



Research into admissions pricing policy in museums and its impact: Executive Summary December 2023

Image credit: Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust
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Introduction

The Association of Independent Museums (AIM) and partners Arts Council England (ACE), Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS), the Welsh Government, the National Museum Directors' Council (NMDC), and the Art Fund commissioned DC Research Ltd working in partnership with Durnin Research Ltd to deliver **'Research into admissions pricing policy in museums and its impact'**.

The aims of the research were:

- To understand current and potential pricing strategies, models and benchmarks, and their high-level impact on museum audiences; and how museums can adapt charging to respond to the current environment and to be prepared for what may happen in the future.
- To create outputs museums can use to decide admissions strategies that maximise income from those able to pay, put the museum in the right pricing bracket in the market, and still offer pricing options that make it accessible and welcoming to all.

The first of these goals is addressed in the main research report and this executive summary of that report. The second goal is addressed in the separate guidance document that has been developed as part of the suite of publications produced as part of this research.

There were four main stages to the research:

- Desk Research and Analysis.
- Survey of the Museums Sector (which received 344 valid responses).
- Museum Consultations (in-depth discussions with 29 museums).
- Development of Case Study examples around admissions charging.



Current Charging Position of Museums



Current Charging Position of Museums

Just over half (51%) of museums responding to the survey charge for general admissions, whilst more than one third (36%) do not charge for admissions at all. Just less than one in 10 (8%) charge for both general admissions and admissions to specific exhibitions, whilst 4% charge for admissions to specific exhibitions only.

Overall, this shows that 64% of museums charge for admissions in some form, whilst 36% of museums report that they do not charge at all for admissions.

Comparing these results with the previous 'Taking Charge' research (2016) shows that a higher proportion of museums now charge for general admissions (51% in 2023 compared to 42% in 2016), alongside a decrease in those that do not charge at all (from 43% to 36%). There is also a decrease in the proportion of museums that charge for both general admissions and specific exhibitions (from 12% to 8%).

Local authority museums are less likely to charge for admissions than independent museums or ex-local authority museums. 71% of local authority museums do not charge whilst just 33% of independent museums and ex-local authority museums do not charge at all. University museums do not charge at all for entry, National Museums charge for admissions to specific exhibitions only, and military museums are more likely to charge for admissions compared to the overall average.

There are only slight geographic variances in terms of admissions charging. Museums in London and the South West of England are slightly more likely not to charge for admissions, whilst museums in the North of England are more likely to charge for general admissions compared to the average, as are museums in Wales.

Those museums for whom core funders account for more than 75% of income are less likely to charge for admissions (64% of these museums do not charge compared to 36% overall). Museums that do not have any core funders closely reflect the overall position with 35% not charging for admissions compared to the overall average of 36%.

Those for whom core funding accounts for less than one-quarter of income are more likely to charge for admissions (86% charge for admissions in some form, compared to 64% overall) – which is to be expected as they will be more reliant on other income streams due to limited core funding. Interestingly, those for whom core funding accounts for between 25% and 50% of income and, to an even greater extent, between 50% and 75% of income are more likely to charge for admissions. 72% of those for whom core funding accounts is between 25% and 50% of income charge for admissions whilst 79% of those for whom core funding is between 50% and 75% of income charge for admissions – compared to 64% overall.

Assessing current admissions pricing policy relative to the significance of the visitor economy for the local area, shows that museums for whom the visitor economy is 'not at all significant' are less likely to charge for admissions (13% compared to the overall average of 64%). Conversely, museums that describe their local visitor economy as 'a key sector' or 'one of a number of significant sectors' are more likely to charge for admissions (73% and 72% respectively compared to the 64% average).

A very clear relationship emerges when the self-reported importance of the museum to the local visitor economy is considered relative to the current admissions pricing policy:

- Those identifying the museum as ‘not at all important’ – 27% charge.
- Those identifying the museum as ‘an attraction of minor significance’ – 55% charge.
- Those identifying the museum as a ‘moderately significant attraction’ – 62% charge.
- Those identifying the museum as ‘one of number of significant attractions’ – 72% charge.
- Those identifying the museum as ‘a key attraction’ – 81% charge.

Looking at the charging position relative to the type of visitor museums typically get shows that museums where the proportion of local visitors account for more than 50% of the audience are less likely to charge for admissions (41% do not charge) compared to those where the proportion of local visitors is less than 50% of the audience (24% do not charge).

Changes to Museum Admission Charging Position in Recent Years

The survey asked about recent changes to admissions charging position and half of respondents (50%) report not having made any changes.

For those museums that had changed their admissions charging position, by far the most common change was an increase in admission prices (70%), followed by the introduction of new types of admission ticket (30%). Only a small minority of respondents (5%) report introducing a decrease in their admission prices over this period.

In terms of making more fundamental changes to their admissions charging, 18% reported that they had moved from charging for admissions to free admissions during this period, whilst 11% report having moved from free admissions to charging for admissions.

Museums that reported that they had raised prices cited a range of factors that were underpinned by the need to raise income. The predominant reason for this is rising costs, as well as the need to make the museum more sustainable, whilst some linked this to pandemic recovery, and the need to respond to a fall in revenue.

Some museums that changed their approach to charging explained this was driven by the need to simplify ticketing, to increase visitors (overall as well as targeting specific groups such as families and young people after the pandemic), and an improved offer as a result of redevelopment or refurbishment.

Most responding museums that report moving from charging to free did so to increase visitors and sought to maximise donations in various ways. Those moving from free to charging typically cited sustainability as the main factor.

Many museums highlighted benchmarking and competitor analysis as an important part of the decision-making process around charging, with some highlighting the importance of this approach in balancing a need for income generation against fulfilment of overall purpose for the museum. Some museums highlighted formal reviews as being an important part of the decision-making process for changes to admissions, typically as part of an annual business planning cycle.

In most cases, including those where there had been reviews and analysis, decisions on admissions policy was made by the governance arrangements and processes in place in each museum. Typically, this would be by the board of trustees on recommendation from senior management.

Museums that had not made a change to their admissions charging position in recent years were asked a range of follow-on questions. It is interesting to note that of those museums that did not report any change, almost two-thirds (64%) stated that they had not considered making any changes to their admissions position over this time. Those who do not charge for admissions are far more likely not to have considered making a change. 76% of those who do not charge report that they did not consider making a change, whilst less than half (47%) of those that do charge for admissions report that they did not consider making a change.

This suggests that there is a notable cohort of museums (around one-quarter of all of survey respondents) who do not charge for admissions, and have not given any consideration to changing this position in recent years.

For those respondents that had not changed their charging position but did consider making changes to their admissions charging position many cited the current cost of living pressures as being a key factor, based on concerns the potential negative effect any changes would have on accessibility, engagement with target audience groups and visitor numbers.

A number of responding museums reported that they were actively reviewing their admissions policy or planning to change in 2023. Key reasons for this were pandemic recovery and works underway.

In terms of the main factors that were influencing the potential decision to change charging in 2023, the need to cover increasing costs, increase income, or support financial sustainability was cited by many museums considering such a change. Such costs include staffing, energy and utilities, the cost of stage exhibitions, and income lost during the pandemic.

Other Considerations around Charging

Additional findings on other aspects and considerations around charging include:

- Very few museums (2%) have used dynamic pricing for admissions, although one-fifth have considered it.
- Almost one in ten respondents (9%) have used Pay What You Can / Pay What You Like, and a further one-fifth have considered it.
- Around one-in-twelve respondents (8%) report having used charging for virtual or online access to the museum, with a further one-fifth (20%) having considered it.
- Specific admissions charging for school visits is far more prevalent – 51% have done so and 13% have considered it, with 36% having neither used nor considered it.
- One-fifth of respondents report they have used, or considered using, other specific pricing models for admissions. The most common types of pricing models reported, in order of prevalence, include: charging for group visits; charging for events, workshops, and other activities; specific donations, free entry, or membership models for schools; discounts for online booking / pre booking.

If respondents for whom Gift Aid is not applicable are excluded, the results show that 38% of museums do not claim Gift Aid for admissions, 34% do claim Gift Aid on admissions using the annual pass scheme, and 28% claim Gift Aid on admissions using the additional 10% scheme.

Only one-third of respondents reported collecting information about the demography and diversity of visitors. Relative to their charging position, the survey found that 23% of those that do not charge collect such information, whilst 37% of those that do charge collect such information – showing that those who charge are more likely to gather such information (although it is a minority of museums - accounting for just over one-third (37%).



Charging Benchmarks



Charging Benchmarks

The table below shows average prices from the survey for those museums that charge for general admissions.

Overall Museum Admission Pricing Benchmarking Results

	Mean (£)	Median (£)	Lower Value (£)	Upper Value (£)	Count
Adult	8.99	7.60	2.00	45.00	210
Concession	7.63	6.60	0	26.00	126
Child (older)	3.64	3.00	0	18.00	204
Child (younger)	0.70	0	0	8.50	198
Family	26.46	24.00	7.00	77.00	105

The results show:

- The median price for an adult ticket for general admission is £7.60.
- The median price for a concession ticket for general admission is £6.60.
- The median price for a younger child ticket for general admission is £0.
- The median price for an older child ticket for general admission is £3.
- The median price for a standard family ticket for general admission is £24.

There is some geographic variation in average admission prices – the median adult price in both England and Scotland was £8, whilst for museums in Wales it was £6.50.

Museums in the North of England report a lower average adult price than museums in the Midlands or the South for adults (£7 compared to £8.80 and £8) and concessions (£5 compared to £6.88 and £7). Furthermore:

- There is little variance of the median prices by type of museum for adults, but some slight variance for other ticket types. Whilst there is little variance between median admission prices by type of museum, the likelihood of charging or not does vary more by museum type. Therefore, whilst prices do not vary much by type the propensity to charge does.
- There is no variance in the median adult price between the main categories of core funding.
- Adult median prices are typically lower in areas that report it is ‘not at all competitive’ to attract visitors. For those museums that do face local competition for visitors, competing on price does not seem to be a common strategy – areas with greater competition show higher median prices relatively.
- The more significant the museum reports that it is to the visitor economy of the local area, the higher the median admission prices.
- The bigger the museum, the higher the adult median price (£6.75 for museums with up to 20,000 visits; £12 for museums with between 20,000 and 50,000 visits; £13.50 for museums between 50,000 and 100,000 visits, and £19.80 for museums with more than 100,000 visits).
- Those museums who report 50%+ of visitors are local, have a higher median price compared to those where locals account for less than 50% of visitors.



Impact of Changes Admissions Charging Strategies



Impact of Changes Admissions Charging Strategies

As noted previously, 50% of respondents report not making a change to their admissions charging position in any of the specified time periods (between 2018 and 2022). For those museums that did change their admissions charging position, the most common type of change by far is an increase in admission prices (70% of those that made a change), followed by the introduction of new type(s) of tickets (30% of those that made a change). Making a more fundamental change has been less common but has occurred – 18% reported moving from charging to free admission whilst 11% reported moving from free admission to charging.

For those that introduced **an increase in admission price**, the most positive impact is that total admissions income had increased, and some even reported positives in terms of the number of visitors, and secondary on-site spend. Many museums that raise prices reported that there was little negative impact, and some found that they had been underpriced for quite some time.

Concern about price sensitivity, and a related sense of nervousness, and (on occasion) timidity around charging does not appear to be solely a staff issue, with some museums reporting concerns raised by volunteers, and others identifying reluctance from Trustees when presented with recommendations to raise prices by staff.

The most positive impact concerning **the introduction of new ticket type(s)** is an increase of total admissions income, followed by number of visitors and demography and diversity of visitors. Many museums reported no change as the most common impact for most aspects considered as a result of changing ticket types. Some museums noted a greater take up in annual passes because of the cost-of-living crisis. This can be regarded as visitors looking to derive further value from their visits.

Moving from charging for admissions to free entry typically generated improved visitor numbers as well as positively impacting on the demography and diversity of visitors and also on-site spontaneous donations. Other positive impacts reported include on secondary on-site spend and also the museum's relationships with the local community. The most negative impact is, unsurprisingly, on admissions income.

Museums that **move from free entry to charging for admissions** highlight the most positive impact being a rise in total admissions income, followed by positive impacts on the number of visitors and the dwell time of visitors. Beyond that, no change was most commonly highlighted by many museums in terms of the impacts. However, negative aspects around both the number of visitors and the level of on-site spontaneous donations were also highlighted by some that had made this type of change to their admissions pricing strategy.



Current Patterns, Innovations, and Good Practice around Museums Admission Pricing

Image credit: Brooklands Museum



Current Patterns, Innovations, and Good Practice around Museums Admission Pricing

There is a real mix of confidence and reticence/nervousness about charging in museums. Some, mainly larger independent museums, are confident about their value, and are commercially focused on catering, trading, and events as well as admissions. Many of these museums review admissions each year as part of their business planning processes.

A clear conclusion is that pricing cannot be considered by museums in isolation, it needs to be part of the business planning process and informed by the values of the institution.

Whilst there are some museums who do not charge as a matter of principle, there remains a cohort of museums who lack the confidence in their museum offer to either charge, or to increase prices for admissions.

Many museums use benchmarking as part of their decision-making processes. In doing so, it is important to look at the relevance of comparators, and look at their offer, the circumstances and key characteristics, and whether comparisons are reasonable and meaningful.

There is evidence of some ticketing simplification or streamlining, with less ticket types being offered, and the removal of concessions for older adults. This simplification offers a range of benefits to museums, especially around an easier and smoother process at front of house for both visitors and staff/volunteers.

Many museums are holding prices on school visits, although 2023 has been a better year than 2022 for many. The schools market remains sensitive to cost of living considerations around both entry price and transport, and some museums offer discounts to local schools.

Most museums that increased admissions prices reported little audience negativities over this, reporting no difference in visitor numbers, and little evidence of price elasticity. On-site secondary spend typically appears not to be affected by changes in price.

Moving from free entry to charging for admissions typically reduces visitor numbers, but a mass outcry is rare. The reduction in visitor numbers is mainly due to the introduction of charging stopping fleeting visits to the museum, with dwell times increasing as a result.

Dynamic pricing is being considered by larger museums to manage peaks (typically by offering discounting for quieter periods in order to manage capacity) and also to encourage participation with target audiences.

There is a mixed picture on online versus in person ticketing, with many museums reporting that the pandemic reducing the proportion of visitors that turn up to buy tickets on the day. Most museums no longer offer discounts for online booking.

Reviewing pricing strategy annually (managing the expectations of visitors, staff and volunteers, and avoiding 'big jumps') is good practice, and price increases need to be part of an overall strategy.

It is important to make sure museums engage and persuade boards, stakeholders, staff and volunteers around pricing and admissions strategies. Communication is vital, and this cannot be overstated.

If donations are an important part of a museum's pricing strategy, it is vital to be clear and coordinated around this. This includes communicating expectations concerning Pay What You Like style strategies, the location of donation points in the museum, and making it easy (if not easier) to make cashless donations.



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