



Coronavirus and conservation: challenges to recovery

Icon briefing – March 2021

Cultural heritage objects and collections simply don't look after themselves. Without the vigilant efforts of professional conservators, our precious cultural heritage is at risk from a variety of threats from water to pests to light and pollution. By preserving cultural heritage, conservators facilitate public access and enjoyment and enable heritage to maximise its economic and social [value](#).¹

The last months have been difficult for cultural heritage professionals and for the institutions where they work. There are still difficult times ahead and recovery will not be simple. We have outlined the key challenges to this below alongside recommendations to support recovery.

1. Short term: Loss of income

Conservation businesses have struggled to survive and need financial support to sustain cashflow as they rebuild their businesses.

- In December 2020, almost half of business owners reported their revenue had decreased by more than 50% compared to normal expectations for the time of year.
- In December 2020, a quarter of business owners estimated they only had up to 3 months of viable operational revenue.²

The fragile ecosystem of conservation businesses depends on commissions from large institutions such as the national museums. Long established private studios have already started to close due to a decline in commissions, and the threat of a shortage of conservation service providers is increasing. The loss of these specialists risks the sustainability of the workforce and its skills.

We have also heard anecdotes from our members that conservators were unable to receive grants through the Cultural Recovery Fund because:

- The application process is tailored to larger organisations and is challenging for SMEs with limited capacity and resources.
- The funding is not available to conservators working as freelancers unless they are a Limited Company or similar.
- The application process calls for the production of a viable business plan projection. This presents a problem for small businesses and freelancers where client demand has dried up.

Our ask: The Culture Recovery Fund for Heritage should be continued, but also amended to ensure that conservation business are not inadvertently excluded.

¹ Icon [statement](#) on the Value of Collections Care Professions.

² [Coronavirus and Conservation Impact Study 2](#). Icon 2021

2. Short term: Ineligibility for financial support

There are certain demographics within the conservation workforce that fall between the cracks of available government support because they are not covered by the Self-employment Income Support Scheme or the Job Retention Scheme, including:

- Sole directors of limited liability companies who don't self-assess for tax and are not able to claim under the scheme.
- Recent graduates and conservators who started in self-employment after April 2019.
- Conservators operating in the gig economy or juggling part-time jobs and freelance work. While such individuals may be covered by the SEISS and/or the Job Retention Scheme, navigating multiple support application processes is a challenge.

Our ask: Current business support measures should be extended to support businesses suffering from the impact of the pandemic. Icon continues to advocate for the extension of the SEISS to support conservators who have been left without any financial aid. Icon has also [joined](#) calls on the Chancellor made by IPSE, the Creative Industries Federation and others to appoint a Freelance Commissioner and establish a Future Workforce Commission. The Commission could encourage the government to rethink how it supports freelance workers and to build a system that ensures parity between the self-employed and those on payroll.

3. Medium term: Lack of demand and opportunity leading to loss of skills

The Coronavirus crisis has brought about the loss of income for many heritage organisations. Museums and heritage sites are at risk of cash insolvency, significant down-sizing or permanent closure. This has led to a lack of demand for conservation services and opportunities.

- The financial pressure on organisations has led to a reduction in conservation activity, threatening the jobs of conservation staff. We have seen redundancy consultations in organisations such as the Tate, the National Trust, the V&A and National Trust for Scotland.
- The lack of work has a knock-on effect on the private sector that provides vital conservation services to institutions. Without regular commissions, private practices may be forced to stop trading, with the risk of further loss of skills.
- There are fewer opportunities for emerging professionals and new graduates as organisations are scaling back operations. This further threatens the capacity of the workforce and the talent pipeline.

In January, Icon launched the [Collections Care Stimulus Fund](#) with seed funding from the Radcliffe Trust. Our aim is to support heritage institutions or services in the UK to access grants to enable them to commission Icon Accredited members to undertake conservation activities. Support for our initiative would help continue generating a pipeline of work and continuity for conservators, protect our world-leading collections and support jobs, skills and businesses.

Our ask: Additional support for a fund that provides modest grants to sustain the many microbusinesses in our sector and the institutions who employ them in the medium term is vitally important. Investing in these businesses will maintain a continuity of professional expertise and protect skills. It will also provide a lifeline for cultural heritage practitioners and institutions, particularly the more vulnerable small and regional museums which are so vital to their communities.