

## Select Committee Inquiry into UK Cultural Heritage - Countries of Culture

### I. Introduction

Written evidence submitted by Alison Richmond ACR FIIC, Chief Executive, Icon, the Institute of Conservation on behalf of the Institute.

The Institute of Conservation is a registered charity and the UK professional body for the conservation 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 organisations. Icon's membership incorporates not only professional conservators and conservation scientists, but many others who share a commitment to improving understanding of and access to our cultural heritage. Most of our members are UK-based but many also work internationally. Icon accredits conservators (Accredited Conservator-Restorers) who have reached a proficient level of practice, judgment and ethics across the professional standards.

We are submitting evidence to this inquiry to draw the Committee's attention to (1) the impact of local authority funding on conservation provision in the regions and to (2) the risks posed to cultural heritage by diminishing resources. As heritage organisations look for new ways to fill the funding gap by generating new income streams, they are looking at increasing the use of and access to cultural heritage assets. We hold the strong belief that conservation is critical to enabling access to cultural heritage, and to reducing the risk of damage and wear-and-tear to heritage, thereby ensuring its survival for the enjoyment of future generations.

We were unable within the time frame to provide a comprehensive overview of conservation provision across all regions. Instead, we have been able to draw out some key themes from a spot survey of our members in regional museums and with reference to published reports. We would have liked to have provided more hard statistics to support our evidence, but this was not possible within the time scale.

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### III. Executive summary

This summary aims to cover the following points of the inquiry

- The current funding situation for cultural sectors in the regions and sub-regions:
- The regional impact of local authority settlement on the cultural sector:
- New funding models in the cultural sector, including the use of lottery funding:
- Skills, management and infrastructure of regional cultural institutions:

- 1. Overall there is a perceived reduction in the resources available for conservation and collections care.**

Numbers of employed conservators have been drastically reduced and there is a perceived movement of conservators from employment to freelance; while at the same time, freelancers are finding it harder to get work. Financially driven changes have merged or reduced the size of departments with resulting diminishing of specialist expertise resource. In some regions, although there has been no reduction in the number of conservators, it is believed that it is too early to assess the impact of recent local authority settlements.

**2. There is a reduction of core conservation staff compliment in many cultural institutions**

Other related job roles, e.g. technicians, registrars, collections managers, are being lost or are moving to freelance, leaving employed conservators to cover these areas, with the resulting diminishing of specialist expertise resource. Project funding is leaving limited resource for routine collection care tasks. The loss of in-house expertise threatens the sustainability of cultural collections.

**3. The conservation workforce is a delicately balanced mixed economy of employed and freelance conservators many working in micro businesses and is vulnerable to changes in funding and other external factors.**

Conservation workplaces are typically small with 1-5 employees. The workforce comprises specialists based on materials and objects types (ceramics, furniture). Some are treatment specialists, others specialise in collections care. Such a mixed economy demands complex infrastructure to be effective – the impact of the loss of in house expertise is of concern as is the loss of specialist conservators.

**4. Many regional museums have no access to conservation advice**

This includes institutions providing advice on a regional basis. Contracting in of services Small grant programmes are useful for project based work but do not provide continuity of expertise.

**5. Income generation may be diverting specialist skills from core work on conservation of collections**

Museums are looking for new ways to fill the funding gap by generating new income streams. Income generation targets are the norm for regional conservation departments and some are moving towards fully self funding. Contracting out of services to private commissions and the additional calls on conservators' time that income generation requires can have an adverse impact on other specialist activities, such as longer term collections care.

**6. Alternative forms of funding are critical to the conservation and preservation of cultural heritage**

Alternative sources of funding, e.g. ACE funding and DCMS through ACE funding (non local authority funding) are considered crucial for conservation services to survive and for the viability of future regional initiatives. Project funding is the norm. At the same time, it appears to be harder to get funding as more museums go to trust status and are attracted to the same funding pots. This can be time consuming and take expert resource away from conservation and care of collections.

**7. Skills gaps and difficulties training new generations of conservators threaten sustainability**

Museums report that they are finding it harder to train the next generation of conservators. Heritage Lottery Fund has played a key role in this training and has provided new funding models for training in heritage.

8. **Partnership working is growing out of the need to make the most of scarce resources.**  
There are some good examples of this.

#### IV. Body of Report

1. While we have been unable to provide comprehensive figures, it is widely perceived that the numbers of employed conservators have been drastically reduced since 2008. Members cited reduction in conservation teams at National Museums Liverpool, Birmingham, Coventry and in the South West. It is expected that further cuts are planned in line with the recent local government settlement. Southwest Museum Development Programme has seen financially driven changes that have merged departments resulting in a loss of expertise. The size of departments has also been reduced. This limits regional activity and restricts the ability to train future conservators. Last year saw the merger of the Conservation and Documentation teams at Bristol under a new manager so there is no longer a dedicated conservation manager there. Last year Bristol also lost one of two object conservation posts. In Bristol, as with most regional museums over the last 10 years there has been a decline in the size the department which used to have two paper conservators, two paintings conservators and a textile conservator. However, they consider themselves luckier than some to have been able to retain in house specialisms with an objects, paintings, paper and preventive conservator still on staff.

In Greater Manchester, there is no perceived reduction in numbers of conservators, but this may be because it is too early to assess the impact of the recent local authority settlements. In fact, there is more certainty with some posts being brought back into core funding. In Bristol, the impact of local authority funding settlements is not yet apparent due to budgets for 2016- 17 having already been set.

2. In the NW, it is reported that other related job roles e.g. technicians, registrars, collections managers, are being lost or moving to freelance, leaving employed conservators to cover these areas, with the resulting loss of specialist resources. Such a mixed economy can offer a level of complexity that demands more management and administration input by specialists who would be more effectively used in specialist activities.
3. The UK conservation workforce is a mixed economy of employed and freelance conservators, with many working in micro businesses. The workforce comprises specialists based on materials and objects types (ceramics, furniture). Some are treatment specialists, others specialise in collections care. Icon's Conservation Labour Market Intelligence 2012-13 estimated that 3,175 people worked as professional conservators, supported by 1,125 support staff, 700 volunteer conservators and 175 voluntary support staff, meaning that the total conservation workforce was 5,125 people. Conservation workplaces were typically very small; 84% of all conservation workplaces have five or fewer conservators working in them and nearly half have only one. Conservation employment was relatively evenly distributed between the public (31%), private (38%) and civil society/charity/NGO (30%) sectors. Skills gaps and shortages were identified in many areas of specialist conservation skills (digital media, time-based media, clocks, watches & scientific instruments, modern materials, furniture & woodwork) and also identified widely in areas of transferable professional skills (leadership, business, project management and IT). (Icon Conservation Labour Market Intelligence 2012-13, Kenneth Aitchison)
4. Many regional museums have no access to conservation advice. The Association of Independent Museums reports that many of their members have no access to conservation

advice of any kind and the small grants that it provides with The Pilgrim Trust do not stretch very far. In Yorkshire,

‘only 9 of the 59 museums surveyed have in-house conservation staff. Yet 11 institutions are supplying conservation advice or services to other museums within Yorkshire. 66% of museum respondents are contracting in conservators to provide advice or remedial conservation on their behalf. Museums were also asked about where they obtained conservation advice if they were not employing an in-house conservator or a contract conservator. Respondents reported taking conservation advice from non-conservators on a regular basis, with 14 respondents taking advice from their Museum Mentor and 8 taking advice from Museum Development Yorkshire. Another 9 received pro-bono advice from professional conservators.’ (Strategies for Sustainability Survey Report: Conservation and Collections Care in Yorkshire, 2015, Alaina Schmisser, Museum Development Yorkshire)

5. Museums are looking for new ways to fill the funding gap by generating new income streams. For example, Birmingham Museums Trust is developing three international touring exhibitions. This makes additional calls on conservators’ time that can have an adverse impact on other specialist activities. Income generation targets are the norm for regional conservation departments and in some cases moving towards fully self funding. In the North West region, although numbers in local authority funded museums are being maintained, remits of the employees are changing to cover income generation activity. Lancashire Conservation Centre staffing levels (conservators & technicians) have not changed much but they have moved from being purely Lancashire museums staff to being expected to make back their salaries in private commissions and now look like they will be self funding if the Lancashire local government changes go ahead. Bristol reports that quite a lot of their high profile conservation work is now paid for through the Museum’s fundraising teams activities. They have been instrumental in bringing in funds to conserve a number of works and are very proactive in trying to secure funding not just for exhibitions but also less exciting collections care work. At the same time, it appears to be harder to get funding as more museums go to trust status and are attracted to the same funding pots.
6. Alternative sources of funding, e.g. ACE funding and DCMS through ACE funding (non local authority funding) are considered crucial for conservation services to survive and for future regional initiatives to be viable. In Bristol, without Renaissance and now ACE funding provision would very definitely be under threat as the council looks to reduce spending where it can. Project funding is the norm. In Birmingham, they have seven staff: 2.5 Staffordshire Hoard conservators funded by National Geographic, HLF, English Heritage and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation; plus 4.5. Local authority museums reported that their staff complements were precarious due to uncertainty about funding continuing. Birmingham Museum Trust reported that while they receive ACE MPM project money for conservation excellence in the region for the next three years, without this funding they would be down from 4.5 to 2.5 staff.

‘In Yorkshire, only 50% of museums surveyed have a dedicated conservation or collections care budget. 68% of museums spend less than £5000 on conservation and collections care per year, and these budgets have remained stable year on year. There is a risk to the sustainability of collections due to a lack of budgetary planning for conservation and collections care on the part of museums.’ (Strategies for Sustainability Report – Yorkshire Museums Trust)

7. Museums reported that they were finding it harder to train the next generation of conservators. Bristol does still have a student programme and tries to take at least one student every year for summer placements. However, with staffing resource having reduced this is becoming harder to facilitate. The balance between workload and being able to providing good quality supervision and the right training experience is getting harder to achieve. Heritage Lottery Fund has played a key role in the training of next generation conservators across the heritage domain, not only in museums, and has provided new funding models for training in heritage conservation. A UK-wide programme delivered by Icon with a grant of £2.45m supplemented with an additional £1m from other funders 2006-2015 created 146 internships with 89% retention in the conservation sector. In 2015, HLF provided an additional £350,000 to a regional museum (the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, County Durham), part of a major heritage grant, for training next generation conservators over five years.
8. Partnership working is growing out of the need to make the most of scarce resources. In Bristol, they are looking at ways of reinvigorate their regional remit as part of a steering group looking at providing a sustainable conservation service in the south west. The feasibility research for this project has just been completed and was funded by the Arts Council and co-ordinated by the region's Museum Development Officers. In the NW, local government museums are working more closely together; Greater Manchester Museums Group, Museum Development North West and individual local partnerships, Bolton and Wigan, for example, mean there has been some good examples of collaborative working. Conservators are consulting either on a pro-bono basis with one of our partners or with Bolton charging for time since.

'The Manchester Partnership delivered the collections care & management programme in 2014-15 with Museum Development North West (MDNW) as part of its Arts Council England (ACE) Museum Development funding programme for 2015-2018. This programme was designed to support museum staff from varying museums in the region to achieve, maintain and improve collections care & management requirements detailed in Section 2 of the ACE-managed Museum Accreditation Standard.' (Museum Development North West Collections Care and Management Programme 2014-15 Evaluation Report)

V. Case Study - A regional summary of impact from the South West Museum Development Programme (SWMDP)

The southwest region is geographically the largest of the English regions and has the second highest concentration of museums (213 with Arts Council England's Accreditation scheme and approx. 250 non-accredited) in the English regions after the south east of England; despite having the lowest population density in England and a far lower average income.

The South West Museum Development Programme (SWMDP) is hosted by Bristol City Council and core funded by the Arts Council England as one of nine Museum Development Providers across the English regions. SWMDP manages and distributes public funding of almost £800,000 per annum as part of the delivery of museum development support services across the region. The current 2015-18 funding agreements comprise of £477,000 Arts Council Museum Development

funding, £181,000 of small capital funds, £125,000 of local government funding and approximately £35,000 of local project funding.

Conservation services in the southwest are predominately provided by conservators employed by local authorities and the National Trust and a large body of freelance conservators. In addition, one full-time conservator is provided as a region-wide resource through the South West Museum Development Programme (SWMDP) with DCMS funding distributed by Arts Council England. 23 local authorities contribute to the programme enabling Accredited museums within their area to draw on a range of support services including those provided by the Conservation Development Officer.

In addition SWMDP is a key provider of funding for conservation projects. This support is partly through its own budget of ACE- administered DCMS funds, but also through the careful management of grants funded projects across the region. Over the past 2012-2015 Museum Development funding cycle the SWMDP Conservation Development officer has carried out over 50 onsite advisory visits and provided professional conservation support to over 120 museum and heritage organisations.

However, despite these services in recent years the numbers of conservators employed by local authority museums and museum services have been drastically reduced and further cuts are planned in line with the recent local government settlement. Bristol City Council and Exeter City Council are the only local authorities responsible for operating museums and employing conservators in the region. Both these services have also cut back their conservation provision. There is an ongoing pressure to reduce the head count in core museum services in order to increase the focus on income generating activities in order to support a diverse funding ecology and dependency on local authority core funding. For example, one city council museum service previously employed 3 full time specialist conservators to care for their extensive collections of prints, paintings and frames, as well as 1 full-time preventive conservator to care for their extensive archaeological, ethnographic, social and natural history collections. They currently have one part-time conservator and when the museum reopens after redevelopment it is anticipated that the service will move away from in-house conservation activity to exclusively external conservation contracts. SWMDP is aware of another large unitary Conservation and Museum Service seeking to find significant reductions as local authority funding shrinks away from non-statutory services.

The impact of a reduction of paid conservators has a direct impact on the productivity of key conservation assets in the region, many of which have directly benefited from Lottery and additional public funding. One example is of a conservation lab being left empty since the previous employee left in one of the county museums in the region. Lastly, freelance conservators are reporting difficulty obtaining work from local authority museums as both the level of activity reduces but also in light of increasing procurement and insurance constraints which are passed down to the contractor.

The SWMDP has recently received Arts Council England's Resilience Funding in order to carry out a feasibility study on the development of a sustainable conservation development service for the region. This project brings together the conservation providers within publically funded institutions to access the assets, processes and

sector infrastructure alongside economists and researchers to identify a model of collaborative conservation and collection care provision within the region. By developing effective strategic collaborations across the providers it has been possible to identify opportunities for maximizing public investment and moving to a financially sustainable model of delivery. However this transition will remain dependant on public funding of core conservation services and assets working in junction with a vibrant and sustainable freelance conservation sector.

VI. Acknowledgements:

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