

Steady state?

A snap museums survey September 2023



Background

In September 2023 AIM surveyed members on how the sector is managing in the midst of challenges including continued high energy bills, lingering effects on audience numbers following the Covid-19 pandemic, and an ever more-challenging picture for public funding.

Over 250 respondents answered, in a representative pattern similar to the September 2022 survey: 90% of respondents were in England, 7% in Scotland, 3% in Wales. 64% of respondents were small museums in AIM membership terms (fewer than 20,000 visitors annually). The remaining third was principally made up of large/largest museums (50,000-100,000 and above) at 15%, with a smaller proportion of medium museums (20,000-50,000 visitors) at 5%. Three-quarters were independent and 9% local authority, with small numbers of university and military museums responding.

Key findings

- For 70% of museums visitor numbers during the summer months were at, or better than, projections and for 64% the same was true of summer income.
- 72% of museums feel able to cope with cost pressures, although for 44% this is only in the short term
- 64% reported they had not had to scale down planned activity this year
- 30% of museums had had a significantly worse summer than projected
- Large museums appear to be particularly vulnerable and were the least likely to report they can absorb costs, with only half reporting this (compared to 70% of small museums and 83% of medium)
- Strongest support needs echo those pre-pandemic: capital funding for maintenance (44%) and transformation projects (39%).
- There is clear demand for MEND, or nation equivalent funds, to be continued

Fewer at imminent risk

A heartening finding is that 95% of respondents do not consider themselves at risk of insolvency, compared to 88% last year. One reported their level of risk as imminent (insolvency before Christmas), with another six at risk in the next 12 months. Three quarters of museums have three or more months of reserves available – although a third of museums expect to dip into reserves to help manage pressed budgets.

Last year's immediate issue, energy bills, appears to have levelled out across the sector. 10% of museums are expecting significant increases in energy bills in the next 6-12 months, while 60% are expecting them to stay the same or reduce. A quarter of museums reported being registered for the Energy Bills Discount Scheme: for 55% of those registered it was too soon to tell whether it would have an impact on their bills, with the rest split evenly between those for which it had been beneficial and those for which it had not helped.

Shortly before the survey was released the RAAC crisis emerged in schools and we added a question about prevalence of this material in museum buildings. Fortunately it seems to be a minor issue for the sector, with 93% of respondents confirming no RAAC present in their buildings and only one knowing it is there, with a handful of others intending to investigate the matter.

As ever, we encourage organisations with concerns about imminent insolvency to contact AIM on lisa.ollerhead@aim-museums.co.uk, or other bodies such as Museum Development services and the Arts Council in England; Museums Galleries Scotland; Welsh Federation; and Northern Ireland Government.

An improving outlook?

The reduced level of crisis reported may be considered indicative of a generally more positive sector outlook compared to last year– although this could also reflect a sector that has resigned itself to lower expectations than before the pandemic. For 70% of museums, visitor numbers during the summer months were at or better than projections, and for 64% the same was true of summer income. About 20% of museums had a slightly worse summer than hoped for (visitor numbers and income 29% or less below projections) – much improved compared to last year, where around 30% of museums had had a significantly worse summer than projected.

There were some differences across the sector in terms of who had a significantly worse summer than expected (visitor numbers 30% or more below projections). Large museums were slightly more likely to have been significantly worse off (7% to an average of 5%); so were museums in Scotland (15% had a significantly worse summer); and 11% of independent museums spun out of trusts had a worse summer, possibly reflecting fewer tourists in the city centres where this type of museum tends to be located. However, small respondent numbers in all these categories may skew results.

The as-expected performance over summer has left most museums in a reasonably strong position going into the quieter winter months. 72% of museums feel able to cope with cost pressures, although for 44% this is only in the short term. Large museums appear to be particularly vulnerable and were the least likely to report they can absorb costs, with only half reporting this (compared to 70% of small museums and 83% of medium). This is a shift from last year when medium museums reported being more vulnerable. Only 6% of museums reported that their costs have stabilised and they are under no pressure. Energy costs remain a key pressure, with 58% of museums reporting this, and a similar proportion reporting expenditure on core activities as a major pressure.

More optimistically 15% of museums are expecting income in the rest of the financial year to be above projections, with 8% expecting to be significantly below projections. Again, the worse outcomes are not evenly expected around the sector: independent museums spun out of trusts, military museums, and the largest museums are more likely to believe visitor numbers will be worse than expected over the next six months.

Tackling costs

85% of museums are continuing to take action to mitigate rising costs – likely to be building on last year, when 90% of museums were taking action. It is also likely that across the sector any 'quick wins' have already been implemented and many museums will now be in the territory of very difficult decisions to reduce costs further. New cost pressures were reported around insurance, servicing loans, coping with local authority decisions (e.g., reduced or removed grants, transferring building costs to occupying charities, short-term tenancies), and progressing work on repatriation and international partnerships. A sizeable minority of museums have reduced important work including public offer, capital works, refreshing galleries, and back of house collections care.

More positively 62% of museums still hope to be able to increase income to offset increased spending and 64% reported they had not had to scale down planned activity this year (compared to 60% last year). Out of the listed actions small museums were most likely to have plans to increase income, reduce energy use, and use reserves, with some innovative ideas to increase income including residential letting and even paranormal investigations. One respondent pointed out erratic weather as an emerging major risk for their outdoor site, with extreme heat and unseasonal rain affecting visitor numbers.

13% of museums have reduced or plan to reduce opening times, down from 20% last year, with an effect on staff time. Considerably fewer museums are planning restructures or redundancies, 6% compared to around 15% last year, which may reflect that this work has been done and more museums are now running on reduced teams.

Current support needs

85% of museums are looking for support. 22% would like help with energy bills compared to 45% last year – we are not currently aware of any Government plans to extend the Energy Bills Discount Scheme. The strongest needs are for capital funding for maintenance (44%) and transformation projects (39%). 39% are also seeking core funding beyond April 2024 and the same proportion would like project funding. 20% need more support to access funding that is already there.

This suggests patterns of support need are returning to that seen pre-pandemic, with maintenance as a major problem for the sector. It is likely that other parts of the sector (local authority and university museums) have greater need for core funding than represented in this group of respondents. Availability of funding for maintenance, projects, and back of house work featured highly in a new question asking where respondents would like AIM to focus its advocacy work in the coming months.

Maintenance was mentioned frequently as a cost pressure and a need, with one museum, after an unsuccessful application to the Museum Maintenance and Development Fund (MEND), asking 'where do we go now?' The need to upgrade was also mentioned as a barrier to generating more income and becoming more sustainable.

Conclusions

While the findings give some reason for cautious optimism, they also suggest a split sector: some museums are enjoying strong visitor numbers and income, can manage the ongoing impacts of the cost-of-living crisis and energy bills, and have limited support needs – while others continue to struggle, although fewer to the drastic point of fearing insolvency. This prompts us to consider whether we have arrived at a juncture where certain museums have successfully rebounded from the pandemic's impact, while others should be regarded as permanently altered in terms of their visitor numbers, income patterns, or their pre-2020 trajectory.

AIM is committed to responding to this split and investigating how we can assist museums that may require new business models, with a particular focus on bolstering their income streams. We are also keen to expand our peer support network and provide customized guidance to better meet the evolving needs of our member museums.

A clear and consistent demand, from right across the sector and reinforced by this survey, is for MEND to be continued and similar funding made available in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

AIM will share these findings in detail with other sector bodies, work with them to highlight ongoing challenges, and continue to press for the financial support and help our members need.

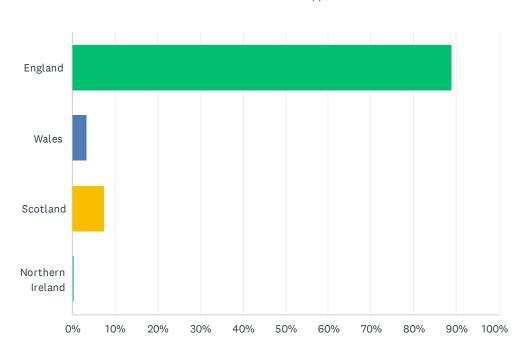
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Appendices



Q1 Where is your organisation?

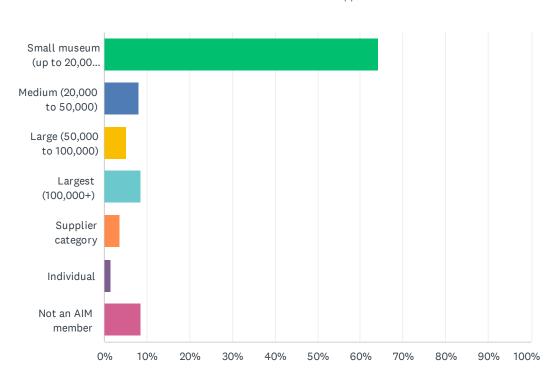




ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
England	88.81%	238
Wales	3.36%	9
Scotland	7.46%	20
Northern Ireland	0.37%	1
TOTAL		268

Q2 What AIM membership category are you in?

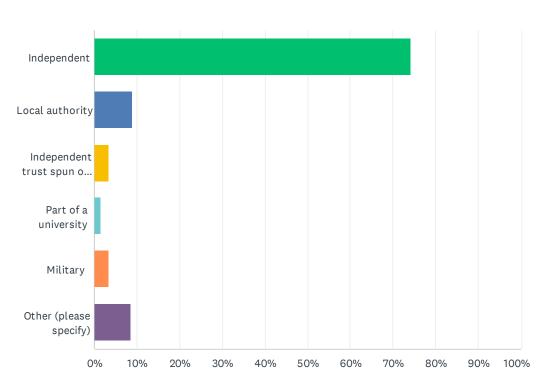




ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Small museum (up to 20,000 visitors)	64.18%	172
Medium (20,000 to 50,000)	8.21%	22
Large (50,000 to 100,000)	5.22%	14
Largest (100,000+)	8.58%	23
Supplier category	3.73%	10
Individual	1.49%	4
Not an AIM member	8.58%	23
TOTAL		268

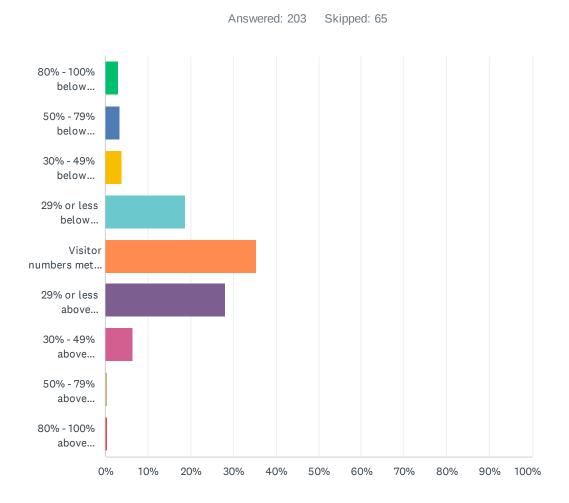
Q3 What type of organisation are you?





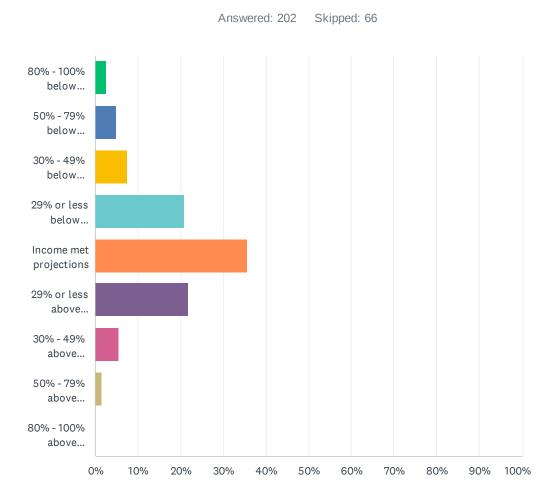
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Independent	74.25%	199
Local authority	8.96%	24
Independent trust spun out of local authority	3.36%	9
Part of a university	1.49%	4
Military	3.36%	9
Other (please specify)	8.58%	23
TOTAL		268

Q4 Thinking about total visitor figures (domestic and international) over the summer months (June – August), what was the reality compared to projections?



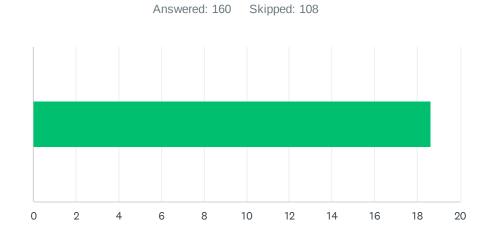
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
80% - 100% below projections	2.96%
50% - 79% below projections	3.45%
30% - 49% below projections	3.94%
29% or less below projections	18.72% 38
Visitor numbers met projections	35.47% 72
29% or less above projections	28.08% 57
30% - 49% above projections	6.40%
50% - 79% above projections	0.49%
80% - 100% above projections	0.49%
TOTAL	203

Q5 Thinking about total income over the summer months (June – August), what was the reality compared to projections?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
80% - 100% below projections	2.48%	5
50% - 79% below projections	4.95%	10
30% - 49% below projections	7.43%	15
29% or less below projections	20.79%	42
Income met projections	35.64%	72
29% or less above projections	21.78%	44
30% - 49% above projections	5.45%	11
50% - 79% above projections	1.49%	3
80% - 100% above projections	0.00%	0
TOTAL		202

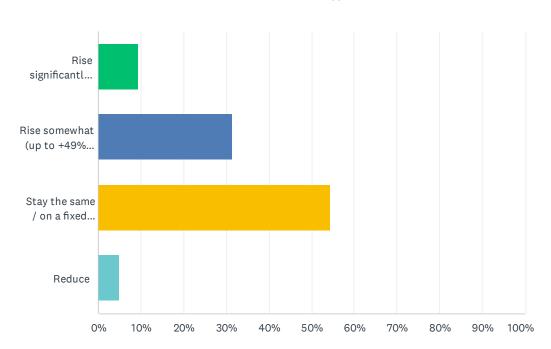
Q6 Broadly what proportion of your total income is now spent on energy bills?



ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
	19	2,983	160
Total Respondents: 160			

Q7 Over the next 6-12 months, do you expect your energy bills to:





ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Rise significantly (+50% or more)	9.38%	15
Rise somewhat (up to +49% increase)	31.25%	50
Stay the same / on a fixed contract	54.37%	87
Reduce	5.00%	8
TOTAL		160

Q8 Broadly, what do you anticipate will be the likely total cost of your energy bill in 2024?

Answered: 126 Skipped: 142

Q9 Have you registered for the Energy Bills Discount Scheme?

Yes

No

Don't know if our...

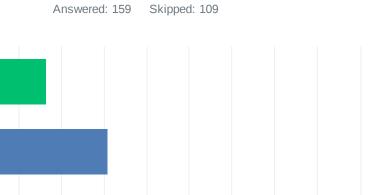
Don't know what this...

0%

10%

20%

30%



80%

90% 100%

70%

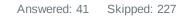
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	26.42%	42
No	40.88%	65
Don't know if our organisation is registered	20.75%	33
Don't know what this scheme is	11.95%	19
TOTAL		159

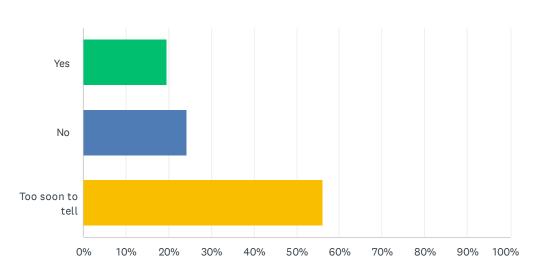
40%

50%

60%

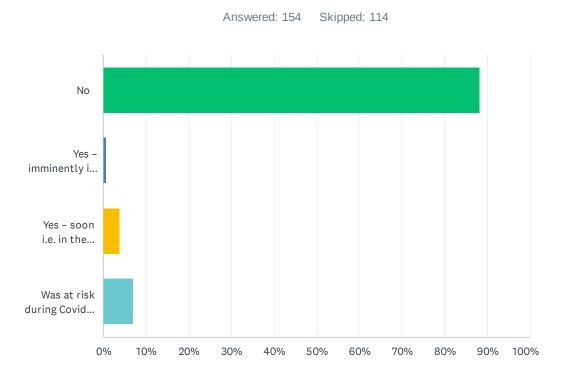
Q10 Have you seen a reduction in costs from the Energy Bills Discount Scheme?





ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	19.51%	8
No	24.39%	10
Too soon to tell	56.10%	23
TOTAL		41

Q11 Is your organisation at imminent risk of insolvency? i.e. are you at risk of closure / going out of business in the near future?



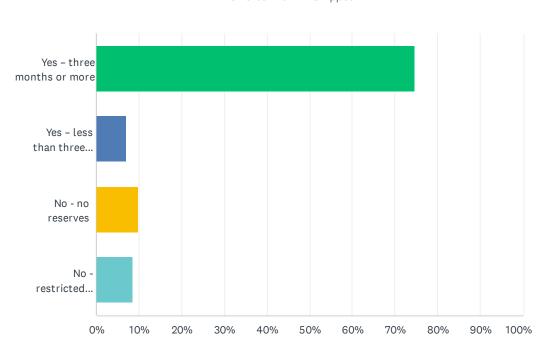
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No	88.31%	136
Yes – imminently i.e. before end of December 2023	0.65%	1
Yes – soon i.e. in the next 12 months	3.90%	6
Was at risk during Covid pandemic, but not now	7.14%	11
TOTAL		154

Q12 If you're at imminent risk, please leave your contact details and we'll be in touch as we'd like to help, if we can. Or you can get in touch with us - lisa.ollerhead@aim-museums.co.uk

Answered: 5 Skipped: 263

Q13 Do you have unrestricted reserves available?

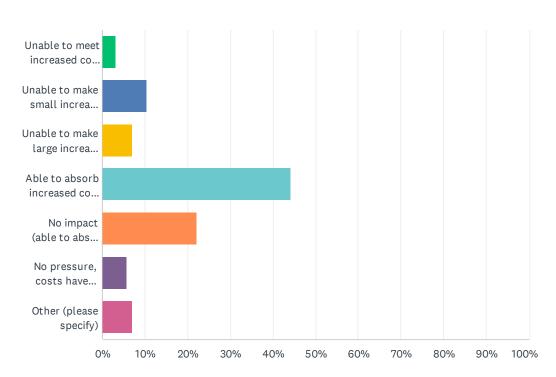




ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes – three months or more	74.68% 115
Yes – less than three months	7.14%
No - no reserves	9.74% 15
No - restricted reserves	8.44% 13
TOTAL	154

Q14 What has been the impact, or is the anticipated impact, on your organisation of increased pressure on costs?

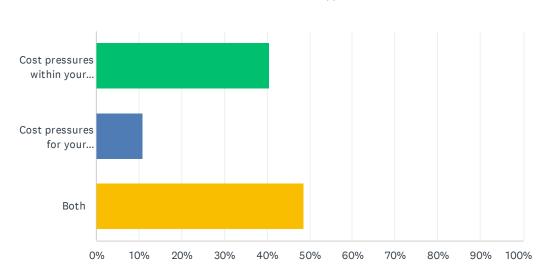




ANSWER CHOICES	RESPON	NSES
Unable to meet increased costs in the short-term (next 6 months) putting organisation at risk	3.25%	5
Unable to make small increases to visitor prices (e.g. admissions, retail, hospitality) without reducing demand	10.39%	16
Unable to make large increases to visitor prices (e.g. admissions, retail, hospitality) without reducing demand	7.14%	11
Able to absorb increased costs in the short term e.g. via reserves, reducing other outgoings etc but not in the long term	44.16%	68
No impact (able to absorb increased costs in the short and long term)	22.08%	34
No pressure, costs have stabilised	5.84%	9
Other (please specify)	7.14%	11
TOTAL		154

Q15 If you're unable to meet costs in short or long term, is the main issue:

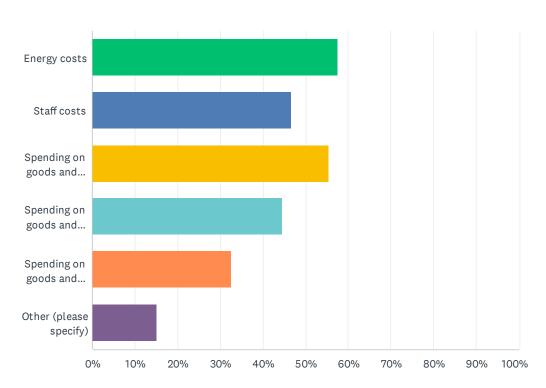




ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Cost pressures within your organisation (increased expenditure)	40.54% 30
Cost pressures for your visitors (decreased income)	10.81% 8
Both	48.65% 36
TOTAL	74

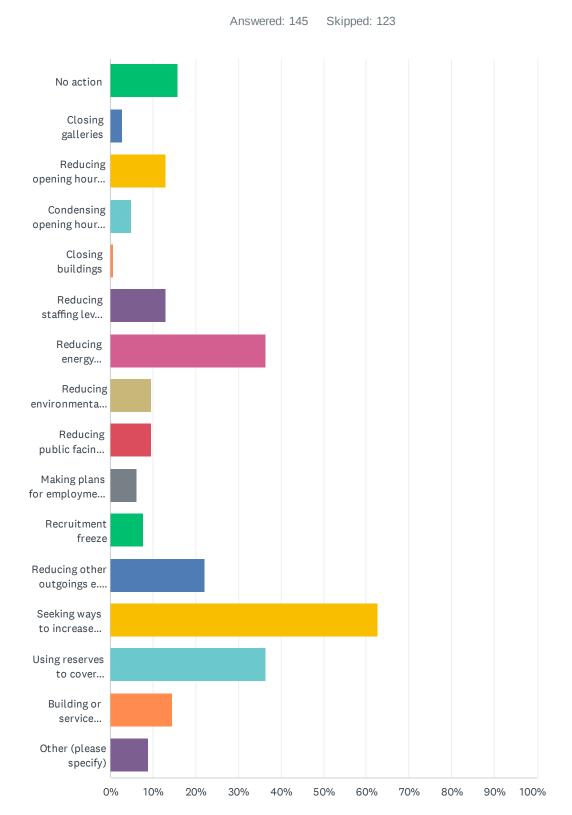
Q16 If you're experiencing cost pressures within your organisation, what are your cost pressures chiefly related to? Please tick all that apply.





ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Energy costs	57.61%	53
Staff costs	46.74%	43
Spending on goods and services for core activities	55.43%	51
Spending on goods and services for capital projects	44.57%	41
Spending on goods and services for programmes/projects	32.61%	30
Other (please specify)	15.22%	14
Total Respondents: 92		

Q17 What action have you taken so far, or do you plan to take, to mitigate rising costs? Please tick all that apply.

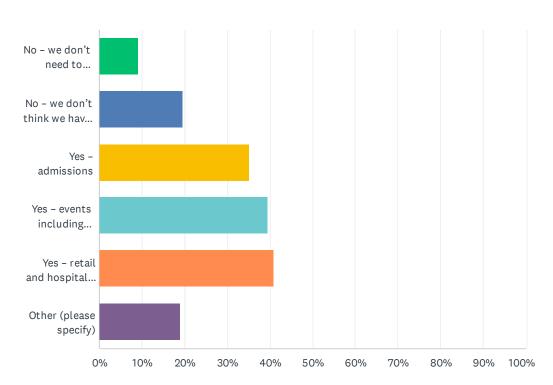


State of the sector survey

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No action	15.86%	23
Closing galleries	2.76%	4
Reducing opening hours / days	13.10%	19
Condensing opening hours across fewer days	4.83%	7
Closing buildings	0.69%	1
Reducing staffing levels temporarily	13.10%	19
Reducing energy consumption	36.55%	53
Reducing environmental controls in galleries	9.66%	14
Reducing public facing activity	9.66%	14
Making plans for employment restructures or redundancies	6.21%	9
Recruitment freeze	7.59%	11
Reducing other outgoings e.g. subscriptions / memberships / training	22.07%	32
Seeking ways to increase income to cover increased costs	62.76%	91
Using reserves to cover increased costs	36.55%	53
Building or service upgrades	14.48%	21
Other (please specify)	8.97%	13
Total Respondents: 145		

Q18 Are you planning to increase income this year? Please tick all that apply.

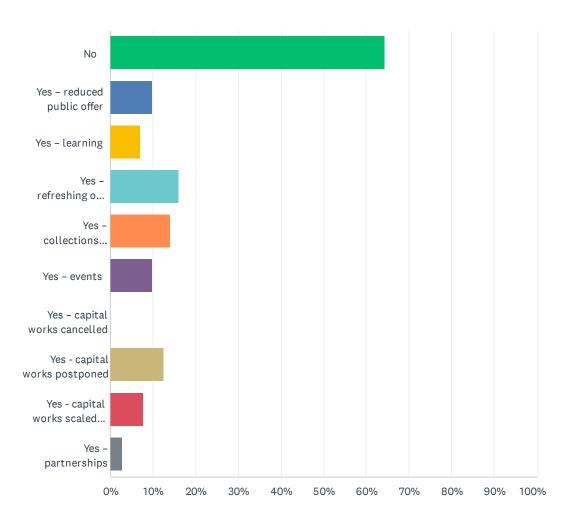




ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No – we don't need to increase our income	9.15%	13
No – we don't think we have options for increased income	19.72%	28
Yes – admissions	35.21%	50
Yes – events including corporate hire	39.44%	56
Yes – retail and hospitality	40.85%	58
Other (please specify)	19.01%	27
Total Respondents: 142		

Q19 Have you scaled down planned activity this year? Please tick all that apply.



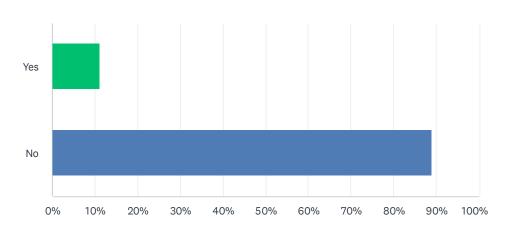


State of the sector survey

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No	64.34%	92
Yes – reduced public offer	9.79%	14
Yes – learning	6.99%	10
Yes – refreshing or creating displays	16.08%	23
Yes – collections work e.g. curation, conservation, research	13.99%	20
Yes – events	9.79%	14
Yes – capital works cancelled	0.00%	0
Yes - capital works postponed	12.59%	18
Yes - capital works scaled back	7.69%	11
Yes – partnerships	2.80%	4
Total Respondents: 143		

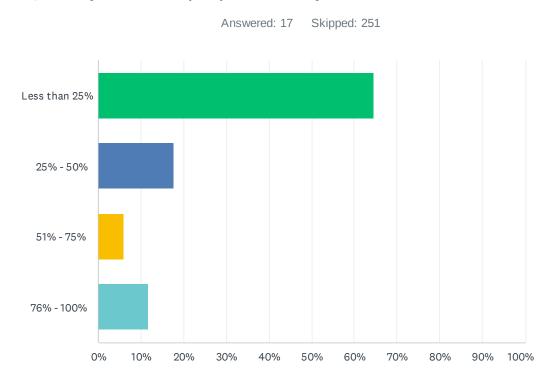
Q20 Are you making plans for employment restructures or redundancies?





ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	11.19%	16
No	88.81%	127
TOTAL		143

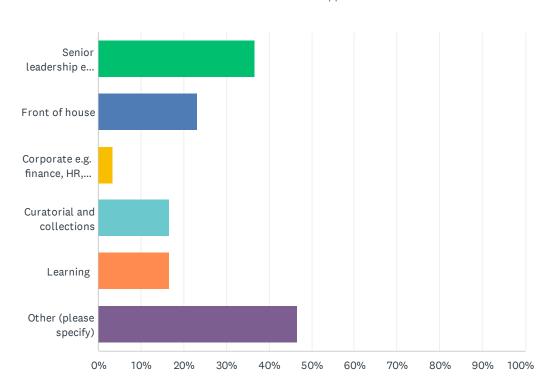
Q21 If yes, what proportion of your staff will be affected?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Less than 25%	64.71%	11
25% - 50%	17.65%	3
51% - 75%	5.88%	1
76% - 100%	11.76%	2
TOTAL		17

Q22 What types of your staff will be affected? Please tick all that apply.

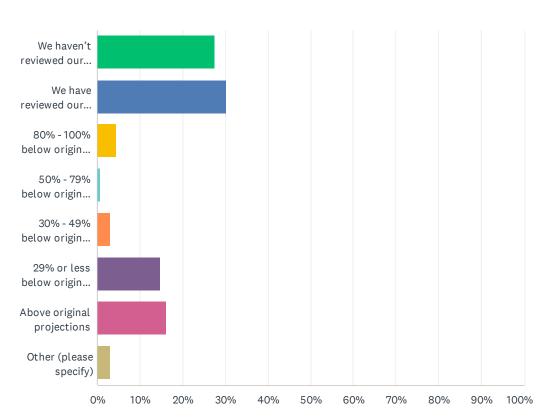




ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Senior leadership e.g. director, management team	36.67%	11
Front of house	23.33%	7
Corporate e.g. finance, HR, IT	3.33%	1
Curatorial and collections	16.67%	5
Learning	16.67%	5
Other (please specify)	46.67%	14
Total Respondents: 30		

Q23 What are your income projections up to the end of March 2024 (i.e. end of the tax year), compared to your projections made at the beginning of your financial year?

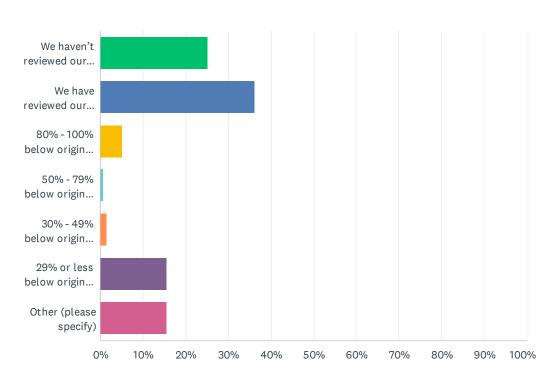




ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
We haven't reviewed our projections	27.41%	37
We have reviewed our projections but they haven't changed	30.37%	41
80% - 100% below original projections	4.44%	6
50% - 79% below original projections	0.74%	1
30% - 49% below original projections	2.96%	4
29% or less below original projections	14.81%	20
Above original projections	16.30%	22
Other (please specify)	2.96%	4
TOTAL		135

Q24 What are your visitor attendance expectations up to the end of March 2024?

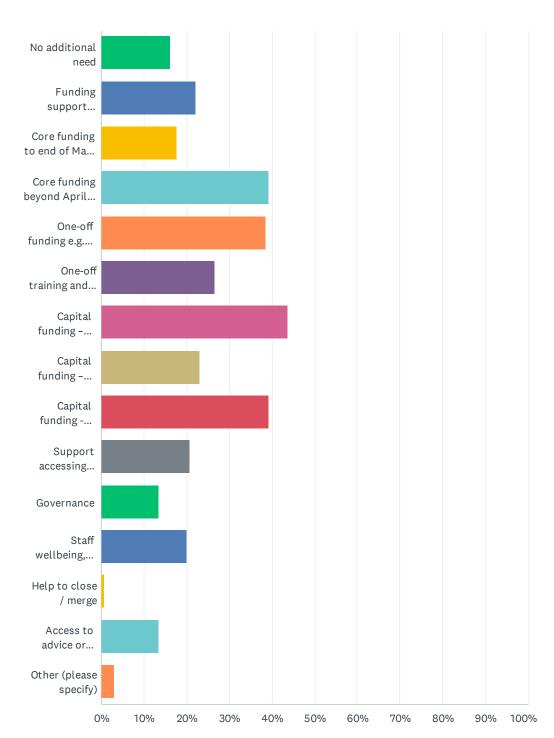




ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
We haven't reviewed our projections	25.19%	34
We have reviewed our projections but they haven't changed	36.30%	49
80% - 100% below original projections	5.19%	7
50% - 79% below original projections	0.74%	1
30% - 49% below original projections	1.48%	2
29% or less below original projections	15.56%	21
Other (please specify)	15.56%	21
TOTAL		135

Q25 What are your support needs over the coming months? Please tick all that apply.

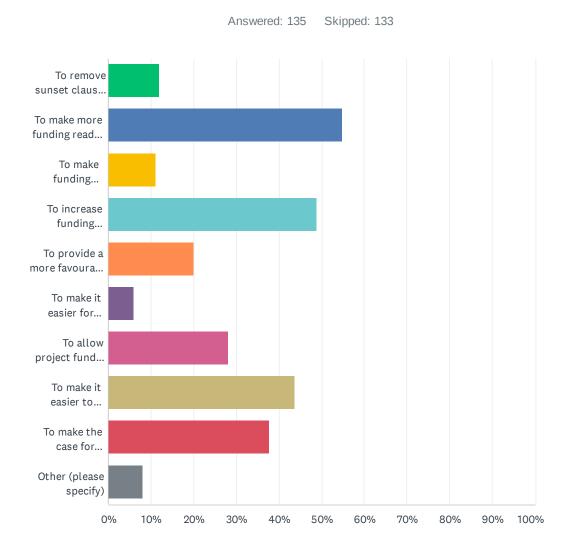




State of the sector survey

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No additional need	16.30%	22
Funding support specifically for energy bills	22.22%	30
Core funding to end of March 2024	17.78%	24
Core funding beyond April 2024	39.26%	53
One-off funding e.g. projects on collections, learning, digital etc	38.52%	52
One-off training and advice e.g. collections, learning, fundraising etc	26.67%	36
Capital funding – maintenance	43.70%	59
Capital funding – equipment	22.96%	31
Capital funding - projects e.g. gallery refresh	39.26%	53
Support accessing available funding	20.74%	28
Governance	13.33%	18
Staff wellbeing, resilience and mental health	20.00%	27
Help to close / merge	0.74%	1
Access to advice or support to reduce energy consumption	13.33%	18
Other (please specify)	2.96%	4
Total Respondents: 135		

Q26 From the selection below, what are your top three messages for AIM's advocacy work over the coming months? e.g. what should AIM be telling funders and decisionmakers about you and your needs? Please select your top three.

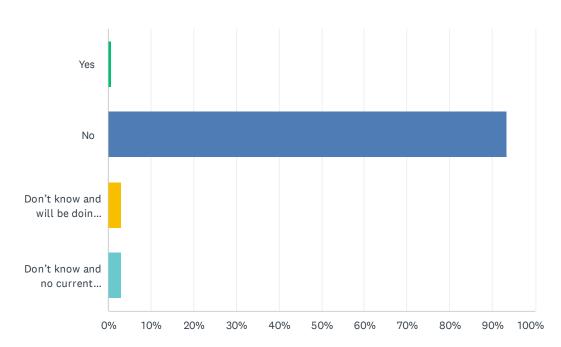


State of the sector survey

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPON	SES
To remove sunset clause of Museums & Galleries Exhibition Tax Relief and make this permanent	11.85%	16
To make more funding readily available to cover core costs	54.81%	74
To make funding available to support environmental projects	11.11%	15
To increase funding available for general maintenance	48.89%	66
To provide a more favourable business environment e.g. a VAT refund scheme for charging museums	20.00%	27
To make it easier for museums at risk to access emergency or bridge funding	5.93%	8
To allow project funding to cover staff costs	28.15%	38
To make it easier to access funding for back of house projects including collections care and management	43.70%	59
To make the case for museums to be more involved in local programmes e.g. regeneration, tourism, levelling up style funding	37.78%	51
Other (please specify)	8.15%	11
Total Respondents: 135		

Q27 Do you have any RAAC (reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete) in your building?

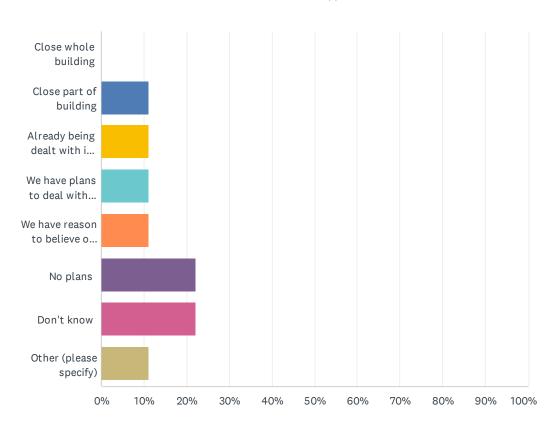




ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	0.75%	1
No	93.28%	125
Don't know and will be doing a survey to check	2.99%	4
Don't know and no current plans to check	2.99%	4
TOTAL		134

Q28 If yes, how do you plan to handle this?

Answered: 9 Skipped: 259



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Close whole building	0.00%	0
Close part of building	11.11%	1
Already being dealt with in a capital project	11.11%	1
We have plans to deal with it in a proposed capital project	11.11%	1
We have reason to believe our RAAC is safe	11.11%	1
No plans	22.22%	2
Don't know	22.22%	2
Other (please specify)	11.11%	1
TOTAL		9