



THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

The Rt Hon. the Lord Elis-Thomas
Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism
Welsh Government
5th Floor
Tŷ Hywel
Cardiff Bay
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15 April 2020

Dear Lord Elis-Thomas,

Impact of Coronavirus on the cultural heritage conservation sector

I am writing on behalf of the [Institute of Conservation](https://www.icon.org.uk) (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 9% of our members work in Wales.

We know you are acutely aware of the scale of the crisis the Coronavirus pandemic represents to the Welsh cultural sector that relies on audiences, visitors and public participation, as well as the risks to the livelihoods of the large number of freelancers who work within the cultural heritage sector. 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 are shutting 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.
- 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 also 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; conservators will be needed to ensure that currently inaccessible objects and collections are properly cared for once access is allowed once again so that people are able to reconnect and regain their sense of belonging. The conservation of our shared cultural heritage has the potential to support our personal wellbeing as well as our economic prosperity both during and after the pandemic.

We therefore warmly welcome the launch of the Welsh Government's Cultural Resilience Fund to assist museums, collections and conservation services and are grateful for this important support, which will help mitigate many of the risks above. However, the crucial social distancing and self-isolation measures put in place to curb the spread of the virus present an additional threat to cultural heritage collections and further Government guidance and leadership is required. Many institutions and organisations have had to close their buildings and sites at short notice, leaving the objects and collections in their care at risk. Collections maintenance, the operation of vital environmental systems and many other important day-to-day tasks are not currently possible, which is increasing rates of deterioration and decay. With buildings empty, emergencies and other immediate threats such as equipment faults and leaking pipes may not be spotted in time to prevent damage.

Addressing this risk can only be achieved by providing the means for key conservation staff to continue to maintain safe and acceptable conditions on sites, and putting in place emergency networks to respond to any potential salvage operations. Your colleagues at DCMS have [confirmed](#) that ensuring the security of premises and appropriate protection and conservation of cultural objects stored in them is an appropriate reason for people to leave their homes. I encourage your Government to release a similar statement to ensure that Welsh cultural heritage is suitably cared for during the lockdown.

Icon continues to work closely with sector bodies across the UK to coordinate our efforts and to offer guidance to cultural heritage organisations at this challenging time. We are also collecting evidence, case studies and feedback from our members to understand key issues and challenges for the profession as they emerge. I would be happy to discuss these points further with you or your team if that would be helpful.

Yours sincerely,



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Chief Executive