



THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

Iain Greenway  
Director of Historic Environment Division  
Department for Communities  
Causeway Exchange  
1-7 Bedford Street  
Belfast  
BT2 7EG

7 May 2020

Dear Mr Greenway,

### **Impact of Coronavirus on the cultural heritage conservation sector**

I am writing on behalf of the Institute of Conservation (Icon) regarding the current and future impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the cultural heritage conservation sector and the urgent support required.

Icon is a membership organisation and charity, which brings together those with a passion for conserving cultural heritage. We represent around 2,500 individuals and organisations comprising professional conservators, heritage scientists and many others with a commitment to ensuring the long-term survival of objects and collections, historic buildings and archaeology. Approximately 4% of our members work in Northern Ireland. Following the success of our triennial conference in Belfast in 2019, we formed a network for conservators living or working in Northern Ireland and for those who have an interest in the region's unique cultural heritage and its preservation.

We know you are acutely aware of the scale of the crisis the Coronavirus pandemic represents to the cultural sector that relies on audiences, visitors and public participation, as well as the risks to the livelihoods of a large number of freelance workers. However, we would like to draw your attention to the further challenges that are specific to the conservation sector:

- Many conservators work in the museums, galleries, archives and historic sites that have been obliged to shut their doors due to guidance on social distancing. These workers face an uncertain future as prolonged closures may be catastrophic for the small, independent charitable organisations that employ them. It is also currently unclear when and how the museums will be able to open and whether there will be support for them if they are unable to return to full functioning capacity immediately. The health and safety of visitors, volunteers and staff remains a concern.
- Face-to-face contact is an integral part of conservation: conservators need to interact with people and objects to consider and identify the best approach to care and treatment. As businesses and people have reduced their activity due to precautions to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus, conservators have already experienced cancelled contracts and reductions in commissions, leading to substantial and sometimes total loss of income.
- The majority of conservation practices are micro, small and medium sized enterprises that are inherently vulnerable to fluctuations in the economy. Even in good times this is a fragile

section of the economy where the financial rewards for highly skilled and knowledgeable professionals are small.

- A third of the conservation workforce is self-employed. While employees can be guaranteed sick pay when they self-isolate, freelancers and the self-employed do not have the same security. We are also aware that individuals who are sole directors of limited companies are even less well protected at this time. Despite the introduction of financial support packages by the UK and devolved Government, we are aware that many people are likely to fall through the cracks or will not have the skills or knowledge to readily access this support even when they are eligible. Further financial support and business advice is urgently needed.

Thinking beyond the immediate phase of adaptation, the future financial health of the cultural heritage conservation sector should be considered. The conservation sector is deeply interconnected with other parts of the economy, maximising the commercial value of the tourism and cultural sectors and creative industries. Our heritage - from national collections to family heirlooms - is integral to our individual and community identities as it allows people to reconnect with history and community memories and to regain their sense of belonging. The authentic experience of being close to tangible objects thus has the potential to support our personal wellbeing as well as our economic prosperity both during and after the pandemic. The work of conservators is vital to ensuring that this level of physical access can be maintained.

However, in order to achieve this the sector needs urgent support to cope with the unforeseen financial challenges outlined above, including:

- **Further clarity and continued communications on timescales** for implementing social distancing policies and transitioning periods to help the sector plan ahead. This is essential so that plans and strategies can be put in place to ensure the collections housed in the UK's institutions are looked after and can continue to engage and fascinate visitors once sites reopen.
- **Comprehensive and timely support for the self employed workforce.** We have urged the Chancellor to extend the UK Government's self-employment Income Support Scheme so that it is truly comprehensive and accessible to those who need this support, or to urgently provide information on how the workers not covered by the new aid measures will be supported. Sole directors of limited liability companies, recently self-employed workers and the many conservators who operate in the gig economy are not currently eligible.
- **Access to further business support advice** to help workers navigate the different support options available. Discussions with our members over the last few weeks have indicated that there is a great deal of confusion with regard to eligibility and payment mechanisms. The multiplicity of support options will be challenging for our members and others to navigate; many may not have the resources to successfully access support.
- **Continued provision of funding and grants.** We welcome Arts Council NI's Creative Support Fund for small and medium sized organisations. The availability of grants for projects protecting the historic environment and the skills that look after its assets will continue to be important in the coming months.

We hope you will consider the concerns and proposals raised by Icon on behalf of the conservation profession as you work with colleagues across Northern Ireland and UK Governments to develop and implement effective support for cultural heritage. Icon is keen to support this vital work and is collaborating closely with sector bodies across the UK to coordinate efforts and to offer guidance to cultural heritage organisations at this challenging time. We would be happy to provide further information if needed.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sara Crofts". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sara Crofts BArch (Hons) MSc IHBC FRSA  
Chief Executive