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EXCELLENCE



THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

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BRIEFING

UKRI: Opportunities to grow our capability

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) has published a [report](#): 'The UK's research and innovation infrastructure: opportunities to grow our capability.' The report assesses the UK's future infrastructure landscape and identifies needs, opportunities and themes that could benefit capability. It is intended as a "strategic guide" to inform investment decisions for the next generation of infrastructure.

This briefing note aims to highlight opportunities for the cultural heritage conservation sector arising from the report.

Background

The Government's Industrial Strategy sets a target to increase total R&D investment to 2.4% of GDP by 2027, calling for significant investment in research and innovation infrastructure. UKRI was consequently commissioned by the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to undertake an infrastructure programme to increase understanding of current capabilities and to plan for the future.

The programme's objective is to create a long-term (until 2030) research and innovation infrastructure roadmap, based on an understanding of existing UK infrastructure, key international facilities in which the UK participates, future needs and resulting investment priorities. The 'Opportunities to grow our capability' report summarises the findings of this programme and is complemented by a [Landscape analysis](#).

Summary of relevant points

The future direction of the social sciences, arts and humanities are discussed in Chapter 5. The chapter conveys an important message of how infrastructures that support the heritage and creative sectors play a key role in ensuring the health, wealth and wellbeing of the nation, drive economic growth and create conditions for greater social cohesion, equality and inclusivity.

Of the chapter's five themes, 'Creative economy' and 'Maintaining and preserving cultural heritage' bear the most relevance to the cultural heritage conservation sector. The findings and proposals are discussed below.

The Institute of Conservation is a membership organisation and charity which brings together those with a passion for the care of cultural heritage. Icon raises awareness of the cultural, social and economic value of caring for heritage and champions high standards of conservation. We represent nearly 3,000 individuals and organizations comprising professional conservators, heritage scientists and many others committed to improving understanding of and access to our cultural heritage.

Find out more about Icon's achievements and impact: www.icon.org.uk/about-us/icons-impact

Theme 3 – Creative Economy

The report explains how the galleries, libraries and museums (GLAM) sectors draw on their collections to drive innovation in essential areas of the creative economy. It calls for increased understanding of the physical world and the knowledge that working with physical objects can bring, noting how cultural research currently focuses on the digital environment.

A case study is presented to showcase materials-driven innovation: A student on the AHRC's Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships programme is applying an understanding of embroidery and digital fabrication to 'repair' and reconstruct sixteenth century embroidered garments in the advanced stages of deterioration. The technique breathes "new life" into fragile objects that would otherwise remain hidden from the public and drives innovation in the emerging field of e-textiles.

Icon welcomes the report's recognition of the interconnections between cultural heritage and the creative industries. The report's example demonstrates the central role that knowledge of conservation and materials can play in powering innovation. We hope the findings will inspire further opportunities for interdisciplinary research in conservation.

UKRI suggests a number of approaches to build on the positive synergies between the creative economy and cultural heritage sector, such as:

- **A national centre for play, creativity and skills** to build "creative confidence" through interaction with materials, objects and crafts and to increase evidence of the value of practical skills.

Icon supports a centre for creative and crafts skills. The conservation of cultural heritage is based on a strong knowledge of the physical properties of materials and practical hands on skills. Engagement with conservation thus has considerable potential to support "creative confidence," with professional conservators being well-placed to deliver technical skills. A national centre would also benefit the pipeline of talent into conservation. This is of particular importance as arts and creative subjects are side-lined in national curricula in favour of STEM subjects.

- **"Blended study facilities"** in heritage institutions and storage facilities to enable researchers, designers and creative practitioners to access physical collections.

Icon strongly believes in the value of collections-led research. Heritage collections can inspire new products and services and inform responses to big societal challenges. For example, collections can offer a benchmark for monitoring change, supporting climate change research. The proposed facilities could in turn enhance heritage institutions' own knowledge of their collections through new perspectives and expertise. Pooling intellectual effort and knowledge plays an important role in maximising the sector's limited resources.

- **National infrastructure for preserving born-digital materials** and data like video games and social media platforms.

Digital products and technologies have already become an important part of our heritage and its conservation challenges traditional and established methods of practice. Icon's [Labour Market Intelligence](#) identified serious skills needs and an absence of available training for time-based and digital media conservation already in 2013.

Icon is an ambitious advocacy body and thought leader for cultural heritage conservation.

We research the cultural and political landscape to identify opportunities and challenges and to deliver insight. We engage with stakeholders and partners to pool resources and to ensure conservation is included within wider discussions. We influence decision makers, opinion formers and the public to build understanding and support for cultural heritage.

The speed at which technology and digital media develop suggests that new skills needs in this specialist area of conservation will continue to emerge. Investment in infrastructure supporting the skills of the conservation workforce is vital to guaranteeing our digital heritage is preserved for future generations.

Theme 4: Maintaining and preserving cultural heritage

The report's results confirm the value of cultural heritage. They underline the heritage economy's 29 billion contribution to national GVA and the many social benefits to mental health and wellbeing derived from heritage engagement. To support continued progress in the field, UKRI proposes:

- Phased cataloguing, digitisation and connecting of national collections

Icon commends this ambitious proposal. Fully integrating collections searches across publicly funded museums would have a transformative effect on research and access: Digitisation can reveal detailed information not normally visible, decrease the risk of damage caused by handling and allow objects to be virtually curated with distant collections. Conservators will need to play a vital role in such work, for example by assessing the suitability of objects for digitisation and undertaking treatment and managing appropriate conditions to enable digitisation. Adherence to standards in digitisation will be of the utmost importance to assure high-quality results.

An important part of an object's metadata is its conservation record, which details the object's condition and conservation history. This information is important to understanding an object's current state but it also reveals to future generations how the asset was valued. Icon is a dissemination partner of [Linked Conservation Data](#) – a Network of partners working on improving access to conservation documentation records. The Network may prove a valuable support to UKRI's proposed series of scoping projects to develop the proposal and improve connectivity between national collections data.

- Advanced facilities for the storage, conservation and analysis of physical artefacts

The report's recommendation is most welcome in light of the need for increased infrastructure to accommodate and care for existing and future collections. Many museums are challenged by overflowing storage with limited staffing and resources risking the preservation of collections. The adequate care of items relies on new and up-to-date infrastructure but also support for skills development and public engagement. The proposals for conservation facilities to provide physical spaces for such activities could help demonstrate the value of cultural heritage conservation to wider audiences.

Conclusion

Icon welcomes the publication of the findings of the UKRI Research Infrastructure Programme.

We are delighted to see the value of cultural heritage explicitly acknowledged in the document and endorse the proposals to support the continued success of the sector. The report's recommendations for infrastructure to help build creative and craft skills, develop the capability of conservation facilities and enhance access to collections and data are of particular importance.