



Association of
Independent
Museums

AIM Bulletin

April 2026

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**Preserving the
spirit of discovery with
UK Antarctic Heritage Trust**

Welcome to AIM Bulletin!

www.aim-museums.co.uk

Comment

As you have likely seen by now, in February AIM launched a major new research report I'm very excited about. We kicked the project off almost exactly a year ago, with Alchemy Research and Consultancy (Anna Dinnen, Dawn Langley, Andrea Nixon, Susan Royce, and Keith Arrowsmith) and I think the need for it has only got greater in the intervening time.

Fragile to flourishing: Museum operating models in an uncertain world started from the work Margaret Harrison does with AIM members as part of our AIM Higher consultancies. We regularly provide museums with experts who can help them go back to first principles on their operating models, and Margaret started wondering whether the ones who figure out a way to become, and stay, successful have anything in common.

As we all know, it's hard to draw general conclusions about museums: every collection, every building, every location, every board, every staff and volunteer team has its own thing going on. But drawing general conclusions about independent museum operating models (just pretty much everything about how the museum works, then) is what we asked this experienced team of researchers to do.

What resulted is a thoughtful, densely packed, highly evidenced and deeply practical report, toolkit, and set of case studies about the business and the numbers, but also the organisation and the feelings. The research asks the question *how can we survive*, and it answers it with *how we can flourish*.

Our recent launch webinar was popular, with over 200 registered. But if you missed that there will be other opportunities to hear more – we think this work is so

important we plan to speak on it regularly over the coming months, as well as exploring potential partners to take it further and help support museums and heritage organisations to find the time and capacity to implement the ideas and tools it brings forward.

We're also thinking hard about the Hallmarks of Prospering Museums, first published just over a decade ago, and how to integrate them with the new knowledge and ideas from the research about sustaining an independent museum in an environment that's increasingly challenging. We think this research has the potential to change things, not just for individual museums, but for independent museums as a sector, and we want to make that change happen.

Thank you to all those who participated in the research over the last year: completed the survey, attended the events, and especially agreed to be case studies. We know museums are asked for information, that is, your time and precious energy, pretty much constantly, and that it doesn't always seem to result in something you can use. We hope with this report you'll consider it was worth it. Our thanks also to Dawn and partners, who've poured an enormous amount into this work.

And finally, no post about operating models would be complete without mentioning it's our focus for this year's AIM conference, 10-11 June at Ushaw and Beamish, tickets on sale now from the AIM website at earlybird rates. It's going to be a lively, busy, and worthwhile couple of days for all those able to join us.

Lisa Ollerhead
AIM Director



Front cover

Antarctica is a land of superlatives: the highest, driest, coldest, and windiest continent on Earth. It is a polar desert where ice has spent 45 million years growing to its current thickness, now holding 90% of the world's ice and 70% of its fresh water. To most, it is a white wilderness, out of sight and out of mind. Yet, scattered along the Antarctic Peninsula are fragile echoes of human endeavour, historic monuments that are not the usual posting for most museum teams. UK Antarctic Heritage Trust's mission is to ensure these sites aren't lost to the very environment that witnessed their beginnings, preserving them for future generations, and sharing their stories across the world. See the profile on page 18. Image of Port Lockroy 2014 (UKAHT-Helen Annan).



**Conference
early bird tickets
for AIM members
are available until
Friday 24 April**

Have you got your tickets yet?

We're looking forward to welcoming you to a fantastic few days in the North East for this year's conference. In the stunning surrounds of Ushaw Historic House, Chapels and Gardens we'll be drawing on our groundbreaking new research into the sector's most effective business models to unpack the essential strategies and practical steps your institution needs to succeed.

This year promises a dynamic mix of inspiration, practical advice, and sector-wide collaboration. Two days of learning, networking, and sharing strategies that we know will act as a catalyst for change.

And with fantastic social events at Art Fund's Museum of the Year, Beamish, The Living Museum of the North we are confident that as well as learning from each other, we'll have a chance to catch up with colleagues old and new to remind ourselves of what makes working or volunteering in this sector so inspiring!

Early bird tickets will remain on sale until Friday 24 April and offer the most cost effective option for AIM members. Check out all the speakers and session info, as well as details of our social events online and secure your tickets today!

aim-museums.co.uk/the-aim-conference

News in brief

Gulbenkian Exhibitions Fund open for applications

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation invites arts organisations to apply for Gulbenkian Exhibitions Fund, a new initiative to help expand programming of international arts in the UK.

Gulbenkian Exhibitions Fund will support exhibitions or showcases of art by living artists from, or based in,

Portugal and Portuguese-speaking African countries. It aims to strengthen visibility in the UK of contemporary art from these regions and provide professional development opportunities for artists.

Grants of up to £30,000 are available for non-profit institutions or organisations in the UK, including museums, festivals, galleries and biennials. Supported work can include

visual arts, moving image or film and, within an exhibition context, performance.

Applications are open until 27 April 2026.

gulbenkian.pt/uk-branch

New exhibition dives deep into mental health and the human condition

The Weight of Being is a focal point in a year-round programme of cultural and community events, including partnerships with mental health charities, community groups, state-funded schools and regional collections and museums.

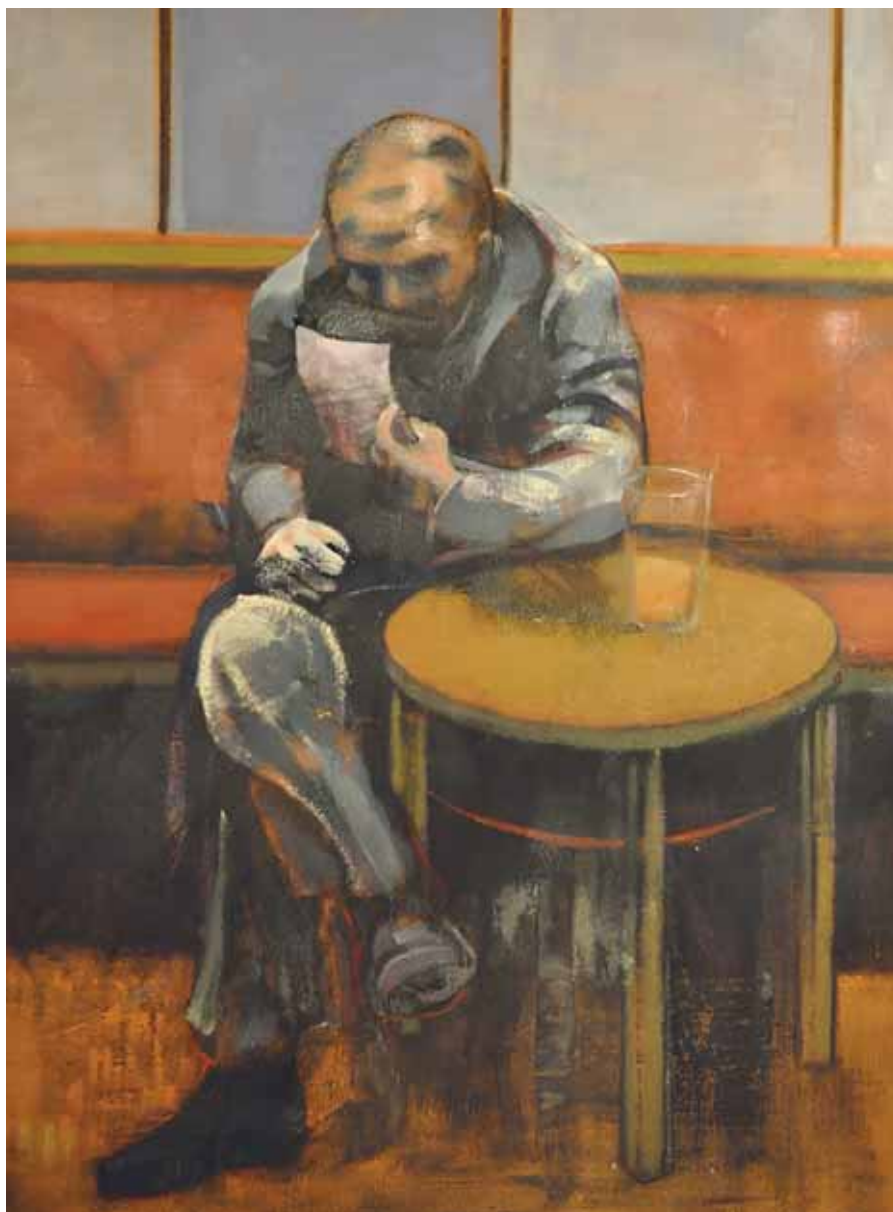
Running from 24 January to 19 April 2026 at Two Temple Place, the exhibition considers mental health as a connecting thread that links all humanity, rather than an othering experience.

Through depictions of deeply personal expressions and collective experiences, the exhibition showcases the various ways in which different artists capture vulnerability, resilience, and the search for solace. Whether reflecting on the weight of everyday life, the struggles shared by whole communities, the threats faced by the natural world, or the fragile nature of the human condition, the works displayed invite viewers to consider how art helps us process, endure and find refuge from trauma, and connection in community.

twotempleplace.org/exhibitions/the-weight-of-being

Shakespeare Birthplace Trust appoints new Creative Director

Shakespeare Birthplace Trust has appointed its first Creative Director. Dr Dominique Bouchard, currently Heritage and Engagement Director at Leeds Castle in Kent, will take up the new post of Creative Director from



John McCracken, *Man in the Pub*, date unknown, Estate of the artist, Hartlepool Borough Council.



1 June 2026. The role of Creative Director was established in the charity's new strategy.

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust is also appointing a Director of Shakespeare Scholarship.

Professor Charlotte Scott will take on the new position, reporting to the Creative Director. She will provide intellectual and strategic leadership for the charity's Shakespearean mission.

Leighton Buzzard Railway ready for a great start

A major reconstruction of a Level Crossing was completed ahead of schedule allowing plans to move forward for the start of the 2026 season at The Leighton Buzzard Railway. The Leighton Linlade Town Mayor has been invited to carry out the now traditional 'waving off' of the first train of the season, and the Town Crier will also be present in fine voice!

The entirely volunteer-run railway starts the season with two steam train services, led by Andrew Barclay 0-6-0T



'Doll' of 1919, and sister loco 'Gertrude' built 1918.

The Volunteer Team who operate and maintain the railway have put in hundreds of hours over the winter closure period, often working in a very cold shed, to ensure that all is ready to welcome visitors this year.

www.buzzrail.uk

Art UK announces new Chair

Ben Terrett CBE has been appointed the new Chair of Art UK, the award-winning art education charity and online home for every public collection of art in the UK. Ben Terrett is the CEO and Co-Founder of Public Digital. He played a key role as Director of Design at the Government Digital Service in leading the design team that launched GOV.UK. Ben was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the 2025 King's Birthday Honours List for services to design.

Ben Terrett CBE said, 'Art UK represents a powerful combination of art, education and technology – three things that have shaped my career and interests for many years. I've long believed that digital, at its best, is a force for good, and Art UK is a brilliant example of that in action.'

Cultural Governance Alliance launches new EDI Benchmarking Tool for your board.

Clore Leadership in partnership with the Cultural Governance Alliance (CGA) have launched a new governance EDI Benchmarking Tool.

Supported by Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and developed in collaboration with Clore Leadership Governance Associate, Keith Arrowsmith, the tool seeks to help organisations embed equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) into their governance practices.

The tool will help you assess whether your governance arrangements actively encourage a diverse board, rather than directly measuring your organisation's current diversity. It is designed to help your board review its performance and set goals relating to EDI policies and processes. After undertaking initial benchmarking, the tool will provide a score across different aspects of EDI in your governance, along with insights and free resources to help you work on the areas you're seeking to improve.

By using this benchmark, your organisation can:

Identify Gaps: Review current practices to see where governance changes could support a more diverse board.

Set Goals: Establish clear, achievable targets for evolving your governance arrangements based on identified needs.

Measure Progress: Track your efforts and demonstrate accountability through regular assessments.

When governance arrangements are robust, an organisation is better positioned to recruit and retain a diverse board. Organisations with diverse boards can:

Enhance Decision-Making: Benefit from a broader range of experiences and perspectives.

Build Trust: Strengthen stakeholder relationships by reflecting the communities they serve.

Attract and Retain Talent: Improve reputation and become a more appealing environment for potential board members and staff.

Provide EDI Leadership: Set a positive example for all staff and volunteers.

www.cloreleadership.org/tool/benchmarking-tool



Community Quilt Brings Historic Photograph Collection to Life

Isobel O'Donovan, Community Curator at the Museum of North Craven life on how community quilt making highlighted the skills required for developing photographs.

When planning how to share our historic photograph collection with our community, we knew we wanted our participants to experience the magic and uncertainty of photographic processes. The Museum of North Craven Life's Horner Collection comprises of over 2000 photographs ranging from collodion glass plates, gelatin negatives and modern colour film from Settle's family run Horner Studio.

But how do you share these images of almost 100 years of life in North Craven when the collection is too fragile to handle? We embarked on a project working with groups across Craven creating cyanotype fabric prints, giving participants first-hand experience of one of the earliest forms of photography. We stitched these prints into a quilt which is now hanging in our Horner

Gallery. Created by children as young as four and adults in their 90s, the community quilt is a joyous celebration of the continued importance of the Horner collection to its community across North Craven today.

To create these cyanotypes, participants arranged objects and images on fabric that had been soaked in light sensitive chemicals and then exposed them to light. After rinsing the prints in cold water, participants watched as blue and white images began to appear. To allow participants to handle, draw and collage photographs from the collection, we created acetate copies of the fragile glass plates. Workshops were thick with conversation imagining the lives of portrait sitters, and the sharing of stories prompted by images of local landmarks and events.

The hands-on experience of creating cyanotypes helped bring the Horner studio to life. The process of creating the image, timing the DIY foil lined cardboard lightbox, rinsing the chemicals and the nervous wait for the image to appear brought into focus the varied skillset of a Horner photographer into focus.

Participants concluded one would need "the precision of a chemist" in order to create the plates for photographs, "the patience of a pastor" to put their

subjects at ease, and the "judgement of a journalist" in knowing when to fade into the background of community events, and when to take the lead.

To mark the unveiling of our community quilt, we hosted a Horner Celebration Day at the museum. Photographer Tony Richards took ambrotype portraits of volunteers and participants. These acted as demonstrations, allowing the public to see up close the preparation of chemicals, portable darkroom, and fixed lens cameras like those used by the Horners. The creative energy sparked during the project continues to ripple – a participant reached out after the event to share a poem they had written inspired by the experience of having their portrait taken.

The quilt prompted an opportunity for us to work with our community not as passive audience members but active creators of their own art and heritage. The Horner studio may have been open just shy of 100 years, but its legacy shall be a great deal longer.

thefolly.org.uk/plan-your-visit/the-museum

Pictured above: Detail from Community Quilt; participant surrounds portraits of a Victorian woman and child with wildflowers as a way of processing their own feelings towards ageing.

Delivering Change Programme Manager Sheila Asante on the collective effort between Museums Galleries Scotland and partnering museums, galleries, and community groups to restructure as organisations based on anti-oppressive principles.

Delivering Change in Scottish Museums

Delivering Change has encompassed 19 Museum Transformers, 100+ Museum Activists (volunteers, staff, or freelancers), and eight community organisations. The project's first year focused on putting in place the logistics, training, and relationship building required for working with our partner museums, galleries, and community groups. During the second year we have begun to learn and embed anti-oppression principles in daily practice. This has resulted in stronger partnerships forming between museums and communities, with exhibitions, policies, and projects co-designed in unprecedented ways.

Key changes include museums adopting new anti-oppression policies, changing hiring practices, and involving community members in decisions. For example, National Galleries Scotland implemented a formal complaints process in response to community feedback, highlighting how community-informed accountability can be embedded in an organisation's policies. Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh developed an Anti-Racism Action Plan, including museum-specific anti-racism mission statements, integration into the 5-year business plan, curatorial reviews for diverse storytelling, and collection research guides. Paxton House front of house staff revised visitor interaction practices (such as stopping "Where are you from?" questions), which demonstrates direct, actionable impact on visitor experience.

Another noticeable outcome from the past year has seen communities taking the lead through the Community Catalysts strand of the programme, where communities have been funded to work with museums. Communities from Roma to LGBTQ+ groups are more actively shaping museum narratives. They're challenging stereotypes, sharing underrepresented histories, and making sure their voices are heard. This is reflected in the partnership between the Scottish Commission for People with Learning Difficulties and V&A Dundee. Their "Discovery" project focuses on the experiences of a systematically excluded community and highlights the themes of accessibility and interactivity in the museum. The relationship between the community and museum has enabled genuine participation and co-production. The museum has also stepped in with additional funding to help the project move forward.

We're also noticing changes in how museum staff and leaders talk about inclusion, power-sharing, and human rights. Leaders are being supported on their journey by the Leadership Programme running as part of *Delivering Change*.

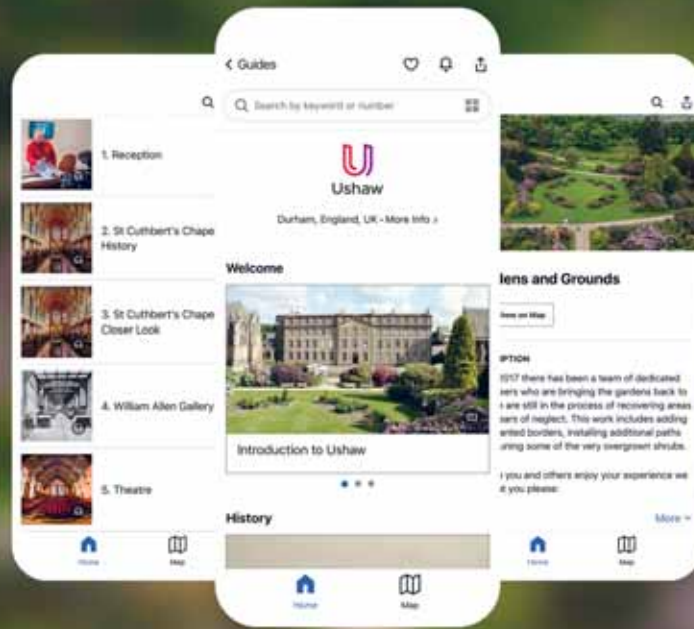
In this strand, 11 museum leaders are being mentored by people working within the sector who have lived experience of oppression.

Attitudes are beginning to shift, even if unevenly – change on this scale is never simple. There are challenges as some institutions are still experiencing difficulties in bringing about tangible change. Common issues are that staff and community partners often feel stretched for time and resources, relationships between participants are still forming whilst having to navigate challenges, and it is taking time to get to the action that many community partners are hoping for. In response to conversations with community partners, additional funding was allocated to Community Catalysts to improve accessibility and equity, enabling more inclusive participation. However, there is still more work to be done to move towards equity.

This second year has shown us that naming what *doesn't* work is as valuable as celebrating what *does*, because it helps the whole sector learn and grow. The third and final year of *Delivering Change* will be about consolidation and legacy, making sure the changes stick and can continue beyond the life of the programme. This means embedding anti-oppression practices inside MGS and *Delivering Change* Museum Transformers, securing resources, and helping museums carry this work forward on their own.

To find out more about Delivering Change, including anti-racism and anti-ableism training developed through the programme and now available to the sector in Scotland, please get in touch with me at DeliveringChange@museumsgalleriesscotland.com.





Opening Doors

How Ushaw Historic House, Chapels & Gardens Uses Bloomberg Connects to Transform Visitor Experience

We spoke to Beth Jackson, Head of Audiences, about Ushaw's work using Bloomberg Connects to showcase their complex heritage site, as well as their ambitions.

Ushaw Historic House, Chapels and Gardens launched its digital guide on Bloomberg Connects in April 2025, but, even before that, the team had heard it had potential. Colleagues had returned from sector events – AIM Conference among them – armed with leaflets and enthusiastic endorsements.

After attending demonstrations and speaking to the Connects team, Head

of Audiences Beth Jackson recognised the value: a digital guide flexible enough to be continually refreshed, supportive of rich storytelling, and – crucially – free. Add in auto-translation features, audio guides, transcripts and an intuitive web version, it felt almost too good to be true.

“I kept thinking, ‘Where’s the catch?!’ We had a full printed guidebook already. But making that accessible – *really* accessible – to every visitor was a challenge for a charity with a small team. Having that auto-translate option was absolutely key for us.”

Ushaw’s aims for the guide were clear from the beginning: accessibility. The Ushaw site is complex and expansive, with chapels, collections, gardens, studios, and a thriving bed-and-breakfast operation attracting more international visitors each year.

“For a charity, producing even one additional language version of our guide would be huge,” Jackson

explains. Now, visitors simply scan a QR code and start exploring in their own language. Since launching, their guide has been accessed in 14 languages, including Bulgarian, Dutch and Chinese.

Equally important was the platform’s flexibility. “There’s still so much we want to add. The guide isn’t something you build once and forget. The ability to update it instantly, ourselves, is invaluable.”

Although Beth led the setup, the project quickly became a team effort. Receptionists helped upload content during quieter shifts; colleagues across the organisation contributed expertise and audio. From the librarian’s insights into a 50,000-book collection to the head gardener’s reflections on the grounds, the guide now captures a multi-voiced, textured picture of Ushaw.

“It became a lovely project. Lots of colleagues could share their

perspectives.” (Check out the “Ushaw Through Our Team’s Eyes” tour on Bloomberg Connects to see the results for yourself)

Moving from print to digital required a new approach to writing. Bloomberg’s support was instrumental. The team received guidance at every stage, and that support continues nearly a year after launch.

“The whole guide was reviewed by an expert – the feedback was incredibly useful. We still have regular meetings about keeping the guide up to date. They don’t disappear once you go live.”

At first, the digital guide focused on enhancing on-site experience. But the team quickly realised its marketing potential – especially for a site still in its infancy. Visitor numbers have grown from 7,000 in 2014 to over 100,000 in recent years, and Ushaw aims to double this figure within the next five years.

The guide showcases parts of Ushaw that delegates or short-stay visitors might otherwise miss, including its extensive gardens and grounds.

“It helps visitors discover just how

much more there is here beyond a first visit, especially when they’re here for a specific event.”

Future plans for the guide include showcasing the 50 creative businesses with studio spaces at Ushaw. During an upcoming Open Studios event, they plan to give each studio a presence on the guide.

“It promotes the artists and helps visitors navigate the studios – it does both jobs.”

The app’s in-built analytics dashboard has also been a significant asset. It shows which content visitors engage with most and offers seasonal patterns helping shape priorities as the team builds new content.

So, what has Beth learnt after a year with Bloomberg Connects?

Start gathering content early.

“Photos, text and archival materials are essential. Having them ready made a huge difference. However, you don’t need to do everything at once, it’s your guide and you can work at your own pace.”

Want to improve your digital storytelling skills?

Get a taste of the training and support that Bloomberg Connects offers. Join Bloomberg Connects and Art UK for an upcoming webinar exploring what makes great digital content, why and how it performs well, and key considerations for using an audience-led approach.

Sign up here



Don’t shy away from audio.

“We’d never done much audio before, but Bloomberg provides the kit, and people really engage with it.”

And above all:

“Just do it. Everything you read about them (Bloomberg Connects) is true – the support is excellent.”



Laura Renaud-Studer, Investment Director at Figurative, explains how repayable finance can work hand in hand with traditional funding models in the cultural sector

Introducing Figurative: A new charity supporting museums and the cultural sector with finance

Museums and cultural organisations have never been more vital to their communities, yet they have rarely been under greater financial pressure. Too many brilliant museums and cultural organisations are held back not by a lack of ambition, but a lack of suitable funding options. As competition for grants intensifies and costs continue to rise, the sector needs new thinking about long-term sustainability.

Who is Figurative?

Figurative is an independent charity working at the intersection of finance, impact, and the cultural and creative sector. Incubated by Nesta, the UK innovation foundation, from 2015 to 2024, Figurative created one of the world's first investment funds dedicated to providing loans to the arts and culture sector. Over the past decade, we've raised more than £30m and supported more than 60 cultural organisations right across the UK including Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Migration Museum, the Food Museum, Story Museum, Rambert, Creative Land Trust, and the Royal Shakespeare Company.

How do we support museums and the cultural sector?

We work with cultural organisations to open opportunities alongside grant funding. We specialise in repayable finance helping arts and culture organisations strengthen their financial resilience and better articulate their

social impact so they can realise their ambitions – whether that means acquiring new assets, growing existing revenue streams, or developing an entirely new venture.

For example, we recently provided financing to the Food Museum in Suffolk to help create a distinctive outdoor play area inspired by food, farming, and nature. The project aimed to transform an underused part of the museum grounds into a high-quality, family-focused space, enhancing the overall visitor experience and strengthening the museum's offer.

The Migration Museum, which explores how the movement of people to and from the UK has shaped who we are, used social investment from Figurative to grow its online gift shop and expand its digital audience.

When is repayable finance the right choice?

Repayable finance is not a replacement for grants or other forms of income. Taking it on means taking on some risk, so organisations need a well-founded degree of confidence in their future income streams before doing so.

Saffron Hall Trust, a performing arts venue in Essex, used a loan from Figurative to invest in its fundraising capacity and grow its earned income streams. Angela Dixon, Chief Executive of Saffron Hall Trust, said: *"If there's an opportunity and an injection of cash would*

help you to take advantage of it, then do it... that's where this kind of investment really works."

When Music Venue Properties (MVP), a charitable community benefit society set up to act as a benevolent landlord to grassroots music venues, faced a fundraising shortfall, a £1 million secured loan from Figurative closed that gap.

Matt Otridge, Chief Operating Officer at MVP, reflected: *"My experience is that it's hard for a lot of cultural organisations to take on repayable finance through commercial lenders. Just being a grassroots music venue is enough to put an X in the box. Impact investment is worth looking at when you've got that long-term vision."*

Apply to the Arts & Culture Impact Fund

Figurative's Arts & Culture Impact Fund is open to applications. The fund offers loans between £150,000 and £1 million, repayable until 2032, to help organisations build assets, drive revenue growth, and achieve long-term financial sustainability and resilience. The fund is designed for socially-driven arts, culture, and heritage organisations – including independent museums – registered and operating in the UK.

Laura Renaud-Studer, Investments Director
investments@figurative.org.uk

figurative.org.uk

Insights from new AIM Associate Supplier the Charities Pensions Club (CPC) highlight a growing concern about pension adequacy and engagement across the sector.



Pensions: understanding their value

The Charities Pensions Club is a membership group for those responsible for pensions at charities. It helps charities run defined benefit (DB) and defined contribution (DC) schemes more effectively and cost-efficiently.

For many organisations, pensions can feel like a technical necessity rather than a strategic priority. Yet the evidence suggests that pension engagement has never been more important. At a recent session, CPC members heard that millions are at risk of under-saving for retirement. While these findings apply nationally, they have particular relevance for charities and cultural organisations that care deeply about the long-term wellbeing of their staff.

Here are some of the best ways to support your staff with their pensions.

Legislative developments

Proposed reforms include lowering the starting age for auto-enrolment, increasing minimum contribution levels over time and strengthening requirements to ensure defined contribution schemes deliver value for money and all go towards supporting employees' retirement savings. The development of a Pensions Dashboards Programme will also make it easier for individuals to trace old or fragmented pension pots. Employers have a critical role in helping staff understand what these changes mean for them.

Employer contribution levels

Our most recent charity member survey found that the average employer contribution rate in the charity sector is above the statutory minimum, at 6%. Higher employer contributions send a strong signal that the organisation is invested in its people's futures. They can also prompt employees to pay closer attention to their own saving levels. Clearly communicating the value of the employer contribution can make a

tangible difference to how the benefit is perceived. Employer pension contribution levels that go above the statutory minimum are often cited as a benefit that helps with staff retention and recruitment.

Pension Communications

We recently ran a survey on pension engagement and found that those charities which do not solely depend on their defined contribution (DC) pension scheme provider for communications tend to achieve higher engagement rates. Messages delivered by a familiar, trusted voice within the organisation have greater impact than generic provider materials.

Engagement works best when communications are relevant, jargon-free and action-focused. Rather than overwhelming staff with technical detail, short, clear messages delivered little and often are more effective than a single annual campaign. Mid-life sessions, workshops on financial planning or discussions around wills and long-term security can also bring pensions into a wider life conversation.

Limitations

Many museum and heritage employees do not have regular access to a computer during the working day. If pension engagement relies solely on provider emails or intranet updates, a large part of the workforce may simply never see the message. Improving engagement therefore requires more inclusive communication methods. Lunch-and-learn sessions, short slots in team briefings, demographic specific sessions (e.g. finance by generations), printed materials in staff rooms, noticeboards and payslip inserts can all help. Reducing reliance on email-only communications is a simple but powerful first step.

Use freebies!

AIM members can also make use of national initiatives such as 'Pensions

Awareness Week' and the 'Pay Your Pension Some Attention' campaigns. These provide free resources and ready-made content that can be adapted internally.

Framing what a pension is

It is time to challenge the narrow perception that a pension simply means retirement. As our group discussed at a recent session, that framing limits relevance to those approaching the end of their careers. Instead, pensions can be positioned to younger generations as a tool for building long-term wealth, achieving financial independence, creating flexibility to reduce working hours and providing security for family and dependants. When framed as a source of choice, pensions become relevant to employees at every stage.

Museums and heritage organisations are rooted in stewardship and long-term thinking. By taking an active, inclusive and human approach to pension engagement, AIM members can extend that long-term mindset to the financial futures of their employees. In doing so, they not only strengthen engagement today but also help build lasting security for the people who bring their organisations to life.

Charities Pension Club

The Charities Pensions Club is a membership group for those responsible for pensions at charities. It helps charities run DB and DC schemes more effectively and cost-efficiently, ideal if you're dealing with legacy DB schemes, reviewing or changing DC arrangements, or managing pensions with a small team (or on your own). Expert support, shared insight and better value for charities. Members also get FREE access to a Financial Wellbeing MOT for their employees – a simple, impactful way to support staff.

www.charitiespensionsclub.com



Volunteers: top 6 Risk Considerations

Catherine Gage from new AIM Associate Supplier Hunters Law LLP on ensuring your volunteers are up to speed with the latest legislation.

The essence of a museum is not contained in glass cases alone – it also lives in the volunteers who welcome, guide, archive, preserve, and protect. Stewardship of

this legacy now extends far beyond collections care, with risk assessments, fire exits, and traditional safety measures no longer sufficient in themselves. New developments redefine good governance in volunteer-led cultural spaces. My top 6 risk considerations are:

1. Equality and Inclusion

As volunteers are not considered to be employees or workers they are not afforded the discrimination protections (including age) under the Equality Act 2010. Also limited is protection under the Employment Rights Act 1996 (as amended) from such things as unfair dismissal and detriment suffered as a

result of whistleblowing. Future case law may, however, test boundaries with certain volunteering arrangements.

Even where statutory protection is limited, inclusive practice is often expected – particularly for museums seeking grants or partnerships with equality and engagement requirements or as part of Charity governance.

2. Governance and Serious Incident Planning

Volunteers often form a significant operational component, representing dependency risks. Boards should receive reporting on volunteer numbers, roles,

The RICHeS programme team will be joining us at the AIM Conference in June as a Gold sponsor, an invaluable opportunity to explore how heritage science could support your work and how you can get involved.

Curious about heritage science?

Opportunities through RICHeS

Research Infrastructure for Conservation and Heritage Science (RICHeS) is the UK's national research infrastructure for conservation and heritage science. Funded by the UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the programme invests in facilities, collections and specialist expertise across independent research organisations including Historic England, Tate and The National Archives, as well as universities across the UK. Whether you are caring for a single collection or managing a complex heritage site, RICHeS can help you access

specialist expertise that may otherwise be out of reach.

RICHeS Access Fund

To ensure this infrastructure is accessible to organisations of all sizes, RICHeS has launched the RICHeS Access Fund. The fund enables organisations to work directly with RICHeS facilities, collections and specialists, covering eligible costs including travel and specialist staff time. With grants of up to £20,000 available, the RICHeS Access Fund offers a practical route to developing new research, addressing conservation challenges and unlocking fresh insights from your collections. The first full call for the RICHeS Access Fund

training, safeguarding compliance, and retention.

Trustees of charitable museums must manage risk in the charity's best interests. Volunteers must be included in the risk register, safeguarding framework – including DBS checks – incident reporting systems, business continuity planning, and grant reporting requirements and, of course, serious incident policies and procedures. Even if not a charity, safeguarding requirements must never be overlooked.

3. Data Protection Responsibilities

Whilst coming in at number 3, museums must remember that liability for data breaches under this heading can be colossal – with maximum penalties of £17.5 million or 4% of the total annual worldwide turnover in the preceding financial year, whichever is higher.

Volunteers handle booking forms, mailing lists, donor records, and school information. Under UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018, the museum is highly likely to be the data controller, making it legally responsible for volunteer breaches.

Special category data – including, but not limited to, health information, dietary needs, or equality monitoring – carries heightened compliance obligations and fines. Volunteers must follow policies on role-based access, breach reporting, and secure record handling. Induction and refresher training should cover data

protection responsibilities with data mapping ensuring all volunteer data. GDPR compliance should feature in a well drafted volunteer agreement and the Volunteer Policy itself.

Compliance should also reflect the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025, which updates UK data governance and requires, a new Complaints Procedure for all by 19th June 2026.

4. Safeguarding and Security

Volunteers working with children or vulnerable adults must be fully integrated into safeguarding arrangements, including checks (DBS/due diligence), training, and reporting routes. All policies and procedures should be integrated into the Serious Incident Policy and Volunteer Agreements and again, the Volunteer Policy itself.

Where Martyn's Law (Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025) applies, front-of-house volunteers must be included in security awareness, evacuation/invacuation, and emergency planning. This is complex legislation with 2026 seen as a preparatory year for 2027 implementation. Volunteers must be protected and trained accordingly.

5. Employment Status Risk

Museums must avoid implied employment. Volunteer agreements should reflect goodwill, not contracts of service and should avoid, for example:

- Giving volunteers set working hours

- Using formal contractual wording or disciplinary procedures
- Offering regular perks or gifts that could be seen as wages (small, one-off honorariums are often out of scope and museums that are also charities, must consider whether Charity Commission approval is required for larger gifts to trustees),
- Requiring volunteers to work in exchange for benefits.

Recognition schemes, such as long service awards, are acceptable but must not replicate employment benefits.

6. Insurance and Demographic Reality

Museums should ensure volunteers are explicitly covered by:

- Public liability
- Employer's liability (even though they are not employees or workers)
- Trustee/D&O insurance
- Professional indemnity, event, cyber, or personal accident cover, as relevant.

Policies must define volunteers as insured persons. After all, they remain an extraordinary asset. Nevertheless, without structured oversight they can also become an avoidable vulnerability.

To find out more about Hunters contact Catherine Gage 020 7412 5240 Catherine.Gage@hunterslaw.com

applications closes in April, with further calls to follow. We encourage you to consider what new opportunities this initiative could unlock for your museum.

Heritage Science Data Service

The Heritage Science Data Service (HSDS) provides the central digital research services for the RICHeS programme. Its online Catalogue of Services makes it easy to explore the expertise and facilities available across the UK. Whether you are analysing paint or paper, investigating bone or working with other materials, the catalogue helps you quickly identify the right partners and start conversations about how the RICHeS infrastructure could support your collections or projects.

The HSDS also runs a Small Grants Programme focused on heritage science and conservation data, with a second call expected in mid-2026.

Case studies

Our October 2025 Bulletin highlighted how heritage science can support work ranging from art conservation to archaeological dating to 3D models for public engagement.

Further examples are available on the RICHeS website, including recent work scanning the *Mary Rose*. In January, five RICHeS Access Fund Catalyst projects were announced, supporting partners to better understand, conserve and engage audiences with heritage. These include archaeological surveys at a Roman site, utilising reference collections to support Durrington Walls research, support for local archives, preservation of historic film reels and embedding braille dots on 3Ds of museum objects. Case studies from these projects, and future projects will continue to be shared on the RICHeS website.

If you are curious about what heritage science could do for your organisation or have questions about the RICHeS programme, please do take the opportunity to meet the RICHeS team at the AIM conference in June. We are delighted to be a sponsor and will have a stand in the expo, come say hello! Stop press: Our colleagues HSDS are also exhibiting!

www.riches.ukri.org

www.hsd.ac.uk

Graham Randall of Duxford Aviation Society on using dashboards to provide insights into your collections data.

Seeing the full picture

Duxford Aviation Society in Cambridgeshire manages the British Airliner Collection with Concorde and other iconic passenger aircraft in a unique and unparalleled collection. Alongside thirteen aircraft there is an expanding archive of technical documents, images and publications linked to each.

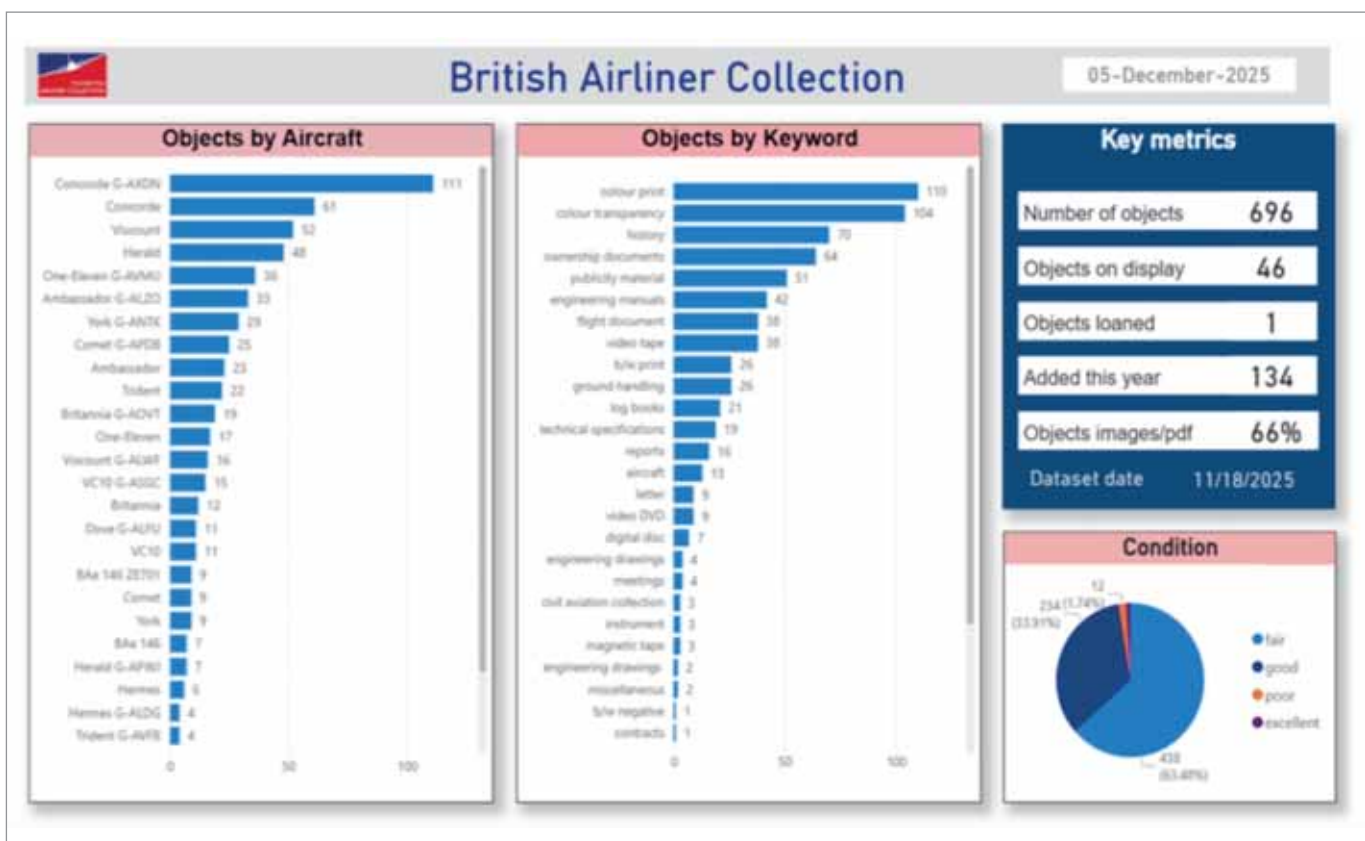
But how can you show the full scope and scale of your collection data in one page? How can you summarise the data in a way that offers clarity and provides insights?

Over the past few months, the team has been developing high-level dashboards to show the scale and scope of the collection as recorded in a Modes CMS database. “Seeing the full picture” means turning raw text and numbers into a compelling narrative using analysis and charts to reveal insights, support discussion, and drive action. Dashboards can provide this full picture, setting out where you are, why it matters, and what to do next.

Steve Radford, Collections Director, says “Dashboards have made the collection more manageable and more accessible for our Board. They are easy to use, and very little training is required because it is so user intuitive.”

The technical bit

The British Airliner Collection is recorded within Modes Complete which is a well-supported and extensive Collections Management System (CMS). The relevant data is exported in csv format. Microsoft Power Business Intelligence (Power BI) imports, combines and transforms this data. Refreshing the raw data from Modes can be done at any time.



Summary page

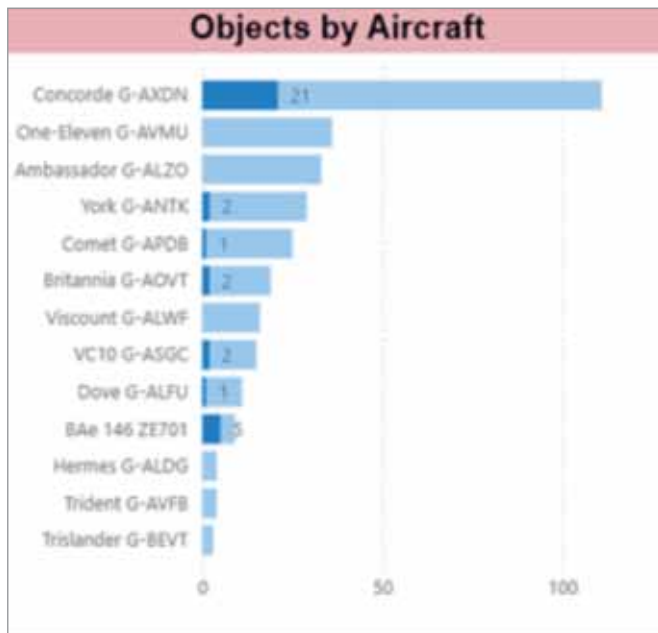
The summary page is the top-level starting point to see the full picture.

The visual elements used in a dashboard (in this case bar charts, a pie-chart and metrics) can be selected from an extensive palette. Pie-charts need to be used carefully as, with many slices, the visual can be somewhat difficult to read and decipher. Buttons can be added to the page and configured to filter the data displayed. For instance, if there were several discrete locations, then buttons can be added to let the user choose which location should be presented.

Interactive analysis

The visual elements in the dashboards are interactive and clicking on a specific bar will update all the associated values in the dashboard.

Our experience is that this ability to drill down sparks a conversation around the results. Are these results expected and acceptable? Should this issue be reviewed as part of the Collections Development Plan? The data is clear and presented in a way that was never obvious before the introduction of dashboards.



Metrics

The key metrics panel was developed to reflect progress against the museum's priorities with the additional requirement that the metrics should be easily understood across the organisation. At the bottom of the panel the date shows when the CMS dataset was exported to ensure the latest position is being reflected in the charts. It was felt that the number of records stored in the CMS was not a key metric given that the quantity field would indicate where multiple items were involved – so the total number of accessioned objects was preferred in this panel. The number of objects on display to the public can increase or decrease as exhibitions are changed to tell a new story or commemorate a specific event.

The metric for Objects Loaned keeps a focus on object movements between organisations or individuals and can

prompt discussions around loan periods and what conditions are attached to any loan.

Some view of the backlog was requested, and it was decided to use a proxy measure shown as “Added this year.” If the backlog is estimated to be around 500 items, and in a year only 10 are added, the outlook is bleak and more action is called for!

Detailed pages

The top-level summary page has been backed up by a small number of detailed pages where individual records from the CMS can be displayed. A format has been designed to provide a table layout with a RAG (Red, Amber, Green) banner at the top together with the count of objects listed.

| Condition poor | | | | 12 |
|----------------|------------------|---------------------------|----------|---|
| Index Key | Current Location | Keyword | Category | Title |
| DUXAS.2021.94 | Bldg 111 | reports | document | Power Plants for the Concord [Concorde] Supersonic Civil Airliner |
| DUXAS.2023.30 | Bldg 111 | engineering manuals | document | Operators Handbook for Avro York July 1946 |
| DUXAS.2023.31 | Bldg 111 | engineering manuals | document | Pilot and Flight Engineers Notes York C1 |
| DUXAS.2023.34 | Bldg 111 | engineering manuals | document | Servicing and General Notes |
| DUXAS.2023.35 | Bldg 111 | engineering manuals | document | Super 1-11 Operations Manual Volume 1 |
| DUXAS.2023.36 | Bldg 111 | civil aviation collection | document | The de Havilland Rapide |

The set of pages now includes a view of Inventory, Locations, Acquisitions and a “Watch page” where the team are monitoring certain parts of the collection. The overall data quality has improved as a result of this work.

AI-enabled questions

Power BI includes “AI-powered questions” so you can ask a question in plain language and Power BI figures out what you mean.

For example, if someone wishes to know what is on display in one area of the museum, you might type in “List the items in Room 14”. This can be extended to select which fields in the record are needed by a fuller request such as “List the items in Room 14 in a table with the object title”.

Using natural language, you can ask to see the results as charts or tables and if the query is worth keeping for repeated use, it can be saved as an action button on the screen.

Hallucination (where AI invents an erroneous but plausible answer) is not an issue as the data being interrogated is only the data that has been exported from your CMS.

Conclusion

With the new visualisation tools now available, collections data has come in from the cold. Visual charts and graphs within dashboards convey complex issues quickly so that everyone can readily see and understand the full picture. We believe that any collection, no matter how big or small, can benefit from this approach.

For more information, contact [Graham Randall](mailto:Graham.Randall@archive@das.org.uk) (archive@das.org.uk)

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Scoping a Museum of AI Cultures



Image by New Material on Unsplash

www.aim-museums.co.uk

We spoke to Kathryn Brown, Loughborough University, about an intriguing new project exploring the meeting points between culture and AI.

Museums have long been entangled with histories of technology. Yet how does the intersection of art, heritage, and technology play out in an era that is increasingly defining itself through the lens of AI? At Loughborough University, we are exploring the idea of a Museum of AI Cultures: a space capable of mediating the concept of AI to publics while also problematizing the impacts of autonomous systems on creativity, labour, and social relationships.

Our research addresses numerous questions that are impacting museums and their relationships to audiences. Many heritage institutions consider themselves in a race to integrate technology into the presentation of their collections and their everyday working practices. Chatbots have become a familiar feature of audience engagement, and curators are turning to large language models to assist with exhibition design and cataloguing. For some museums, the adoption of AI can not only serve audiences, but also help to shape an emerging techno-heritage agenda.

However, it is also worth considering what might be lost in the delegation of traditional museum practices to autonomous technologies. Museums are important social spaces that, in the words of the International Council of Museums, “operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities” (ICOM definition, 2022). While AI might encourage audience participation or widen knowledge by creating new kinds of engagement with collections, it can also risk foreclosing dialogues between people. The replacement of a museum educator by a chatbot, for example, has ethical consequences for human interaction that extend beyond the obvious point of technology’s impact on employment.

Similarly, AI-powered games might be attractive to younger audiences. Yet it is fair to ask whether gaming shifts attention from collections to mobile devices, thereby homogenising museum experiences with everyday uses of technology. The implications of creating heritage games that piggyback off mobile technologies are even more significant in the light of age restrictions that countries have introduced to limit online gaming (China) or children’s use of social media (Australia, Portugal, France, Malaysia). As these concerns and the resulting restrictions continue to spread across nations, museums need to review their own ethical relationships to audiences and to consider the point at which techniques for public engagement disintegrate

into machine gadgetry or the support of technical addiction.

As museums investigate AI or adopt it into their practices, new ethical imperatives arise in wider contexts. These include appreciating the impact of AI on the environment, the exploitative conditions of micro-labour in the creation of large language models, or the impact of biases that are now a familiar aspect of those models. If some museums have been beset by controversies around corporate sponsorship, might institutional independence also be eroded by partnerships with tech companies that promote exhibitions showcasing AI and its creative outputs?

The ethical stakes are high, but AI need not spell bad news for heritage institutions or their audiences. We argue that museums can open productive debates about technology and can encourage visitors to explore how AI affects their lives as well as their experience of art and heritage objects. Taking the ICOM museum definition seriously, the “participation of communities” is crucial to value-sensitive design in contemporary museum culture. This means appreciating different socio-cultural attitudes to technology and engaging closely with audiences to understand their expectations of AI and its capacities.

Museums can offer true leadership in this field, but only if they adopt a self-reflective perspective on the risks and potential of an AI future.

ai-museum.lboro.ac.uk



Penguins at Port Lockroy (UKAHT-Peter Watson).

Extreme Museums

Managing Heritage at the end of the Earth

Helen Langwick, Head of Programming and Engagement UK Antarctic Heritage Trust

Antarctica is a land of superlatives: the highest, driest, coldest, and windiest continent on Earth. It is a polar desert where ice has spent 45 million years growing to its current thickness, now holding 90% of the world's ice and 70% of its fresh water. To most, it is a white wilderness, out of sight and out of mind. Yet, scattered along the Antarctic Peninsula are fragile echoes of human endeavour, historic monuments that are not the usual posting for most museum staff. At UK Antarctic Heritage Trust (UKAHT), our mission is to ensure these sites aren't lost to the very environment that witnessed their beginnings, preserving them for future generations, and sharing their stories across the world.

A Heritage at the Mercy of the Elements

Preserving history 9,000 miles away is an exercise in extreme logistics. Each year, our dedicated Antarctic team travels from the UK to the tip of Argentina before crossing the notorious Drakes Passage by ship to reach these remote outposts. Their supplies, from beans to bolts, are shipped months in advance and they often live and work in very basic conditions.

The challenge is immense. Many of our bases, like Base A, Port Lockroy or Base E, Stonington Island, were not built to last the eighty years they have to date. Constructed from

prefab timber sections or scavenged materials such as packing crates, they were intended as short term shelters for scientists and explorers. Now, they face a new, more insidious threat: climate change. As Antarctica warms, it is becoming wetter and wooden structures that stood for decades in the dry cold are now battling dampness and mould making our conservation work more urgent than ever.



Graham and Dale working at Blaiklock (UKAHT-Michael Duff).



Team photo at Port Lockroy 2025 (UKAHT-Peter Watson).

Not your Average Museum

Our flagship site, Base A, Port Lockroy, sits on Goudier Island, a tiny rock the size of a football pitch. Here, our seasonal team manages the world's southernmost post office as well as a museum in Bransfield House, a fascinating time capsule of life on Base. While they man the "Penguin Post Office" and monitor the resident Gentoo penguin colony, they are also living the heritage they protect, dwelling in the same isolation as the pioneers of the 1940s. Bridging the clandestine beginnings of Operation Tabarin with pioneering climate research, these sites serve as vital portals to the Antarctic. They offer a unique window into history, where the lived experiences of a few reveal stories with a universal resonance.

Resting nearly 3,000 metres below the icy surface of the Weddell Sea, the shipwreck of Sir Ernest Shackleton's *Endurance* remains a haunting symbol of the Heroic Age and the sheer limits of human fortitude. Lost in 1915 after being crushed by pack ice, its discovery 107 years later has presented a conservation challenge unlike any other we face.

Because it lies beneath the sea ice, traditional heritage conservation methods are simply not applicable. Instead, protecting *Endurance* is about diplomacy and international cooperation. We lead the development and maintenance of a vital Conservation Management Plan that transcends physical repairs, focusing on building strong partnerships across the 56 nations of the Antarctic Treaty. This collaborative approach ensures *Endurance* and its legendary story of human endeavour is protected by global agreement, continuing to inspire generations from the deep.

Bridging the Gap

Because so few will ever set foot on this fragile landscape, we are working to bridge the 9,000-mile gap through immersive digital storytelling. We have used laser scans and oral testimonies to create Virtual Reality experiences, such as the trek from Stonington Island in *A Frozen Night*, allowing people to experience walking through history

without leaving home. Our *Voyage to Antarctica* Podcast brings the voices of scientists and explorers directly to worldwide audiences, exploring why this icy wilderness matters to everyone. And through other activities such as school visits or our YouTube webinars, we engage schools and the public, interviewing those whose lives have been impacted by the continent. We are always looking for new ways to engage the public from pop up events in UK museums to creative writing competitions. Partnership work is vital to help us continue to boost the reach of our stories and their impact.

Antarctica Matters

Antarctica is not just a relic of the past; it is the heartbeat of our planet's future. The stories of survival, of dog sledging, crevasse rescues, and scientific breakthroughs, are a testament to human fortitude. But more importantly, they remind us of our responsibility. We aren't just saving wood and metal; we are preserving the spirit of discovery and a vital record of our climate's history as well as speaking to the perilous future of Earth's ecosystems.

Those who support us are engaging in an act of guardianship for a continent that belongs to all of us. Whether through our podcast, our shop, or memberships, they are helping keep these distant but relevant stories alive and relevant.

www.ukaht.org



Cargo to shore, Port Lockroy (UKAHT-Peter Watson).

Unlocking the secrets of shared knowledge

Clare Mills, Co-CEO, Charity Finance Group explores the value of sharing.

There is a quiet kind of courage in saying: *here is where we struggle, here is what we tried, here is what worked and what didn't.*

It doesn't always feel courageous in the moment – it can feel like exposure, and that can feel risky – but when organisations share their honest experiences, something useful happens: patterns emerge, people recognise themselves and, over time, we improve how we do things. And we make a greater difference.

I was reminded of this when reading AIM's new research, 'Fragile to Flourishing: Museum Operating Models'. It's a substantial piece and a powerful example of what becomes possible when leaders are candid. Although designed for independent museums, 'Fragile to Flourishing' contains lessons that reach far beyond them.

The research explores the inner workings of 30 diverse museums, all with one thing in common: they opened their doors and described their journeys towards greater sustainability. They shared their pressures and the practical steps they took to strengthen their organisations.

The result isn't a list of recommendations or quick fixes. Instead, it's a suite of practical resources for transformation, grounded in real experience. What's clear is that flourishing museums share certain qualities. They adopt a growth

mindset. They think systemically. They move from reactive firefighting to something more considered and proactive. Crucially, they are willing to take managed risks and are willing to learn – not only from their own work, but from the experiences of others.

I was delighted to see real honesty and reflection around governance, risk management, financial viability, literacy, modelling (and so much more!) None of this can happen without a culture of openness and this is what makes 'Fragile to Flourishing' so valuable for others.

Interestingly, the same principle applies to something as routine as charity banking. Many organisations have a complicated relationship with banking services. Account closures, difficult processes, slow responses, a lack of understanding of how the sector operates. These are not rare complaints among Charity Finance Group's members or within the wider sector. They are widespread, and they have real consequences for organisations like yours.

The good news is that our work with banks is helping to ease some of these problems. The less good news is that there is still a way to go.

Banking on you

CFG has been gathering evidence on charity banking for several years, and this work has made a measurable difference. Thanks to the openness of AIM members and many others, we've been able to take real stories to banks, regulators and government. Your insights have shaped guidance for the wider sector and helped us push for systems that work for charities.

We are now running the **2026 Charity Banking Survey**, and we need your help again. The survey takes around 10-15 minutes and covers your banking relationships, switching banks, and how environmental, sustainability and governance considerations influence your banking decisions. Everything is confidential and used only in aggregate. But when aggregated, your experience becomes evidence – and evidence is one of the most powerful tools our sector has!

It's worth reflecting on this: 'Fragile to Flourishing' research only exists because museums were willing to share their stories. CFG's banking work only exists because charities are taking them time to describe what is happening to them.

In both cases, individual organisations gave a small amount of time, and the whole sector gained something useful. It's a reminder that the knowledge needed to strengthen our organisations already exists – we simply need to gather it, analyse it and share it.

If you haven't already, please take a few minutes to complete our 2026 Charity Banking Survey and share with colleagues: <https://bit.ly/CFGBankingSurvey2026>.

And head to aim-museums.co.uk to look at the 'Fragile to Flourishing' resources. Ten to 20 minutes on both will be time well spent – and the potential return, priceless.

CFG membership is free to AIM members as part of our partnership. Not yet a signed-up CFG member? Already a member and wish to find out more? Email the team: membership@cfg.org.uk. Or find out more and sign up free here: www.cfg.org.uk/aim

AIM Bulletin

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