



THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

The Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP  
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport  
100 Parliament Street  
London  
SW1A 2BQ

25 March 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

### **Impact of COVID-19 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 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.

We know you are acutely aware of the scale of the crisis the COVID-19 pandemic represents to the UK's cultural and creative sectors that rely 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 and creative industries. We have noted recent communications from your department and are grateful for the support that DCMS is already giving these sectors.

However, I would like to take the opportunity to draw your attention to the further challenges that are specific to the UK's cultural heritage conservation sector, in particular:

- Many conservators work in the museums, galleries, archives and historic sites that are shutting their doors across the UK 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 COVID-19, 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.

- While some freelance conservators work in their private studios many freelance conservators work on-site on major nationally important projects like the Westminster Palace and Lincoln Cathedral restoration projects. Social distancing measures are risking the income of these conservators because they are unable to work remotely. In addition, the stoppage of work on sites like these poses a risk to the fabric of the buildings where they are left in an unprotected state. We are also concerned about the continuity of skills provision, as highly-trained craftspeople may leave the sector resulting in a skills shortage.

Thinking ahead, the future financial health of the cultural heritage conservation sector cannot be ignored. The 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 identities and conservators will be needed to ensure that currently inaccessible objects and collections are properly cared for once access is allowed once again. 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.

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 to help the sector plan ahead.** This is vital 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.
- **A targeted and coordinated emergency package of support for the cultural heritage sector.** We commend the Chancellor's package of measures to support businesses but urge Government to ensure help is available for cultural organisations of all types and sizes, including charities. Clarity and support from Government and funding bodies to help cultural organisations navigate the process of applying for existing support will also be needed.
- **We wholeheartedly support IPSE's [call](#) for a Temporary Income Protection fund or some other measure for the self-employed to cover loss of income.** We welcome the Government's measures to improve access to the welfare system and credit and tax deferrals but share IPSE's concerns that the self-employed remain exposed.

We hope you will consider the above issues as you continue to raise across Government the support needed for the sector's continued survival. We are working closely with The Heritage Alliance and other sector bodies 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 DCMS team if that would be helpful. I have also written to the Chancellor and Secretary of State for Health to welcome the Government's efforts to date and to raise the same concerns I have outlined to you in this letter.

Yours sincerely,



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Chief Executive