



THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

## Icon submission to DCMS Select Committee on the impact of Coronavirus

June 2020

### 1. Summary

1.1. The Coronavirus pandemic and associated social distancing and self-isolation measures have had a serious impact on the cultural heritage sector that relies on income from audiences and visitors, has public engagement and participation at its core and is supported by a significant number of freelancers. Livelihoods, jobs, institutions and their collections are currently at high risk.

### 2. About Icon

2.1 The Institute of Conservation ([Icon](#)) is a UK-wide 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.

2.2. Conservation is a source of economic prosperity and growth, contributing to business, industry and employment. The sector is deeply interconnected with other DCMS sectors, maximising the commercial value of the tourism and cultural sectors and creative industries. The conservation of our shared cultural heritage has the potential to support our economic prosperity and also our personal wellbeing both during and after the pandemic.

### 3. What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

3.1. Since the outbreak, Icon has been collecting case studies and experiences from our members. In April 2020, we undertook a survey asking conservators to share how they had been affected by the pandemic. Feedback from members and our survey results have revealed that the Coronavirus outbreak and associated social distancing measures are having considerable and severe impact on conservators and conservation:

3.1.2. **Job security** - Many conservators work in and for the museums, galleries, archives and historic sites that have closed across the UK. Many conservators have been furloughed. 26% of respondents to our survey said they had furloughed staff.

Employed conservators face an uncertain future as prolonged closure may be fatal to the organisations that employ them.

3.1.3. **Loss of income** - Over 90% of survey respondents reported loss or postponement of work, while two out of five respondents reported postponement or cancellation of planned income-generating events. 70% of respondents said that their monthly income had decreased.

3.1.4. Social distancing measures have resulted in this loss of income as conservators have not been able to travel to their studios or to meet clients. Face-to-face contact is an integral part of conservation as conservators interact with people and objects to consider and identify the best approach to care and treatment.

3.1.5. A third of the conservation workforce is self-employed and rely on commissions from clients such as museums and private individuals. Conservators have experienced loss of income due to cancelled contracts and reductions in commissions as clients have stopped commissioning new conservation work during the crisis.

3.1.6. **Cultural heritage objects and collections** in museums, archives and libraries that were closed due to social distancing measures are at risk as collections maintenance and the operation of vital environmental systems is no longer possible. Many important day-to-day care and maintenance tasks are not currently being done, which may increase rates of deterioration and decay. Without the regular presence of skilled conservation professionals other immediate threats such as equipment faults and leaking pipes may not be spotted in time to prevent damage.

3.1.4 Over half of respondents described the Coronavirus as presenting “moderate risk” to the medium-term viability of their business or organisation, though they hoped to be able to continue to operate if the negative impacts are successfully mitigated.

#### **4. How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector’s needs?**

4.1. Our survey results suggest that the Government’s **furloughing** scheme has helped to mitigate impacts in the short term. 26% of respondents said they had furloughed staff but only 5% stated they had laid off staff.

4.2. While Icon welcomed the Government’s **Self-employed Income Support Scheme**, we remain concerned that the SEISS is not comprehensive enough. There are certain demographics within the conservation sector that fall between the cracks because they are not covered by SEISS or the Job Retention Scheme, including:

4.2.1. Sole directors of limited liability companies who don’t self-assess for tax and are not able to claim under the scheme.

4.2.2. Conservators who started in self-employment after April 2019 or are recent graduates. These new entrepreneurs are already particularly vulnerable and require support while they grow their businesses.

4.2.3. The many conservators who operate in the gig economy or juggle a variety of part-time jobs and freelance work and earn small amounts of income from a range of sources. While such individuals may be covered by the Self-employment Income Support Scheme and/or the Job Retention Scheme, navigating multiple application processes in order to access support will no doubt be a challenge.

4.3. The results of Icon's recent Coronavirus survey showed a need for further **clarity on available Government business support and advice**. When asked which financial support measures they expected to access to mitigate effects, 55 percent of respondents said they are awaiting further clarification of government support. One contributor called for a "less complicated system" while another said "clearer advice" is needed.

4.3.1 The demand for greater clarity appears to be mirrored by the wider heritage sector. Historic England's survey of businesses and organisations across heritage fields (including archaeology, gardens, landscapes and historic buildings) showed similar results, with more than 50 percent of respondents stating they were waiting for clarification of government support measures.

## **5. What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?**

5.1. While any conservators will benefit from the Chancellor's extension of the **furlough scheme** to October. However, this means that the scheme will end just as we head into the winter season – a challenging time for many organisations in the heritage sector that rely on seasonal demand. If support is completely withdrawn, it is likely that many heritage organisations will cease to exist – having faced the equivalent of three winters in a row. To abandon them when they need support most would undermine the original objective of the furlough scheme, and result in significant redundancies.

5.2. The government should consider **extending the furlough scheme** to those sectors that will need it through the winter, to ensure that they are able to bounce back in time for next year's high season.

5.3. Heritage sites and organisations rely heavily on the vital **skills** and expertise of the **self-employed sector and contractors**. These individuals provide not only conservation but also public engagement, specialist archaeological services, and other small consulting contracts. In the long-term, there is a risk that many self-employed and freelance workers will be unable to survive, as they fall between the gaps of the existing Government schemes, leading to a loss of specialist skills. Without these skills, more heritage assets will fall into disrepair and capital and conservation projects will face issues commissioning work. These contractors are also required

to teach the next generation of specialists - if they cease to trade, specialist skills could be lost forever.

5.4. Museums and galleries have suffered devastating loss of income over the last few months and will have to make tough financial choices about spending in order to ensure that they survive. We are concerned that they will struggle to commission important conservation work in the coming months and ask that the Government includes measures to safeguard the conservation of cultural heritage until cultural institutions get back on their feet. Without support we fear that some of our members will be forced to consider closing their businesses and important conservation skills will be lost from the sector.

5.5. The Government should ensure that specialist skills survive through **targeted grants** and support for heritage skills. This would ensure the future survival of the sector, and the important work that it undertakes. This could be in the form of apprenticeship support or skills and work training through Government funding. Encouraging young people into apprenticeships in the heritage sector would boost existing organisations and secure the future of our vital work.

5.6. There are likely to be significant shifts in the profession if employers like museums close and private practices shut down. We will need to understand how the overall shape of the sector and profession will change by carrying out new research. The Government should consider supporting workforce research and labour market intelligence to help employers, educators and individuals to make informed employment, training and career decisions.

5.7. The cultural heritage sector relies heavily on **volunteers**. According to Historic England's Heritage Counts, there are 616,000 heritage volunteers in England alone. The full impact of the pandemic on the sector's volunteers should be investigated.

## **6. What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?**

6.1. DCMS could have provided more prompt guidance and advice on how to carry out essential monitoring duties and collections care activities within the social distancing and isolation guidelines. The sector would have benefited from the Government disseminating advice on interim collections care to museums, libraries, archives and galleries at national and regional level and for it to consider further measures to financially support small institutions to carry out these tasks.

6.2. The Government could have provided more clarity on advice and guidance around site working. Government guidance, which required people to stay home unless they were going outside for food, health reasons or 'essential work' left the construction industry and the significant number of cultural heritage professionals that work within it confused. A lack of clear guidance made fulfilling the conditions of insurance policies difficult to maintain and presented a risk to dealing with potential insurance claims. For example, due to the valuable cultural heritage assets on certain sites, conservators are usually obliged to visit a site at least every 30 days as

a condition of their insurance. We therefore would have liked to see DCMS urge the Government to promptly publish clarification on whether construction-related work was 'essential' and if heritage sector companies and conservation professionals should continue to work on site.

## **7. How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?**

7.1 Icon encourages DCMS to support the sector in adapting to new digital ways of working, by supporting:

7.1.1. **Research** to advance technology and heritage science to enable remote access to collections which would allow for remote monitoring and reporting of environmental conditions.

7.1.2. **Digital skills** to help the sector run events and training online. For example, in the event of a second wave, it may be necessary to develop ways to remotely train new volunteers for salvage and disaster response in museums. Distributing video material online to teach physical activities such as water removal, packing wet collections etc. will rely on conservators possessing strong digital skills.

7.1.3. **Digitisation projects** to enable the public to virtually access museums and sites and enjoy collections online.