010: 25) highlights that for many museums in the UK, “the collection is the defining matter of museums, it is what makes a museum unique and should be the highest priority and

consume the greatest proportion of museum resources”. It is reasonable to predict that more museums will pay attention to their existing collections and “reactivate” them.

To sum up, unlike implementing precautions against Covid-19 in museums, whether museums prioritise digitalization, community participation, or new collection activation plans, it will take time to observe the final effect. These adaptive practices demonstrate that independent museums, despite limited resources, can act as agile sites of experimentation. Their bottom-up responses offer valuable models of resilience grounded in local relationships and institutional reflexivity. While shaped by the constraints of small-scale operations, such innovations may hold transferable lessons for the wider museum and cultural heritage sectors, particularly in times of systemic disruption.

6.1.3 Seeking for Future Success

The Covid-19 pandemic offered museums a rare opportunity to pause, reflect, and reassess their previous practises and how to proceed with future growth (Philp, 2022). This section will present findings regarding how these independent museums sought out new avenues of future development.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, museums—particularly independent ones—have increasingly accepted the necessity of commercialisation. Since the mid-1980s, public museums have grown more business-like, because the most recent round of budget cutbacks means that they can no longer rely on public support (Candlin, 2012: 33-34). Compared with public museums, due to the financial nature of

independent museums, independent museums in the United Kingdom have a sharper perception of “customers” and greater agility in adapting to visitors’ needs.

First, widespread concern about the risk of infection in public places significantly hindered the public’s motivation to return to museums during the initial reopening phase. Health and Social Care Secretary, Matt Hancock made a statement on coronavirus on 10 April 2020: “Of course, the most important way to protect yourself is to stay at home. Because a front door is better than any face mask” (Department of Health and Social Care and Hancock, 2020). Hancock’s words were not his own conjecture, but a “common sense”. In response, in addition to meeting the reopening requirements required by the government, some museums and heritage sites began to strategically re-evaluate the potential of their outdoor space for their future development (Stephens, 2021).

Outdoor environments had long served as informal points of contact between museums and local communities, particularly in rural and suburban areas. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, outdoor space was one of the reasons why many museums attracted local visitors. One volunteer in an industrial museum (P16) said that:

Our museum is a dog-friendly museum, and many local residents like to walk their dogs here. They just take a stroll in the area, and every so often they will take part in new museum exhibits or festival activities. However, they do not go inside the museum each time they

arrive in order to see the exhibitions that are now on display there. The frequency of their patronage is so high that they come here almost every day.

This comment illustrates how outdoor spaces can support frequent, low-barrier engagement, even without formal ticketed entry. These repeated informal interactions, while not always monetised, can foster community loyalty and emotional investment. As addressed by Crooke (2020), the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as a chance to innovate; however, it should also serve as a moment to pause and consider the complex nature of museum audiences. Carman (2002: 118) has outlined that not everyone is interested in museums. Many people who visit museums do not do so for readily apparent educational or cultural purposes, such as gaining knowledge or having an aesthetic experience, but to fulfil sociocultural and personal needs (Falk and Dierking, 2013: 31), such as walking their dogs or enjoying an afternoon stroll with their family. A museum that aims for future success should consider all types of visitor interests to foster support and engagement.

Other museums also noticed the group of visitors that only use outdoor spaces. For example, the Forge Mill Needle Museum, a historic site that illustrates the heritage of the needle and fishing tackle industries in Redditch, introduced two admission tiers for both museum users and outdoor space users: visitors could access the outdoor space as well as café and gift shop free of charge and pay for the admission fee if they want to enter the indoor exhibition (Forge Mill Needle Museum, no date).



Figure 6.8 The outdoor space of Forge Mill Needle Museum. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 27

June 2022.

Apparently, this model not only reduced barriers to access but also allowed the museum to remain relevant to local audiences even during periods of restricted indoor activity. Since the beginning of the pandemic, outdoor attractions, as well as museums that have gardens or access to open-air settings, have had a natural edge over their competitors (Gilling, 2021b). The director of one museum (P18) said that:

The outdoors, with its clean, well-ventilated air, gives off a feeling of less risk than the interior of a building, which is particularly true considering the length of time people stay indoors. Sometimes people just need some time to enjoy the sunshine and wind.

This sentiment was echoed by Hedley Swain, the Royal Pavilion & Museums Trust’s chief executive, who observed that many institutions began to “think of [outdoor space] more as an extension of the

museum, as a space for events and interpretation” (quoted in Gilling, 2021b: no page). This reflects a broader rethinking of museum spatiality, where the boundaries between the museum and its environment become more adaptable. Such a shift is not unique to independent museums; it resonates across the cultural sector, where institutions are increasingly expected to operate as open, fluid spaces responsive to public health, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. In this sense, the spatial flexibility explored here not only addresses temporary pandemic needs but also aligns with longer-term transformations in how cultural institutions relate to place, access, and everyday life.

While strategies such as the reactivation of outdoor space provide resilience and visibility, they do not resolve underlying funding precarity. The next section will present the findings on how the independent museum sector in the UK has responded to the financial impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

6.2 Practices to Mitigate Financial Impact

As mentioned in Chapter 5, the independent museum sector experienced a severe financial impact in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, some of them even faced the risk of being of permanent closure. Nevertheless, as noted in the previous chapter, only few museums permanently were closed due to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic. This is inextricable from the effective initiatives of the independent museums in the UK to tackle their financial challenges. Based on the results of research surveys and case studies, this section examines how the independent museums in the United Kingdom weathered the financial crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. This section begins by examining museum fundraising efforts during the pandemic, then explores how independent museums have sought new

sales streams, and finally discusses the cost-saving strategies implemented to address revenue shortages and inflation.

6.2.1 Fundraising

“This is a very simple truth: if you lack money, you need to raise money in as many ways as you can”, says an interviewee. For most of the museums that participated in this study, raising money beyond what is generated from conventional sources like entrance fees, retail, and catering relies on two main sources: public grants and donations.

One open-ended question in the survey asks, “what has been the most helpful factors and strategies in mitigating the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on your museum?”. Based on themes, the answers to this question have been summarized in Figure 6.9. It should be noted that a survey respondent may mention one or more themes.

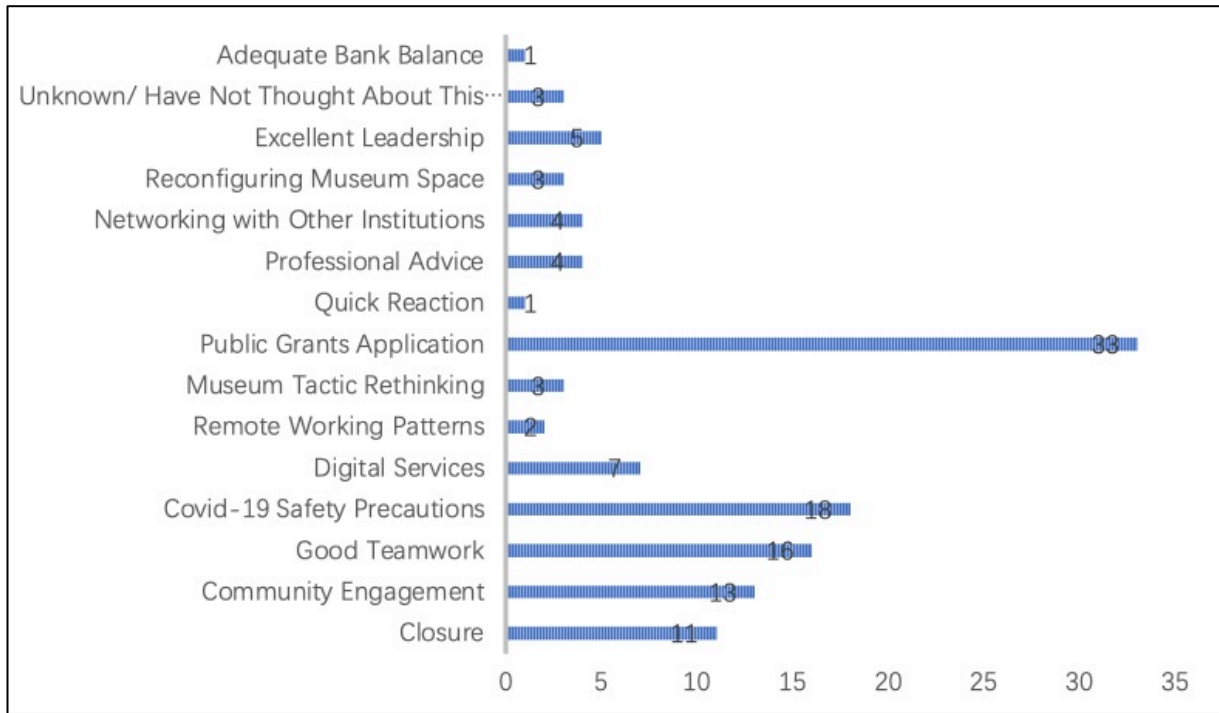


Figure 6.9 The answers to the survey question “what has been the most helpful factors and strategies in mitigating the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on your museum” by themes

Clearly, as Figure 6.9 shows, applying for public grants has been the most effective solution for independent museums to solve their financial crisis. According to the study of Candlin and Liebenrood (2021), a large number of institutions were involved in the delivery of grants, including national bodies (e.g. Arts Council England, National Lottery Heritage Fund), devolved governments (e.g. Museums Galleries Scotland, Northern Ireland Museums Council), heritage organisations (e.g. Historic England, Art Fund), and over 400 local authorities. One survey respondent expressed their opinion about public grants:

Big thanks to the Lottery Emergency Heritage Fund for the money that helped us pay the rent for the venue that otherwise we might have had to close.

For many small independent museums, especially those unaccredited, the Heritage Emergency Fund was one of the few viable options. The fund provided two grant support—£3,000–£50,000 and £50,000–£2.5 million—but applicants had to meet specific criteria: being not-for-profit, having a history of receiving grants, and demonstrating capacity for heritage delivery (Heritage Fund, 2020b). It is worth noting that private owners of heritage institutions who had previously received grants under £10,000 were not eligible to apply for this fund, which excluded many small, privately established museums with modest financial needs from accessing this emergency funding. Obtaining public funding subsidies was a challenge, especially considering that the majority of independent museums lacked a dedicated fundraising department or even the appropriate personnel to complete these application forms. One museum director of a small museum (P11) said that:

Our museum failed the first round of Cultural Recovery Fund application. The reason given was that our museum's financial situation was not as dire as other museums in the intense application competition, so it failed. However, I believe our revenue decline is extremely problematic, as we rely entirely on admission fees. In our second application, we provided additional proof that our museum was in peril before we were ultimately approved.

Such cases reveal the structural challenges that arise from overlapping and inconsistent eligibility criteria (Candlin and Liebenrood, 2021). As mentioned in section 5.1.2, after museums were forced to close, the demand for professional fundraisers surged, underscoring the fact that museums without specialised fundraising expertise to identify and apply for the most appropriate grants were at a disadvantage in navigating complex application processes. However, there were still many museums that are not eligible to apply for public grants because they did not meet the requirements. A director of a small independent museum (P01) explains this issue:

Our museum's operating costs are small, and the local railway terminal has provided our venue and utilities for free since its inception. We are entirely run by volunteers. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, our annual operating expenses were approximately 2,000 pounds, so even with the addition of the PPE costs, we are still well below the minimum subsidy requirement of 3,000 pounds.

Given these barriers, public grants, while valuable, were not equally accessible across the independent museum sector. As a result, many institutions turned to alternative forms of fundraising—particularly public donations. Prior to the pandemic, many independent museums, such as the Blitz Museum, used on-site donation boxes with suggested cash donations as an alternative to paid entry. After the pandemic, many museums added contactless donation devices and online donation options. This could be regarded as a wider digital revolution in the museum sector. For example, the Royal Airforce Museum introduced QR codes to receive mobile phone donation options as well as contactless

donation devices, to make it more convenient for visitors (see Figure 6. 10 and Figure 6.11). These innovations not only diversified income sources but also reflected a wider shift toward digital engagement within museum operations. Although not a full solution to structural financial shortfalls, digital donations allowed museums to maintain visitor support in an increasingly cashless and convenience-driven public environment.



Figure 6.10 Cash donation box at the Royal Airforce Museum. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 21

October 2022.



Figure 6.11 Contactless donation device at the Royal Airforce Museum. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 21 October 2022.

Donations may also be made online, which is another prevalent method for raising money for charitable causes. This can be accomplished by putting donation channels on the organization's official website, adding donation choices to the online booking system, and soliciting donations via social media. The Florence Nightingale Museum, a museum once announced permanently closed in March 2020 due to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic, reopened on May 12th, 2022, after saving itself from permanent closure with the help of a total of around £400,000 raised through a combination of grants, a charity auction, and public donations (Mitchell, 2022: no page). The Florence Nightingale Museum used both its official website (see Figure 6.12) and social media account to solicit donations (see Figure 6.13).

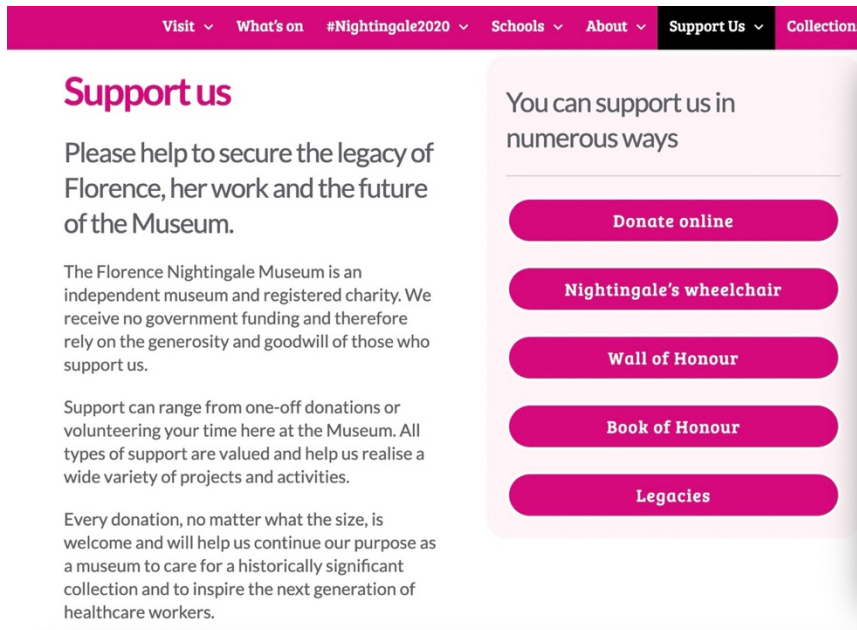


Figure 6.12 The Screenshot of the Florence Nightingale Museum Official Website. Image captured by the author on 18 April 2023.

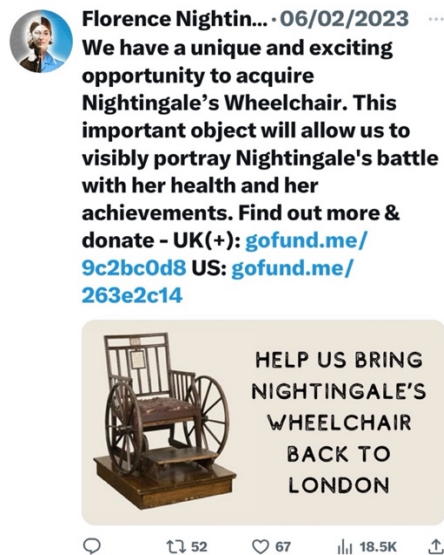


Figure 6.13 The screenshot of the Florence Nightingale Museum Twitter account. Image captured by the author on 18 April 2023.

In addition to accepting financial donations, some museums received in-kind donations of items (such as used books and clothing) and sold them to generate revenue. Despite the absence of a direct monetary donation, the museum's proceeds from the charity sale act as a donation. For example, one case study museum, the Englesea Brook Chapel & Museum, a small Methodist museum located near Crewe, raised money through a regular second-hand book sale. Over 35,000 second-hand books on all subjects are available for sale every Friday and Saturday (Methodist Heritage, 2023).

Based on the research findings regarding fundraising, public grants played a key role in rescuing museums from significant financial threats. Without the support of emergency public funds, the overall context of the independent museum sector might have been much more difficult. However, emergency funds were time-limited — for instance, the last round of the Heritage Emergency Fund ended on September 30, 2020 (Heritage Fund, 2020b). The adage “when the tide goes out, you see who is swimming naked” aptly describes the situation of the cultural sector without Covid-19 emergency funds. This metaphor highlights a critical structural issue within the independent museum sector: emergency grants, while vital in the short term, hid deeper vulnerabilities. In this context, the pandemic did not so much cause institutional fragility as it did reveal and accelerate existing financial imbalances. For museums that rely heavily on ticket sales, seasonal tourism, and retail sales, the absence of consistent core funding leaves them perpetually on the brink. This underlines the need to reconceptualise resilience not simply as the capacity to absorb shocks, but as the ability to anticipate, adapt, and evolve institutional models in response to systemic change.

Responsive museums took advantage of the slowdown in activities during lockdowns to engage with previously hard-to-reach donors and potential contributors (Stephens, 2023b). As noted in Chapter 2, museums and communities have a reciprocal relationship, meaning that when museums are in need, communities are likely to offer support. According to Crooke (2007: 31), “in examples of community where a sense of place is central, the disruption of place becomes a key threat, and people will then pull together to construct a narrative of belonging that will counteract perceived threats.” This explains why the Florence Nightingale Museum was able to reopen after announcing its permanent closure.

The willingness of communities to support museums is certainly a positive sign. However, this spirit of reciprocity now faces new pressures. As indicated in Chapter 5, the cost-of-living crisis and potential geopolitical tensions have constrained disposable income for many individuals, diminishing their ability to donate. For instance, Alan Brigham, Chair of The Hull People’s Memorial Museum, reported that donations from visitors had declined as “people simply do not have the spare funds to make the same level of contribution as they once did” (Museums+ Heritage, 2022: no page). In this context, fundraising alone is insufficient to ensure long-term financial sustainability. Museums—and other institutions that cannot depend on public grants—must explore alternative income streams and more diversified business models to build greater resilience.

6.2.2 Looking for New Sales

In addition to fundraising, many independent museums tried to mitigate the loss of income by looking for progress in sales, including the sales of entrance tickets, retail, and services. For a commercial

company, one useful way to increase sales is by offering a discount. In the museum context, this often translates to reduced or waived ticket prices. One survey participant mentioned that:

By the time we re-opened, we developed the outreach programme so that we could reconnect with our audiences and engage with new audiences. When we reopened, we dropped the small charge we used to make to access anything other than the ground floor and made entry to all parts of the museum and tower free of charge. This boosted our visitor numbers and donations covered the loss of entry revenue.

Additionally, some museums adopted a mixed economy approach, which involves “charging for some activities while offering others at a discount or for free to specific audiences or at certain times” (Mulberg, 2023: no page). A good example of this is the People’s History Museum in Manchester, which offers free entry while hosting a range of creative workshops inspired by the museum’s collections, such as sewing, chatting, and sharing sessions (People’s History Museum, no date). For instance, a workshop scheduled for November 23, 2024, provided three pricing options: the full price of £15, a discounted member rate of £10, and a limited number of free places for individuals facing economic difficulties (*ibid.*).

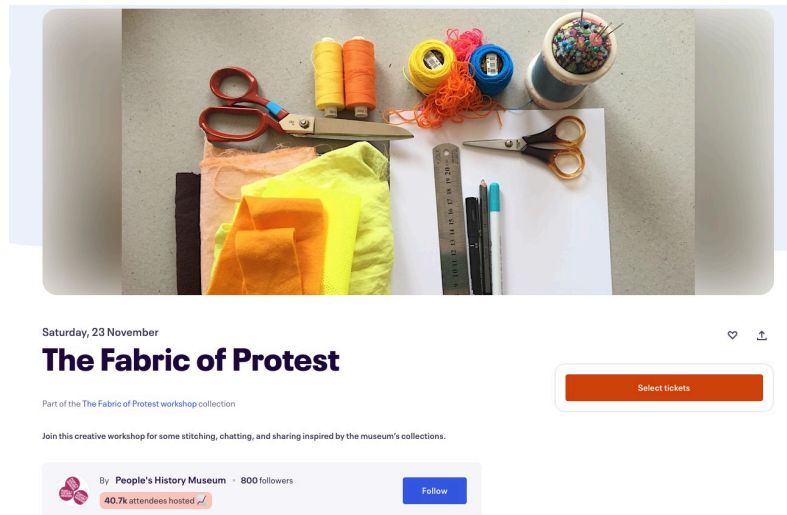


Figure 6.14 The reservation webpage of “The Fabric of Protest” workshop at People’s History Museum (People’s History Museum official website, image captured by the author on 18 April 2023).

Beyond admission fees, some museums focused on promoting the sales of museum products, including souvenirs, guidebooks, and café meals. In parallel, museums are increasingly willing to develop their E-shops after the pandemic (Arent and Navarrete, 2021: no date). One outstanding example is The Tank Museum boosted, which reported a tenfold increase in online sales during the pandemic, eventually winning the *Best Online Shop* at the Cultural Enterprises Awards and the *Shop of the Year 2021* at the Museum and Heritage Awards (Diprose, 2021). The Tank Museum has used its unique collections as an inspiration to design products. Figure 6.15 displays the best-seller of 2020 - the Sherman tank slippers (*ibid.*).



Figure 6.15 The sherman tank slippers in the Tank Museum (The Tank Museum Online Shop, 2023)

“When lockdown hit and the museum was closed, we were able to go to this engaged audience and ask them to support us by buying from the online shop”, says Simon Prager, the Head of Commercial Operations of the Tank Museum (cited in Diprose, 2021). According to Diprose (2021), the redesigned website, competitive pricing, and digital advertising on Facebook, YouTube, and Google Shopping attracted a large number of new customers and contributed to sustainable growth, preserving at least 20 positions and creating four new ones. The success of this approach was not only symbolic but structural: at least 20 jobs were retained, and four new ones were created, illustrating how digital commerce can contribute to long-term organisational sustainability. As addressed by Aroles *et al.* (2021), business management and consumerism concepts have gradually permeated the UK museum sector, making museums increasingly business-savvy. While this business-oriented trend may raise questions about the shifting values of museum practice, it also reflects a pragmatic response to enduring financial pressures—especially for institutions operating without public support.

6.2.3 Cost Saving

In addition to fundraising and income generation, many independent museums have pursued cost-saving strategies to mitigate the long-term financial consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. This section highlights several creative and transferable approaches observed across the case studies.

Firstly, recycling is a good choice. Taking the National Emergency Museum as an example, the museum's CEO Matthew Wakefield (cited by AIM, 2022b: no page) says:

At NESM we have become masters of reinvention; surplus handcuffs become exhibition barriers, duplicate helmets become light fittings and old lockers become display cases. Cost-saving methods like this not only save us pennies but reduce our landfill contribution and give new life to old or unused items. Through our networks, we also rescue surplus items from elsewhere that were destined to be thrown away. Things like old museum cabinets, storage systems, tech, and even salvage from fire stations come to us to be refurbished and reused.

Because they originated from the same subject area, these inventive re-uses of museum collections are not at all intrusive in the exhibition but instead merge in beautifully with the overall scenery (see Figure 6.16).



Figure 6.16 The light fittings made by duplicate helmets in the National Emergency Services Museum. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 30 June 2022.

During the interview, Matthew also mentioned that the museum took advantage of an excellent opportunity to purchase one the exhibition case (see Figure 6.17) from another museum that had closed during the pandemic: “this is a remarkable bargain. We save money and contribute to the world’s environmental protection”. This example aligns with the principles of both financial thrift and environmental sustainability and illustrates how inter-museum networks can function as informal infrastructures of mutual support.



Figure 6.17 The exhibition case that the National Emergency Museum bought from another closed museum. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 30 June 2022.

Other museums chose to find unnecessary expenses through audits and then try to save the budget.

One museum finance officer emphasised (P19) that:

After the outbreak of the pandemic, we applied for some government funds for the museums, which necessitated the preparation of comprehensive financial statements and analysis. During the process of this procedure, we came across certain unneeded expenditures that had been neglected in the past. For example, we can obviously combine some infrequent office supply purchases together and then obtain a prior bargaining position in the form of bulk purchases thus saving money.

Taken together, the strategies discussed in Section 6.2 show that financial resilience in the independent museum sector lies not in any single solution, but in the strategic combination of public funding, community donation, and commercial diversification. Emergency grants offered crucial short-term

support, but their limited scope and eligibility criteria exposed systemic blind spots for small, low-cost museums outside formal funding structures. Donations—both financial and in-kind—provided greater flexibility and local engagement but were vulnerable to wider economic pressures such as the cost-of-living crisis. Meanwhile, innovations in sales and cost-saving practices highlight the importance of internal adaptability and resourcefulness. Overall, sustainable recovery requires a layered financial model—one that balances stability, autonomy, and creative responsiveness.

Many of the strategies discussed in this section would not be made possible without the commitment, creativity, and care of those museum workers. Hence, it is equally important not to overlook the emotional labour of museum staff and volunteers. As Crooke and Farrell-Banks (2024: 114) address, “the pandemic both exposed and intensified how personally meaningful and emotionally affecting museum work was.”

6.3 Practices to Mitigate Emotional Impact

In Chapter 5, I have discussed the impact of Covid-19 on independent museums in terms of emotional impact, which includes worries about job security, loneliness due to lockdown, and overwork due to lack of staff. According to the results of case studies, the majority of participating museums did not have any specific plans or strategies in place to address the negative emotional impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic had on staff and volunteers. Therefore, focusing on those emotional impacts, the independent museums had to explore solutions to remit these negative feelings.

6.3.1 Clear Communication

Based on my survey results and case studies, museum workers who were employed in the lower level of an institution's structure were extremely concerned about whether the communication within the museum was transparent, timely, and inclusive. According to the results of a sector-wide study across different museum types conducted by Art Fund and Wafer Hadley (2022), three-quarters of staff in independents (74%) were worried about the future of their organisations. Psychologists believe that worry, which is defined as negative thoughts about an upcoming event, evolved as a problem-solving behaviour (Stern, 2009). However, when museums were confronted with an unprecedented crisis, such as a global public health issue, such worries, coupled with a dearth of trustworthy information, can quickly transform into an environment of grave anxiety among the museum staff and volunteers. One museum education officer (P12) said that:

After less than a year of working at this museum, I encountered the lockdown. At one point, I was very apprehensive. I do not know if I will lose my job as a result of the museum's declining cash flow. I am unaware of the museum's financial situation. I once speculated, based on some details in my work, about the possibility that we still possessed some funds.

This quote illustrates how the absence of clear institutional messaging during crisis situations can lead to misinformation and even the breakdown of internal trust. According to the case studies of this research, in larger museums with many staff and volunteers, in the face of a crisis, members of the decision-making team and staff at all levels need to regularly share the current situation to maintain

clear communication. It is necessary for communication to be open, consistent, and honest at all levels of the museum in order to achieve the balance that must be achieved between reaching the museum's strategic and commercial aims and developing a sustainable operating model for frontline employees (Smith *et al.*, 2021: 4).

6.3.2 “A coffee Talk Works”²: informal meetings during the lockdown

As the survey results indicate, 90% of respondents received encouragement from other colleagues in the museum during the pandemic. During the in-depth interviews, I questioned the respondents about the encouragement among colleagues, and many of them highlighted the importance of peer support through online meetings that they held during the lockdown. One manager reflected (P15) that:

I resided with my children throughout the lockdown. Only when I am on a video conference with my museum colleagues I get a sense of what it is like to be a working woman. I am overjoyed to finally meet my wonderful co-workers. Even though we cannot meet in person, we are pleased to have a cup of coffee through this webcam.

This manager's response exemplifies how informal, virtual social spaces became emotional lifelines for many museum professionals, particularly for those balancing care responsibilities and professional identity. Without a united and collaborative team, no organization can achieve its long-term goals (Deakin, 2022). While digital tools were often adopted for operational

² This statement is attributed to one of the interviewees.

continuity, they also served a vital affective function: helping staff maintain a sense of belonging, professional purpose, and emotional connection. A team environment characterized by strong communication and solidarity can help ease negative feelings and enable individuals to recover from the emotional impact of Covid-19 more quickly.

As discussed in Section 6.1, creating a safe working environment after the reopening of museums was crucial for employees. At the same time, organizing group activities related to museum operations under the regulations of Covid-19 pandemic for staff and volunteers proved beneficial for enhancing their well-being. For example, Woodhorn Museum has a special project supported entirely by 75 volunteers—the Union Chain Bridge Archive, where these volunteers contributed their time and skills to this project (Woodhorn Museum, no date a). Figure 6.18 illustrates the volunteers' wildlife recording activities from a boat on the river.



Figure 6.18 Volunteers along the banks of the River Tweed (Woodhorn Museum, no date a)

6.4 Presentation of Emergent Findings

Similar to Chapter 5, this research has revealed several unexpected findings from open-ended questions and secondary data about how independent museums navigated and contributed to their communities during the Covid-19 pandemic. This section will cover three elements: the digital facility transformation of independent museums, their contributions to the community, and their political engagement.

6.4.1 Digital Facility Transformation

During the lockdown, independent museums adapted by moving their outreach efforts online, rapidly developing virtual exhibitions, hosting webinars and lecture series, and enhancing communication via social media (Crooke *et al.*, 2022a: 7). Section 6.1.2 also echoes this point, highlighting the success of BCLM on social media. However, due to the contagious nature of the coronavirus, the digital transformation of museums, as noted by Crooke *et al.*, also encompassed a range of upgrades to physical museum facilities, including improvements to donation and ticketing systems.

Firstly, before the pandemic, contactless payments and donations were already thriving in museums (Kelly, 2018), and Covid-19 pandemic further accelerated this progress. According to Gilbert (2020), the People's History Museum in Manchester introduced contactless donation devices at its front desk in 2019. Museum staff warmly welcomed visitors and encouraged donations, and within just 42 days, the museum had recouped its initial investment, compared to 84% of institutions that recovered their investment within 12 months (*ibid.*).

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic made contactless card payments the preferred method- not only as a convenient fundraising tool but also as a public health necessity. Many museums subsequently leveraged this technology to boost donations and enhance digital fundraising efforts (*ibid.*). Section 6.2.1 has already detailed the installation of contactless donation devices at the Royal Air Force Museum (Midlands) following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Secondly, as noted in Section 3.5.4, a crucial requirement for reopening museums is that “timed tickets may need to be pre-booked to reduce the number of people entering an exhibition or site at one time.” This has increased the demand for digital ticketing services, particularly for small independent museums that cannot afford sophisticated commercial ticketing systems. For example, the small independent Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Wales announced on August 6, 2021, that “we broke the internet!” and explained (Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, 2021: no page):

On Thursday 5th August, demand exceeded expectations and the available bandwidth of our host servers, and the whole site crashed... that is the whole site, not just our booking page. Hundreds of messages and emails later, and the page is fixed but the air must have been blue at our host servers.

As explained by the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, small independent museums often lack the technicians to manage online ticketing systems. In contrast, larger institutions like The Tank

Museums have invested in sophisticated commercial ticketing systems such as Visisoft, which provides accurate visitor data, manages income, sends marketing emails, and occasionally announces upcoming events. While the exact cost of this system is confidential, the examples on the Visisoft website suggest that it is typically affordable only for large museums like The Tank Museum and The Beamish Museum (Visisoft, no date). While larger institutions have leveraged the crisis to upgrade their systems, many smaller museums struggled with temporary fixes, limited staff capacity, or system instability. As digital infrastructure becomes integral to basic museum operations—including access, fundraising, and data management—this digital divide demands urgent attention from funders and policymakers.

6.4.2 Museums' Contribution to their Communities

As discussed in Section 2.2.3, Gurt and Torres (2007) note the reciprocal relationship between heritage and people. The findings from Section 6.2.1 reveal concerns within museum communities about the viability of independent museums facing financial crises. Despite the significant challenges many independent museums experienced, they still strived to contribute social value to their communities. For instance, a front space of the BCLM served as a Covid-19 vaccination centre from January to June 2021 and this vaccination centre administered a total of 125,000 doses (BCLM, 2021: no page).



Figure 6. 19 Covid-19 vaccination Centre, Black Country Living Museum, Dudley (Kidd, 2021)

Bautista (2021: 32) asserts in her book, *How to Close a Museum: A Practical Guide*, that “we often claim that museums are one of the most trusted institutions in our society, more than the government, the media, and corporations. Trust entails the responsibility to the greater good in the service of society.” According to BCLM (2021: no page), BCLM was the first large vaccination centre to open in the region, providing maximum convenience and flexibility for local residents, and demonstrating its commitment to the health and safety of the community. BCLM’s swift adaptation to the public health emergency reflects its sense of civic duty, demonstrating that cultural spaces can be reimagined as community infrastructure in times of crisis.

Another example is the community well-being workshop designed by the Northern Ireland War Memorial (NIMC) to. According to Crooke *et al.* (2022b: 31), in 2020, NIMC collaborated with a fitness coach and a local care home to hold workshops via Zoom and later introduced a Covid-secure

lending box project. This initiative was welcomed by residents with dementia. A care home worker remarked, “they came just when needed with the isolation of lockdown; the residents really needed something else to think and talk about” (Fryer, 2021: no page). Many other independent museums have undertaken similar efforts in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic to support community welfare, particularly for marginalized groups. For instance, The Museum of the Order of St John developed free Seacole Sessions for Autistic and Neurodiverse Families (The Museum of the Order of St John Eventbrite, no date). During the pandemic, these independent museums have played a crucial role in uniting communities and supporting marginalized groups.



Figure 6.20 Seacole Sessions for Autistic and Neurodiverse Families at The Museum of the Order of St John (The Museum of the Order of St John Eventbrite, no date)

In sum, these examples suggest that independent museums not only responded to crisis through internal adaptation but also reaffirmed their civic purpose through direct community intervention. Rather than retreating from public life, many museums expanded their social role, becoming sites of care, connection, and local resilience.

6.4.3 Political Engagements of the Independent Museums

Museums, beyond their societal responsibilities during the Covid-19 pandemic, can also engage in political dialogue in unique ways. Crooke (2023: 484) argues that, whether acknowledged or not, museums are inherently political spaces. This is particularly evident in the case of The Cartoon Museum in London. As discussed in Appendix 4, Cartoon Museum frequently uses humorous and satirical cartoons (see Figure 4.8) to reflect and shape societal trends. During my visit to The Cartoon Museum, I purchased an intriguing comic booklet. This booklet, with its sharp language and humorous illustrations, satirizes the 2020 controversy surrounding the “Partygate” involving former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. While this thesis does not seek to analyse the political controversy itself, the booklet highlights how museums can act as intermediaries between artists and the public, offering space for dissent and critique.

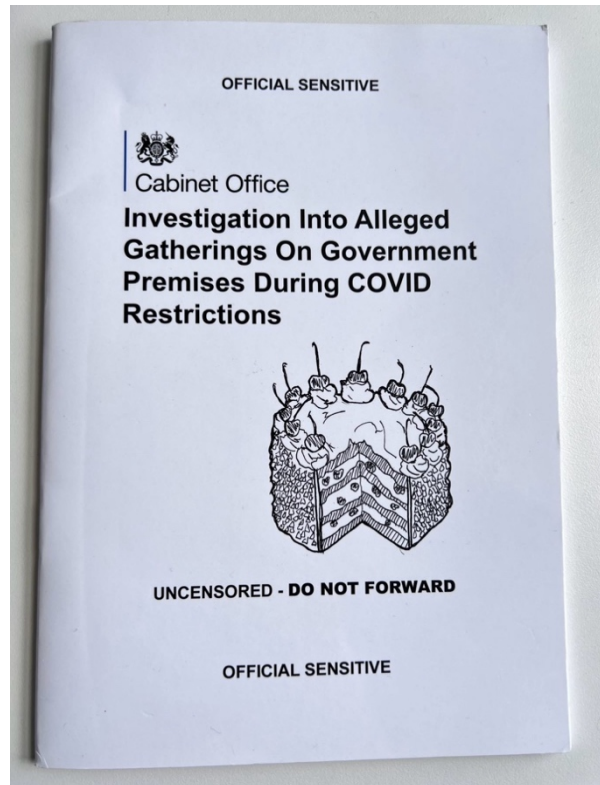


Figure 6.21 The comic booklet about “Partygate” bought in the Cartoon Museum. Photo taken by the author on 23 May 2024.

The opportunity for this artist to share his or her perspective on the political issue with audiences was facilitated by the museum’s provision of public space. Similarly, the People’s History Museum engaged in discussions with environmental organizations about creating protest banners (People’s History Museum, 2024). Both The Cartoon Museum and the People’s History Museum, as noted in Chapter 2, serve as platforms for public exchange and thought-provoking discussions. However, the financial pressures highlighted in Chapter 5 raise concerns about the future of political engagement by museums. When museums, especially those receiving direct or indirect governmental grants, face significant financial challenges, their ability to participate in political and social issues might be

compromised. Chynoweth *et al.* (2020: 6) argue that distancing museums from politics is dangerous as it diminishes a critical platform for public discourse and reduces the museum's political function. Therefore, this research suggests that maintaining political engagement is not merely an optional aspect of museum practice—it is part of what defines the museum as a democratic and reflexive institution. As Crooke (2023: 484) notes, “neglecting the challenges of change is a failure to recognize the full character of the museum, a place of flaws as well as great potential”.

6.5 How did the museum stakeholders react to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic?

As introduced in Chapter 1 (Section 1.4), this study adopts the concept of the museum ecosystem to understand the interdependent relationships among different stakeholders. The preceding sections in this chapter have discussed how independent museums have responded to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. This section will outline the actions taken by other museum stakeholders within the museum ecosystem—namely, museum communities, professional organizations, and governmental bodies—to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

6.5.1 Museum Communities

As defined in Chapter 2, museum communities are multi-layered. Donors, staff, and volunteers are all integral parts of the museum community, contributing their money, time, or skills to support museums. From my fieldwork at various case study museums, I found that the museum communities also include individuals such as trustees, partners, members, donors, and even the families of museum staff, who all also played a role in mitigating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on museums.

A notable example is The Cartoon Museum. During the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the museum faced a significant cash flow crisis, with a nearly 50% loss in revenue in 2020 (Comicscene, 2020). To raise funds, the museum’s director Joe Sullivan’s husband ran a half marathon (The Licensing Blog, 2020). Additionally, cartoonists, such as Martin Rowson, contributed by curating and publishing a digital book featuring 193 works by 71 artists titled *Draw the Coronavirus: A Cartoon Mini-Challenge from the Mind of Martin Rowson* (Jennings, 2021). Furthermore, Rebellion, one of the UK’s largest comic publishers, designed a T-shirt emblazoned with “The Cartoon Museum” to raise funds for this institution (Broken Frontier, 2020: no page).



Figure 6.22 The Fundraising T-shirt for the Cartoon Museum, featured by the cover of Battle Picture Weekly

(Broken Frontier, 2020: no page)

These fund-raising projects demonstrate that museum resilience is not confined to institutional decisions but is distributed across a network of engaged individuals and creative publics. This illustrates how shared cultural ownership, and emotional investment can mobilise resources in times of crisis—adding another layer to the concept of museum “community.”

6.5.2 Professional Organisations

In the ecosystem of the independent museum sector, professional organizations also played a crucial role in mitigating the impact of Covid-19 pandemic. They made three key contributions to help the museum sector recover from the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic: conducting professional surveys, sharing museum insights and knowledge, and providing resources or services.

As summarized in section 3.6, various organizations in the museum and heritage sector conducted professional surveys in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (see Table 3.3). These surveys focused on aspects related to the organization's scope and vision. For instance, Southwest Museum Development's survey specifically addressed the impact of the pandemic on museums in England. These surveys, conducted by professional organizations, leveraged their influence within the sector to gather firsthand data on the pandemic's effects on the sector and produce reports. This data is aimed at helping the museums stay informed about the latest trends and reflect on their practices (Heritage Fund, 2020a). More importantly, according to AIM, a key role of AIM is to advocate for independent museums by advocating their value to politicians, stakeholders, and funders, encouraging investment to aid the recovery from the pandemic's impact (AIM, 2019).

Secondly, professional organizations also served as platforms for sharing the latest expertise and insights within the museum sector. As discussed in Chapter 2, ICOM's debates about the transformation of museum definition have garnered significant attention from both academia and the industry. Additionally, as mentioned in Section 6.1.3, the Museum Association provided a series of

practical suggestions on how to make museum outdoor spaces safe for visitors, addressing the use of outdoor areas to attract audiences in the post-pandemic era (Gilling, 2021b).

Thirdly, professional organizations in the museum sector provide a range of free resources and services to address various needs within the museums. For example, as mentioned in section 6.2.3, the National Emergency Services Museum recycled collections in the curation to save cost. This is available to seek assistance from the Museum Association’s website under the free toolkit titled “Off the Shelf: A Toolkit for Ethical Transfer, Reuse and Disposal” (Museum Association, no date b). As highlighted by Crooke and Farrell-Banks (2024: 119), beyond museum practices, the Museum Association also launched an online well-being centre to address the mental health concerns of museum professionals (Crooke and Farrell-Banks, 2024).

These findings demonstrate that professional organisations functioned not only as advocacy agents but also as care infrastructure providers, reflecting a broader vision of sectoral resilience rooted in collective responsibility. However, their practises also exposed important limitations in terms of reach, representativeness, and structural capacity. While initiatives such as toolkits and mental health resources were well-intentioned, they often presupposed a certain level of digital literacy, organisational capacity, and staff availability—conditions that many smaller independent museums could not meet. In this context, what appears as “shared support” in discourse may inadvertently obscure the uneven accessibility across the sector.

6.5.3 Governmental Bodies

Similar to professional organizations, governmental bodies in the museum ecosystem have also conducted investigations into the impact of the pandemic on the museum sector (see Table 3.3). Unlike professional organisations, governmental responses were often reactive, regulatory, and resource-driven, focused primarily on macro-level financial intervention (Adams, 2020b). As mentioned in Section 5.1.3, many research participants indicated that the UK government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme was widely used and significantly alleviated the employment stress caused by the pandemic. Similarly, Section 6.1.2 highlights that most survey participants reported that governmental grants played a crucial role in helping their museums mitigate the financial pressures brought on by Covid-19.

To salvage the severely impacted UK cultural sector, the UK government allocated £1.57 billion through the Culture Recovery Fund, administered by several funding bodies, including ACE, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and Historic England (Heritage Fund, 2020a). A key issue surrounding these government bodies was the allocation of pandemic grants. For example, ACE awarded £2.3 million to 103 museums outside its national portfolio as part of an emergency support package during the Covid-19 pandemic, while 80 applications were rejected, reflecting an approval rate of about 56.3%. This supports the joint response from professional organizations such as MA, AIM, and the National Museum Directors' Council, which stated that "emergency loans have not been widely used by the sector" (Adams, 2020b). This is because, as mentioned previously, many small museums lacked the

expertise to complete governmental grant applications, and some museums' financial needs did not meet the entry requirement to apply for grants.

Even though the Museums and Galleries Tax Relief (MGTR) was not specifically set up for the pandemic, only a few of the independent museums that participated in this research reported having applied for it to increase profitability. However, actual participation in this scheme was significantly lower than anticipated, with the actual claims amounting to only 36% of the forecasted figure (Puffett, 2022). Similar to governmental grants, large museums typically had the resources to proceed these applications, whereas small museums often lacked basic awareness of MGTR(*ibid.*). According to a qualitative research conducted by Ipsos (Rennick and Finlay, 2022) on the impact of MGTR, simpler application processes for government cultural sector support schemes can benefit more organizations, as it increases accessibility for those that cannot afford professional application services (Rennick and Finlay, 2022). As governmental bodies, it is crucial to consider the diversity of museum sector when providing support. By leading the allocation approaches, the governmental bodies can balance the chances of funding for institutions of different sizes and regions, thereby avoiding exacerbating disparities between different museums, such as those mentioned in Section 6.4.1, which arise from differences in financial capabilities.

6.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, independent museums in the United Kingdom have maximized their independence and responsiveness as independent museums and proposed a variety of responses to the impact of the

Covid-19 pandemic. To adapt to the new social environment, the museums first reformed their institutional approaches, including their working patterns, museum practices, and future strategies. A museum's first option when confronted with financial difficulties is to pursue government grants and donations. To provide more accessible services for museum visitors, many independent museums employ commercial marketing strategies. There are also numerous museums that use money-saving opportunities to help alleviate financial strain. To mitigate the emotional impact, the governance skills of the decision-making group and the cohesion of the museum workers are especially crucial. In addition to posing challenges, the pandemic has ushered in an era of experimentation. This chapter has also discussed the digital facility revolution and independent museums' social contribution in the context of Covid-19 pandemic. Next, this chapter also reveals how other museum stakeholders react to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

Crucially, the responses presented in this chapter suggests that independent museums have a distinct capacity for immediate decision-making, relational accountability, and innovative governance. In this sense, they acted as micro-laboratories of cultural resilience, offering insights with relevance far beyond their own institutional scale. Broadly speaking, there is similarity among different kinds of cultural institutions, especially those operating with limited funding and facing structural disadvantages in accessing local resources. According to a study conducted by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), 773 public libraries have been closed in the UK since 2010 as a result of austerity policies (Busby, 2019). Similarly, Millar (2017) argues that local archives often lack the infrastructure and visibility needed to attract sustained public or private investment,

despite their crucial role in community memory and access to information. In this context, several of the adaptive strategies discussed (such as using outdoor space as public commons) offer a broader framework for rethinking the role of cultural institutions in times of disruption. Therefore, some practices addressed in this chapter point toward a vision of museums and similar institutions not simply as preservers of heritage or deliverers of services, but as civic infrastructures: sites where uncertainty is made intelligible, social ties are cultivated, and collective futures are rehearsed.

Moreover, this chapter has also highlighted inequities across the cultural sector. The uneven access to digital infrastructure and the exclusionary criteria of emergency grants—all raise questions about whose practices are visible, resourced, and valued in the post-pandemic landscape. These issues are not unique to independent museums; they resonate across theatres, libraries, archives, and galleries, particularly those operating outside dominant urban and institutional networks.

Above all, the impact of Covid-19 pandemic has set up a series of challenges for the museums in all elements. In response to this, many independent museums have improved or acquired the capacity to “bounce back from the crisis”, which is known as museum resilience. Does this mean that the concept of museum resilience has been enriched in the context of the pandemic? The next chapter will take up this theoretical challenge, interrogating the implications of these findings for how resilience should be redefined in post-crisis cultural governance.

Chapter 7 Leaning into The Force of Bouncing: The Concept of Museum Resilience

7.0 Introduction

Over the past 50 years, scholars from a variety of disciplines have pinpointed “resilience” as a watchword (Holling, 1973; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003; Woodley *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, the concept of resilience has been introduced into the cultural sphere and is frequently mentioned in related professional reports and research papers (Robinson, 2010; BOP Consulting, 2012; Monaco *et al.*, 2020; Arts Council England and Wafer Hadley, 2022; Cerquetti and Cutrini, 2023). Outside the authoritative literature, according to Rosaland Gill and Shani Orgad (2018), the concept of resilience has penetrated all aspects of people’s lives, becoming the central term of popular culture to capture individual and collective responses to difficulties and shocks. As the title of this chapter goes, broadly speaking, resilience is seen as the capacity to bounce back from trauma or misfortune (Kaye-Kauderer *et al.*, 2021). The application of the concept of resilience is so pervasive that it seems ambiguous when it is interpreted in the museum field. However, in the museum field, this pervasiveness has also brought about definitional ambiguity and inconsistent applications of the term. In Chapter 2, I have referred to several key theories about the museum resilience, but when I started the research in the context of the UK’s independent museum sector during the Covid-19 pandemic, the following doubts have arisen:

If we take a step back, it is necessary to think about why it is meaningful for the museums to be resilient. Who is playing the role of “advertising” this concept? What is behind the scenes of this prevalent term?

Regardless of the context, the interpretation of resilience is always associated with the ability to cope with “bad things”, such as natural disasters, epidemics, terrorist attacks, economic recessions, equipment malfunctions, and human error (Redman, 2022: 1-2). It appears that the function of resilience is to aid individuals and organisations in protecting themselves from possibly harmful events and developments which can broadly be characterised as falling within a general category of “bad things”. However, when museums were being consumed by the flames of a crisis, there was a tendency for uncertainty to shroud the future; nonetheless, exciting and significant changes frequently followed in the wake of these significant occurrences (Redman, 2022: 1). This paradox suggests that resilience may not merely be a reactive capacity but also a potential catalyst for strategic transformation. So, can a museum’s resilience enable it to be more proactive rather than just responsive when it copes with troublesome situations? Many scholars, such as Robinson (2010) and Pizarro (2018), emphasize the importance of resilience for the prosperity of museums and galleries. But what does the resilience of cultural organizations mean to the community?

An organization is a complex network of people, locations, and resources. Most of the professional guidelines (BOP Consulting, 2012; Tuck, Pirie, and Dickinson, 2015; Pizarro, 2018) helping the museums to build their resilience are focusing on the organisations at large. However, individual efforts

and agency might be weakened by these authoritative guidelines. This raises the question of whether such resilience frameworks are top-down managerial tools or if they can be meaningfully interpreted and enacted at the grassroots level.

With these questions in mind, I began my investigation in the context of the independent museum sector in the United Kingdom after the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. As discussed in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, I demonstrated how the independent museums were impacted and how they responded to the effects. The contents of these two chapters serve as a foundation for this chapter because through the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and museums' responding strategies, it is possible to identify what good practices for building a resilient museum and what the lessons were the outcome for museums is not leading to resilience. Further, this study also concentrates on incorporating people's opinions regarding the concept of museum resilience at all staff levels and in museums of various scales. Through a close discussion of qualitative interview data, this chapter examines how resilience is articulated, challenged, and negotiated in everyday museum work. Ultimately, this chapter contributes to a more grounded, polyvocal understanding of resilience that moves beyond abstract managerial narratives.

7.1 The Investigation of Museum Resilience in this Research

To collect sufficient data for this research, extensive online questionnaires (with a total of 2781 survey invitation emails sent out and 157 eligible replies obtained) were sent out to independent museums across the United Kingdom. A part of the survey was dedicated to obtaining responses from museum

staff about their thoughts on the concept of museum resilience. In-depth interviews conducted in the case study museums provide additional insights and enrich the findings. This section presents a complete viewpoint that recognises the complexity of museum resilience, cultivates good practises, and draws attention to lessons learned within the independent museum sector by taking into consideration the varied perspectives of museum staff members.

7.1.1 Voices from Research Participants

In this study, the responses of the participants regarding the resilience of museums are presented in two distinct formats: Likert scale data from the survey and conversation transcripts from semi-structured interviews. Given the large number of participants (157 survey participants and 32 interviewees), it may be difficult to convey the viewpoints of every individual in depth. This section will therefore begin by presenting the survey results and analysing the overall attitudes of museum employees towards museum resilience. Subsequently, an in-depth analysis of respondents' perspectives on five different angles identified through in-depth analysis of the patterns that became apparent in the responses will be conducted: financial resilience, organisational resilience, collection resilience, community resilience, and technological resilience.

The Likert scale is a measurement tool that allows participants to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a statement using a numerical scale. In this study, five-point Likert items were used to evaluate how important or effective staff believed certain strategies or attributes were for building

resilience. Below, Table 7.1 summarizes the results of the survey questions regarding the concept of museum resilience.

Question Number	Question Content	Number of Responses for “Strongly Disagree”	Number of Responses for “Disagree”	Number of Responses for “Not Known”	Number of Responses for “Agree”	Number of Responses for “Strongly Agree”
Question 6	You know and understand the mission of the museum where you work.	5 (4.2%)	0 (0.0%)	1(0.8%)	28 (23.7%)	84 (71.2%)
Question 15	The communication within the museum where you work is easy and straightforward.	2 (1.7%)	10 (8.6%)	4 (3.4%)	40 (34.5%)	60 (51.7%)
Question 16	All colleagues in your museum are able to express their own concerns and be involved in the decision-making process.	4 (3.5%)	7 (6.1%)	6 (5.2%)	65 (56.5%)	33 (28.7%)
Question18	You are satisfied about the cooperation between departments or groups in the museum.	2 (1.8%)	9 (8.0%)	9 (8.0%)	54 (47.8%)	39 (34.5%)
Question19	The museum where you work has rethought and summarized the success and failure of its work and strategies during the pandemic.	7 (6.0%)	12 (10.3%)	20 (17.2%)	58 (50.0%)	19 (16.4%)
Question 21	The museum where you work holds a positive attitude towards building external networks.	1 (0.9%)	4 (3.5%)	8 (7.0%)	58 (50.9%)	43 (37.7%)
Question 22	The museum where you work is willing to accept new ideas or concepts.	1 (0.9%)	6 (5.2%)	4 (3.4%)	68 (58.6%)	37 (31.9%)
Question 23	The museum where you work has regular learning tasks	13 (11.3%)	30 (26.1%)	17 (14.8%)	47 (40.9%)	8 (7.0%)

	regarding the museum profession or administration skills via workshops, readings, or lessons.					
Question 24	Museum resilience could be seen as the ability of museums to recover from the crises and adapt to the changing circumstances. In light of your experiences with the pandemic, do you consider the museum where you work to be resilient?	1 (0.9%)	3 (2.6%)	8 (6.9%)	67 (57.8%)	37 (31.9%)

Table 7.1 The results of the survey questions regarding the concept of museum resilience

In unpredictable times, the museum’s mission and principles should stay consistent (Fleming, 2015). Thus, the museum’s employees, especially leaders, must understand and update their perception of the purpose. Question 6 of the research survey seeks to assess the museum staff’s understanding of the museum’s mission as the governing principle for museum practise. As indicated in Table 7.1, although the majority of respondents reported an understanding of their museum’s mission, this should not be equated with active engagement or strategic clarity. As discussed in Chapter 5, the Covid-19 crisis placed pressure on many museums to prioritise operational survival, which may have overshadowed long-term strategic alignment.

While a shared understanding of the museum’s mission forms the foundation of strategic resilience, such understanding cannot be sustained in isolation. It relies heavily on consistent and effective communication across all levels of the institution. Therefore, it is important to examine how staff

perceive internal communication dynamics in their daily work. As shown in Table 7.1, In this study, a combined 86.2% of respondents expressed agreement that communication in their museums was “easy and straightforward” and around 10% of staff reported difficulties. This finding echoes the reflection of an education assistant mentioned in Section 6.3.1, which indicates that although senior management may perceive communication as effective, frontline or junior staff may encounter barriers due to a lack of structured processes or limited opportunities to participate in cross-departmental dialogue. This suggests that future institutional management must urgently address this question if museums are to build cohesive, responsive teams capable of navigating uncertainty.

Besides clear and straightforward communication, equally important is ensuring that all staff members have a voice in decision-making processes. Resilience is about mindset. “Activating equity and inclusion” is essential for the success of an institution’s internal and external relationships, as well as its present and future resilience decisions (Ackerson, Bailey, and Anderson, 2021: no page). In this study, Question 16 asked whether “all colleagues in your museum are able to express their own concerns and be involved in the decision-making process.” Most participants responded positively, indicating a perception of participatory openness within their institutions and a minority expressed doubts, suggesting that inclusive decision-making may not yet be consistently practised across all roles and departments. However, it is important to interpret this result with caution. While survey responses generally indicate a high level of perceived inclusivity in decision-making, as mentioned in Section 4.5, the demographic profile of respondents may have influenced this outcome. As such, the findings

from Question 16 should be understood as reflective of senior perspectives, rather than as a comprehensive measure of institutional inclusivity.

Next, the collaboration between departments is a fundamental element of organisational resilience, enabling institutions to mobilise internal resources and respond cohesively to external disruptions. As presented in Table 7.1, most participants indicated satisfaction with interdepartmental cooperation, while a smaller group (8.0%) expressed dissatisfaction and another 8.0% were uncertain. These results suggest that most respondents perceived their museums as having functional internal collaboration structures.

As for organisational reflection and learning, most (67%) respondents (both agree and strongly agree) think the museum has summarised the successes and failures of its work and strategy throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and adjusted accordingly. A significant portion (16%) of respondents, however, agree or strongly agree that there are problems in this area. A further twenty respondents (17%) have said that they either do not know enough about the review procedure at the museum or are unsure. This could imply an issue either with the extent to which sufficient reviews have been carried out, or with communication about the results, for instance, because the museums where the respondents work do not share the summary document with the entire institution, or some staff were not involved in the discussion. As such, the findings suggest that reflection—though occurring in some form—may not be systematically embedded or collectively experienced. From a resilience-building perspective, this

indicates a missed opportunity. Ensuring inclusive, organisation-wide reflection is thus essential—not just for immediate recovery, but for long-term strategic evolution.

While internal reflection and learning are critical steps toward resilience, they are not sufficient on their own. Museums now are required to adopt an outward-looking approach—engaging as active participants in the wider ecosystem of culture and the creative industries, where they continuously adapt by forming partnerships, exchanging knowledge and resources (Bradburne, 2001; Dewhurst and MacDowell, 2015; Chaitas, Chipangura and Meparishvili, 2024). In this regard, an institution’s attitude toward external networking serves as a vital indicator of its adaptive capacity. As indicated in Table 7.1, in response to Question 21, the majority of respondents think the museum where they work has a good approach to expanding their professional connections with other institutions. Nonetheless, there are few respondents who pick up on a negative or restricted attitude in this respect. This may suggest that the cultivation of external networks is often handled at the senior management level and not always communicated throughout the organisation. If network participation is centralised or limited to leadership, the broader staff may remain unaware of these efforts—undermining the institution’s ability to mobilise its full relational capital.

When asked if the museum where they work is open to new ideas or concepts, the vast majority (91%) of respondents (both agree and strongly agree) said yes. This suggests a strong organisational culture of adaptability and curiosity. This is because, in the context of independent museums, the need for innovation is arguably even more pressing. Lacking the public resources and institutional legacy of

national museums, independent museums often rely on relevance, novelty, and responsiveness to capture and retain public attention. The success of TikTok marketing of innovation is not merely desirable but strategically necessary—a way to differentiate their offerings, sustain community engagement, and build return audiences.

Question 23 asked whether museums provide regular opportunities for employees to take on new tasks and acquire new skills. The responses reveal a more divided picture: 47.4% agreed, while over one-third (37.1%) disagreed, and 14.7% were uncertain. This is the most ambivalent result among the set of organisational questions and highlights a critical vulnerability in the resilience of independent museums. While many institutions may value innovation and openness (as seen in Question 22), the lack of consistent investment in staff development suggests that those values may not be institutionally embedded. Several factors may contribute to this gap. As addressed in Chapter 5, staff shortages, time pressures, and tight budgets often limit access to training or upskilling, particularly for part-time staff and volunteers. In smaller museums, where informal learning is more common than formal training, these opportunities can be highly inconsistent and dependent on individual initiative.

As the only question that directly mentioned the concept of museum resilience, Question 24 aims at investigating how the survey participants evaluate the museums where they work in terms of resilience. As a whole, the majority (90%) of respondents (both those who agree and those who strongly agree) consider the museum where they work to be resilient based on their experiences during the pandemic. There still are certain people who do not see the museum as sufficiently resilient or reflect ambiguity

or doubt about how they feel about the museum's resiliency in light of their own experiences during the pandemic. Given that most survey respondents hold senior roles (see Figure 4.8), the high level of agreement in this question may reflect an aspirational or symbolic attachment to resilience, rather than a critical evaluation of the specific structures and practices that support it.

In sum, these findings provide insights into various aspects of resilience performances, including mission understanding, communication, colleague involvement, cooperation between departments, strategy review, the construction of external networks, acceptance of new ideas, provision of professional skills, and evaluation of museum resilience. The great majority of respondents approved of or positively regarded the declarative phrases with positive intonation, with the exception of Question 23, where the findings revealed a clear balance between positive and negative. This indicates that participants generally held a positive impression of the museum's efforts to build organisational resilience.

This deviates from what I had anticipated. I believe that "survivorship bias" explains the overwhelmingly positive nature of the outcome. The phenomenon of survivorship bias is a form of selection bias that occurs when a dataset only takes into account extant (or "surviving") observations and ignores observations that have ceased to exist (Nikolopoulou, 2022). As mentioned in Chapter 4, the invitations for the research survey were mostly sent out to the contact emails given by the official websites of the museums. This suggests that the individuals to first viewed the survey invitations were those who handle public correspondence. Then, these individuals conducted a rudimentary evaluation

and forwarded the email to whomever they considered suitable to respond to the survey. The results of the survey also reflected the effects of such procedures. The majority of respondents to this study's survey were senior staff members, including the CEO and director. Putting aside the general organisational integrity of this particular group of people, the mere fact that these museums were able to view the invitation email and chose to respond suggests the following:

- First of all, the museum is operating normally
- It has an official website and provides effective contact information
- There is a dedicated staff responsible for monitoring and processing public emails
- The staff of the museum may be interested in this research and willing to participate, which shows that at least there are members in the museum who think that museum resilience is something valuable to explore

The museums that might not have an official website or have no accessible contact details were automatically left behind. In addition, despite the original intention of a more diverse set of respondents, the majority of surveys were forwarded to senior employees for completion. Therefore, additional discussion through case studies and in-depth interviews is essential to address survivorship bias and capture broader perspectives from different positions within museums.

7.1.2 The Good Practices and Ways of Working that Contribute to Resilience

Based on case study observations and in-depth interviews, several practices emerged as particularly valuable in strengthening the resilience of independent museums. These practices span financial, social, digital, and curatorial domains, illustrating the multidimensional nature of institutional resilience in the post-Covid context. Here are some important strategies and examples of how museums can develop resilience:

➤ **Diversifying Funding Sources**

Financial resilience is a foundational pillar of institutional survival. Museums that rely on a single income stream—such as ticket sales—are highly vulnerable to external shocks. Diversifying funding sources by seeking support from multiple channels such as government grants, corporate sponsorships, philanthropic donations, membership programmes, and revenue-generating activities (e.g. gift shops, events, rentals) can improve financial resilience (Brodie, Kane, and Clark, 2012: 3-4). In this regard, the Black Country Living Museum is a prime example. According to its annual report from 2016 to 2021 (Black Country Living Museum, no date), the Black Country Living Museum received revenue from donations and legacies, admission fees, government grants, retail income, ancillary enterprises, and investment income. Diversified income distribution enabled it to adapt to a fluctuating external environment and maintain its financial resilience.

➤ Building Strong Community Relationships

Resilience is also relational. Engaging with the local community and building strong relationships with community stakeholders, including schools, universities, businesses, cultural organizations, and local government, can enhance a museum's resilience. Collaborative initiatives, shared programming, and involving community members in decision-making processes can create a sense of ownership, support, and mutual benefit. Florence Nightingale Museum could present an example that turns the tide by seeking engagement with museum communities. The Florence Nightingale Museum went through a turbulent process as it first announced its indefinite closure in January 2021 as a result of Covid-19 and then reopened on 12th May 2022 (Hardaker, 2022b) after receiving a total of approximately £400,000 raised through grants, charity auction and public donations (Mitchell, 2022). To express their thanks for the donations (Florence Nightingale Museum, no date), Florence Nightingale Museum established a "Wall of Honour" to mark people's contribution to the museum (see Figure 7.10). This approach transformed financial recovery into an opportunity for deeper community connection.

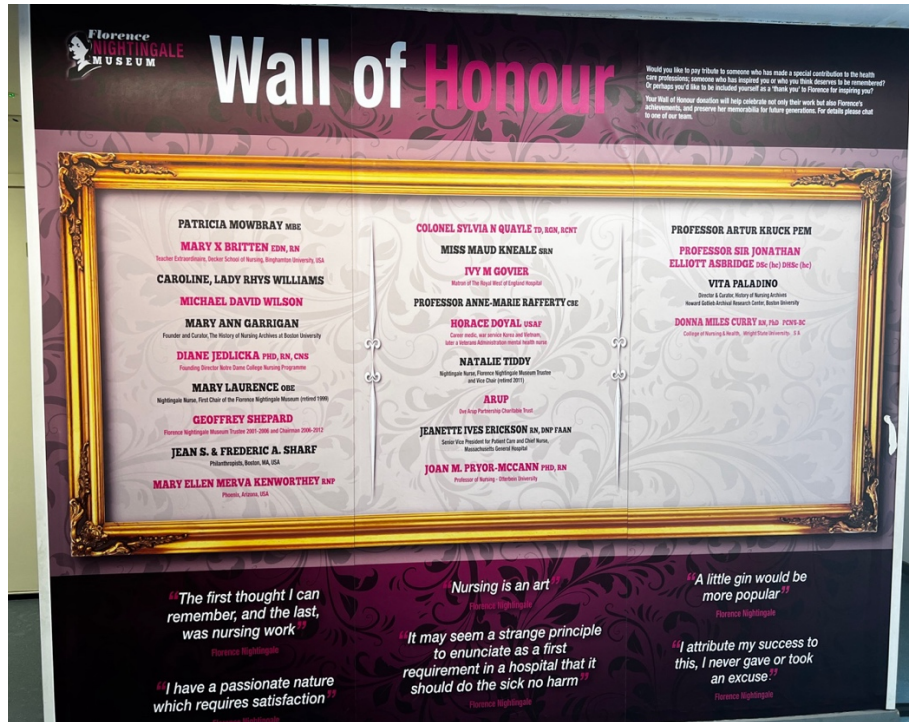


Figure 7.1 The Wall of Honour in Florence Nightingale Museum. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 29 August 2022.

➤ Embracing Digital Engagement

Embracing digital technologies and online platforms can expand a museum's reach and increase its resilience. Creating virtual exhibits, developing online educational programs, engaging with audiences through social media, and providing digital access to collections and resources can ensure continued engagement even during times of physical closure or limited access. Weardale Museum, a volunteer-led museum, was assisted by digital services (virtual exhibition and educational program via official website) to reopen its door after a long-term closure resulted by the Covid-19 pandemic (Weardale Museum Website, no date). Its experience illustrates how even resource-limited institutions can expand their reach and maintain audience engagement through targeted digital strategies.

➤ Adapting Exhibition and Programming Strategies

Staying relevant to evolving audience interests and needs is crucial for resilience. Museums can adapt their exhibition and programming strategies by regularly refreshing their displays, incorporating interactive elements, offering diverse perspectives, and addressing current societal issues. According to my onsite observation, many case study museums, like Black Country Living Museum and Cartoon Museum, would hold occasional events to attract visitors. Flexibility and responsiveness to changing visitor expectations can help museums remain resilient and attract a wider audience. The Jack the Ripper Museum, a museum that displays a series of murders in 1888 in the East End of London, has been a controversial museum due to its exhibition contents (Mansfield, 2021). With the addition of the influence brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, the museum was at the edge of being sold at auction in 2021(BBC News, 2021b: no page). In order to reduce the protests brought about by the theme of the museum, according to an anonymous interview participant, the managerial members of the museum made some adjustments to the content of the museum, removed some horror decorations at the gate of the museum, and increased the narrative on the living conditions of women in the Victorian era (see Figure 7.2). Now the Jack the Ripper Museum is operating normally under the development of its project of women's history in East London. These changes reflect a strategic pivot toward curatorial sensitivity and social relevance, allowing the museum to continue operating while repositioning its public image.

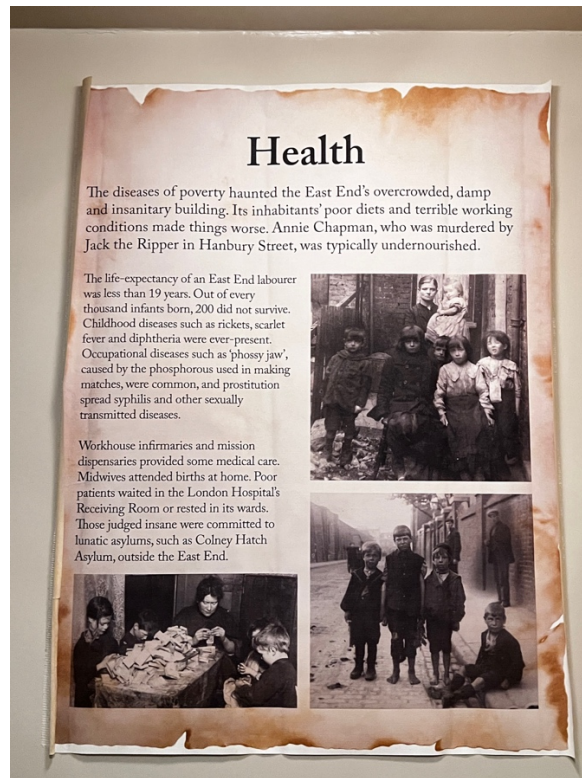


Figure 7.2 The Introduction Board in Jack the Ripper Museum's New Exhibition. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 10 June 2023.

➤ Visitor-Centric Approach

Placing the visitor at the centre of museum experiences contributes to resilience. Understanding visitors' interests, needs, and preferences through audience research, feedback mechanisms, and visitor evaluation can inform decision-making and help museums tailor their offerings to meet visitor expectations. The Florence Nightingale Museum introduced the feedback collection system in 2021 in their exhibiting space to further understand how the visitors think about the museum and their experience (see Figure 7.3). The information that the museum collects involves gender, age, hometown, ethnic background, and thoughts about the museum. Such mechanisms facilitate responsive adaptation

and demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity and transparency, both of which strengthen public trust and institutional legitimacy.

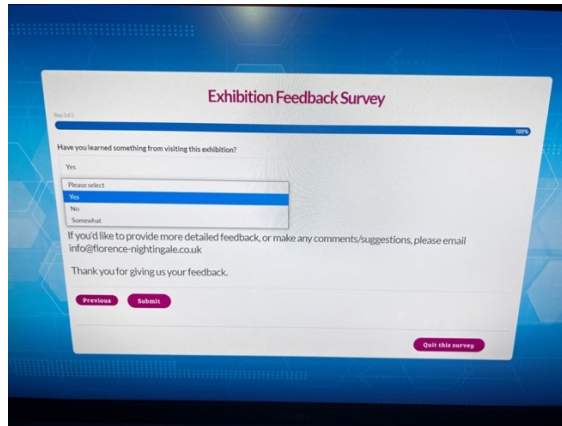


Figure 7.3 The Feedback Survey of Florence Nightingale Museum. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 29 August 2022.

Taken together, these examples underscore that organisational resilience is not a singular attribute, but a set of practices, relationships, and value orientations that are enacted across multiple dimensions. While resources and contexts vary across institutions, the core insight remains: museums that survive and adapt do so by combining structural preparedness with cultural openness, grounded in their mission but flexible in method. The strategies identified here are not universal prescriptions, but emergent practices shaped by local constraints and creative agency, and thus hold value for the wider independent museum sector seeking to navigate uncertainty.

7.1.3 The Lessons Learned Where the Outcome for the Museum is Not Leading to Resilience

Examining bad examples of practices that do not lead to museum resilience can provide important lessons on what to avoid. These cases reveal the risks of overextension, structural blind spots, and missed opportunities for inclusive or future-oriented planning.

The first example concerns BCLM's issues with overcrowding and inadequate facilities for people with disabilities. Despite the museum's contributions to local NHS during the pandemic and its success on social media, my on-site observations witnessed significant overcrowding during peak seasons, leading to long queues at restaurants, toilets, and shops. However, there were noticeably few wheelchair users visiting the museum. As introduced in Appendix 4, BCLM, as an open-air museum replicating a Victorian-era British town, has very limited accessible pathways for disabled visitors. Here are two one-star reviews in 2024 on Google Maps from visitors expressing their dissatisfaction with the museum (Google map Comments of The Tank Museum, no date):

Visitor A: Waste of time and money. Very disappointed, hour-long waits for the mine and chip shop, no trams or horse-drawn wagons like there used to be. The queues for the mine and chip shop were ridiculous should have more than one chip shop for the capacity of visitor numbers.

Visitor B: ... We really struggled with my mom being in a wheelchair. It said online that it is all fine for wheelchair use yet she could not see or do anything! Also, not many dropped curbs to get on and off the path. Would not visit again.

It is understandable that BCLM aims to welcome more visitors to boost its revenue. However, every museum has a threshold for visitor capacity; exceeding this limit can lead to a sharp decline in visitor satisfaction and affect the likelihood of return visits (Ballantyne and Uzzell, 2011). Additionally, as highlighted by the comment from Visitor B, BCLM still needs to improve its accessibility for disabled visitors.

A further critical but under-discussed vulnerability concerns the security of museum premises. Several cases listed in Appendix 6 in Chapter 5 reveal that some independent museums were forced to suspend operations or permanently close due to the loss of their physical space. Interviews with museum staff suggest that many institutions, particularly those operating from heritage buildings or shared community spaces, often rely on informal or short-term agreements, sometimes lacking legal clarity or multi-year protections. One Chair Trustee of a museum (P19) admitted in an interview:

We did not begin investigating lease renewal options until after receiving a notice to vacate.

If we had known earlier that the museum building could not be renewed, we would have had enough time to look for an alternative site. We focused so much on programme delivery that we forgot the ground beneath our feet was disappearing.

This statement captures a recurring challenge across small museums: operational urgency often displaces strategic foresight. As resilience planning has come to focus on programming, community

engagement, and financial diversification, the basic question of site security has been marginalised. Yet, as this case shows, no resilience strategy can succeed if the museum physically disappears. As shown in Appendix 8, according to the UK Museum Accreditation Scheme, an accredited museum must have a formal occupancy agreement with at least 12 months' notice of termination (Arts Council England, 2018). This underscores the importance of not only securing premises but also ensuring that tenancy arrangements meet minimum standards of stability.

A final, and perhaps most troubling, lesson from this research concerns the phenomenon of strategic over-optimism—a kind of “performed resilience” intended to satisfy funders, stakeholders, and public audiences. Multiple interviewees described how museums felt obliged to present themselves as resilient, even when struggling internally. Survey data (see the analysis of Question 24 in Section 7.1.1) revealed these overwhelmingly positive responses regarding institutional resilience—yet deeper interview data mentioned in previous Chapters painted a more ambivalent picture, especially from frontline staff. This suggests a form of discursive resilience: saying the right things to remain fundable, even while struggling with burnout, financial precarity, or structural fragility. As pointed out by Newsinger and Serafini (2021), the resilience displayed by cultural organisations may, in fact, constitute a performative form of resilience, one that reflects an acceptance and concealment of trauma under austerity conditions and signals the precarious status of cultural institutions and professionals within broader social and economic structures. Museums must therefore be encouraged to articulate not only their strengths but also their uncertainties if sector-wide resilience is to be genuine rather than performed.

7.2 What is Museum Resilience in the Context of this Research?

This chapter starts by elaborating on the concept of organisational resilience of museums, particularly with regard to the independent museum sector in the United Kingdom, to provide a response to the primary research question that was posed. While Chapter 2 reviewed the evolving literature surrounding resilience, this section builds on that foundation to articulate a working definition of museum resilience in the context of this research. In doing so, it aims to move beyond simplified or idealised uses of the term and instead propose a framework that accounts for the tensions, contradictions, and lived realities faced by museums navigating the prolonged crises.

Research Question

In the light of museum resilience, what is the impact of Covid-19 on the independent museums in the UK?

7.2.1 Why Does Museum Resilience Trigger Authoritative Concern?

Mark Neocleous (2013:3) argues that the concept of resilience has emerged as one of the most important political terms of our time in the last two decades:

It falls easily from the mouths of politicians, a variety of state departments are funding research into it, urban planners are now obliged to take it into consideration, and academics are falling over themselves to conduct research on it.

Tracing its modern policy lineage, Neocleous (2013: 4) links the rise of resilience discourse to post-9/11 national security strategies, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, where it became central to what he calls a “culture of preparedness.” Brammal (2016) further explains that in the United Kingdom, the rise of resilience thinking coincided with the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government’s austerity measures introduced in 2010. In the UK’s *National Security Strategy* (Cabinet Office, 2008: 3), resilience is positioned as a necessary response to an interconnected web of global threats—terrorism, pandemics, climate change, and geopolitical instability—requiring coordinated societal readiness. Notably, this framing merges geopolitical anxiety with systemic governance, constructing resilience as a disciplinary logic that mobilises institutions and citizens alike to internalise risk management as a moral and operational imperative.

Similarly, Redman (2022: 33) outlined every crisis in the history of American museums, including the fire at the Smithsonian Institution in 1865, the flu epidemic in 1918, the economic collapse after 1929, and the cultural wars of the 1990s, and concluded that whenever museums encountered a crisis, policymakers and museum directors have consistently chosen austerity and promoted institutional self-reliance. In difficult times, such a result can easily prompt some institutions to make “people or institutions” decisions, with women and minority groups frequently bearing the burden of the consequences (Redman, 2022: 127).

As stated by the Cabinet Office of the United Kingdom (2008), the country requires a newer, more positive, and more systematic concept to realise the combination of national strategy and political

imagination, which is driven by an intense sense of insecurity and the need for national security. First, the concept of resilience is so new in the language of government agencies that it did not emerge until the 1970s, at first in the discipline of ecology. Second, it is more optimistic and widely adopted than terms such as “disaster management” and “crisis assessment” making it more readily accepted by the public. As Necoleous (2013: 3) argues, part of the appeal of resilience lies in its ability to frame negative issues in a positive light. Outside the authoritative literature, the concept of resilience has penetrated all aspects of people’s lives, becoming the central term of popular culture to capture individual and collective responses to difficulties and shocks (Gill and Orgad, 2018). Thirdly, the concept of resilience is predominantly based on systemic thinking: to accomplish it, the efforts of multiple sectors must be combined. Therefore, governments worldwide have simultaneously formulated initiatives and policies aimed at enhancing the resilience of cities, communities, and individuals (Weichselgartner and Kelman, 2014; Moser et al., 2019)

If the unstable international environment contributed to introducing the concept of resilience to the national security level of many countries, then the global economic crisis of 2008 and the austerities that followed drew more areas, including the cultural field, into the circle of “building resilience.” Following the advent of the global financial crisis in 2008 and the concurrent austerity agenda introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2014, the concept of resilience became prevalent in the United Kingdom (Bramall, 2015; Newsinger and Serafini, 2021). As mentioned in Chapter 2, Mark Robinson’s report “*Making Adaptive Resilience Real*” (2010) is a key theoretical foundation in museum resilience. It is worth noting that just months after the

publication of Robinson's report, the DCMS announced a 25% budget cut (DCMS, 2021: no page). The timing of the release of these two documents is so subtle that many people have expressed doubts about the way in which the concept of resilience is applied in the cultural sector. Newsinger (2015: no page) writes that:

But austerity is not a natural phenomenon; it is a political process that is consciously reshaping society in a myriad of ways to the detriment of those at the bottom, particularly the young and the disabled.

Newsinger's opinion (*ibid.*) is corroborated by the report written by the United Nations Special Rapporteur, Philip Alston, on extreme poverty and human rights in the UK in 2019. According to this report (Human Rights Council, 2019: 1), one-fifth of the population in the UK, the world's fifth-largest economy, lives in extreme poverty. The austerity policies implemented since 2010 have intentionally weakened the "minimal protection" for many marginalized individuals: numerous social services have been cut, law enforcement services have been reduced, several libraries have closed, and community and youth centres have been scaled back, with public spaces and buildings sold off (Human Rights Council, 2019: 4). The society needs public amenities and services providing a safety net that supports everyone, but this report sharply points out that the social safety net in the UK is no longer reliable, forcing the most vulnerable individuals to confront the risks directly.

Although many people criticize the concept of resilience as a tool for the state to shift responsibility for the crisis onto individuals, it is difficult to demonstrate that its widespread dissemination and embracement across multiple domains of governance is a result of its instrumental properties. Nevertheless, due to the nature of the concept of resilience and the pressures from the global situation and recession, the concept of resilience remains frequently used and is highly relevant to current circumstances and national expectations for the future. It is important to highlight that resilience is not merely a practical skill museums should acquire, but also a concept they must critically examine and reflect upon to better understand the broader contexts in which it functions.

7.2.2 Why do Independent Museums Need to Focus on Museum Resilience

As outlined in Chapter 3, the UK's independent museum sector is characterised by significant diversity in size, governance structures, and thematic focus. Here, combined with the concept of resilience, this section will review the features of the independent museum sector in the UK and address the importance for independent museums to pay attention to organisational resilience. It will examine the financial insecurity of the independent museum sector, the variety of exhibition themes, their significance to local communities, their reliance on human resources, and the disadvantages of cooperation, thereby demonstrating why independent museums should pay special attention to building museum resilience.

Firstly, financial insecurity remains a foundational concern. Organisations' potential to become more resilient is likely to be prejudiced by their dependence on public funding (Bagwell *et al.*, 2014: 10).

Woodham (2018:36) discusses a speech by former UK Culture Minister Ed Vaizey at the 2010 Museum Association Conference, where Vaizey praised the entrepreneurial spirit of independent museums and suggested that museums funded by local authorities could also consider transitioning to a trust model to achieve self-sufficiency. Although independent museums are more diverse and flexible in terms of funding sources compared with local authority museums, income from visitors takes time to accumulate. Once the museum encounters a sudden crisis (such as the flood damage in the Ironbridge Gorge Heritage Centre mentioned in Chapter 5), it is difficult for independent museums to raise large sums of money to cover the losses in a short period of time. Income from ticket sales and memberships may provide autonomy, but it is neither predictable nor easily scalable in times of emergency.

Secondly, independent museums are very rich in the themes of the exhibition. Many of them collect and display industrial and military collections, which need large storage space, specialized maintainers and staff with preventive collection protection capabilities. This has laid considerable hidden dangers for future restoration costs and exhibition capabilities (Tuck, Pirie, and Dickinson, 2015: 20). For example, Section 5.2.1 mentions that the Scottish Industrial Museum, with its extensive collection of industrial artifacts, faced significant maintenance pressures due to rising electricity costs. Without strategic planning for long-term sustainability, the burden of care for such collections becomes a latent threat to institutional resilience.

Thirdly, the role of independent museums in supporting local community resilience is both vital and under-recognised. As indicated in section 6.4.2, the front area of the Black Country Living Museum

worked as a vaccination centre for the residents in Dudley. If cultural heritage is viewed as a resource for the local communities in terms of cultural experiences, the capacity of the cultural heritage to contribute to local resilience is contingent upon the cultural heritage system's resilience (Cerquetti and Cutrini, 2023). As mentioned in Chapter 6, many independent museums also provided online services to communities during the lockdown and contributed to people's well-being with their cultural services after reopening, which helped the local communities better recover from the impact of Covid-19 pandemic. However, this mutuality also implies that museums must first strengthen their own internal resilience—in governance, resources, and strategy—before they can reliably function as agents of broader recovery and well-being.

Fourthly, the sector's reliance on volunteer labour, while offering flexibility and community embeddedness, poses inherent risks. One of the advantages of independent museums is that the capacity of volunteers is greater than that of local authorities (Tuck, Pirie, and Dickinson, 2015: 11). However, this is also a double-edged sword. A museum with a large proportion of volunteers or a museum run entirely by volunteers is highly dependent on whether they will stay or not. Once volunteers are no longer able to help with museum operations, regular operations will be impacted or even cease (similar to the museums that will be closed permanently as discussed in Chapter 5). This highlights the importance of succession planning, skills transfer, and inclusive governance structures as components of resilience.

Finally, unlike local authority museums that are well-integrated with other local authority services, some independent museums are not able to afford or access the same level of resources and expertise. Being part of a larger organisation allows local authority museums to benefit from economies of scale and scope. Therefore, independent museums need to work hard to mitigate this disadvantage by seeking cooperation and networking, which is an important part of the concept of resilience. As resilience is inherently systemic, it cannot be cultivated in isolation; it demands cooperative models of practice that allow small institutions to share burdens and leverage collective strength.

Overall, from the content of the previous chapters, we can see examples to support the fact that independent museums may have different pros and cons in terms of organisational resilience due to their characteristics (including size, exhibition themes, and locations). By engaging critically with the concept of resilience, independent museums can better understand their limitations, activate their embedded strengths, and develop tailored strategies for long-term sustainability in an increasingly unstable cultural landscape.

7.2.3 The Interpretation of Museum Resilience

This section aims to combine the existing theories and the findings of this research to interpret the concept of museum resilience. As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, in terms of the comprehension of resilience in the museum sector, as already mentioned one of the most important authors is Mark Robinson. Robinson (2010: 10) argues that resilience involves not only self-defence or self-

preservation but also constant adaptation and redesigning in the pursuit of a main purpose, as well as acceptance of the understanding that change is both normal and important. Along the same line, he created the notion of “adaptive resilience”, which is mentioned in section 2.5.2.

However, if this understanding of adaptive resilience is placed in the context of this study, there are aspects in need of further explanation. For example:

From the survey and in-depth interview results, quite a few independent museums, especially micro-independent museums led by volunteers, hardly find it feasible to actively seek changes or innovation in order to adapt to external changes. They tend to comprehensively consider the resources currently at their disposal, and then make a decision that is most suitable for them. This means they could adapt to the new circumstances at their own pace. As stated in Chapter 6, although in the era of mobile media providing convenient and widely disseminated digital museum services has become a trend, for certain small museums that cannot afford this due to a limited budget, blindly following the trend will bring a huge financial burden. This suggests a different rhythm of adaptation—one that privileges sustainability over speed, and operational realism over strategic ambition. For most cultural institutions, especially those operating under high financial or logistical constraints, “adaptive capacity” cannot exist in a vacuum; it must emerge from and be sustained by basic institutional viability.

From Appendix 6 which summarises the announced permanently closed independent museums in the UK, it is clear that the loss of museum premises or loss of the people who maintain the function of the

museums is the main cause of most permanent closures. This underscores a critical insight: museum resilience is not solely a matter of mindset or adaptability—it is ontologically dependent on the stability of three foundational components: collections, premises, and people. These elements form what might be termed the museum’s infrastructural core, without which no strategy of adaptation or innovation can meaningfully take place. However, in Robinson’s (2010) definition, the priority of these elements is not emphasised. By contrast, the findings of this research suggest that resilience in the museum context must begin with securing these core conditions of existence—what could be conceptualised as the substrate of resilience.

To find a breakthrough, I turned to the origin of museum management theories, seeking inspiration from management studies. I discovered David Denyer’s report, published in 2017, titled “Organizational Resilience: A Summary of Academic Evidence, Business Insights, and New Thinking”, which provided a solid theoretical foundation highly relevant to the context of this study. This report synthesizes over 50 years of acknowledged management thinking and insights from more than 180 academic papers (Cranfield School of Management, no date). It emphasizes the urgent need for organizations to embrace risk and build resilience in order to survive and thrive, aligning closely with the argument of this study that “zero risk” is impossible. Moreover, David Denyer creatively concretizes the concept of organizational resilience by introducing a “resilience tension quadrant”, offering a method to visually represent and understand this notion (*ibid.*).

Denyer (2017:10) argues that the drivers of organisational resilience do not operate in isolation but together and he has introduced an organisational resilience tension quadrant to illustrate how the drivers of organisational resilience work jointly. Inspired by Denyer, I developed a tension quadrant (Figure 7.4) to display the framework of museum resilience in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

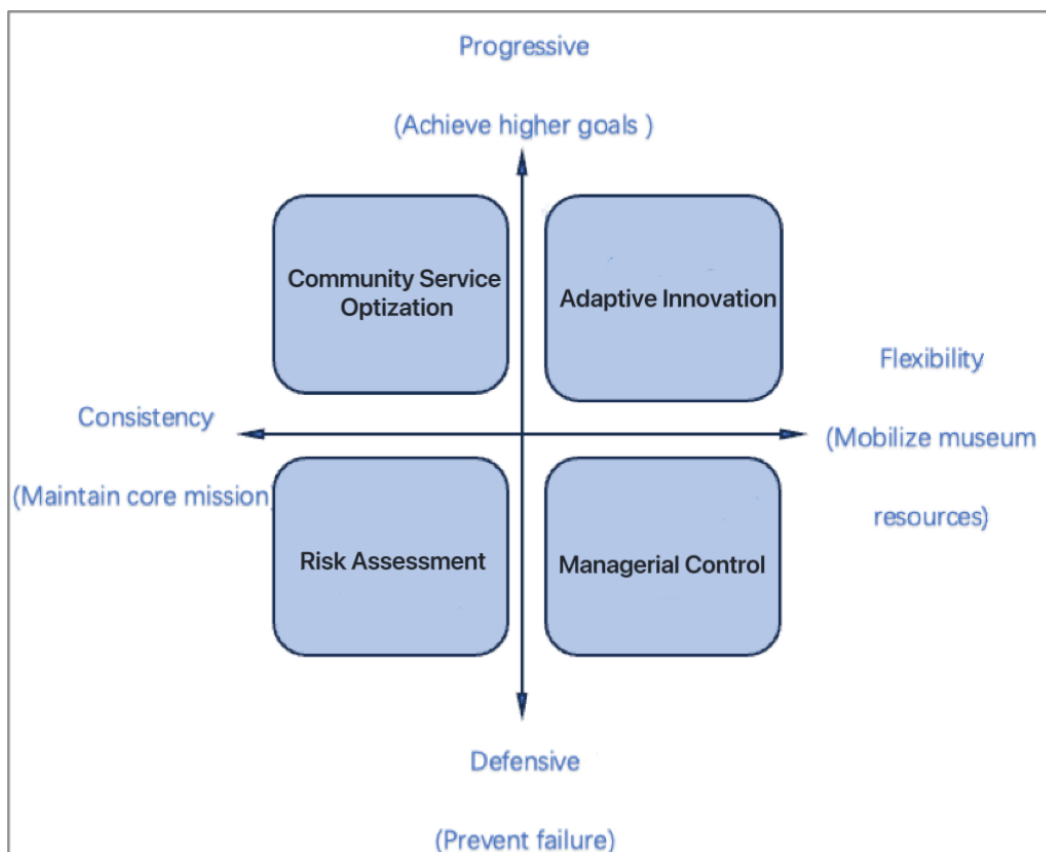


Figure 7.4 The Museum Resilience Quadrant (image by author)

According to the illustration in Figure 7.4, museum resilience is a combination of four abilities: first, a museum needs a defensive ability to avoid destructive failure; second, it needs consistency in guarding the mission of the museum; thirdly, it needs the ability to flexibly mobilise resources; and fourthly, it needs progressive power to achieve greater goals.

This quadrant framework has two advantages. First, it emphasizes the priority of museum practice, which is applicable to museums of different sizes, themes, and regions. This framework contains three layers of goals: the fundamental goal is defensive, which means maintaining the basic function of the museum and preventing severe failure; the advanced goal is seeking consistency and flexibility of the organisation, paving the way for higher goals; the ultimate goal is achieving higher progress.

This resilience model is adaptable across different museum categories. Chapters 5 and 6 present various examples illustrating how museums of different sizes and backgrounds responded to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, larger museums generally embraced the advantages of digital transformation, whereas smaller museums approached digital initiatives with more caution due to the cost. This highlights the need for a good resilience framework to be adaptable, allowing museums of all types to accommodate the differing needs and capacities of institutions, ensuring that both large and small museums can navigate challenges effectively. Therefore, under the resilience model shown in Figure 7.4, museums with less-developed resilience could first ensure the stability of defensive power, and then seek consistency and flexibility. Museums that already have good defensive museum practices should work towards progressive power.

The second advantage is that the model can accommodate all the key themes addressed in this research. The topics involved are very complex and include museum management, museum finance, museums and wellbeing, museum staffing, museum visualization, digital museum, and museum branding. This

model can bring together these diverse topics and bring clarity to the recommendations in the coming Chapter 8. It organises recommendations for museums into four dimensions, making it easier for museums to classify and understand the guidance provided. Additionally, the model is highly memorable, ensuring that museum practitioners can recall it quickly in practice, offering immediate insights and inspiration when faced with challenges.

7.3 The Role of Stakeholders in the Building of Museum Resilience

In the (at least academic) literature on key stakeholders, Freeman's classic definition of "any group or individual who can affect or be affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Friedman, 2006: 46) is widely adopted. While this definition is often applied in managerial contexts, its relevance to museums lies in its direct connection to how institutions identify the range of actors shaping their sustainability and future direction. In a strict sense, according to Friedman (2006: 13), the following groups of people or organisations are considered stakeholders in museums: government agencies and policymakers, customers (visitors), suppliers and distributors (raw material suppliers), employees, local communities, professional organisations, freelance museum specialists, scholars, the media, the general public, competitors, and business partners.

In the context of this research, this section will solely examine the external museum stakeholders that have a direct influence on building a museum's resilience. This section will begin by discussing the function of "advocator" played by professional associations in bringing attention to museum management and supporting museums in boosting their resilience. It will then move on to discuss the

role of “guarantor” played by government departments in the process of strengthening the resilience of museums.

7.3.1 “Advocator”: the Role of Professional Organisations in Building Museum Resilience

As introduced in Chapter 3, professional associations like ICOM UK, MA, and AIM play a crucial role in enhancing professional communication within the museum sector in the UK and even around the world. These museum professional organisations, especially AIM, act as “advocators” for the independent sector.

Professional associations play the role of advocates, and it should be understood as a two-way relationship, in the sense both of promoting museum interests to the government and mediating government initiatives to the museums. As industry representatives, professional organisations represent museum concerns and interests and provide a unified voice to policymakers and funding agencies. Their commitment to securing funding, policy support, and recognition of the important role museums play in society can enhance the overall resilience of the sector. For example, The Welsh Federation of Museums and Galleries and the Museums Association reversed Cardiff Council’s decision to close the Museum of Cardiff after months of advocacy (Robertson, 2023). Without the mediation of the museum professional association, MA, there is a potential that the Cardiff Museum will convert into a “pop-up” attraction, endangering the collections and community relations of the museum (*ibid.*).

Simultaneously, museum professional associations also promote the latest policy interpretation and the latest professional knowledge to museums. These organizations conduct research on various aspects of the museum sector, such as visitor trends, fundraising strategies, and governance practices. Insights gained from such research can guide museums to make informed decisions that increase the resilience of their operations. For small independent museums with limited budgets and staffing, this sharing of resources is invaluable. For example, AIM has a special blog on its official website called “Awareness & Networks”, which provides an analysis of governmental policies and funding applications in the light of the independent museum sector (AIM, 2023a). In addition, these organisations facilitate networking opportunities for museum professionals, allowing them to share best practises, information, and experiences. Through collaboration, museums can learn from one another, form alliances, and implement innovative strategies to surmount challenges collectively, which mitigates to a large extent the limitation of cooperation described in Section 7.2.2.

Like any organization, professional associations have their own limitations. First, the ability of professional organisations to implement their initiatives and support member museums may be limited by funding, since their own operations are mainly funded by the government’s Arm’s Length Bodies (ALBs). Raising funds to support various programs and activities can be challenging, especially during times of economic downturn or reduced government funding. Second, in the case of AIM, which aims to represent the concerns of independent museums, there may be differences in the degree to which it represents the diversity of museums across the UK. In certain regions where member museums are more concentrated, like England, AIM’s influence and impact may be more pronounced. Ensuring

equitable support and participation for museums in remote or sparsely populated areas can be challenging. Third, ensuring the active participation of all member museums can be difficult. Several research participants said in interviews that small museums with limited staff numbers may find it difficult to fully benefit from AIM's offerings, especially if they have difficulty allocating time and staff to work on various projects. Therefore, some museums may not be taking full advantage of the resources and opportunities to develop their resilience. To address these constraints, professional associations need to adapt and respond to the changing needs of the industry, actively seek feedback from members, and commit to continuous improvement, inclusiveness, and innovative resources.

7.3.2 "Guarantor": the Role of Governmental Bodies in Building Museum Resilience

If professional associations are "advocators", then governmental bodies function as their macro-level "guarantors" in maintaining the resilience of museums. In fact, government departments play a vital role in ensuring the overall survival of the independent museum sector in the UK. As mentioned in Chapter 6, the widespread and prolonged Covid-19 pandemic has not directly led to the permanent closure of many museums. One of the most important reasons is that the government provided a lot of funds to those museums that were on the verge of bankruptcy. In my survey and interviews, most of the participants said that a grant from the government is a powerful tool to support the museum in times of financial difficulties. I very much agree with a metaphor mentioned by a curator (P21) in an interview:

Fundings provided by the government are like a coronavirus vaccine for residents. It will not make you much healthier, but it will at least reduce your Covid symptoms, and you will not die right away.

This metaphor poignantly captures the function of government funding as an external modulator of institutional risk. If resilience is understood as an internalised form of institutional immunity, then public investment operates as a temporary but necessary intervention—a stabilising force that prevents acute system collapse. This logic further reinforces the notion that resilience is not an entirely endogenous trait of institutions; it is co-produced through sustained policy frameworks and funding infrastructures.

In addition to financial support, government departments play another important role in policy formulation and advocacy. DCMS develops the policies and frameworks that guide the operations and development of UK museums, which cover areas such as cultural heritage protection, access and inclusion, digitalization, and education promotion. In 2022, DCMS encourages museums to adopt sustainable practices, both environmentally and economically, including improving energy efficiency, reducing carbon footprints, and exploring diverse financing models to ensure long-term financial stability (Adams, 2022b). It is clear that the government's cultural sector is ensuring that these cultural institutions can thrive and adapt to a changing cultural environment, which is beneficial for the long-term resilience of the museums.

However, governmental influence is not without critique. As Section 7.2.1 noted, cultural policies grounded in resilience discourse can also shift responsibility for survival onto under-resourced institutions. Therefore, the role of the state must be critically examined—not only as a provider of emergency support but as a systemic actor whose decisions shape the risk landscape in which museums operate.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter opened with reflections upon how the survey participants think about the notion of museum resilience and provides analysis of several case study museums in the light of museum resilience. Next, I analysed why the concept of resilience has become a widespread “common sense”. Then, I explained this study’s refined conceptualisation of what museum resilience is and introduced a framework to visually exhibit this concept.

Undoubtedly, the popularity of the concept of museum resilience is inseparable from the overall climate of austerity brought about by the unstable environment in recent years. In 2010, as the UK government began cutting public funding, the flexible marketing responses and entrepreneurial spirit of independent museums were frequently praised and seen as models for the future of museums (Woodham, 2018). However, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of this model in the face of systemic crises and geopolitical instability. With public funding now diminished, the real challenges for the museum sector have just begun.

However, if it is examined dialectically, museum resilience is not illusory but has its own framework and operating logic. Linking the study of resilience in managerial research, this chapter defines museum resilience as the ability of museums to adapt, survive, and thrive in the face of various challenges and disruptions. It encompasses the capacity of museums to withstand and recover from crises such as pandemics, natural disasters, financial downturns, political instability, and changes in societal trends and expectations. Firstly, resilience begins with institutional viability. To maintain fundamental viability and avoid failure, museums need to maintain a sustainable financial model that allows them to cover operational costs, fund preservation efforts, develop new exhibitions and programs, and invest in staff development. At the same time, to adapt to changing circumstances, museums should be responsive to the challenges effectively. This includes having clear governance, leadership, and decision-making frameworks, as well as flexible and adaptable operational systems. Besides, building a resilient museum organization involves maintaining its core mission. Museums play a vital role in their communities, and their resilience is closely tied to the resilience of the communities they serve. Engaging with the community, understanding its needs and aspirations, and developing programs and initiatives that address those needs are crucial for building community resilience. Finally, a resilient museum should not remain static but evolve to meet contemporary demands, adopting a forward-looking perspective and planning for higher goals. Many of the challenges museums face today, such as digital transformation and sustainability, require sustained investment and strategic planning. These issues cannot be addressed through short-term plans but demand ongoing commitment to ensure that museums remain relevant and capable of adapting to future challenges while fulfilling their mission of preserving and sharing cultural heritage.

This chapter also explores the role of museum stakeholders in strengthening the resilience of museums within the independent museum sector. In the process of building resilience, professional associations and government departments serve as “advocators” and “guarantors” respectively. Organizations like MA and the AIM gather insights from museums and provide sector-wide guidance. Meanwhile, government bodies offer fundamental support, including financial backing and long-term value frameworks. However, as shown in previous sections, access to these forms of support remains uneven, and some institutions—particularly micro museums—continue to face marginalisation within the resilience discourse.

In sum, this chapter has mapped the conceptual architecture of museum resilience—its core components, its enabling conditions, and its embedded stakeholder networks. This provides the theoretical foundation for the following chapter, which will translate these insights into practical recommendations for strengthening resilience in the UK’s independent museum sector.

Chapter 8 Bouncing Forward: How to Build A Resilient Museum?

8.0 Introduction

On 5th May 2023, the head of the UN World Health Organization (WHO) declared that “Covid-19 is now an established and ongoing health issue which no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern” (World Health Organization, 2023: no page). Undoubtedly, this is a moment worthy of celebration, but on a deeper level, we have to reflect on what we have learned from this global crisis and how to proceed in the post-pandemic era. Resilience, as defined in the previous chapter, is the capacity of a museum to withstand disturbances, recover swiftly from setbacks, and even adapt to changing circumstances. This chapter focuses primarily on the topic of “bouncing forward,” which means how museums can maintain long-term sustainability and seek positive development in an ever-changing setting. Since the external environment is constantly altering, there are no universal remedies. The response must be directed by the specific local context (which will continue to evolve) and guided by strong leadership (Tuck, Pirie, and Dickinson, 2015: 28). Even though it is challenging to determine what comprises the “best” practice, sharing of information is essential and valuable.

Both academia and the professional field have offered extensive guidance and recommendations for museums on “how to do” (Museum Association, 2020; Carignani, 2023; Museum+Heritage, 2023).

The recommendations presented in this chapter are derived from the analysis of museum resilience conducted in this research and the insights and lessons shared by the staff in the case study museums involved in this research, providing highly relevant and up-to-date specific advice. In light of this, this chapter will first introduce defensive recommendations that aim to maintain the long-term sustainability of the museums; then it will address the practises required to maintain the core mission of the museum; following this it will provide suggestions regarding the flexibility of the museum; and finally it will move on to the recommendations that aim to achieve higher goals, such as becoming an iconic organisation.

8.1 Defence: Maintain Function and Resist risks

8.1.1 Recommendation One: Create a “Community Time Bank” (CTB)

As Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate, many small museums lack on-call specialists for occasional but critical tasks, such as digital media production, building maintenance, and grant-writing advice. For example, as mentioned in Section 5.2.1, when winds damaged the roof of the Wight Aviation Museum, prompt access to a local roofer proved essential to keeping the exhibitions safe and open. Because these specialists are needed only intermittently, adding them to the payroll is unrealistic for most small cultural institutions. A pragmatic recommendation is to establish a Community Time Bank (CTB), a locally focused barter network in which visitors, retirees, students, and freelancers deposit hours of expert help and withdraw curated cultural experiences in return.

To launch the CTB, the museum first creates a living skills registry via an online form or an on-site QR code, ensuring at least two trained backups for every critical function. Each hour of CTB service earns one time coin, recorded in a shared ledger. Museum staff can issue an alert whenever a sudden vacancy threatens a core function, and responses are logged to provide real-time coverage statistics. CTB volunteers then redeem their coins for museum benefits that cost little but feel valuable, such as behind-the-scenes tours, preview nights, guest-pass upgrades, or shop discounts. A concise dashboard will be useful to summarise total hours banked, call-up success rates, and coin circulation, and can be shared with museum stakeholders to demonstrate how the CTB converts community goodwill into measurable museum resilience.

Unlike traditional volunteer programmes, the CTB activates ‘spare’ community skills and rewards participants with tangible returns, creating a reciprocal model that signals respect for their contribution. By mobilising latent skills as social liquidity, the CTB extends human-capital redundancy into a mutualistic micro-economy and directly addresses the staffing gaps documented earlier.

8.1.2 Recommendation Two: Build a Membership Program and Engage through Ticketing System

Appendix 7 summarises the admission fee structures of the museums examined in this study. Although some museums offer free admission, these museums are in the minority because they operate at a low cost. For instance, the local train station provides the Borth Station Museum, its museum residence, water and electricity expenses for free, and it is operated by volunteers. According to the staff of the Borth Station Museum, donations of approximately 3,000 pounds per year from the donation box are

sufficient to maintain the museum's daily operation. However, the majority of case study independent museums charge admission fees to finance their operations. In this context, a robust membership programme, backed by a data-enabled ticketing system, becomes indispensable.

As depicted in Appendix 7, there is no general rule for selecting between the two modalities of charging a singular fee or an annual membership charge; rather, it depends on the museum's business decisions. According to a large museum's financial officer (P19),

If the annual membership system is selected, the museum needs to conduct distinctive activities throughout the year, particularly during the holidays, so that visitors who have applied for annual memberships feel refreshed. It resembles Amazon's membership model in some ways. Continually subscribing museum members will receive discounts, resulting in a very high membership retention rate at our museum.

In addition, museums can guide audiences through their pricing structures, and the most effective method is to offer discounts to specific demographics. As illustrated in Appendix 7, students, the elderly, children, the disabled, and their caretakers are eligible for discounts or even free offerings. This will likely attract this portion of the audience and their companions. The Titanic Museum has taken a novel approach by restricting student and senior discounts to weekdays only. Through such guidance, the museum's weekend reception burden can be alleviated, and others who have no free time during the week can have a more enjoyable museum visit.

Moreover, independent museums are often physically and visually embedded in their environments, allowing them to use the environment to create additional value for themselves. For some museums, instead of standing out as discrete, distinct institutions, they blend in with the surrounding structures and, by extension, the groups and activities housed within them (Candlin, 2015: 151). This arrangement operates slightly differently based on the exact accommodations and the relationship between the exhibition and the immediate environs of the museum (*ibid.*). For example, Jack the Ripper Museum offers two-hour guided tours, which are usually operated in small groups. The advertising slogan of the museum is described as follows:

We will take you on a walk through the dark and narrow streets of London's famous Victorian East End. We will trace the footsteps and crime scenes of the murders Jack the Ripper committed. This tour is not for the faint-hearted (London Top Sight Tours, 2023: no page).



Figure 8.1 Walking tours held by the Jack the Ripper Museum (Headout, no date)

With a pricing structure in place, the next step is to build a ticketing system to underpin it. Beyond simply processing admissions, a modern ticketing platform functions as a lightweight customer-relationship-management hub. Every transaction—whether a single-visit ticket, an annual pass, or a guided-tour add-on—feeds automatically into a unified visitor profile. Those profiles can then be segmented by visit frequency, spending patterns, and demographic attributes, enabling precisely targeted e-mails, push notifications about events aligned with prior interests, and off-peak dynamic pricing trials.

Integrating membership, ticketing, and marketing analytics in one system thus converts admissions from a static revenue stream into an ongoing engagement loop. In short, such a platform turns one-off transactions into sustained relationships and, in doing so, reinforces the museum's economic stability and community relevance.

8.1.3 Recommendation Three: Be Aware of Potential Losses

A museum that places a high priority on financial stability should also be mindful of potential losses. Notably, the term “losses” incorporates not only direct financial losses but also property depreciation, personal injury, and collection security. However, according to the result of fieldwork, only a small number of medium to large institutions possess well-developed operational policies and associated liability insurance, whereas small museums, particularly those administered exclusively by volunteers, often lack comprehensive policies and procedures.

The interview records gathered during field research reveal that only the Ironbridge Gorge Museum and the National Emergency Museum highlighted the significance of managing potential losses. As outlined in Chapter 5, employees of the Ironbridge Gorge Heritage Trust noted that the 10 museums managed by the Ironbridge Gorge Museum are prone to flooding because of their location in a riverine gorge. As a result, Ironbridge Gorge Heritage Trust gained £10,000,000 in public liability insurance to ensure the safety of both their operated museums and their visitors. The National Emergency Museum places an emphasis on preventing potential losses due to a previous substantial cost associated with building restoration and the preservation of outdoor exhibits.

Two misconceptions underpin this gap. First, some leaders imagine that an emergency plan is a checklist deployed after disaster strikes. Effective plans are drafted while operations are normal, reviewed at least annually, and embedded in calendars, shift handovers, and maintenance logs. Second, outcome-driven key-performance indicators (visitor numbers, ticket sales) devalue the invisible but

essential work of facilities and collections teams. A facility manager of a museum in Sheffield told me that his department was responsible for routinely inspecting the interior and exterior of the museum building, cleaning beehives and bird nests under the roof, and clearing parked vehicles from the fire exit. The facility manager (P23) said that “our work was grossly undervalued by the museum’s administration team, which allocated more resources and opportunities to the education and curatorial departments. If daily maintenance tasks are not handled properly, they will eventually accumulate into a significant repair cost”. In addition to visible occurrences such as fires, natural disasters, larceny, vandalism, accidents, and manual handling incidents (Prideaux, 2023: 4-8), potential threats also include unseen dangers. These imperceptible risks may involve the gradual wear and aging of equipment and infrastructure over the years, radiation exposure, and hazards associated with museum collections (South West Museum Development Programme, 2021: 6). Invisible risks are frequently ignored, despite the fact that they have the potential to accumulate over time and pose significant latent threats. The assertion that “organizations focus on capturing key performance indicators based entirely on outcomes” (Hanley, Baker, and Pavlidis, 2018: 18) can lead museum leaders to mistakenly employ metrics such as visitor numbers, ticket sales, revenue, and instructional hours to evaluate staff contributions. Certain departments, particularly those involved in conservation and facility administration, may be disadvantaged by this evaluation method, as their day-to-day responsibilities frequently involve the fulfilment of highly repetitive tasks with less visible impact. For instance, a member of the facility maintenance staff may have conducted routine patrols without incident on a given day, but he or she has to start anew on the next day. This type of monotonous labour frequently fails to inspire a sense of accomplishment in employees. “Narrow approaches to assessing value run a

high risk of uninformed decisions” (Hanley, Baker, and Pavlidis, 2018: 18), which can leave a negative impact on employee morale and ultimately create vulnerabilities within the organisation.

Nicholson (2012) contends that the recipe for success lies in the establishment of a board-reviewed and approved policy that is universally adhered to. The policy should name who does what, list how often each area is inspected, and set deadlines for reporting problems. Firstly, during the process of designing and drafting policies, the allocation of maintenance responsibilities and obligations within the museum becomes more precise. Secondly, work logs and summaries serve not only to facilitate the handover of tasks between different shifts but also to provide a tangible representation of work accomplishments. This documentation can serve as corroborative evidence during employee assessments and promotions. Insurance needs a yearly review to be sure it still covers local risks such as floods, storms, or theft. Finally, the museum’s dashboard should give equal weight to “days with no incidents” or “maintenance tasks completed on time” alongside income figures.

By formalising duties, valuing preventive labour, and financing residual risk through tailored insurance, small museums can update their crisis responses with a disciplined cycle of anticipation and mitigation. In doing so, they safeguard assets and visitors alike while reinforcing the broader fabric of organisational resilience.

8.2 Consistency: Maintain Main Mission

By maintaining consistency, museums can uphold their mission, build trust with visitors and stakeholders, and create a more reliable and enjoyable experience for all involved. According to the results of the research survey, 95% of the surveyed museum staff members believe that they have a clear understanding of their institution's mission. However, in the survey, in response to open-ended questions on consistency, participants exhibited a degree of dissatisfaction with museum diversity and equality, as well as uncertainty regarding the rethinking underlying museum failure. Therefore, this section will provide feasible recommendations addressing these two issues.

8.2.1 Recommendation Four: Prioritise Equality and Well-Being for Unpaid Staff

In the process of interviewing the directors or CEOs of the case study museums, it was almost universally claimed by each director that their museum was committed to creating a diverse and equitable institution where both paid and unpaid staff are equally respected. However, such homogeneous declarations raise the possibility of a gap between rhetoric and reality. It can be challenging to obtain “politically incorrect” answers from the official spokesperson of an organization. Therefore, the content of this section primarily derives from the statements of dissatisfaction regarding diversity and equality that emerged during semi-structured interviews with lower-level museum staff and on-site observations.

The discussion surrounding diversity and fairness within museum settings primarily focuses on three key points: gender-based pay disparities between female and male employees, a significant overrepresentation of white employees compared to Black, Asian, and minority ethnic employees in the museum sector in Europe, and the United States, and the prevalence of highly educated and middle-class backgrounds among most professionals (Charr, 2022). What sets this research apart from others is that it includes a proportion of small museums, particularly those entirely operated by volunteers, providing additional perspectives on diversity among museum staff.

In the United Kingdom, due to the limited financial viability of many museums to employ full-time or even part-time staff, many independent museums are operated entirely by volunteers. Volunteering is an active citizen behaviour that benefits the community in some way and is not primarily motivated by economic gain (Stebbins and Graham, 2004: 18). For many of the volunteers participating in this study, working in the museum provides them with a third space outside of their home and workplace.

One volunteer in a small museum (P13) expressed it as follows:

I used to be a history teacher at a primary school, and after retirement, I had a lot of free time on my hands. I wanted to do something, but I did not want a proper job like before. But I also did not want to stay at home and become a bored old man. So, being a museum volunteer is perfect for me. Apart from being punctual, there are no strict requirements for me here. I can enjoy chatting and making new friends.

Therefore, volunteers in this segment are often considered to possess a spirit of selfless dedication (Laverie and McDonald, 2007: 1). However, from the perspective of “serious leisure,” research suggests that these volunteers primarily engage in unpaid labour at museums driven by their own interests and personal motivations (Edwards, 2005; Orr, 2006; Stamer, Lerdall and Guo, 2008). Stamer *et al.* (2008) outline that by effectively implementing “serious leisure” volunteer management strategies, a win-win situation can be achieved between museums and volunteers. In this context, museums gain access to free labour, while volunteers benefit from a sense of self-identity and cultural recognition.

However, tension arises when volunteer recruitment skews toward one demographic—retirees with ample pensions and leisure time—undermining diversity. Economically disadvantaged people may be excluded by travel costs or the prospect of months of unpaid labour. As Chapter 5 noted, a volunteer complained that rising transport prices made regular shifts unaffordable. Indeed, for young students aspiring to gain work experience in the museum industry, the cost of several months or even a year of unpaid work in exchange for experience and industry networking can be a daunting prospect. Volunteering has become widely accepted as a pathway into the museum sector. There is evidence suggesting that aspiring museum professionals rely on familial support, which exacerbates concerns that requiring volunteer service as a prerequisite for paid museum employment may pose barriers for applicants from impoverished backgrounds or lack such support networks (Holmes, 2006: 9).

On the other hand, an age-skewed team also impedes inter-generational knowledge exchange. This issue is particularly pronounced in the case of the Blitz Museum (see Figure 8.2) in Coventry.

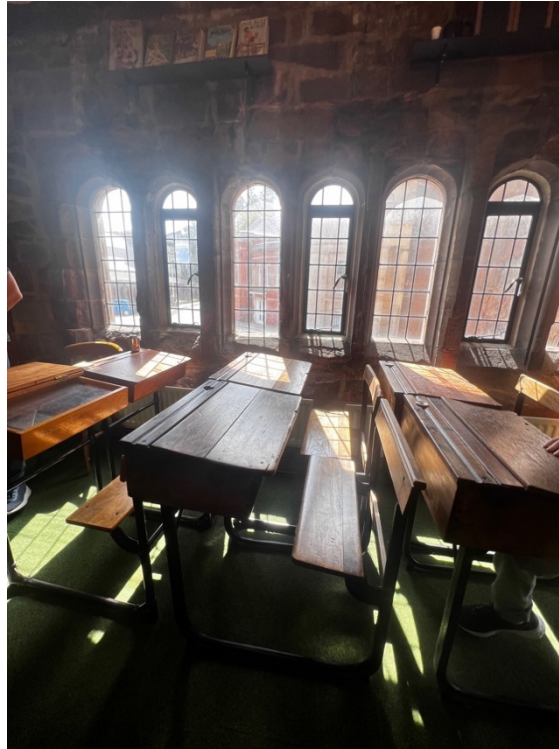


Figure 8.2 The classroom in the 1940s exhibited in the Blitz Museum, Coventry. Photo taken by the author during a site visit on 23 March 2023.

The Blitz Museum is a small museum entirely operated by volunteers, showcasing the history of the Coventry Blitz during the 1940s (Blitz Museum, no date). Most of the volunteers at this museum are local residents of Coventry aged 60 or older, and some even lived through the Coventry Blitz themselves. One volunteer (P24) mentioned during an interview:

I am delighted to share my childhood memories with the visitors, especially the children, to let them know how I spent those challenging times during my youth and make them realize the value of peace. I really want to pass down those stories, but we have very few young people here, and I worry that they will not be able to remember so many stories.

This volunteer's perspective reflects the anxieties of many aging volunteers when it comes to finding succession. Particularly for many community museums, passing on hidden histories and marginalized narratives through community volunteerism is an excellent way to foster a sense of community identity. However, if they cannot attract more young people to participate in museum operations, it threatens more intangible aspects of heritage—skills and memories of elderly volunteers will disappear after their passing in the future (Baker and Cantillon, 2020: 1). If museums could provide travel reimbursements or transport passes for the volunteers with tight budgets, it could help more people remove a key financial barrier to participate museum volunteer work. By embedding such benefits in policy and budgets, museums move closer to genuine equity, enrich their talent pool, and safeguard intangible heritage for future generations.

8.2.2 Recommendation Five: Introduce a Review Workflow for Social Media Posts

As Chapters 5 and 6 note, many cultural institutions now use social media channels to share news and strengthen community ties. Every post, however, carries a reputational risk—especially for small museums with limited staff and no dedicated crisis-communications expertise. For instance, in April

2024, the British Museum uploaded a short video on TikTok and Instagram that played on gender stereotypes; the clip was quickly criticized as sexist, prompting the museum to delete it and issue a public apology. Incidents like this underscore the need for a clear pre-publication review process to protect the museum's reputation.

A practical solution is a review workflow. In this workflow, the author and one colleague—usually the social media coordinator—jointly check if the draft matches the museum's mission and social responsibility and avoids obvious legal or cultural pitfalls. If either reviewer flags sensitive material (protected characteristics, hate speech, contested issue, copyright, or any topic likely to provoke strong emotion), the post enters a one-hour cool-off queue. Only after that pause does a third person—often a duty manager or rotating volunteer—give final approval. The short delay creates space for reflection and breaks the cycle of impulsive publishing.

8.3 Flexibility: Mobilize Your Museum

Chapter 6 examines how independent museums respond to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrating the adaptability and responsiveness of the independent museum sector. Whether it is the Black Country Living Museum moving exhibitions to TikTok or the National Emergency Services Museum using its collection as exhibition decor, a “flexible museum” relies on the innovative, inclusive, and open values held by its staff. Such examples are not accidental—they are the product of internal organisational cultures that value sharing, collaboration, and inclusive decision-making. In a

time when many organizations must respond to a rapidly changing world, museums should value the self-awareness of every member of staff and foster efficient and open interpersonal relationships (Morgan, 2013). This section, from the perspective of organisational flexibility, puts forward two recommendations for museums and, more broadly, the cultural sector. First, it advocates for the establishment of a publicly accessible resource-sharing platform. Second, it suggests that museums—particularly those operating as loosely structured autonomous institutions—should reconsider and clarify their internal leadership structures.

8.3.1 Recommendation Six: Establish a Museum Resources Exchange Platform

While the preceding recommendations above address changes that an institution can implement, this section provides a recommendation for museum stakeholders to strengthen resource integration and sector-wide collaboration. Drawing on Chapter 7's example of the National Emergency Services Museum repurposing display cases from a closed museum, this thesis proposes a sector-wide, not-for-profit exchange network where museums can list, request, and transfer spare or decommissioned assets, such as show-cases, archival shelving, and climate-control units. Hosted as an online portal, the platform could operate on “give, loan, or low-cost sell” terms, with users uploading photographs, dimensions, and condition reports.

The platform offers significant advantages. First, the scheme advances sustainability and circular economy goals by extending the life cycle of museum facilities. Second, it enables cash-strapped museums to acquire professional equipment they could not afford at normal prices, narrowing the

quality gap between large and small institutions and deepening the solidarity within the sector. Third, the portal generates data on carbon savings and material flows, informing national heritage-sector reporting and strengthening grant applications that prioritise environmental impact.

This platform could be governed by recognised governmental bodies ensure quality control and trust, and an annual “Re-use Award” would incentivise participation. By formalising the swaps based on personal networks, this platform would embed circular-economy thinking at the heart of heritage management and demonstrate how ecosystem-level collaboration can reinforce the resilience of every museum. More importantly, this platform also holds potential for application across other types of cultural institutions, such as theatres, parks, and libraries.

8.3.2 Recommendation Seven: Mind the Importance of Leadership

Museum leadership plays a crucial role in the development of the museum and its response to crises. According to a report made by ICOM regarding museum leadership, it is essential to provide a clearer definition of what museum leadership entails, explicitly differentiate between leadership and management, and acknowledge the complex requirements, such as curatorial skills combined with a vision, outstanding people management and business skills, and international connections (ICOM 2021b: 19). This complexity becomes especially salient in moments of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic when the resilience of an institution often hinges on the capability and mindset of its leadership.

In the case of the London Cartoon Museum, the director Joe Sullivan, with years of management experience and a resilient personality, effectively addressed multiple changes triggered by the pandemic, including the death of coronavirus amongst the staff (mentioned in section 5.1.3), and financial challenges (mentioned in section 6.5.1). In an interview with the comic magazine 2000AD (Johnson, 2022: no page), Sullivan was asked, “running a cartoon museum might seem like many people’s ideal job. How did you come to be doing it?” He (*ibid.*) responded that:

Most of my career has focussed on working with people who do not usually visit museums and finding ways for the museum to support their interests and needs. Comics have been a really useful part of that, for example with refugees or neurodiverse people, since telling stories through drawing is both therapeutic and non-verbal. As a big comic fan, I was delighted to join The Cartoon Museum when the opportunity came up.

This inclusive, audience-oriented vision also informed his internal leadership style. During my research interview with Joe, he showed great passion and patience for his work. Joe stated that shortly after he joined in 2020, the museum faced a significant low point: the passing of his colleague Alison Brown had a devastating impact on the other staff members. Despite the immense pressure he faced as the director, he undertook numerous initiatives to encourage his grieving colleagues to come together and navigate through the challenging times, including compiling Alison’s biography and establishing a comic award in her memory. The leadership of Joe Sullivan helped unite the team, overcome difficulties, and ensure the museum’s survival during the difficult time.

Furthermore, given the substantial discussions surrounding the leadership of museum directors, this research leans more toward examining museums primarily composed of volunteers. Museums and other nonprofit arts and cultural organizations heavily rely on community volunteers to support their day-to-day operations (Kartchner *et al.*, 2021: 1). However, the presence or absence of internal leadership structures dramatically affects organisational resilience. In museums entirely comprised of volunteers, two distinct forms generally emerge (Nicholson, 2012). In the first model—represented by the Borth Station Museum—volunteers assign themselves formal roles, including a designated director. Although unpaid, this structure mirrors that of a staffed institution. The volunteers at this museum expressed that having such a managerial role is effective in organizing volunteers, ensuring their attendance, and maintaining a professional attitude (Cantillon and Baker, 2022: 2-3). The other form, as exemplified by the Blitz Museum, does not establish an independent organizational structure. This museum has a total of 20 volunteers, predominantly elderly individuals, and the entire volunteer group is supervised by Coventry Cathedral. However, there is almost no internal organizational structure within this group of volunteers. Many of them do not even know each other due to scheduling differences. The result is an organisation with minimal institutional identity or strategic capacity—lacking not only leadership but the means to act collectively, whether in applying for funding, coordinating community programming, or securing support for youth engagement.

These contrasting examples suggest that leadership need not be formal or salaried—but it must be intentional. Even in volunteer-run contexts, resilience depends on structures that enable coordination,

vision-setting, and decision-making. Institutions without such structures may survive in the short term, but they are less likely to innovate, respond to crises, or sustain community engagement over time. In response, independent museums—regardless of size or staffing—should establish identifiable leadership structures that promote cohesion, responsibility, and long-term vision. For volunteer-run museums, this may mean appointing a coordinating trustee, creating a rotating leadership role, or developing simple regulations to ensure information-sharing and collaborative decision-making. Leadership, in this context, is not about authority—but about ensuring that someone takes responsibility and brings people together.

8.4 Progress: Achieve Higher Goals

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has ceased to be a global emergency and is no longer a pressing issue for most museums, the long-term viability of museums in the post-pandemic era remains a critical concern. The previous section provided recommendations on flexibility, focusing primarily on the survival of museums in a changing world. The rationale for pursuing these higher goals is clearly illustrated in the evolution of ICOM museum definitions discussed in Chapter 2, which highlights the need for museums to adapt to contemporary societal changes and remind people that museums can do many things to make the world a better place. As Weil (2003b) pointed out, a museum is like a mousetrap, which is always “potentially” useful. Weil’s metaphor underscores the idea that the value of a museum lies in its ability to provide solutions or assistance relevant to its external environment (Rounds, 2012). As referenced in the most recent museum definition discussed in Chapter 2, terms such as “inclusivity”, “diversity” and “sustainability” indicate that museums are supposed to actively

work to demonstrate their capacity to address societal issues that currently capture public attention. This section will emphasize how museums can pursue higher goals and provide feasible recommendations in light of this research.

8.4.1 Recommendation Eight: Reposition Museums as Community-Embedded Institutions in Local Recovery Ecologies

Chapter 6 underlined the critical role of governmental grants for museums facing revenue shortfalls. In this context, providing concrete evidence of the positive impact museums have on their communities has become paramount. Crooke *et al.* (2022a: 35) also emphasize this point, arguing that, in the face of numerous challenges, “measuring and demonstrating the societal impact of museums is key for survival”. In section 6.2.1, I outlined the qualifications for museums to apply for the Heritage Emergency Fund, including a criterion that eligible applicants should “be able to demonstrate a track record in delivering participatory heritage activities”. This clearly indicates that possessing a demonstrable record is essential for gaining the support of key museum stakeholders.

The temporary vaccination centre established at the Black Country Living Museum during the pandemic (see Figure 6.19) serves as a powerful example of how museums—particularly those with deep local roots—can contribute meaningfully to public resilience beyond the cultural domain. This case illustrates the potential of museums to act not merely as sites of heritage

interpretation, but as integrated civic resources that support their communities. Building on this insight, it is recommended that museums strategically reposition themselves as “community-embedded institutions.”

This involves becoming structurally involved in long-term, multi-sectoral partnerships—with local authorities, public health services, educational institutions, housing associations, and youth support organisations. For instance, a museum might formalise its role as a venue for annual emergency preparedness workshops; co-develop mental health programmes with local care providers; or host multilingual informational sessions for newly arrived immigrants. These activities not only address pressing local needs but also generate reciprocal trust and shared responsibility, thereby increasing the museum’s visibility, legitimacy, and long-term relevance.

To enable such repositioning, sector bodies such as AIM or the MA could provide practical guidance by developing toolkits on forming cross-sector collaborations. This would reduce the transaction costs of partnership formation and allow museums, especially smaller, resource-constrained institutions, to better institutionalise their social value beyond temporary programming.

Ultimately, reimagining museums as community-embedded institutions enhances not only their societal impact but also their internal resilience. It encourages museums to see themselves not as passive recipients of public attention or policy funding, but as proactive contributors to the

collective wellbeing and long-term recovery of the communities they serve. In doing so, museums stand to gain new roles, build broader alliances, and access more sustainable forms of support that extend well beyond the cultural sector.

8.5 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has presented a set of specialized and practice-oriented recommendations tailored specifically to address the needs and challenges faced by independent museums. It is important to note that while these recommendations may not encompass every facet of museum management comprehensively, their purpose extends beyond merely resembling standard consultancy advice or content found in museum textbooks. Instead, they aim to provide pragmatic and actionable guidance, intended to be of practical value to independent museums in the United Kingdom and, potentially, to a wider array of cultural heritage organizations. These recommendations invite museums to reimagine their roles—not merely as stewards of collections, but as adaptive, embedded, and values-driven institutions actively shaping the futures of their communities.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

9.0 Introduction

Inevitably, all museums will, at some point, confront challenging crises imperilling their continuity (Gurian 1995: 17). The crisis precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic in the independent museum sector in the United Kingdom serves as a lens, reflecting the responses of independent museums in the UK to this global public health crisis. This thesis endeavours to advance scholarly and professional understanding of museum resilience through an analysis of the sector-wide crisis management actions, constituting the first study dedicated to addressing museological concerns within the UK's independent museum sector during the Covid-19 pandemic era. To realize this objective, the following set of secondary research questions were posed:

- What was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums in the UK (SRQ1)?
- How did independent museums respond to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (SRQ2)?
- What characterizes museum resilience in the context of the independent museum sector as it navigated the crisis induced by the Covid-19 pandemic (SRQ3)?
- If museum resilience exists, what strategies do museums employ in its development (SRQ4)?

The preceding chapters have addressed these questions empirically. This chapter now turns to their theoretical and sector-level implications. This concluding chapter will first reconsider the analytical framework of the study, before its second section reviews and synthesizes the analytical findings of the study and the third section will conclude the insights and reflections that emerged from this thesis that support or contest existing theories in museology. The final section proposes potential future research directions identified throughout this thesis.

Some researchers emphasize the critical role of museum management strategies, contending that the survival and continuity of a museum “may greatly depend on the approach taken to their management” (Deans, 2022: 7). The empirical findings of this study, however, revealed a more nuanced picture. From the fieldwork results of this study, the impact of Covid-19 on independent museums in the United Kingdom did not result in the wave of closures predicted by Andrew Lovett, Chair of the Association of Independent Museums, who thought the pandemic would inevitably lead some museums to “just run out of cash and go to the wall” (cited in Candlin, 2021: no page). The findings of this research underscore that institutional resilience is co-produced by organisational capabilities and the wider ecosystem in which a museum operates.

Accordingly, as introduced in Chapter 1, this thesis develops a “sector-oriented” perspective positing that the independent museum sector in the UK functions as an ecosystem (refer to Figure 1.2), consisting of multiple stakeholders. Building on the analysis in Chapters 5–7, which traces how resources—finances, information, expertise, and social value—circulate within this ecosystem, the

system's operating logic becomes increasingly clear and is ultimately displayed in the model shown in Figure 9.1.

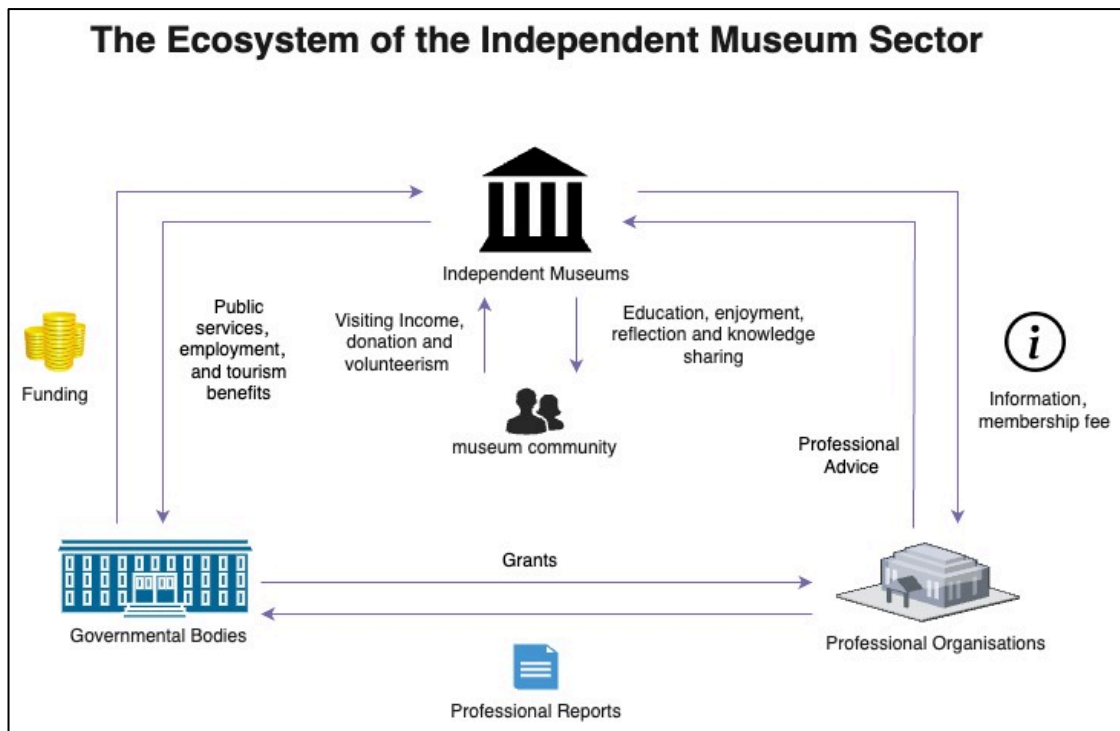


Figure 9.1 The "Ecosystem" of the Independent Museum Sector in the UK

Figure 9.1 offers an essential "bird's-eye view" framework of how this research explores the role of each stakeholder in this ecosystem from a museological standpoint, as well as the flow of resources (such as funds, information, experience, human resources, and social well-being services) within this ecosystem. The framework of this ecosystem (as Figure 9.1 shows) is idealized and should not be understood as a seamless whole, because the flow of the resources might be subject to cracks in the system. Nevertheless, it is those cracks that prompted the critical insights of this research. For example,

the DCMS as a governmental body was responsible for emergency financial support in the form of the Cultural Recovery Fund from 2020 to 2022 to help the cultural institutions facing imminent financial failure (DCMS, 2022: Foreword), but the governmental investments were delivered by the Arm's Length Bodies, including ACE, English Heritage, and National Lottery Heritage Fund, which have diverse “leeway” in how to set the application requirements and make the decisions (*ibid.*: 98). Therefore, the critical insights lie in the cultural policy-making strategies of governmental bodies in terms of how to make the money go to the institutions most in need.

To capture these dynamics, this framework also visually maps the different museological insights that this research involved. As Figure 9.2 indicates, the conceptional themes that this research involves are better organized by the ecosystem narrative instead of being listed separately without reference to their interrelationship in a larger framework. The following Section 9.3 will further summarize the contribution of this research surrounding the concepts shown in Figure 9.2 below.

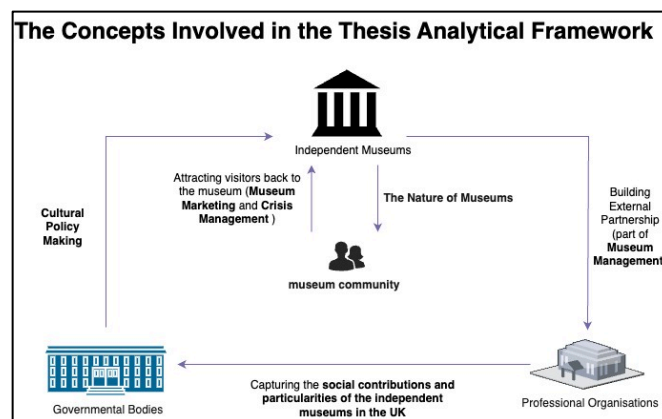


Figure 9.2 The Concepts Involved in the Thesis Analytical Framework

9.1 Answering the Research Questions

This section will summarize the answers to the research questions raised in Chapter 1.

9.1.1 What Impact did the Covid-19 Pandemic Have on the Independent Museums?

As demonstrated in Chapter 5, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused financial, institutional, and emotional impact on the independent museums in the UK. Initially, the finances of the independent museums had the most severe impact due to the fact that the revenue streams of independent museums were strongly correlated with the number of visitors. Nevertheless, widespread closures were largely avoided, as many small rural museums operated with low fixed overheads, and the financial impact of income loss was partially mitigated by external support funding, including government furlough schemes, emergency funding, and public donations. As a result, the financial effect reverberated across the museum sector, prompting changes to institutional operating procedures, volunteer recruiting, opening and closing hours, possibly even resulting in staff layoffs. These modifications further induced an emotional impact among staff and volunteers, resulting in sentiments such as weariness, worry, and solitude.

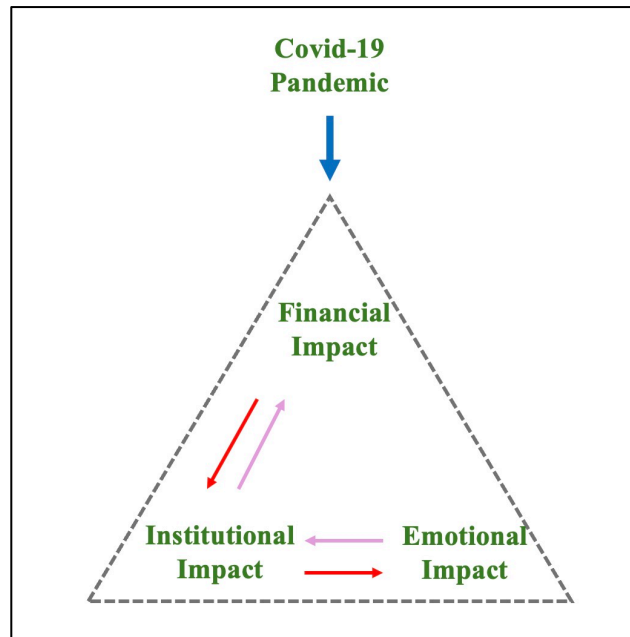


Figure 9.3 The Interaction of Financial, Institutional, and Emotional Impact

An important insight arising from this study is that financial, institutional, and emotional impacts do not operate in isolation, but interact with each other (see Figure 9.3). Each dimension, if encountered alone, appears manageable. For example, emergent grants can mitigate the cashflow shortage, but when financial distress is coupled with staff leaving and strategic missteps, the museum is drawn into a self-reinforcing spiral. As Chapter 5 shows, the Covid-19 pandemic functioned as a structural stress test: it exposed pre-existing weaknesses in risk preparedness, workforce sustainability, and regional inequality. As Adams (2022a: no page) underlines, “it is an uncomfortable truth that the sector has been slow to address the pay issue because demand for jobs in museums has always remained high; skilled, talented professionals choose to stay as a labour of love, despite knowing they would be better off elsewhere”. The burden brought on by reducing labour costs during the post-pandemic austerity

period may enhance their levels of stress, anxiety, and dissatisfaction, and influence workers' long-term career choices, which might impact the resilience of the institution in the long run.

Moreover, short-term emergency funds and wider geopolitical distractions subsequently obscured these weaknesses. As indicated by Dana Andrew (2022), the Executive Director of ICOM UK, with emergency funds no longer available, the actual effect of the Covid-19 pandemic (such as previous cutbacks and future losses) will be felt acutely and profoundly. Primarily, Brexit will unavoidably diminish the quantity of visitors originating from the European Union, as well as the prospective workforce, and prospects for collaboration with European museums (Adams, 2020a). Furthermore, inflation may have an impact on the cost of energy, welfare of workers as well as the spending or charitable contributions made by visitors. According to the survey completed by AIM (2022a: no page) regarding the difficulties caused by inflation and energy price surges in the independent museum sector, half of the participating museums reported that they can absorb cost-of-living pressures in the short, but not long term.

Accordingly, this thesis concludes that the pandemic meets the definitional threshold of a crisis not because it triggered immediate institutional collapse, but because it delivered a long-term, compounding disruption of workforce continuity, public accessibility, and operational stability. This conceptual clarification shifts the scholarly conversation beyond simplistic metrics of temporary closures and instead frames the pandemic as a systemic probe of resilience within the independent museum ecosystem.

9.1.2 How Did the Independent Museums in the UK Respond to the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic?

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums in the UK varied, and responses were diverse as institutions navigated unprecedented challenges. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the independent museum sector, shown as an ecosystem in Figure 9.1, had significant challenges in maintaining its operations. Independent museums used a range of strategies to alleviate financial pressure and prevent a depletion of cash flow that might hinder their operations. However, beneath these pragmatic moves lay deeper power dynamics: institutions with stronger networks or professional staff were able to mobilise resources more quickly. The DCMS-led Arm's-Length Bodies served as funders, providing emergency financing to cultural and creative organisations impacted by the pandemic, with the aim of aiding their survival throughout the financial crisis. Professional organisations served as facilitators, responsible for fostering the exchange of information, knowledge, and collaboration within this ecosystem. This section will provide a concise overview of the actions and roles of each stakeholder.

Chapter 6 illustrates the proactive measures taken by independent museums to alleviate the impacts of the pandemic. As mentioned in section 6.2, some independent museums implemented cost-cutting measures. This included furloughing staff, recycling reusable resources, reducing operating hours, or re-evaluating budget priorities. Such measures were often necessary but also had the unintended effect of hollowing out institutional capacity. With reduced visitor income, independent museums turned to fundraising efforts to support their operations. Some launched public appeals, seeking donations and memberships to help offset financial losses. Many museums also sought support from grant programs

and government relief schemes. To stay connected with audiences during closures and lockdowns, many independent museums embraced digital platforms. Virtual tours, online exhibitions, and educational content became popular ways to engage with the public remotely. This allowed museums to maintain a presence, continue education initiatives, and even reach new audiences. Although these digital solutions produced short-term engagement spikes, only a few institutions had the resources to develop sustainable online strategies. Therefore, the long-term impact of pandemic-driven digitalisation in the UK independent museum sector remains to be seen. To alleviate emotional concerns among museum staff, museums organized online meetings and informal gatherings as measures to assist employees in addressing feelings of loneliness and anxiety. According to some research participants, clear and straightforward communication and the leadership demeanour of museum directors also contributed positively to organizational cohesion. However, these emotional support measures, while appreciated, often lacked formal structures, underscoring how emotional labour remains undervalued and under-resourced.

Besides the efforts of the museums themselves, the UK government introduced various support measures to assist cultural institutions during the pandemic. Independent museums accessed financial aid through schemes like the Cultural Recovery Fund, which aimed to provide emergency funding to prevent closures and support ongoing operational costs (DCMS, 2022: 1). The British government has implemented a series of tax relief and loan schemes aimed at alleviating the financial burden on cultural institutions, including the suspension of commercial taxes, the provision of low-interest loans, and other measures to support institutions such as museums (HM Revenue & Customs, 2023). Nevertheless,

because the funding bodies also have the responsibility to explain the expenses to their stakeholders and taxpayers, the public grants were distributed under various evaluation criteria (DCMS, 2022: 96-103). Such criteria are, however, far from infallible, and gaps in their coverage remain. Chapter 6 notes that some independent museums did not have the opportunity to participate in applications for government funds due to their small size, due to focusing on themes that did not conform to mainstream ideology, and lack of qualified professionals to fill out applications. This exclusionary effect reinforced existing regional and thematic inequalities, demonstrating that crisis relief often mirrors pre-existing hierarchies rather than upending them.

During the pandemic, museums and heritage professional organisations implemented several measures to strengthen the industry's ability to withstand challenges. Professional organisations, such as ICOM, AIM, and the Museum Association, played a crucial role in assisting the sector members by providing vital information during the first phases of the pandemic, including government guidelines, funding applications, and health and safety rules. They disseminated information via various means such as the network and e-mail to aid the museums in comprehending and addressing the repercussions of the disease. Due to the pandemic, museums were closed or had their operations limited. In response, some organisations (e.g. AIM and the Museum Association) offered assistance in quickly transitioning to digital platforms, providing mental health support services for staff, and fostering collaboration among cultural institutions. In addition, professional organisations (such as ICOM, AIM, and the Heritage Alliance) actively advocated for government intervention by urging emergency financing, tax relief, and loan assistance to aid cultural institutions. This "information aid" often presumed a baseline

capacity—adequate broadband, digital skills, and time—that many smaller institutions simply did not possess, thus replicating a digital divide within the sector.

To summarise, the independent museum sector in the UK made great efforts to adapt to the sudden impacts of the pandemic. While the initial purpose was to address immediate problems, the process also generated several undertakings that have enduring importance for the independent museum sector and the broader cultural heritage realm. Several museums and heritage institutions maintained some of the measures implemented for the purpose of ensuring public safety throughout the pandemic, including online ticket procurement, outdoor activities, and hygiene safeguards in public spaces. These initiatives continue to play a role in museum marketing and museum services even after the spread of the virus is no longer an emergency (WHO, 2023). Furthermore, museums started to place greater emphasis on fostering community engagement. Although this was a trend before the Covid-19 pandemic, the isolation from museum communities during the lockdown has reinforced the importance of community engagement. As Crooke (2020) indicates, museums are demonstrating loyalty to their communities, hoping it will be reciprocated in the challenging times when these communities are expected to be the museums' most effective advocates. Whether the museums focus on expediting digitization or prioritising local audiences, these strategies are all intended to assist museums in maintaining public engagement in the swiftly changing social, economic, and political environment that museums have to navigate to ensure their continued relevance and survival. Furthermore, after the occurrence of this crisis, the independent museum sector initiated a comprehensive process of introspection including reflection on the societal function of museums, prospective paths for growth,

and the ability to withstand crisis. According to one of the research interviewees, “museums must endeavour to adapt to society change in order to guarantee that they can continue to provide significant cultural and educational value to society”. This sentiment purports an epistemic shift that institutions ostensibly explore their potential in taking social responsibility—but in practice, many of these efforts could remain superficial experiments without substantial, sustained funding and structural change in governance and resource allocation.

9.1.3 What is Museum Resilience in the Context of this Research?

Prior to providing a definition of the concept of museum resilience, it is essential to elucidate the process by which the thesis arrived at this outcome. Initially, Chapter 2 (the literature review) examined the existing body of research pertaining to resilience. The result is an elucidation of the evolutionary path of the idea from the realm of biology (Holling, 1973) to the realm of museology, as well as an examination of how the concept of museum resilience is delineated in academic literature. However, this thesis goes beyond a literature-based prescription by drawing directly on empirical insights from staff surveys and semi-structured interviews conducted at UK independent museums between 2020 and 2023. Throughout data analysis, I focused on patterns among both successes and failures, interrogating how institutions either strengthened or eroded their capacity to withstand and adapt to Covid-19’s disruptions.

As an example, the Englesea Brook Museum often organises staff brainstorming meetings. Collaboratively, museum staff members consider how the museum can better serve a wider range of

visitors. Based on the outcomes of these discussions, specific measures are taken, such as putting up additional roadside museum signage to direct prospective visitors. The Blitz Museum, a volunteer-run museum, may lose its oral history archive in the future as a result of an absence of young volunteers and has yet to come up with suggestions for a solution. These contrasting cases reveal that resilience cannot be reduced to a single best practice; rather, it emerges from the interplay between institutional leadership, resource allocation, and willingness to experiment. Incorporating a wider range of both successful and unsuccessful cases into the analysis could help to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of museum resilience, aligning with actual practice and experience in the sector. In short, within the framework of this thesis, museum resilience refers to:

A comprehensive capacity that includes four abilities: first, a museum needs defensive ability to avoid destructive failure; second, it needs consistency in guarding the mission of the museum; thirdly, it needs the ability to flexibly mobilise resources; and fourthly, it needs progressive power.

The concept of museum resilience proposed in this research includes two pioneering aspects:

First, compared to Robinson's concept of adaptive resilience (Robinson, 2010), the definition of museum resilience given by this research is undeniably more "up-to-date". This is not only because it is rooted in museum practices during the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023, but also because this definition caters to the most practical needs of museums. In the face of a constantly changing environment, museums often need to make a series of trade-offs in all aspects of their operation. These trade-offs in real practices cannot be explained simply by Robinson's already classic notion of staying

true to the core mission (*ibid.*). For example, transforming outdoor spaces involves utilizing current cash flow to invest in future community engagement, and raising ticket prices may lead to financial growth, but at the expense of alienating price-sensitive visitors. Such decisions cannot be fully captured by a generic “mission-centric” model; instead, resilience must be understood as the capacity to reconfigure institutional priorities and resource mixes in real-time without undermining essential functions.

Second, this research’s definition of museum resilience innovatively emphasizes the foresight of museums. While many case study institutions survived via reactive crisis management, the truly resilient museums exhibited proactive, long-term planning. They articulated clear strategic horizons (e.g., transitioning toward hybrid community engagement), thereby enabling them to anticipate threats and allocate resources accordingly. Conversely, institutions lacking robust strategic vision often remained trapped in short-cycle “firefighting,” unable to leverage limited relief funding into lasting organisational change. In addition, this thesis argues that museums aiming to achieve higher goals in the future should focus on demonstrating their social value, as this not only strengthens the reciprocal relationship between the museum and communities but also serves as a vital way for museums to justify their presence.

9.2 Contribution to Knowledge

This section will illustrate what contribution this thesis has made to understanding the nature of museums, museum communities, museum marketing, museum crisis management, museum resilience, and the nature of the independent museum sector.

9.2.1 The Nature of the Museum

Redman (2022: 9) argues that museums, which sometimes occupy centuries-old buildings and hold objects created or uncovered long ago, intrinsically suggest historical continuity. Nevertheless, this thesis contends that such continuity is always mediated by socio-political currents: museums are at once custodians of the past and barometers of present-day anxieties and aspirations. Many scholars and writers have noticed that museums nowadays are embracing starkly bolder roles as agents of well-being and as vehicles for social change (Moore, 1997: 22; Sliverman, 2009; Chipangura and Mataga, 2023: 55-75). They acknowledge the contribution that museums make to society but believe that the role of museums in this process is still that of a transmitter. Several critics have even dismissed museums' social role entirely. According to David A. Tucker (1993: 7), regarding a museum as a real social service organisation is "a delusion, and moreover, an insult to real social workers, police officers, teachers and housing officers who strive to make a material contribution to the quality of people's lives". These views from more than 20 years ago are very outdated from the perspective of today's museums.

As stated in Chapter 2, the shifting of the museum's social role has been addressed by the newest museum definition by ICOM. The knowledge and thinking that museums bring to the public is an invisible social service, helping people better understand the world around them. As social work defines it, introspection is an essential aspect of mental well-being, including the recognition, contemplation, and comprehension of one's own emotions, experiences, and ideas (Sliverman, 2009: 45). Taking the Vagina Museum as an example, the existence of this museum is dedicated to "have a vision of a world where no one ashamed of their bodies, everyone has bodily autonomy and all of humanity works together to build a society that is free and equal" (Vagina Museum, 2023: no page). Unlike formal schooling, which typically targets specific age cohorts, museums reach multigenerational audiences—shifting from didactic authority to participatory civic forum—and thus mobilise visitors to debate pressing social issues.

In addition, this thesis has contributed evidence of museums' direct functions in providing supplementary social welfare benefits during the Covid-19 pandemic. Museums achieve their purpose of promoting social well-being via an engaging and instructive approach, making it more appealing to users. This study conducted qualitative research and gathered samples of tangible social services given by museums, in addition to examining the impact of invisible social influence. The preceding chapters present evidence substantiating the tangible impact of museums' social services. Many case studies museums, such as Ironbridge Gorge and the Cartoon Museum, organised lectures, online concerts, and other cultural activities to engage the audience during the significant lockdown period. The museum volunteer schemes offer a space for retired individuals to re-establish an identity and students to

acquire practical skills. These examples substantiate Section 2.1.2's assertion that museums embody multiple, overlapping identities—not only as repositories of artifacts but also as agents of social welfare, lifelong learning and community resilience. As Coffee (2021: 15) states, “the impetus to revise the ICOM definition was and remains the diverse social change constantly underway around the world.” In sum, this thesis further supports the view that the role of museums is dynamic and closely tied to the evolving society in which they exist. Moreover, this research provides direct evidence that the role of museums is changing: the social functions of museums have gradually become visible, and museums are using diverse approaches to contribute to social welfare and social development.

9.2.2 Museum and Communities

This thesis demonstrates that, in the wake of Covid-19, museums ceased to function as mere repositories of objects and instead became active catalysts for community engagement—challenging conventional assumptions about the museum–community relationship. While the relationship between museums and communities has long been a focal point of discussion in the museum studies field (Crooke, 2007; Watson, 2007; Karp, Kreamer, and Levine, 2013), prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, museums had never anticipated being compelled to remain isolated from communities for such an extended period. As discussed in Chapter 6, museums made concerted efforts to reach the public during lockdowns through various means such as online exhibitions, web courses, online stores, and social media interactions. They have realized that the fundamental existence of a museum in contemporary society is not guaranteed, since they are not “timeless institutions standing apart from the processes of

change operating on the present-observing and recording, but not participating in, nor affected by, change” (Karp, Kreamer, and Levine, 2013: 158).

In this thesis, the pandemic is seen as a kind of turning point that pushed museums to become true partners with their communities rather than distant authorities. Some museums began to ask community members to help plan online projects or contribute stories and photos to virtual exhibits. By inviting people to take part in creating content, museums shifted from a top-down approach to a more open, sharing style of working. In contrast to the proactive stance of museums, the attitude of museum communities appears relatively subdued. Despite the significant contributions made by museum communities to many museums in resisting the impact of the pandemic, the trends concerning returning visitors and volunteers are not notably encouraging. For example, section 5.2.2 has highlighted the decline in volunteerism, particularly among the elderly. This could be attributed to various factors. Firstly, museums face increasing competition from a broader range of cultural products such as performing arts and sports events, which have also accumulated pent-up capacity since 2020. Secondly, the rapidly changing social environment, such as rising living costs and climate change, poses unpredictable risks for both museums and communities. Even so, it would be wrong to say that museums completely lost touch with their communities. In many places, museums found new and creative roles. Some served as pop-up vaccination centres, turning gallery spaces into places where people could receive Covid-19 shots. Others shared food or cleaning supplies with neighbours in need. Gardens and open-air courtyards became gathering spots for safe, small-scale events. By taking on

these roles, museums showed they could be much more than showrooms for artifacts—they became active helpers in public health and well-being.

In summary, the pandemic reshaped how museums and communities interact. Museums are no longer perceived, or behaving as, an “all-powerful and uncontested authority” (Lang and Reeve, 2007: 5). It means that museums need to work collaboratively with communities and actively seek their input. Yet communities faced their own challenges, such as inflation and global uncertainties. For researchers, this means the museum–community bond must be studied as an evolving process. It needs to watch how resources, technology, and trust flow back and forth between a museum and its community. By focusing on these interactions, we can better understand how museums can remain relevant and supportive rather than retreating into an isolated educational institution in a world full of uncertainties.

9.2.3 Museum Marketing

This thesis acknowledges that while the Covid-19 pandemic has imposed significant challenges on independent museums in the UK, it has also yielded positive effects in the realm of museum marketing. According to Lang and Reeve (2007), museum marketing involves the generation of ideas, identification of potential needs, communication of these opportunities to potential buyers/customers through advertising, and the promotion of the organization, goods, and services by making them attractive and suitable for diverse markets. In the context of independent museums, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought changes in ticketing systems, social media, and museum branding. Following the governmental guidance regarding the reopening of museums and galleries (GOV.UK, 2020b), it was necessary to have a ticketing or booking system to set pre-defined capacity numbers for museum

venues and ensure the even flow of visitors throughout the day. However, this thesis indicates that the ticketing systems established during the pandemic period have been retained even after the end of the pandemic, becoming one of its “legacies”. These systems are utilized for marketing purposes, including disseminating marketing advertisements, tracking visitor flows, and understanding audience preferences. In addition, the role of social media engagement during the pandemic has also played great importance in staying connected with museum communities. During lockdowns, museums turned to digital platforms not only for sharing content but also for fostering genuine two-way conversations.

Closely linked to ticketing and social media was the need for clearer, more authentic branding. Some museums seized the moment to articulate or refine their mission statements, crafting slogans that resonated with shifting public concerns—whether that meant emphasising local heritage, celebrating underrepresented stories, or offering spaces for reflection on wellbeing. These transformations in museum marketing have contributed to a more effective public engaging solution and tracking museum-and-user relations. Looking ahead, the pandemic-driven marketing changes appear poised to have a lasting impact. By integrating data from online bookings, cultivating genuine social media exchanges, and refining mission-driven branding, independent museums have become more attuned to audience needs and more agile in responding to external pressures. Yet these gains also highlight the need for critical reflection: to ensure that marketing strategies remain inclusive, affordable, and aligned with the institution’s core values, museums must continue to ask who is being served in an increasingly digital world.

9.2.4 Museum Crisis

This research has critically examined the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on independent museums in the United Kingdom, confirming the pandemic as a significant crisis within the independent museum sector. Employing a comprehensive definition of “crisis” drawn from managerial studies, this study identified six essential criteria to ascertain whether the pandemic’s impacts reach the threshold of a crisis within the context of museums. The findings suggest that the pandemic represents an unpredictable and unusual occurrence that generates substantial uncertainty, threatens institutional viability, and challenges the social environment surrounding museums.

While acknowledging the Covid-19 pandemic as a crisis for independent museums is not novel, this research offers innovative insights into the concerns surrounding the long-term viability of the independent museum sector in the post-pandemic era. Firstly, the study highlights the potential disruption caused by the pandemic and other disturbances, such as the cost-of-living crisis, on the labour sustainability of museums and heritage sectors. The widening wealth gap is narrowing the pool of potential volunteers who can afford to work freely for the museums, increasingly making volunteer work exclusive to the middle class who have the time and health to spare. Moreover, the persistent issue of low pay in the museum and heritage sector, compounded by the rising cost of living in the UK, diminishes the sector’s ability to attract early-career professionals. Secondly, the pandemic has spurred demand for online services at museums, escalating the financial pressures on many independent institutions. As public support wanes, museums face the recurring question of who will pay for digital infrastructure. Over time, the gap between “digitally savvy” and “digitally stranded” museums

threatens to widen the sector into haves and have-nots. Thirdly, since the outbreak of the pandemic, the communities that museums rely on have undergone significant changes. For example, the cost-of-living crisis has profoundly impacted the spending habits of many low-to-middle-income families, affecting not only leisure and cultural activities such as museum visits but also the inclusiveness of museums towards diverse demographic groups. In other words, the audiences that museums count on for future support are being forced by economic and environmental forces to rethink their leisure choices.

Viewed together, these trends suggest that museums face a cascade of challenges rather than a single shock. In practice, many independent museums are still adjusting to a reality where staff is poorly paid, digital investment is hard to sustain, and audiences face competing economic and ecological pressures. For scholars and museum professionals, the lesson is clear: museum crisis management must move beyond short-term relief to a genuine rethinking of long-term viability and museum mission. Institutions must ask whether they can survive in a world where crises overlap and reinforce each other. Independent museums and other types of cultural institutions must recognize that a crisis is not a rare anomaly but an ongoing condition in which uncertainty is the new normal. Only through sustained reflection and systemic change can museums move from crisis mode into a resilient, community-anchored future.

9.2.5 The Nature of the Independent Museum Sector- from an ecosystem perspective

This thesis focuses on the independent museum sector in the UK and views it as an ecosystem, where museums, government bodies, professional organisations, and communities interact in complex ways. One of the contributions of this research is to visually demonstrate how the various components of this ecosystem (see Figure 9.2) collaborated during the pandemic.

Imagine museum resilience as the “immunity” for the museums, helping them withstand challenges, adapt to new circumstances, maintain their core mission, and pursue higher goals. However, this resilience alone does not guarantee that all museums can avoid severe consequences. For example, Appendix 6 shows that some independent museums did close permanently when their own reserves or adaptive strategies proved insufficient. To prevent widespread closures across the museum ecosystem, governmental bodies have needed to act as guarantors. In this context, the financial support provided by governmental bodies to struggling museums is comparable to distributing free “vaccines.” As evidenced by the museums that participated in this research (Section 6.2.1), public grants have helped many independent museums avoid permanent closure. These grants played a crucial role in mitigating the pandemic’s financial impact, not only physically reducing closure rates but also restoring confidence throughout the entire museum sector. However, the effectiveness of these “vaccines” is not permanent. As the efficacy of public grants diminishes over time, museums still need their own “immunity” to face the evolving threats within an ever-changing environment. Throughout this process, professional organizations served as “health advocates” within the independent. Museum ecosystem. For the museum sector, these organizations communicate professional insights, provide information

and consulting services, and promote the importance and contributions of museums and the heritage sector to governmental bodies. This advocacy is vital when it comes to allocating public funds to museums and the heritage sector.

Notably, this research emphasizes the potential changes within this ecosystem, particularly regarding the austerity in the cultural sector frequently mentioned in this thesis. Section 7.2.1 analyses the context of the museum resilience concept in the UK's cultural sector. If resilience becomes a buzzword used to justify the withdrawal of public funding, the sector's long-term health may be eroded. As addressed previously, the public funding provided by the government indeed played a significant role in offering emergency support to the UK's independent museum sector during the Covid-19 pandemic; however, this does not guarantee that the UK government will provide a similar safety net for the entire museum sector when the next crisis arises. After all, the UK's government has declared the country is "broke and broken" (James, 2024: no page). Therefore, the focus of this thesis serves as a warning for independent museums in the UK and even for broader cultural institutions: in a situation where the government is tightening its belt, it is unwise to place all hopes on emergency funds. Museums must strengthen their "immune systems" not only to survive the next crisis but to thrive in an environment marked by austerity, digital divides, and shifting community needs. By recognizing these interdependencies, the sector can move from crisis management to genuine ecosystem health, ensuring that independent museums continue to serve their communities for years to come.

9.3 Future Research

Assuredly, as with all research projects, there are some limitations on the timescale and capacity of the conclusions that the research can draw. Consequently, in the following this project offers additional research prospects, allowing for the further development and testing of the insights arising from the study.

9.3.1 What Will Happen Next If a Museum Is Permanently Closed?

From the context of this thesis, it is not difficult to see that although the museum is described by many scholars as a shrine (White, 1997: 1; Shackley, 2001: 359), it is also an institution, indicating that there is a potential risk of bankruptcy. As stated in Chapter 5, museum closure is categorised into two types: soft closure and hard closure. If a museum decides to close permanently (hard closure), what happens to the collections, exhibitions, knowledge, staff, and community after its closure is a question worth studying. It may include several museological concerns, including museum ethics, museum collection management, and museum well-being. Chapter 6 discusses the recycling approach used by the National Emergency Services Museum. The National Emergency Services Museum used some objects of little cultural significance as materials for the museum's interior furnishings. In addition, it acquired exhibit cases from another bankrupt museum at a discounted rate. This situation brings to mind the fact that when a museum ceases operations, its artifacts, knowledge, and even personnel might re-enter the cultural sphere by means such as selling, storing, transferring, or reusing. To further explore the notion of museum closure, the following set of questions were posed: If a museum has permanently closed, what impact will this have on the museum communities? If a closed museum's tangible and

intangible heritage is no longer accessible to the public or is only open to a limited audience (such as collectors who acquire museum artifacts at auctions), what losses does this pose to the museum sector? How about the impact on social services and community roles during this process? If the artifacts, knowledge, and even personnel from these closed museums are reintegrated into other cultural institutions, how will they fit into the narrative of the new context?

Like the ecological narrative in this thesis, the moving of these objects and property after the closure has a striking resemblance to the process of a flower degrading, as it progressively decomposes into chemicals inside the soil, therefore providing nourishment for subsequent creatures. Some things only reveal their true importance once lost. Understanding what will happen in the aftermath of a museum closure is crucial. The critical awareness of permanence and loss can contribute to a heightened understanding of the importance of effective management. More significantly, it can communicate the significance of a museum's existence to its stakeholders. Although I tried to contact the original owner of the display cabinet at the National Emergency Services Museum, this proved impossible since it is difficult to contact the personnel of museums that are no longer in operation, but a study targeting museums at risk before they reach the state of permanent closure would be able to circumvent this difficulty. I look forward to future opportunities to further explore the process of museum "degradation" and the losses and ethical challenges behind this process.

9.3.2 From a Policy-making Perspective, What is the Link Between Encouragement of Resilience Theories and Current Socioeconomic Transformation?

During times of complex societal transformations, the government and professional organisations will initiate the promotion of new ideologies or campaigns. To better explain this issue, this section will provide examples from the USA and China. For instance, the United States initiated the “Rosie the Riveter” campaign in World War II with the aim of motivating women to participate in industry assembly lines (Cokely, 2023). Similarly, in the aftermath of the 1970s, China implemented a strategy that advocated for women to prioritise familial responsibilities as a means to address job challenges (Fan, 2011). Contemporary researchers have deconstructed these approaches and critically analysed the debates on the social division of work for women as a soft initiative that subtly encourages women to peacefully accept the fact that resources are allocated to other groups (Lv, 2014).

The above examples alerted me to the question of whether the widespread mention of resilience theories in the cultural field might also be a soft initiative, aiming to make the current climate of financial austerity appear more palatable and prompt the cultural institutions to be more accepting of the financial cuts in the cultural field. Resilience theory in the context of policymaking typically emphasizes the ability of a system or sector to withstand shocks, adapt to change, and recover quickly from setbacks. While resilience is often considered a positive quality, when policymakers aim to enhance resilience more broadly, they may prioritize allocating resources to areas deemed critical to social stability, economic growth, or national security. On the contrary, the cultural sector will face financial cuts. The above examples alerted me to reflect critically on the issue of whether the

widespread mention of resilience theories in the cultural field might serve as a subtle strategy, which may be designed to promote a more positive tone to financial cutbacks and encourage cultural institutions to more readily accept reductions in funding within the cultural field. The question is important to ask - however, this study cannot assert that policymakers are using resilience theory to achieve a soft landing of austerity in the cultural field because it requires more dimensions of evidence to support such a claim. A potential path to answer this question may be to investigate whether there are similar patterns in the development path of resilience theory and the up-and-downs of economic progress.

9.3.3 How to Evaluate and Display Cultural Value in an Objective Way?

Chapter 7 indicated that a museum's resilience in terms of consistency capacity not only includes understanding its own mission and significance but also demonstrating the cultural value of the museum to stakeholders. This capacity to comprehend and exhibit cultural value has significance within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic since the public grants (e.g. the Cultural Recovery Fund) took it into account in the process of distributing financial support. Nonetheless, it is difficult to measure the cultural value of a museum or heritage site because the benefits of cultural value need long-term observation, and it is difficult to have an immediate effect. Even the DCMS acknowledges in the Cultural Recovery Fund Evaluation Report (DCMS, 2022: 97) that:

In contrast to the objectivity of the financial criteria, stakeholders felt that the cultural significance test was more subjective – an element of subjectivity being inevitable for the

assessment of a qualitative criterion. ALBs were the sole judge of this, based on their sector knowledge and expertise, certainly for the smaller grants. Even for the large awards that went through the Culture Recovery Board, internal stakeholders from the Board reported that they were very reliant on the recommendations made by the subject-matter expert ALBs regarding cultural significance.

Given the lack of a broadly accepted method for objectively determining cultural value, ALB and DCMS have declared a preference for using quantifiable financial criteria to lessen the uncertainties associated with assessing cultural value and making financing decisions (*ibid.*). Indeed, this method is as equitable and transparent as can be achieved under the current circumstances. If future research can devise a model capable of objectively evaluating cultural value, museums that do not fulfil the financial benchmarks but possess significant cultural value as discussed in Chapter 6 will be eligible for financing.

9.3.4 What Trends Can Be Discerned from the Allocation of Public Grants by Governmental Bodies? How Might this Trend Impact the Practices of Museums in the UK in Return?

In the process of data collection, I serendipitously noticed that many participants in the in-depth interviews have their own perceptions regarding the allocation trends of public grants. Their viewpoints had been summarized into two categories. Firstly, some CEOs or directors of the museums believe that the government tends to allocate funds to museums that contribute to promoting the national brand of the United Kingdom. In addition, some other respondents hold the view that

museums that can provide diverse societal welfare functions are more likely to receive government investment. Because this thesis is focused exclusively on the independent museum sector, it is not enough to conclusively affirm the presence of such a trend in the allocation of public funds.

However, these two perspectives have sparked my curiosity since they seem to have some validity. A museum, dedicated to showcasing the cultural and political history of a country, functions as a “symbol of national cohesion... the living profile of a people’s history and culture” (Aithnard, 1976: 193-194) by compactly encapsulating the nation’s history within a confined space. From the point of funding bodies, experiencing museums with national heritage is of great importance in “educating and forming the young” (Assogba, 1976: 218). This is evident in the allocation principles of some public grants in the museum sector (such as the Museum Estate and Development Fund and the National Heritage Memorial Fund). Taking the Museum Estate and Development Fund as an example, the aim of this fund is to “make sure everyone, no matter where they live, can access the UK’s world-renowned culture” (DCMS, 2023: no page), which highlights the idea of democratizing access to cultural resources, ensuring that the benefits of the UK’s renowned culture are available and enjoyed by individuals irrespective of their geographic location or socio-economic background. To investigate the initial hypothesis mentioned at the outset of this section, I conducted a tentative analysis by amalgamating funding allocation reports from government agencies and the fundamental museum information from the Mapping Museum Database (Mapping Museums Lab, no date). Taking the Second Round Museum Estate and Development Fund (DCMS, 2023) as an illustrative example, the funded museums are located across the UK and a large number of successful museum applicants (see Figure 9.4) exhibit

subjects related to the UK's industrial heritage, country houses, maritime history and arts. Therefore, the initial perceptions suggesting the tendentiousness in national symbolism and museums' social functions appear to be substantiated. However, objectively, to examine this as a trend, it is imperative to conduct a comprehensive analysis of a greater number of samples over a specific timeframe. Subsequent research may endeavour to amass additional data, delve deeper into the contextual intricacies of these data, and compare findings with pertinent literature and studies. Such a comprehensive study will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the trends in museum fund allocation.

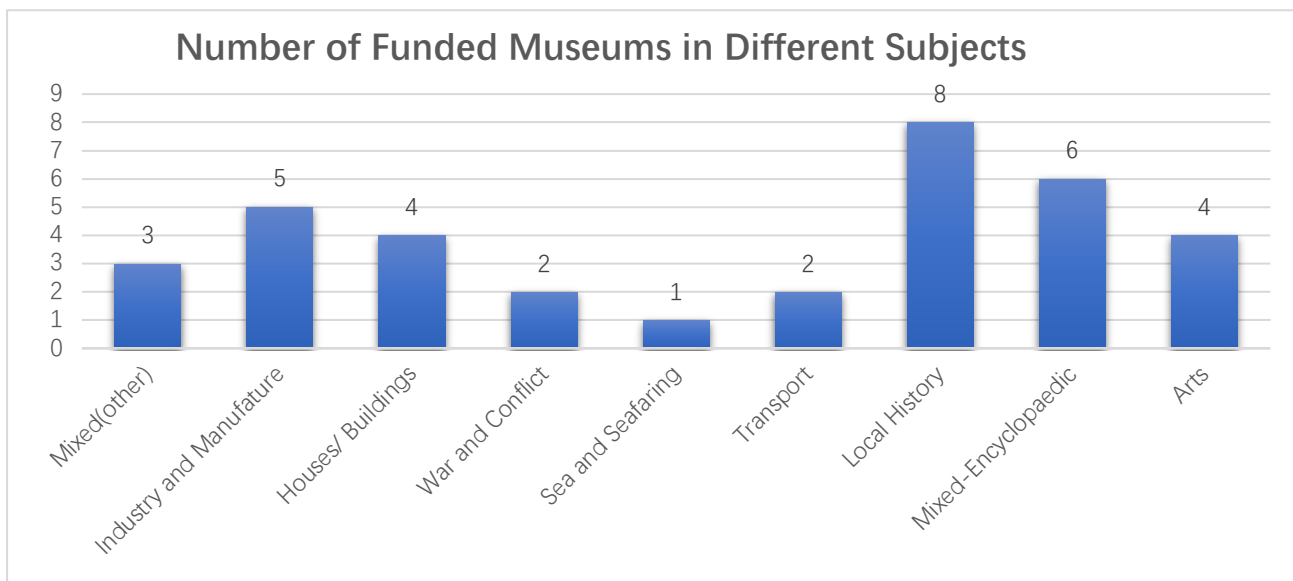


Figure 9.4 The Number of Funded Museums in each subject

The significance of researching the trend in the allocation of public grants in the museum sector has always existed but has become even more noticeable in today's complex socio-economic environment. As outlined in Chapter 6, the emergency funds provided by the government bodies have played a

pivotal role in alleviating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on museums in the UK, which accelerated the trend towards searching for the help of public grants across the sector.

Therefore, it is necessary to critically analyse the impact of the allocation trend of funds on the practices of museums in the United Kingdom. Currently, many public grants are only open to accredited museums (such as funds led by ACE). This places unaccredited museums, which constitute a significant number of the country's independent museums, at a natural disadvantage when applying for public grants. Therefore, unlike Hasse(1985: 50) illustrated, it may be the funding agencies, rather than the museums, that need to “come out of their ivory towers” and adopt a less conservative approach in evaluating the value of museums. Unaccredited museums often concentrate on subjects outside typical academic norms, such as rural industry, transportation, religion, and minority identity (Candlin *et al.*, 2019). Museums that closely reflect the daily lives of ordinary citizens, showcasing subjects such as food, sports, services, and entertainment, often find themselves in an unrecognized and squeezed grey area. Collecting, as human behaviour that has persisted since ancient times, continues in museums today. As Fanizzo (2020: 1) notes, “what is collected is what is deemed desirable, and what seems desirable is telling of the views and beliefs of a society and its time”. The selective strategy for government grants is crucial, as it should encourage more diversified and inclusive museum practices across the United Kingdom. While emphasizing grand national narratives, there should also be room for museums that tell the memories of ordinary people.

9.4 Final Reflections

From a humanities perspective, this thesis's discussion of crisis and resilience shows that when crisis strikes, cultural institutions do not simply retreat; instead, their shared passion and collective memory often forge new strength. Exploring the Covid-19 pandemic and other societal crises reminds us that resilience is not just about returning to normal operations, but about using reflection and innovation to reshape institutions, protect vulnerable groups, and find new paths forward in times of upheaval. At the same time, from an ethical viewpoint, humanities research aims at helping society to more keenly recognize injustices in resource allocation and imbalances in who gets to speak. This awareness can push public policy toward greater transparency, inclusivity, and a more human-centered approach.

In short, studying crisis and resilience is not only about "how we survive," but also about "how we move forward together in a fairer, more compassionate way." By comparing experiences across eras and cultures, such research offers enduring ideas that help society retain its creativity and empathy even amid turbulence.

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Appendix 1: Research Participant Information Sheet



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IRONBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL
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HERITAGE

Museum Resilience: Exploring the Impact of Covid-19 on Independent Museums in the UK

PhD project by Lingjun Li

Participant Information Sheet

Thank you for considering participating in this study. This participant information sheet outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant. If you are happy to take part in this study after reading this information sheet, please sign the consent form in advance of the participation.

1. What is the research about?

The unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic has had a direct or indirect impact on most museums and heritage sites, threatening their income resources, staffing, and security during the lockdown, as well as posing a range of challenges for the conditions under which they could reopen for physical access to their users. This doctoral research project is focused on exploring the impact of Covid-19 on

independent museums in the UK in light of the concept of museum resilience. By investigating the conceptual and practical application of resilience in the independent museum field, this research aims at providing empirical evidence and new thinking for those cultural organizations in the future.

2. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You do not have to take part if you do not want to.

3. What will my involvement be?

You will be asked to take part in an interview/survey about your experience or knowledge of independent museums.

The survey should take approximately 20 minutes. The interview should take approximately 60-90 minutes.

4. How do I withdraw from the study?

You can withdraw from the study at any point within 30 days after the participation in the survey or the interviews without having to give a reason. If any questions during the interview make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them. Withdrawing from the study will have no adverse consequences for you. If you withdraw from the study, the data you provided will be deleted. There is no difference in the withdrawal procedures between the survey and interviews. If an organization wants

to withdraw, an official notification from the managing director within 30 days after the participation is needed, and then data of the whole organization will be deleted.

5. What will my information be used for?

The researcher will use the collected information for academic research and dissemination.

6. Will my taking part and my data be kept confidential? Will it be anonymised?

Access to the research data will be limited to and strictly controlled by the researcher in order to maintain confidentiality. Unless you specifically ask to be cited by name, you will be anonymised in the research outputs, so that the data cannot be attributed to the participants. In the final output, care will be taken to obscure the identification of those participants who have requested anonymity, and any references to statements which the informants have flagged as sensitive will be made in terms that are sufficiently general so as not to identify the research participant.

7. Will I receive any feedback?

After the completion of this research, free online access to the dissertation will be provided via the website of The Association of Independent Museums for everyone interested in this research. You can also ask for a PDF copy directly from the researcher via email if you are interested.

8. Research Data Management Policy Notice

The University of Birmingham's Research Data Management Policy can be found at:

<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/library/research/rdm/Policies/Research-Data-Management-Policy.aspx>

9. What if I have a question or complaint?

If you have any questions regarding this study please contact the researcher, Lingjun Li, via

[REDACTED].

If you have any concerns or questions regarding the researcher, please contact the main supervisor, Dr.

Helle Jorgensen via [REDACTED].

Appendix 2: Outline of Interview Questions

General type of interview Participants	Informant's specific position	Questions to address research question one	Questions to address research question two
<p>Independent Museum Staff</p>	<p>Director/ Head of the museum</p>	<p>Background</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How long have you been in this position? 2. How many employees are there in your museum? <p>Regarding the institutional impact</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. How would you say that your work and responsibilities have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic? <p>When did you begin to respond to the impacts of the pandemic, and what did you do? (If the answer for question 3 does not include the online museum services for the public and the remote working solutions for the staff, the interviewer will ask the interviewee to elaborate on their role)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. How did you make decisions about what to do? 5. Were there any particular pre-existing strategies, resources or stakeholders, within or outside of your museum, that you drew on in determining your response to the pandemic? How useful and adequate do you feel that these were? Were there any particular sources of support 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are you familiar with the concept of museum resilience? If yes, from where do you know it? (If no, the researcher will briefly introduce this notion) 2. If yes: How do you define a resilient museum? 3. Is the concept of museum resilience one that you apply actively in your own work? If so, how? If not, are there other terms or practices that you use in your work to refer to something similar? 4. Do you think the museum where you work is a resilient museum? Why? Are there particular areas of the museum's work where you feel that your resilience is strong, or has to be further developed? 5. If you think your museum is resilient, how does this make itself apparent during this pandemic? 6. Do you think the digital museum services and remote working methods have contributed to the museum resilience during the pandemic?

		<p>and insight that you were missing?</p> <p>6. To what extent do you feel that your museum has maintained effective governance and normal functions during the closure and reopening of the museum caused by the pandemic?</p> <p>7. What have you learned from the way the museum has been operating during the pandemic?</p> <p>8. Have you appealed to the museum staff for rethinking and summarizing any experiences and ideas that could feed into the museum's future work?</p> <p>9. Do you think that the pandemic will change the museum's approach to management of crisis in the future? If yes, then how?</p> <p>10. Have you registered the number of staff who get Covid-19 infected? If yes, how many have been impacted? What were the consequences for the museum? What is the procedure when a member of staff gets infected?</p> <p>Regarding the financial impact</p> <p>11. What has been the financial impact of the coronavirus pandemic on your museum?</p> <p>12. What has the impact of the pandemic been on your sources of funding, other than direct income from visitors (e.g. funding bodies)?</p>	<p>7. Do you think that the concept of museum resilience is important, for your own institution and for the museum sector in the UK at large? If yes, how do you feel that it has been applied in professional practice, especially when responding to the pandemic?</p> <p>8. What sort of limitations and potentials do you think that the independent museums in the UK experience now in terms of developing their resilience?</p> <p>9. If you compare your position as an independent museum with the wider museum sector in the UK, then what do you think are the key similarities and differences in terms of how you are positioned in responding to the pandemic in a way that retains your resilience?</p> <p>10. Are there any developments that you think could help further the resilience of independent museums in context of the pandemic or other future crises which the sector may experience?</p>
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		<p>13. How do you deal with these issues?</p> <p>14. How do you think that your situation in terms of financial impacts compares to other independent museums in the UK?</p> <p>15. How do you think that the situation of independent museums compares to the museum sector in the UK at large?</p> <p>Regarding the Emotional impact</p> <p>16. Clearly the pandemic is an unprecedented experience: How have you felt as you responded to the pandemic?</p> <p>17. What have been the prevailing emotional responses to the impacts of the pandemic among you and your colleagues at the museum? What, for instance, were the key concerns and worries for staff within the museum? Have different groups within the museum been impacted differently?</p> <p>18. Have you done anything to respond to the emotional impacts of the pandemic within the museum? If yes, what, and how did it work?</p> <p>19. Do you feel that there are unaddressed concerns that remain? If so, how do you think that they could be dealt with?</p> <p>Interaction</p> <p>20. Do you have any questions for me?</p>	
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		<p>21. Are there any of your colleagues at the museum that you would recommend that I also interview to gain a wider range of perspectives on handling the pandemic in the museum?</p> <p>22. Are there any relevant internal museum documents that you would be willing to provide access to for my analysis?</p>	
	<p>Senior staff (including departmental manager, curator and chief curator)</p>	<p>Background</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How long have you been in this position? <p>Regarding the institutional impact</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. How would you say that your work and responsibilities have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic? 3. When did you begin to respond to the impacts of the pandemic, and what did you do? 4. To what extent do you feel that your museum has maintained effective governance and normal functions during the closure and reopening of the museum caused by the pandemic? 5. What have you learned from the way the museum has been operating during the pandemic? 6. Have you appealed to your department members for rethinking and summarizing any experiences and ideas that could benefit the museum's fighting against pandemic? 	

		<p>7. Do you think that the pandemic will change the museum's approach to management of crisis in the future? If yes, then how?</p> <p>Regarding the financial impact</p> <p>8. Has your department been financially impacted by the pandemic? How?</p> <p>9. Have different departments or groups within the museum been impacted differently in finance? If yes, then how and why?</p> <p>10. How do you deal with these issues?</p> <p>Regarding the Emotional impact</p> <p>11. Clearly the pandemic is an unprecedented experience: How have you felt as you responded to the pandemic?</p> <p>12. How do you evaluate the performance of your department or group during the pandemic?</p> <p>13. What have been the prevailing emotional responses to the impacts of the pandemic among you and your department or group members? What, for instance, were the key concerns and worries within your department or group?</p> <p>14. Have you done anything to respond to the emotional impacts of the pandemic within your department or group? If yes, what, and how did it work?</p>	
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		<p>15. Do you feel that there are unaddressed concerns that remain? If so, how do you think that they could be dealt with?</p> <p>Interaction</p> <p>16. Do you have any questions for me?</p> <p>17. Are there any of your colleagues at the museum that you would recommend that I also interview to gain a wider range of perspectives on handling the pandemic in the museum?</p> <p>18. Are there any relevant internal museum documents that you would be willing to provide access to for my analysis?</p>	
	<p>Ordinary Staff (Including department coordinator, curatorial assistant, marketing officer, operations coordinator, and retail sales)</p>	<p>Background</p> <p>1. How long have you been in this position?</p> <p>Regarding the institutional impact</p> <p>2. How would you say that your work and responsibilities have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic?</p> <p>3. When did you begin to respond to the impacts of the pandemic, and what did you do?</p> <p>4. To what extent do you feel that your museum has maintained effective governance and normal functions during the closure and reopening of the museum caused by the pandemic?</p> <p>5. What have you learned from the way the museum has been</p>	

		<p>operating during the pandemic?</p> <p>6. How do you evaluate the performance of your museum during the pandemic?</p> <p>7. Do you think that the pandemic will change the museum's approach to management of crisis in the future? If yes, then how?</p> <p>Regarding the financial impact</p> <p>8. Have you been financially impacted by the pandemic? If yes, how? Did you receive any help to mitigate this, and if so, from where?</p> <p>9. Do you know the financial situation of the museum during the pandemic? If yes, what are your sources of information and what do you think about the situation?</p> <p>Regarding the Emotional impact</p> <p>10. Clearly the pandemic is an unprecedented experience: How have you felt as you responded to the pandemic? Have you been worried about yourself (e.g. profession, salary and safety)?</p> <p>11. Do you think the personal protection measures for staff are enough?</p> <p>12. What have been the prevailing emotional responses to the impacts of the pandemic among you and your department or group members? What, for instance, were the key concerns and</p>	
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		<p>worries within your department or group?</p> <p>13. Have you done anything to respond to the emotional impacts of the pandemic within your department or group? If yes, what, and how did it work?</p> <p>14. Do you feel that there are unaddressed concerns that remain? If so, how do you think that they could be dealt with?</p> <p>Interaction</p> <p>15. Do you have any questions for me?</p> <p>16. Are there any of your colleagues at the museum that you would recommend that I also interview to gain a wider range of perspectives on handling the pandemic in the museum?</p>	
<p>AIM Team Staff</p>	<p>There are only five positions in the AIM team.</p>	<p>Background</p> <p>1. How long have you been in this position? Can you describe your work?</p> <p>Regarding the institutional impact</p> <p>2. How would you say that the work of AIM has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic?</p> <p>3. When did AIM begin to respond to the impacts of the pandemic, and what did you do?</p> <p>4. How did you make decisions about what to do?</p> <p>5. Were there any particular pre-existing strategies, resources or stakeholders, within or</p>	<p>1. Are you familiar with the concept of museum resilience? If yes, from where do you know it? (If no, the researcher will briefly introduce this notion)</p> <p>2. If yes: How do you define a resilient museum?</p> <p>3. Is the concept of museum resilience one that you apply actively in your own work? If so, how? If not, are there other terms or practices that you use in your work to refer to something similar?</p> <p>4. Based on your working experience within the independent museum field, do you think the notion of</p>

		<p>outside of AIM, that you drew on in determining your response to the pandemic? How useful and adequate do you feel that these were? Were there any particular sources of support and insight that you were missing?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. To what extent do you feel that AIM has maintained effective and normal functions during the pandemic? 7. How does AIM help its members organize training programmes and guidance services on institutional management strategies? What is the effect? 8. How well do you think that the independent museum sector has managed the impacts of the pandemic? 9. What do you think that the chief impacts of the pandemic on independent museums in the UK have been? 10. What difference do you feel that AIM has been able to make in supporting independent museums during the pandemic? 11. Which other stakeholders and initiatives have been important in enabling independent museums to respond to the pandemic, and how? 12. What have been the key challenges for AIM and for the independent museums in responding to the pandemic? 	<p>resilience is important to the independent museums? Why? How?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Are there particular areas of the work in independent museums in the UK where you feel that their resilience is strong, or need to be further developed? How does this make itself apparent during this pandemic? 6. Do you think that the concept of museum resilience is important for the museum sector in the UK at large? If yes, how do you feel that it has been applied in professional practice, especially when responding to the pandemic? 7. What sort of limitations and potentials do you think that the independent museums in the UK experience now in terms of developing their resilience? 8. If you compare the position of independent museums with the wider museum sector in the UK, then what do you think are the key similarities and differences in terms of how they are positioned in responding to the pandemic in a way that retains their resilience? Are there any developments that you think could help further the resilience of independent museums in context of the pandemic or other future
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		<p>13. Has AIM worked to systematise the impacts and insights arising from the pandemic in the independent museum sector? How? What did you learn? Where do you feel that more research and development is needed?</p> <p>Regarding the financial impact</p> <p>14. How many museums chose to join or leave AIM since the Covid-19 has impacted the sector? For what reasons?</p> <p>15. How does AIM help its members deal with the financial impact of the pandemic? What is the effect?</p> <p>16. Has the cooperation with freelance museum experts or other third-party consultants been impacted by pandemic? If yes, how?</p> <p>17. How do you think that the financial situation of independent museums compares to the museum sector in the UK at large in the wake of the pandemic?</p> <p>Interaction</p> <p>18. Do you have any questions for me?</p> <p>19. Are there any of your colleagues that you would recommend that I also interview to gain a wider range of perspectives on handling the pandemic in the museum?</p> <p>20. Are there any relevant internal museum documents that you would be willing to provide access to for my analysis?</p>	<p>crises which the sector may experience?</p>
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<p>Other participants</p>	<p>Freelance museum experts and third-party consultants</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How long have you been in this position? Can you describe your work? 2. How do you cooperate and build your connections with independent museums? 3. Did this pandemic influence your work? If yes, how? What have been your chief concerns? 4. From your point, how do you consider the differences between independent museums and other types of museums in terms of how they have been impacted by and responded to the pandemic? 5. Do you have any questions for me? 6. Are there any of your peer experts that you would recommend that I also interview to gain a wider range of perspectives on handling the pandemic in the museum? 7. Are there any relevant documents that you would be willing to provide access to for my analysis? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are you familiar with the concept of museum resilience? If yes, from where do you know it? (If no, the researcher will briefly introduce this notion) 2. If yes: How do you define a resilient museum? 3. Is the concept of museum resilience one that you apply actively in your own work? If so, how? If not, are there other terms or practices that you use in your work to refer to something similar? 4. Based on your working experience within the museum field, do you think the notion of resilience is important to the independent museums? Why? How? 5. Are there particular areas of the work in independent museums in the UK where you feel that their resilience is strong, or need to be further developed? How does this make itself apparent during this pandemic? 6. Do you think that the concept of museum resilience is important for the museum sector in the UK at large? If yes, how do you feel that it has been applied in professional practice, especially when responding to the pandemic? 7. What sort of limitations and potentials do you think that the independent museums in the UK experience now in
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			<p>terms of developing their resilience?</p> <p>8. If you compare the position of independent museums with the wider museum sector in the UK, then what do you think are the key similarities and differences in terms of how they are positioned in responding to the pandemic in a way that retains their resilience? Are there any developments that you think could help further the resilience of independent museums in context of the pandemic or other future crises which the sector may experience?</p>
	<p>Volunteers</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you describe your volunteer work at the museum? How long have you been in this museum as volunteer? 2. Did this pandemic influence your volunteer work? If yes, how? 3. What have been your chief concerns as a volunteer during the pandemic? 4. How well do you feel that the museum has responded to the pandemic? 5. Do you have any suggestions on how the museum could have responded better to the pandemic? 6. Will you continue your volunteer work? If no, why? 7. If you were not already volunteering for the museum, do you think you 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are you familiar with the concept of museum resilience? If yes, from where do you know it? (If no, the researcher will briefly introduce this notion) 2. If yes: How do you define a resilient museum? 3. From your point, do you think this museum is resilient? 4. How do you think the museum could enhance its resilience? 5. Do you think volunteers contribute to the museum resilience? How?

Appendices

		<p>would have considered to do so in the current circumstances, with a still ongoing pandemic? Why/not?</p> <p>8. Do you think that the museum needs to do more to attract volunteers due to the continued impact of the pandemic? Why/not, and what might it do?</p> <p>9. Do you have any questions for me?</p> <p>6. Are there any of your peers that you would recommend that I also interview to gain a wider range of perspectives on handling the pandemic in the museum?</p>	
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Appendix 3: Research Survey



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A Survey of The Impact of Covid-19 on Independent Museums In the UK

My name is Lingjun Li. I am a research student from the University of Birmingham, and I am conducting this survey for my doctoral research program. My research aims at exploring the financial, institutional, and emotional impact of Covid 19 on independent museums in the UK and contributing to help building their organizational resilience. As part of my research, this survey is trying to investigate how independent museums experienced and responded to the impact of the pandemic. To get a sector-wide overview, I would be grateful if you could take part in this survey and share it with your peer organizations.

Note:

1. This survey is designed for independent museums within the United Kingdom. If your organization operates outside of the United Kingdom or does not belong to the independent museum sector, this survey does not apply to you. If you are not clear whether your organization is an independent museum, you can check it on <https://www.museumsassociation.org/about/faqs/>.
2. All your personal information will be obscured in the research output. You can also request to completely anonymize the name of your institution by stating your wish in the free text responses.
3. You have the right to withdraw your replies to this survey within 30 days after the participation with no consequences. Any information provided will be delated if you wish to withdraw within the deadline.
4. After the completion of this research, the access to the results of this research will be provided via AIM's website.
5. Should you require additional information, please contact me on [REDACTED]

By ticking this box, I confirm that I have read, understand, and agree to the terms and conditions in the participant information sheet for enrollment in this survey.

Part one: background questions

1. What is the name of your organisation?

2. Where does your organization locate?

- England
- Wales
- Scotland
- Northern Ireland

3. What best describes your role in the organization?

- CEO/Director/ Head
- Collection Management
- Conservation
- Education
- Research
- Curation
- Administration
- Finance
- Fundraising
- Retail and Service
- Safety
- Other

4. What is the size of your museum?

- Small museum (annual budget less than £30,000 per year)
- Medium museum (annual budget £30,000-£250,000 per year)
- Large museum (annual budget more than £250,000)

5. What is the main funding body of the museum where you work?

Part two

Please indicate how well the following statements apply to you and the museum where you work

6. You know and understand the mission of the museum where you work.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not known
- Agree
- Strongly agree

7. People across all levels of the museum have been involved in developing the museum mission and values.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree

- Not known
- Agree
- Strongly agree

8. The museum where you work has integrated emergency plans for potential crisis.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not known
- Agree
- Strongly agree

9. The decision-making team in my museum activated the emergency plan or organized a well-planned responding proposal when the Covid-19 pandemic emerged as a crisis to the museum sector.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not known
- Agree
- Strongly agree

10. The museum where you work has maintained effective governance and normal functions during the closure and reopening of the museum caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not known
- Agree
- Strongly agree

11. During the museum closure cause by the Covid-19 pandemic, you were worried about the future of the museum where you worked.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not known
- Agree
- Strongly agree

12. Due to the pandemic, you were worried about your own future (e.g. reducing salary, losing job or being infected at work).

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not known
- Agree

Strongly disagree

13. During the pandemic, you have received encouragement from other colleagues in your museum.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Not known

Agree

Strongly agree

14. Encouragement by other colleagues have contributed to a positive working environment.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Not known

Agree

Strongly agree

15. The communication within the museum where you work is easy and straightforward.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Not known

Agree

Strongly agree

16. All colleagues in your museum are able to express their own concerns and be involved in decision-making process.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Not known

Agree

Strongly agree

17. You are satisfied about the performance of your museum's decision-making team in responding to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Not known

Agree

Strongly agree

18. You are satisfied about the cooperation between departments or groups in the museum.

Strongly disagree

- Disagree
- Not known
- Agree
- Strongly agree

19. The museum where you work has rethought and summarized the success and failure of its work and strategies during the pandemic.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not known
- Agree
- Strongly agree

20. The museum where you work has received useful support for managing the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic from external stakeholders (e.g. government, funding bodies or interest organizations).

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not known
- Agree
- Strongly agree

21. The museum where you work holds a positive attitude towards building external networks.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not known
- Agree
- Strongly agree

22. The museum where you work is willing to accept new ideas or concepts.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not known
- Agree
- Strongly agree

23. The museum where you work has regular learning tasks regarding the museum profession or administration skills via workshops, readings, or lessons.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Not known
- Agree

Strongly agree

24. Museum resilience could be seen as the ability of museums to recover from the crises and adapt to the changing circumstances. In light of your experiences with the pandemic, do you consider the museum where you work to be resilient?

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Not known

Agree

Strongly agree

Part three

25. What have you experienced as the greatest worries and challenges to work in your museum during the Covid-19 pandemic?

26. What has been the most helpful factors and strategies in mitigating the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on work in your museum?

27. Do you think that the pandemic has changed your museum's approach to managing crisis? If so, then how, and why?

28. What, if anything, do you think would help develop the resilience of the museum where you work?

29. This research is also recruiting 10-20 case studies to investigate the impact of Covid-19 on independent museums and their responses through in-depth study which includes interviews with staff and review of museum policies and communication to the public about its response to the pandemic. If you are interested to take part in this, please leave your email address.

Appendix 4: Introduction to the Case Study Museums (Alphabetically Ordered by Name; Information Collated from Museum Official Website and Museum Introduction Leaflets)

1. Benjamin Franklin House

The Benjamin Franklin Museum, located at 36 Carven Street, London, is the only surviving residence of Benjamin Franklin in the world. This Georgian-style townhouse, built around 1730, was Franklin's home and workplace for nearly sixteen years and served as the first de facto American embassy. Today, the Benjamin Franklin House combines live performances, immersive audio, and projections to narrate Franklin's life in this historic building. Additionally, the museum offers a background in anatomical medical history on its lower level, providing educational resources on human science and free science experiment courses for young students.

2. Black Country Living Museum

The Black Country Living Museum, located in Dudley, England, is an open-air museum dedicated to preserving and showcasing the rich industrial heritage of the Black Country region. Established in 1978, the museum spans over 26 acres and features a collection of historical buildings, including houses, shops, and industrial facilities, all meticulously relocated to create an authentic representation of the area as it was during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Visitors to the museum can explore historic streets, interact with costumed staff, and experience traditional trades and crafts such as coal mining, metalworking, and pottery. The museum also offers immersive demonstrations and educational programs, making it a vibrant resource for learning about the region's industrial past. With its focus on preserving the local culture and heritage, the Black Country Living Museum provides a

unique opportunity to step back in time and gain insight into the lives of those who shaped this important industrial region.

3. Blitz Museum

The Blitz Museum, located in Coventry, UK, is dedicated to preserving and recounting the profound impact of the Blitz on the city during World War II. Established to honour the memory of those who endured the air raids, the museum provides a comprehensive exploration of Coventry's wartime experience. One of the museum's most poignant features is its focus on the Coventry Cathedral ruins a powerful symbol of the city's resilience. The museum showcases the history and significance of the bombings that devastated the original cathedral in November 1940. The ruins of Coventry Cathedral, left as a war memorial, serve as a stark reminder of the destruction and subsequent rebuilding efforts. The museum includes detailed exhibits about the events of that night, the damage inflicted on the cathedral, and the city's recovery and reconstruction.

Visitors can explore a range of exhibits that feature authentic wartime artifacts, personal stories from survivors, and immersive displays that vividly depict the challenges faced during the raids. Through these exhibits and the inclusion of the cathedral ruins, the museum provides a deeply moving account of both the destruction and the remarkable resilience of Coventry's residents.

4. Borth Station Museum

Borth Station Museum, located in Borth, Wales, is dedicated to preserving the rich history of the local railway and its impact on the community. Situated in a charmingly restored railway station building, the museum offers an immersive journey into the world of rail transport, showcasing the evolution of the railways in this picturesque region. Visitors to the Borth Station Museum can explore an extensive collection of railway memorabilia, including historic locomotives, vintage railway uniforms, and period photographs. The museum's exhibits highlight the crucial role the railway played in connecting Borth to other parts of Wales and beyond, contributing significantly to the town's development and heritage. One of the museum's key features is its recreation of a traditional railway station environment, complete with authentic signage and furnishings from the early 20th century. This setting allows visitors to experience the atmosphere of a bygone era when the station was a bustling hub of activity.

5. Cartoon Museum

The Cartoon Museum, located in London, UK, is a vibrant celebration of the art and history of cartooning and comics. Established to highlight the cultural significance and creativity of cartoon art, the museum offers an engaging exploration of this unique medium. Visitors to the Cartoon Museum can enjoy an extensive collection of original cartoons, comic strips, and graphic novels from both historical and contemporary artists. The Cartoon Museum also hosts educational programs and events designed to inspire and engage audiences of all ages. Through its dynamic exhibits and hands-on activities, the museum fosters an appreciation for the art of cartooning and its role in reflecting and shaping societal trends.

6. Englesea Brook Chapel Museum

The Englesea Brook Chapel Museum, located in Englesea Brook, Somerset, is a historic site dedicated to preserving the heritage and significance of the local chapel and its community. Established within the charming 19th-century chapel building, the museum offers an intimate look into the religious and social history of the area. Englesea Brook Chapel Museum offers exhibits related to the chapel's history, including religious texts, period photographs, and memorabilia from the chapel's role in local life. The museum's exhibits highlight the development of the chapel, its influence on the community, and the broader context of the religious movements in Somerset during the 19th and early 20th centuries. It opens from early April to late October every year and offers free entrance.

7. Florence Nightingale Museum

The Florence Nightingale Museum, located in London, UK, is dedicated to celebrating the life and legacy of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing. Situated on the grounds of St Thomas' Hospital, where Nightingale began her pioneering work, the museum offers an in-depth exploration of her remarkable contributions to healthcare and her enduring impact on the nursing profession. In response to the global pandemic, the museum has introduced an exhibition highlighting the parallels between the challenges faced by Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War and those encountered by healthcare workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. This exhibition explores the evolution of nursing practices and the continued relevance of Nightingale's principles in addressing modern healthcare crises.

8. Ironbridge Gorge Museum

The Ironbridge Gorge Museum, located in Ironbridge, Shropshire, UK, is a sprawling and comprehensive complex dedicated to celebrating the region's industrial heritage. Spanning over 1,000 acres, this museum is one of the largest open-air museum complexes in the UK. It encompasses ten distinct sites, each representing a significant aspect of the Industrial Revolution. Among its attractions are Blists Hill Victorian Town, a meticulously recreated Victorian town with period shops and living history demonstrations, and the Coalport China Museum, which showcases the area's rich ceramic production history. The complex also includes the Jackfield Tile Museum, with its extensive collection of decorative tiles, and the iconic Iron Bridge and Tollhouse, offering insights into the engineering marvel that symbolized the era's technological advancements.

The museum's vast grounds allow for an immersive visitor experience, with interactive exhibits and educational facilities spread across its sites. These features include hands-on workshops and live demonstrations that bring the industrial processes of the past to life. The large scale of the museum also enables it to host numerous events and special programs throughout the year, accommodating large numbers of visitors and providing a rich, engaging exploration of the region's industrial history.

9. Jack the Ripper Museum

The Jack the Ripper Museum, located in London, UK, provides an immersive exploration of one of history's most infamous unsolved mysteries. Situated in the heart of Whitechapel, where the infamous crimes took place in the late 19th century, the museum delves into the chilling story of Jack the Ripper,

a serial killer who terrorized the area in 1888. One of the key elements of the museum is its focus on the social and historical conditions of Victorian London, which offers insights into the environment in which these crimes occurred. The museum examines the impact of the murders on the local community and the broader implications for policing and criminal investigations of the time.

10. National Emergency Service Museum

The National Emergency Services Museum, located in Sheffield, UK, is dedicated to preserving and showcasing the history of emergency services in the UK. Situated in a historic former fire station, the museum offers an extensive collection of exhibits related to police, fire, ambulance, and other emergency services, providing visitors with an insightful look into the development and operation of these crucial services. Its artifacts span multiple categories, each reflecting the evolution and significance of emergency response throughout the years. The museum's collection includes a range of vintage emergency vehicles, such as fire engines, police cars, and ambulances, meticulously restored to showcase their historical importance. In addition to these vehicles, the museum houses an array of historical uniforms, equipment, and operational tools used by various emergency services.

11. Royal Air Force Museum Midlands

The Royal Air Force Museum Midlands, located in Cosford, Shropshire, UK, is a prominent institution dedicated to preserving and showcasing the history and heritage of the Royal Air Force (RAF). As one of the museum's major sites, it offers a comprehensive look into the RAF's past, highlighting its role in aviation history and its contributions to military and civilian life. The museum boasts an extensive

collection of aircraft and aviation artifacts, ranging from historic biplanes to modern jets. Notable exhibits include iconic aircraft such as the Avro Vulcan, the Supermarine Spitfire, and the Handley Page Victor. These exhibits are meticulously restored and displayed, allowing visitors to appreciate the engineering and design that have defined the RAF's air power. The museum has recently expanded its galleries to include more interactive and educational exhibits. The new displays highlight technological advancements in aviation and provide context on the RAF's role in various conflicts and peacekeeping missions.

12. Titanic Museum

Titanic Belfast, located in Belfast, Northern Ireland, is a premier visitor attraction dedicated to the RMS Titanic, the famous ship that was built in Belfast and sank on its maiden voyage in 1912. Situated on the site of the former Harland & Wolff shipyard where the Titanic was constructed, the museum offers a comprehensive and immersive exploration of the ship's history and its enduring legacy. The museum is widely known by its state-of-the-art exhibition galleries, which use multimedia and interactive technology to engage visitors with the Titanic's story. This includes simulations of the ship's launch, an exploration of the shipyard's history, and an in-depth look at the tragic sinking and subsequent recovery efforts.

13. Woodhorn Museum

Woodhorn Museum, located in Ashington, Northumberland, UK, is a vibrant cultural institution dedicated to preserving and showcasing the rich heritage of the coal mining industry and the broader

history of the region. Set in a former coal mining complex, the museum offers a comprehensive exploration of the local industrial past, including the impact of mining on the community and the development of the surrounding area. Among its notable displays is the Pitman's Pallet, which presents a poignant array of miners' personal belongings and memorabilia. This exhibit provides a personal perspective on the experiences and contributions of miners, adding a human dimension to the historical narrative. Beyond its mining-related collections, Woodhorn Museum also displays on local communities, historical events, and cultural practices that have influenced the region's development. These artistic representations offer a unique perspective on the region's heritage and the personal experiences of those involved in mining, enriching the overall visitor experience.

Appendix 5: Thematic Coding Summary Table for Interview Data

Inter view ID	Role	Interview Date	Dura tion (Min utes)	Theme	Sub-theme
P01	Director	18 May 2022	34	Institutional Impact	Indefinite Closure/ decision-making
P02	CFO	10 June 2022	30	Institutional Impact-staffing	Fixed-term workers
P03	Operator	17 June 2022	23	Institutional Impact-closure	Unstable premises/ staff structures
P04	Temporary Retail Assistant	20 June 2022	18	Institutional Impact- Staffing	Casual/Precarious Employment
P05	Receptionist (volunteer)	25 June 2022	15	Emotional Impact	Front-of-House Emotional Strain
P06	Part-time researcher	18 July 2022	36	Emotional Impact	Furlough
P07	Curator	18 July 2022	30	Emotional Impact	Job Insecurity
P08	Director	19 July 2022	34	Institutional Impact-closure	Seasonal resilience
P09	Actor	22 July 2022	20	Emergent Findings	Elderly People
P10	Volunteer	30 Sept 2022	29	Museum Sector's Labor Sustainability	Volunteering Cost
P11	Director	1 Oct 2022	37	Inequality	Access to External Funding
P12	Education Assistant	11 Oct 2022	40	Emotional Impact	Remote working mode
P13	Volunteer	1 Nov 2022	19	Emergent Findings	volunteer
P14	Collection Manager	12 Nov 2022	25	Museum Responses	Lockdown Maintenance
P15	Programme Manager	14 Nov 2022	33	Museum Responses	Social media
P16	Volunteer		12	Museum Responses	Outdoor Spaces
P17	Receptionist	6 April 2023	10	Financial Impact/Emotional Impact	Revenue Loss/ Workload
P18	Director	10 April 2023	37	Museum Response	Digitalization
P19	Finance Officer	13 April 2023	29	Museum Response	Finance Audit
P20	Chair Trustee	2 May	24	Museum Closure	Lost Venue
P21	Director	20 May	41	Funding	The Importance of Public

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					Grants
P22	Retail Assistant	21 May 2023	11	Emergent Findings- impact	Flooding
P23	Facility Manager	27 May 2023	28	Emergent Findings	Risk Assessment/ Job Value
P24	Volunteer	25 June 2023	37	(Supplementary Interview) Age Diversity	Knowledge Sharing/ Succession

Appendix 6 Announced permanently closed independent museums in the UK

Name	Closed Time	Area (by nation)	Closure Type	Closure Reason
The Museum of Army Music	Early 2020	England	Soft closure	In 2016, the Ministry of Defence suggested the sale of Keneller Hall (the original premises of the Museum of Army Music) as part of heritage rationalisation, which would allow the Armed Forces to examine their national historic footprint and ensure it was fit for purpose (The British Army, 2021). After the sale of its original premises, the museum therefore became homeless (Army Museums Ogilby Trust, no date).
The Hall at Abbey-Cwm-Hir	July 2020	Wales	Hard closure	Finance crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Sheehan, 2020).
Shire Horse Farm and Carriage Museum	2020	England	Not clear	The owner retired (information provided by an interviewee).
West Wales Museum of Childhood	2020	Wales	Soft closure	The original premises became unavailable, and the owner of the museum wanted to retire. (Information provided by a survey respondent).
Mechanical Memories Museum	2020-2021	England	Not clear	Not clear.

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Flame Gasworks Museum	2022	Northern Ireland	Soft closure	Funding model is no longer sustainable, and the museum lacked resources to operate (McManus, 2022).
Hull People's Memorial Museum	June 2022	England	Hard closure	Hull People's Memorial Museum relies heavily on public donations, but it is hard to raise money under the current economic circumstances and the increasing operation costs including the rents and utility bills have become unaffordable (Hull People's Memorial Museum, 2022 ³ ; Museum+Heritage, 2022: no page).
Pembrokeshire Candle Makers Centre	September 2020	Wales	Hard closure	The owner of the museum retired (Pembrokeshire Candle Makers Centre Website, 2022).
Fort Paull	January 2020	England	Hard closure	Owner of the museum retired (Robinson, 2020).
The Commando Museum	September 2020	Scotland	Hard closure	It lost its premises because the property changed hands (Candlin, 2021).
Walton Maritime Museum	2020	England	Soft closure	It lost its premises because the property owner Tendring Council announced an unaffordable rent hike (Candlin, 2021).
Jack the Ripper Museum	2021	England	Soft closure	The exhibition subject was controversial and had attracted critique, but the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic could also be part of the reason (Candlin, 2021).

³ The Hull People's Memorial Museum has permanently closed, and its webpage has been withdrawn.

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Ashworth Barracks Museum	2020	England	Soft closure	Not clear.
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Appendix 7 Cost of admission to case study museums (information gathered from the museums' official websites)

Name of Museum	Charging Methods	Price	Note	Source
Borth Station Museum	Free entry	£0	Donation recommended	Borth Station Museum, 2023: no date
Ironbridge Gorge Museum	Single entry pass and Annual Membership	Single ticket from £0 to 23.5 (depending on which site that the visitor chooses); £33 (annual ticket for adults or senior); £36 (annual ticket with additional benefits for adults or seniors)	Have multiple options for families and students	Ironbridge Gorge Museum, 2023: no date
National Emergency Museum	Annual Membership	Adult (£9.5); child (£7.5); concession (£8.5); students (£8.5); 999 Staff (£5.5); wheelchair User (£5.5)	Family ticket for 2 adults and 2 children or 1 adult and 3 children (£26.5)	National Emergency Service Museum, 2023: no date
Cartoon Museum	Single entry pass	Adult (£9.5); concession (£6); student (£4); Universal Credit recipients (£2)	Under-18s, Art Fund, London Pass, Members (Free)	Cartoon Museum, 2023:no date

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Black Country Living Museum	Annual membership	Unchained annual pass for adults over 16 years old (£22.95); unchained annual pass for adults over 65 years old (£20.95); unchained annual pass for people with no income (£19.5);	Black Country Living Museum also provide membership (£40) with other benefits and privileges like priority booking for special events, free car parking, a range of retail discounts.	Black Country Living Museum, 2023: no date
Titanic Museum	Single entry pass	Adult (£24.95); child 5-15 years old (£11); student and unemployed (£19); Senior (£19); Child under 5 (free)	Family pass for 2 adults and 2 children (£62). Student, unemployed and senior visitors could only have discounts on weekdays.	Titanic Museum, 2023: no date
Blitz Museum	Free entry	£0	Donation recommended	Blitz Museum, 2023: no date
Royal Air Force Museum	Free entry and membership benefits	£0 for entry; £50 for membership (over 16 years old)	The membership benefit include out-of-hour events, retail discounts, gifts, and priority access.	Royal Air Force Museum, 2023: no date
Englesea Brook Chapel Museum	Free entry	£0	Donation recommended; Adult guided tour costs £7 per person	Englesea Brook Chapel Museum, 2023: no date

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Woodhorn Museum	Annual membership	16 and under (free); adult (£7); concession and students (£6)	Dog Welcome	Woodhorn Museum, no date b
Benjamin Franklin Museum	Single entry pass	Adult (£10); student (£7)	London Pass is valid to use	Benjamin Franklin Museum, 2023: no date
Jack the Ripper Museum	Single entry pass	Adult (£10); child and pensioner (£8)	Guided walk tour (£10)	Jack the Ripper Museum, 2023: no date
Florence Nightingale Museum	Annual membership	Adult (£12); concession (£10); student (£7); child (£6)	Visitors with Art Fund membership could have 50% off. Guided tours cost £16.	Florence Nightingale Museum, 2023: no date 26/07/2025 14:56:00

Appendix 8 Standard Requirements of Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom

To meet the criteria of the Accreditation Scheme, a museum needs:

1. A clear statement of purpose
2. An appropriate constitution
3. A satisfactory structure for your governance and management
4. A forward or business plan that covers the current and subsequent planning year
5. Financial Sustainability
6. Secure occupancy of all premises containing collections
7. A risk assessment of security arrangements
8. A clear, workable emergency plan
9. To take responsibility for all the collections you manage
10. A policy, approved by the governing body, for developing collections, including acquisitions and disposals
11. An approved documentation policy
12. To follow the primary Spectrum documentation procedures
13. An approved collections care and conservation policy
14. A collections care and conservation plan
15. An approved access policy
16. An access plan

17. To understand who uses your museum, and who doesn't
18. To use information to assess your user's needs
19. To have a plan for developing your range of user
20. To provide stimulating learning and discovery activities, including exhibitions and programmes based on your collections
21. To communicate effectively with users and potential users through a range of access, marketing, and promotional activities