

ART FUND & CULTURE COMMONS

# Views from the Independent Museum & Gallery Sector on local cultural decision making

INSIGHT PAPER

Kate Wafer  
Wafer Hadley

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This Insight Paper was produced by **Art Fund** as part of ‘the future of local cultural decision making’, a major UK-wide open policy development programme led by **Culture Commons** and partners.

## Abstract

This paper is part of ‘the future of local cultural decision making’, an open policy development programme led by Culture Commons and a coalition of 30 partners. It examines the impact of local decision making on the UK’s creative, cultural, and heritage ecosystem. Based on a roundtable discussion with independent museum directors and additional sector research, this paper highlights the varied relationships between museums and local authorities. It discusses the benefits and challenges of devolved decision making, emphasising the need for strategic, inclusive and well-resourced approaches to support independent museums. The findings underscore the potential of regional structures in enhancing the role and recognition of museums in broader cultural and policy frameworks.

## Keywords

museums; local authorities; strategic planning

At the time of publication

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## Culture Commons

Culture Commons bring the creative, cultural and heritage sectors together with the research community and policymakers to co-design new policy and influence decision making at the local, regional and national levels. We are leading **'the future of local cultural decision making'** open policy development programme.

You can find out more about us at [www.culturecommons.uk](http://www.culturecommons.uk)

## The Author

Kate Wafer is an experienced consultant, researcher, evaluator, facilitator and coach, with nearly 30 years in the cultural sector. Since 2006 she has been the Director of cultural insight consultancy Wafer Hadley, working with diverse clients around the UK, such as funding bodies, local authorities, and museums and galleries at a wide range of scales. She works closely with Art Fund on evaluation, research and planning. Her approach is people-centred and collaborative.

## The Programme

['the future of local cultural decision making'](#) is an open policy development programme led by Culture Commons and a coalition of partners made up of local governments, the creative and cultural sectors, arm's length bodies, grant giving bodies and leading research institutions.

Together, the partners are exploring how further 'devolution' and/or increased local decision making might impact on the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem in different nations and regions of the UK.

More information about the programme can be found on the dedicated [digital hub](#).

## Open Policymaking

‘the future of local cultural decision making’ is an open policy development programme based on a not-for-profit and collaborative partnership model.

Open Policymaking was described by UK Government in 2014 as a process that ‘opens up the formation of public policy to a wider variety of stakeholders’.

Culture Commons have adopted some of the key principles sitting behind this approach and elaborated on them when designing this programme, particularly the commitment to transparency.

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# Executive Summary

This Insight Paper draws from a roundtable discussion of museum directors from across based in independent museums in the UK. The key findings to take forward are:

- 1.** Relationships between museums and local authorities look very different from place to place. On balance, there is significant room for improvement in how museums are supported and involved strategically to benefit places and communities.
- 2.** Political churn at the local level can be a major barrier to the effective involvement of independent museums in local cultural decision making process. Within local authorities, this churn includes changes to political appointments and overall control, moving political goalposts and changes to internal staff and departments that disrupt relationships, shared goals and collaborative working.
- 3.** Without increased resources, a focus on the hyper local in deciding how budgets are spent could pose a threat to the support for independent museums, as they tend to have a wider remit. Greater devolution to regional structures may prove more beneficial to museums in delivering these wider remits.

# Introduction and context

This roundtable discussion was convened by [Art Fund](#) as part of 'the future of local decision making' - an open policy development programme being led by [Culture Commons and a consortium of partners from across the UK](#).

The 16 invited participants were Chief Executives or Directors of independent museums and galleries in all four UK nations, selected by Art Fund to reflect a range of types of organisation and locations. We are hugely grateful to the Museum Directors who gave their time so generously and shared their insights so thoughtfully.

Independent museums account for more than 70% of the UK's museum sector. The rest of the sector is comprised of national museums funded directly by national governments, those run wholly by local authorities, and university museums. Independent museums include medium-scale 'civic' museums that usually have a particular focus on place and may have previously been local authority-run before being subsumed into a Trust. This category also includes art galleries, specialist collections, historic houses and small and sometimes volunteer-run local museums. Independent museums may be mainly self-sustaining or predominantly funded, and may or may not charge entrance fees, depending on their chosen financial model. In this paper, the term 'museum' has been used to collectively describe this broad range.

In addition to the roundtable discussion, this Insight Paper draws on the findings of the 2024 [Art Fund Museum Directors Research](#) on the prevailing conditions within the museums sector.

# Current relationships

local authorities and other regional decision making bodies

There appears to be no consistency in the types of relationships that independent museums and local authorities have in the UK, which can range from 'close and supportive' to 'non-existent'. The majority of the relationships we heard about fall somewhere in the middle of this range, with some form of relationship but (at least from the perspective of museum leaders) a marked potential for improvement.

## The Approach to Culture

It is clear that the way local authorities approach culture, and the value they apportion to it, varies enormously - even between local authorities that sit side by side geographically. This means that independent museums can be working very closely with one neighbouring authority but have almost no contact with another.

Participants shared that the emerging regional combined authorities and metro mayoral structures in England appear to value culture more highly and see the potential of the cultural assets within their regions to support in the realisation of local policy priorities. It may be early days, but some museum leaders shared that this more pro-culture approach could impact positively on individual constituent local authorities' perceptions.

***"We've got a new mayor, so it's going to be interesting how culture is seen going forward."***

## The Financial Relationship

In Art Fund's recent sector research, we found that just over half of independent museums in the UK received some form of funding from local authorities in 2023/24. This ranged from core funding (particularly for those operating as an arms-length Trust) to small project grants, perhaps for education work or community engagement. Local authorities were also seen to contribute to capital redevelopments in some independent museums in their localities.

Local authorities might own the buildings in which the independent museum is housed and be responsible for its maintenance. The museum collections themselves might legally belong to the authority. An independent museum might be on a peppercorn rent for the building it occupies and might have received support for energy bills in recent years.

In some cases, independent museums are service deliverers or contractors, providing activity commissioned by the local authority. This might include health and wellbeing work, programmes for schools, art programmes or free entry aimed at local residents. These relationships can be more straightforward than the funding paradigm.



***“When we’re in the role of agent, we actually have a very good working relationship.”***

Due to the recent financial crises in many local authorities (including Section 114 notices), some independent museums have seen their local authority funding withdrawn completely. Others are facing significant uncertainty about their future financial relationship. In some cases, this is having a considerable knock-on effect on other sources of funding that can be reliant on ‘match funding’ from multiple sources.

***“We’re no longer funded at all by the local authority. It feels a bit like we’ve been cast out to sea by them at the moment.”***

Museum leaders told us that they recognise that many local authorities can no longer afford to support culture at the scale they once did, and that this leaves gaps in both funding and strategy.

# Involvement in decision making

the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem

There is evidence that independent museums are typically consulted when cultural strategies are being developed in their local areas. In some cases, this can feel tokenistic, with little sense of meaningful dialogue or impact as a result.

***"[The consultation] does feel very performative and not very effective."***

In other cases, independent museums have been instrumental in initiating and/or developing the strategy or even commissioned to deliver it by the local authority.

Many of the museum leaders we spoke to sit on local authority and/or combined authority boards and strategy groups and are pleased to do so. This can see them contributing to cultural policy discussions, but also to wider policy domains such as economic development, health and wellbeing, or neighbourhood planning in their immediate locality.

***"Our big push is to ensure that culture is embedded into all areas of local decision making...including housing, education and social care. We're moving in the right direction, but it's a long journey."***

One of the challenges identified in the roundtable discussion and in the Art Fund sector research was political churn: of individuals, structures and policies.

***"I've lost count of how many different cultural strategies at various levels have been commissioned. I'm not sure if they weren't there anyone would notice..."***

This means that the time and energy invested by museum directors in building relationships and developing priorities can seem wasted, as these structures are reconfigured.

***"We're now having to re-establish relationships that had been set up for years - that's one of the challenges."***

# Responses to the offer of more decision making powers

## Opportunities

Many independent museums have been active in the field of community engagement for some time. Some of the roundtable participants we spoke to immediately saw the potential for them to use these skills to support local authorities to devolve decision making further to local people.

Building on existing community relationships, their creative facilitation skills, the perceived neutrality of the spaces they run, and their regulated, scrutinised and evaluated delivery, independent museums could make an ideal delivery partner to bring communities together in new forms of civic engagement and decision making processes.

***“[Through our engagement work] We're very expert in sharing power, in sharing ownership and in co-production and co-curation.”***

In our discussion, a minority of museums also felt that they could benefit from more grassroots decision making, as this would demonstrate to the local authority how passionate people are about the independent cultural providers on their patch and their role within placemaking locally.

***“When you get people engaging directly with local culture, they get very animated about it. But when they're deciding who their local councillor or local MP is, it gets lost in all the noise of the other important things.”***

The devolution of decision making could also lead to more holistic thinking about culture within local councils, seeing its instrumental value to a wide range of local priorities, rather than culture being siloed.

## Challenges

Set against these potential opportunities for independent museums were some tangible concerns about the long-term impact of devolved decision making.

As we have seen, cultural assets are not universally valued in the same way by local authorities from place to place. Museums are a discretionary service (as opposed to libraries which are a 'statutory' duty in each of the four nations of the UK). This can mean that local council support for museums can be withdrawn before other services. Roundtable participants feared the use of blunt tools that ask residents to choose between discretionary cultural assets and statutory services (such as social care). If there is no new money, how will museums not lose out?

Ensuring local decision making is truly democratic was also seen as problematic. With the example of the low turnout for the election of Police and Crime Commissioners, participants wondered: who would be making the decisions and based on what insights? There was testimony that some communities are already suffering consultation fatigue in response to the continual requests for input into local decisions.

If decision making is devolved to communities and volunteers at the grassroots level, what is the quality of their practice, in terms of promoting equality, diversity and inclusion, for example? Or what mechanisms could ensure the quality?

Participants also asked where the strategic overview will come from and who will make things happen. Cultural strategies can simply become 'wish lists', presented in the hope that others will deliver them, unless communities are also given the support and resources to deliver on decisions.

***“If you devolve it down and then step back and think that's it sorted, we've handed this to communities, it's really hard to make strategic decisions around cultural provision and so you can inadvertently end up with quite big gaps being created.”***

Local focus could also lead to a cultural short-sightedness. Independent museums have the potential to deliver against local, regional, national and even international agendas, but these wider functions might be undervalued in a system of enhanced local decision making.

For many stretched independent museums, it seems that their greatest hope lies in the devolution of funding and support from central government to regional decision-makers, while greater local decision making may pose more of a threat.

Without additional staffing resources, the independent museum leaders we spoke to feel that they will struggle to respond to either new opportunities or address potential threats.

## Conclusions

- There is no consistent pattern of relationship between independent museums and local authorities in the UK. The types of relationship are numerous and complex. No one devolution policy is likely to work in all places.
- Culture and cultural assets (such as independent museums) may be valued very differently between different local authorities.
- Some local authorities no longer have the capacity or expertise to support cultural provision in their areas.
- Independent museums are typically consulted when cultural strategies are being developed in their local areas. This is often tokenistic, but sometimes an independent museum is the driver behind the creation of a local strategy.
- Independent museum directors often sit on local authority and combined authority boards and strategy groups and are pleased to do so where they can see an impact and benefit.
- Political churn is a major barrier to the effective involvement of independent museums in local decision making. Greater political stability and more joined up strategy between national, regional and local structures could help.
- Many independent museums already work hard to engage their local communities. Given these skills, their position and connections, there is potential for some to be contracted to facilitate greater community decision making around cultural provision.
- However, an increased focus on the grassroots and local residents may narrow the value given to museums and disadvantage independent museums with a wider regional, national or international appeal or importance. There are risks that any financial support they receive may be lost and they find themselves excluded from decisions made in the area.
- Greater devolution from central government to regional and combined authorities in England appears to hold the best potential for independent museums to achieve greater financial support and recognition.

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