



Association of
Independent
Museums

AIM Bulletin

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Welcome to AIM Bulletin!

An appreciation of Sir Neil Cossons 1939-2026

"Remember what you believed when you arrived."

Sam Mullins reflects on the inspirational influence of Sir Neil Cossons, co-founder and president of AIM, who died recently aged 87.

Brought up in Beeston, Notts, his schoolmaster father took the family on holidays to places like Liverpool, Sheffield and Hull to better understand where the country's wealth was generated, an experience of bustling activity which Neil said never left him.

With a geography degree from Liverpool – as a student he donated £1 to the rescue of a Liverpool tram – he started in museums as one of four graduate trainees at Leicester Museum. Under the mentor's wing of director Trevor Walden, Neil's career progressed to the GWR Museum in Swindon, then as the first curator of technology at Bristol in 1964 where a major new industrial museum was planned but eventually unrealised.

Cossons' interest in industrial archaeology in Shropshire had been deepened by attending a course by Michael Rix at Ironbridge in 1965. In Bristol, he and lecturer Angus Buchanan spent three years tutoring an evening class in industrial archaeology, then a new subject, which proved the genesis of the Association for Industrial Archaeology founded in 1973.

Neil moved on to become deputy director at Liverpool Museum in 1968 aged 29. In 1971, Neil became the first director of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, galvanising the existing community volunteers and Coalbrookdale museum to create a pioneering series of museums and sites across the Shropshire coalfield, with the key support of the Telford Development Corporation.

This was a new model of museum that responded to rapid economic change and growing public interest in industrial history by being entrepreneurial and visitor market focussed, charging admission, deploying volunteers, delivering authentic storytelling, alongside an imaginative use of the government's unemployment scheme

and high design standards, thanks to Robin Wade Associates.

Cossons' development of Ironbridge was one amongst a varied clutch of site and open-air museums which, as visitor attractions rather than public services, responded to and promoted public interest in new types of heritage.

New museums independent of local or central government funding sprang up every fortnight. With co-founder David Sekers from Gladstone Pottery Museum, Neil founded AIM in 1977 to represent and link the new wave of independent museums; they recruited a board including Michael Ware, National Motor Museum Beaulieu; Patrick Greene, Norton Priory; Jonathan Bryant at Bass Museum; Chris Zeuner at Weald & Downland Museum; writer and broadcaster Kenneth Hudson as bulletin editor; and Lord Montagu of the National Motor Museum Beaulieu as patron.

AIM cultivated the government agencies of the day. As agents of change in a largely moribund sector their approach was well received. At AIM's 1978 London press launch on a paddle steamer on the Embankment, the chair of the Museums & Galleries Commission, Sir Arthur Drew, famously



Front cover

Kiplin Hall is an independent historic house and gardens located in the heart of rural North Yorkshire, established as a visitor attraction in 1971. Following Covid and changes to their marketing approach and ticketing, they grew visitor numbers from 19,000 to 34,000 a year. The tearoom and shop, already underperforming at lower numbers, was soon overwhelmed resulting in the team deciding to build a new visitor centre. Refurbishment on a recently vacated stable block began in 2024 and opened in 2025. Read the story on page 19.



From L: Patrick Greene, founder trustee (Norton Priory), Neil Cossons, first chair (IGMT), Lord Montagu, patron (National Motor Museum, Beaulieu), Max Hebditch, director Museum of London who facilitated AIM's creation and Brenda Capstick, secretary of the Museums Association.

described the new independents as being 'the primordial slime of the museums world'. Neil joyously quoted this at every anniversary, not least because traditional museums had taken it to be a slur whereas the AIM pioneers revelled in it. Neil's instincts were to challenge museum stuffiness and the primacy of the art museums.

This was a new model of museum, funded not by central or municipal

After 14 years of success at Ironbridge, recognised by an OBE, Neil moved to the National Maritime Museum in 1983. At interview he was asked how long he might stay and he candidly replied 'until the Science Museum came vacant' where he duly became director in 1986.

He took great pride in the new 'Making of the Modern World' gallery and the Wellcome wing, moving the museum

transfer of the whole Museum to the safeguarding of the National Trust. Neil was delighted to be present at the handover ceremony in November 2025.

Throughout his career Neil inspired collaboration through his charisma and perhaps his greatest legacy was always being ready to encourage and shape the museum careers of those around him. He was an inspirational giant of the heritage era and much that we take for granted in the museum landscape today was initiated by him and the founders of AIM.

In his speech at the AIM annual dinner in 2017 Neil remembered a message left for him as he began his new role at the National Maritime Museum – "Remember what you believed when you arrived." "AIM went forth," he continued, "in its DNA was a vibrant energy – its events were the noisiest and happiest of the year. AIM museums were self-critical, you tried ideas out on your friends, the things that bound them together were stronger than anything that could divide. AIM took the opportunity to influence things and persuade government of the essential practicality of how independent museums worked. Not driven by dogma, they kept an open mind; they were free spirits." He suggested the independent format may not be right for all types of museums, but had much to offer others, including essential survival techniques; "At a time of much change AIM could offer friendship and advice, enabling others to see light on the horizon."

Sam Mullins
AIM Chair, 1999-2005

“ What I think we need to do is to establish a different form of relationship between the museum, its collections and in particular, its people, its expert staff and the customer. And what I think we should do is to accept that the customer will pay a part of the cost, my belief being that the user will pay for something which is demonstrably, tangibly better. I would rather preside over a museum that charged which is improving than one which didn't as a matter of principle and was in decline. ”

government, but largely through the box office and commercial activity; entrepreneurial and risk taking, riding the wave of popular interest in new types of national heritage: canals, railways, vernacular architecture, mills, mines, blast furnaces. When John Letts set up the National Heritage Museum of the Year awards in 1973, independent museums won for the first five years. In 1977 Ironbridge was UK Museum of Year, as well as the first winner of the European Museum of the Year award and in 1986 amongst the first tranche of World Heritage Sites recognised in the UK.

on with exhibitions on contemporary science such as computers and food. Neil was knighted in 1994 and left to chair English Heritage in 2000 where the protection of industrial heritage and townscapes around them benefitted from his perspective.

In 2021, Neil's championing of Ironbridge came full circle when he was appointed by English Heritage to chair the Ironbridge Heritage Foundation which transferred all the historic sites in the Gorge formerly owned by the Telford Development Corporation to the Museum Trust. This greatly simplified the eventual



The Government has agreed to exclude certain charitable memberships from the implementation of the subscriptions regime in the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act (DMCCA) 2024.

Advocacy win on membership schemes

Following concerted cross-sector advocacy efforts, the Government has agreed to exclude certain charitable membership schemes from the implementation of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act.

Concerns had been voiced across the sector around the potential for individuals to extract benefit from an organisation's membership scheme prior to immediately seeking a potentially full refund. Addressing these concerns, the implementation will now maintain existing consumer protections and exclude contracts which are between a charity and a consumer and that allow consumers to attend performances, see collections, or visit places related to their charitable purpose. Such memberships will not be subject to additional regulation under the subscription regime.

This latest advocacy success follows cross-sector discussions with the Department of Business and Trade dating back to 2024. AIM joined NMDC and national museums to represent museum interests, alongside several major heritage and arts institutions and sector bodies.

AIM Director, Lisa Ollerhead

"This is a fantastic result and a brilliant example of arts and culture sector bodies coming together to jointly advocate for change.

Memberships are a crucial income stream and point of emotional connection for many independent museums so it's great to see our concerns addressed so comprehensively.

Considerable thanks are due to ministers from the Department of Business and Trade for listening and

the work of DCMS colleagues across government to make the case too.

AIM's advocacy efforts are often happening quietly behind the scenes on quite technical issues such as this, but the positive outcome is hopefully clear for all."

NMDC Chair Laura Pye said:

"We are delighted to hear that museum membership schemes will be exempt from the new DMCCA rules, which will ensure that this essential source of income for all types of museums is protected and can continue to grow.

We are extremely grateful to Ministers and officials from DBT and DCMS for listening to sector concerns, and to colleagues across museums and the wider charitable sector for working together so successfully to make the collective case for our vitally important work."

Know Your Neighbourhood evaluation released

The evaluation report on Know Your Neighbourhood is now available.

Between January 2023 and March 2025, the Know Your Neighbourhood (KYN) Fund invested almost £30 million to widen participation in volunteering and help tackle loneliness in 27 disadvantaged areas across England. Originally scheduled to end in March 2025, in April 2025

Over £25m distributed to museums across England in latest MEND support



Earlier in 2026 the Culture Secretary committed up to £1.5 billion to the cultural sector over this parliament, with the Arts Everywhere Fund aiming to support over 1,000 arts venues, museums, libraries and heritage buildings across England.

Administered and delivered by Arts Council England on behalf of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Museum Estate and Development Fund (MEND) has allocated a share of £25.5 million to support 28 museums

to undertake vital infrastructure works and improve the visitor experience.

In this round, organisations such as Black Country Living Museum in Dudley have been awarded £454,159 to safeguard key historic buildings, ensuring they remain safe and open for visitors while preserving the region's unique heritage.

In total the fund has supported 150 museums over the past four years.

Museum Estate and Development Fund full list of recipients:

London

- London Transport Museum – £999,999
- Museum of the Order of St John – £413,015

North East

- Hartlepool Borough Council – £2,458,641
- Chesters Roman Fort – £476,566

North West

- Grundy Art Gallery – £357,000
- People's History Museum – £2,491,670
- Port Sunlight Village Trust – £499,999
- Lancaster City Museum – £94,056
- Bramall Hall, Stockport Museums – £1,000,000

- Greater Manchester Transport Society – £244,000

- The Armitage Museum and Library – £238,098

East of England

- Natural History Museum, Colchester – £499,477
- Sheringham Museum – £456,170

South East

- Walmer Castle – £3,080,000
- The Brickworks Museum – £280,000
- Whitchurch Silk Mill – £210,045
- Brading Roman Villa – £80,707

South West

- Bristol Museums – £3,567,713

East Midlands

- Boston Guildhall – £401,112
- National Tramway Museum – £492,880
- Creswell Crags – £184,705
- Newstead Abbey, Nottingham – £1,550,747

West Midlands

- Black Country Living Museum – £454,159
- Compton Verney – £794,750

Yorkshire and the Humber

- Burton Constable Hall – £242,000
- Oakwell Hall, Kirkstall – £1,638,724
- Yorkshire Museum – £2,000,000
- Ryedale Folk Museum – £350,676

the Fund was extended to run until March 2026, with up to an additional £4.5 million of funding.

Arts Council England distributed grants to 106 organisations through three delivery partners: Creative Lives, Libraries Connected and AIM. AIM's KYN project – Connected Communities – offered grants of between £15,000 – £100,000 to museums delivering projects to 'improve community connections through high-quality volunteering opportunities and/or reduce loneliness and increase social bonds.'

The evaluation of the Arts Council England-funded projects saw participants report improvements in making new self-connections and feeling less isolated. Participants also reported improvements in their wellbeing, skills, and confidence with some describing it as "life changing" and "lifesaving." The report also indicates that engaging in creative activities and volunteering opportunities supports the development of skills and wellbeing, something that participants can continue to build on.

www.artscouncil.org.uk/know-your-neighbourhood

News in brief

Treasured art and artefacts to travel to communities across the UK

Significant works of art including Constable's *The Hay Wain* will go on display at museums and galleries across the UK thanks to the Weston Loan Programme with Art Fund. The 10th year of the grants programme – which enables smaller museums to borrow major works from national or major lending museums and galleries – will see pre-Raphaelite masterpieces, medieval manuscripts and one of the most celebrated paintings of the British Enlightenment go on display at 15 regional museums and galleries across the UK.

Museums lending works of art include the British Library, the Courtauld Gallery, National Galleries of Scotland, the National Gallery, Tate, the Victoria and Albert Museum and Wellcome Collection, with works going on show at museums in England, Scotland, and Wales.

Highlights include Wright of Derby: *From the Shadows* (13 June – 1 November 2026) at Derby Museum and Art Gallery, co-developed with the National Gallery, which brings Joseph Wright's celebrated *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768) to the painter's hometown for the first time in 80 years, as part of the 'Year of Wright'.

A major exhibition at the Museum of Somerset opening spring 2027 will present the Chew Valley Hoard, the largest coin hoard ever discovered from the period of turmoil following the Norman Conquest, recently acquired by the South West Heritage Trust.

Funded by the Garfield Weston Foundation, to date the Weston Loan Programme with Art Fund has supported more than 100 exhibitions at over 120 venues across the UK,

including several touring shows, providing over £2.2 million of funding to regional museums and galleries and enabling thousands of people to experience nationally significant works in their local museums.

Museum Data Service appoints new Head

Dr Mia Ridge, the British Library's Digital Curator for Western Heritage Collections joined the Museum Data Service in April on a secondment from



the British Library. Part of the Digital Research team, she leads projects and provides advice and training on computational research, AI/machine learning, and crowdsourcing with cultural collections.

Launched in late 2024, Museum Data Service (MDS) is an ambitious initiative, funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies and now by the UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which provides a platform to bring together over 100 million object records from 1,750 UK accredited museums and other collections over the next ten years.

Weald & Downland Living Museum secures £227,000 investment

The Weald & Downland Living Museum, Singleton, Chichester, has been awarded £227,000 funding from the DCMS/Wolfson Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund. The open-air museum is dedicated to preserving and celebrating the rural heritage of southeastern England however the 40-acre site's rural character can present challenges. Steep slopes, uneven paths, and historic terrain can make navigation difficult for wheelchair users, those with mobility aids, families with pushchairs and visitors with other access needs.

"This funding will support a major capital improvement project designed to enhance accessibility, protect the landscape, and improve the



overall visitor experience” said Clare de Bathe, Museum Director at the Weald & Downland Living Museum.

A total of £177,000 will be used to replace the existing paths across the site with a new, durable surface, alongside the installation of improved drainage systems. Covering over 2,500m², these works will prevent erosion and ensure the paths remain accessible and safe for years to come.

In addition, £50,000 has been allocated to significantly improve wayfinding across the site.

Work started in May 2026.

www.wealddown.co.uk

Stained Glass Museum achieves national recognition of excellence

The Stained Glass Museum in Ely, Cambridgeshire, has been awarded Designated Status by Arts Council England, placing it among a select group of institutions whose collections are recognised as being of national significance.

Designated status has been awarded to the museum’s whole collection, including its collection of glass, preparatory designs and cartoons, and specialist tools and sample materials used to make stained glass, recognising it as one of the most significant collections of its kind in the country.

Dr Jasmine Allen, Director and Curator at The Stained Glass Museum says: “Achieving Designated status is a real accomplishment for our team, and an important step towards achieving our vision for the museum to be ‘a national centre for the enjoyment and understanding of stained glass through storytelling, creativity and research’. It underlines the important role The Stained Glass Museum’s collections play in the public understanding of the history and development of stained glass in Britain – not only through our public gallery, learning, outreach and events programme, but also through research projects, partnerships, publications, conferences, and increasingly loans to other cultural institutions.”

stainedglassmuseum.com



Beauty Tricks (2017) by Pinkie Maclure.



Vivienne Westwood: Rebel – Storyteller – Visionary

The Bowes Museum is currently hosting a major retrospective dedicated to Vivienne Westwood (1941–2022). Focusing on Westwood's iconic designs from the early 1980s to the 2000s, *Vivienne Westwood: Rebel – Storyteller – Visionary* celebrates the legacy of Britain's most provocative and imaginative designer, whose influence continues to shape global fashion.

More than 40 ensembles, along with individual garments, accessories,

jewellery, and ephemera from the collection of Peter Smithson, join never-before-seen garments from private collections, as well as loans from Manchester Art Gallery and Fashion Museum Bath.

The exhibition evokes a working atelier showcasing the craft behind Westwood's rule-breaking design and chronicles how the Vivienne Westwood label evolved over time, framing its history through the Worlds End years, the Westwood years and the Kronthaler years.



Westwood was a dedicated researcher of historical dress and visited The Bowes Museum in 2006. Reflecting this connection, the exhibition juxtaposes over 80 historic objects from the museum's own collection with her designs, emphasising shared themes and artistic references.

thebowesmuseum.org.uk

Sense-check your museum's brand

AIM Associate Suppliers Osch have built a free tool to help museums get a clear sense of how strong their brand really is – across vision, mission, audiences, identity and more. It is designed for anyone who plays a part in managing the brand, wherever they sit in the organisation.

It can be used with multiple members of your team to build a shared picture across the museum, whether that's leadership, marketing, learning, or visitor-facing teams. It pinpoints where your brand is strong, uncovers gaps you might not have spotted, and gives you a clear steer on what to prioritise.



It is a practical way to build alignment, plan improvements and make better decisions with the resources you have.

To try the tool, head over to oschdesign.com/brand-snapshot

The Cartoon Museum celebrates 20 years

In 2006, The Cartoon Art Trust succeeded in opening Britain's first museum dedicated to cartoons, caricature, and the comic arts. The Museum, first located on Little Russell Street and in a new location on Wells Street since 2020, boasts a unique and historically significant collection of

more than 6,000 artworks and 8,000 library items telling the 300-year story of British cartooning from the Georgian era to today.

Over the last 20 years, The Cartoon Museum is proud to have welcomed more than 500,000 local, national, and international visitors and engaged with nearly 40,000 children with schools, learning, and outreach programmes

www.cartoonmuseum.org

Dive in to Poole's Cavern App and Audio Tour

Buxton Civic Association (BCA) has launched Poole's Cavern app, an engaging way for visitors to explore the historic limestone cave, allowing them to discover its fascinating geology, history, and stories at their own pace. The app is available to download for free on the Apple App Store and Google Play Store, making it easy for visitors to access the experience before or during their visit. Alongside the digital launch, visitors will also benefit from newly installed illuminated interpretation panels within the cavern, enhancing the experience and bringing key features of the cave to life.

The initiative aims to broaden the appeal of Poole's Cavern, attracting new and more diverse audiences while enriching the visit for returning guests.

buxtoncivicassociation.org.uk/pooles-cavern



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Lee Miller: A Woman at War

Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum, Woodstock has opened a new exhibition of Vogue model, surrealist photographer, and war correspondent Lee Miller's wartime work in *Lee Miller: A Woman at War*, from 23 May to 13 September 2026.

During the Second World War Lee worked as a combat photographer with the US Army, creating a unique historical record. The new exhibition covers her war correspondence work for *Vogue* from 1942 where she highlighted women's roles in the war effort, as well as the reality of life for women caught up in conflict across

Europe. Her first wartime assignment for *Vogue* captured nurses at work at a then-US Army hospital in Oxford – Headington's Churchill Hospital. Miller would become one of the few female photojournalists on the front line covering the Normandy invasion and the liberation of Paris. Her work in the newly liberated concentration camps of Buchenwald and Dachau was sent to *Vogue* in 1945, accompanied by the caption 'I IMPLORE YOU TO BELIEVE THIS IS TRUE.'

Her 60,000+ negatives and documents were discovered in her attic by her son, Antony Penrose, after her death, leading to her recognition as a pivotal 20th-century artist and photographer.



In the first of a series of features looking at different ways in to the ‘Fragile to flourishing’ research, AIM consultants share their initial reflections.

Challenging ourselves in challenging times

Changing your culture

Fragile to Flourishing is a set of resources on museum operating models that helps museums and heritage organisations take a fresh look at how they operate, their resilience and new ways of facing an unclear future. It explores the overall sector landscape and the strategies that organisations need to adopt to deal with the considerable challenges ahead. It also focusses on specific areas that relate to financial stability and sustainability (e.g. types of income source, endowments, reserves, etc.).

The work is crammed full of thought-provoking analysis, ideas, and concrete suggestions on how to review and improve different financial and organisational performance, to move along the five-stage continuum from ‘Fragile’ (just surviving) to ‘Flourishing’ (confident outlook).

New ways of working

Looking at sector trends in the medium- to long-term, the message is uncompromising – that traditional museum models are increasingly difficult to sustain and are no longer fit for purpose and that the assumptions behind the way that many organisations function are no longer valid.

The research and case studies suggest a fundamental reset for many museums and heritage venues to face an uncertain environment and move towards becoming flourishing organisations. Central to this is adopting a different mindset, which looks systematically across the whole organisation at all levels of activity and operations, identifying opportunities for growth, change, innovation and expanding entrepreneurship.

This may require a radical re-evaluation of how services are delivered, becoming more dynamic, flexible, cross-disciplinary and moving easily across analogue and digital. Planning will need to be ready to adapt to future trends and situations, becoming modular and joined up rather than in separate silos.

Many of the specific suggestions for change will be familiar to *AIM Bulletin* readers. They include diversifying income streams; developing a mixed economy/enterprise model; making the most of all your assets to increase earned income and support other activity; understanding and engaging local audiences and communities and building lasting relationships; focussing more on visitors, community and stakeholders and becoming less collection centred.

Organisational cultural change

A main thread running through the work is the need for many organisations to change their culture. This includes becoming more outward looking, commercial, systematically exploring opportunities to renew and update their visitor offer, looking to offer something fresh and distinctive within their audience markets.

Strategic development will move away from a 'defensive crouch' where an organisation is treading water or making piecemeal changes to one that embraces change and innovation across all areas of activity, actively challenging assumptions and exploring how to do things differently – 'what would it look like if...'

This type of operating model imagines a fluid way of working, which is less governed by rigid sections or departments, but more vibrant and cross-functional, driven by looking to the future, delivering strategic growth, and moving the organisation towards the characteristics of 'flourishing.' Accompanying this is a move towards

co-operative teamworking, empowering staff to generate ideas, take responsibility and have control over decision-making not hampered by strict staffing structures.

Encouraging creative risk

Cultural change involves encouraging creative risk. Developing an outlook that routinely identifies creative opportunities that go beyond playing safe and proactively embeds creative risk across processes and activities is a major shift for many organisations.

Creative risk inevitably means dealing with uncertainty and the difficulty of assessing and balancing risk as the price for moving away from easy options. Giving permission for creative risk recognises that failure is part of the creative process and can give valuable insights. This only works across an organisation if accompanied by an understanding that creative risk is harder to manage and that there are acknowledged rewards for undertaking risk within the process of organisational development and change.

Creative partnerships play a key part in embracing creative risk. The research and case studies show how they can extend reach and bring in new audiences. Partnerships in different sectors add fresh viewpoints, approaches, and expertise, as well as opening possibilities for moving outside a venue's walls and embedding organisations more within their local communities.

Choosing a development path

Fragile to Flourishing helps each organisation to assess its own situation and choose a suitable development path. The approaches, resources, KPI's etc. are intended to be adapted to individual circumstances. Planning, embedding, and managing change are the foundation of a wide range of suggested activity throughout the resources and can be incremental, starting small and building up success, confidence, and a culture of change. *Fragile to Flourishing* is a call to action – the first step on the path to change is to make a start.

Colin Mulberg
www.colinmulberg.com



“Make positive change happen”

When AIM asked me to offer a view on the new ‘Fragile to Flourishing’ (F2F) resources, I was very conscious that to get the most from them, you need to read them for yourself.

This article highlights what I personally found most memorable, offered as another way in.

For me, it is the case studies that stand out: real stories of real museum people on their own path from fragile to flourishing. I appreciate the honesty: *“The case studies capture a moment in time; each is part of an unfurling story.”*

Amongst a wealth of sound evidence and advice, the critical thread throughout the case studies is a quality of attitude, of mindset: *that it remains possible to make positive change happen, over time.*

Positive mindset is not about ‘Pollyanna thinking,’ disregarding the difficult and only focusing on nice things. It is about the powerful concept expressed by the writer Margaret Atwood: *“You may not be able to alter reality, but you can alter your attitude towards it, and this, paradoxically, alters reality. Try it and see.”*

Amongst the case studies, the Bowes Museum is trying to see the furthest ahead in time: to imagine itself, and its purpose, in 2092. The Bowes is at pains to acknowledge it is not yet fully ‘flourishing,’ and they know the future is unpredictable. But they can see where they are today – especially in terms of processes, and technology – and

act where that feels lacking for the long term. The Bowes mindset is to get to grips with what can be tackled right now – within their 2092 frame – working towards ‘thriving in the future’.

All the F2F case studies highlight a crucial point: addressing issues in the present, including developing long-term strategy, needs resourcing:

- The Bowes Museum has a 2-year Resilient Heritage NLHF grant supporting its long-term thinking, helping risk-taking feel a bit less risky.
- Another case study museum, the Lightbox in Woking, received emergency NLHF funding and UK Shared Prosperity funding ‘to explore how best to rebalance its portfolio of business models’ (what we might also call income streams).
- The Towner in Eastbourne does not report receiving similar targeted support, but its case study notes that ‘specific investment funds in business model development would be embraced.’

Achieving funding to support transformation can be a real struggle for any organisation, and especially AIM’s smallest members. But no commercial business progresses without investment, and neither can museums. Investing more time does often need more money, but other case studies show the importance of targeting the time and effort you already have. Again, mindset is key. The

Governance: Visionary or Pragmatic?

In the last months, two particularly interesting documents have come out that have pertinence to the role of governance in independent museums. One is the AIM led research on Museum Operating Models, and the other the Arts Council’s Good Practice Guide on Chair/CEO relationships.

Without doubt both are extremely useful documents. The first recognises not only that governance needs to evolve to ensure it is contributing as effectively as possible as the museum itself develops – what works at one stage might not at the next. Moreover it recognises that sticking too rigidly to traditional governance approaches in the current times of financial

constraint will likely impede innovation, taking measured risk and generating income. It makes the case for a flexible, “visionary” approach to governance. The second is an incredibly thoughtful and practical piece that sets out a blueprint for a functional Chair/CEO relationship, recommending a wide range of measures that could be put in place to maximise effectiveness. And we all know how bad it is when that relationship is not right.

But when I think about some of my clients in the sector, I wonder what they will draw from these documents. They both provide ideal pictures of how things could be, but how they map on to the reality of the situation

for a lot of independent museums I am less sure.

Both documents work best in contexts where there is quite a lot of scale. Talking about visionary governance makes most sense when you have a large executive team, and a well-resourced and highly capable volunteer board, but for many in the sector, there needs to be a much more pragmatic approach.

One of the strengths of the independent museums sector is its diversity and just thinking back over the past year I’ve seen a wide array of different models in play, many of which seemed to be working effectively for their context. In one I saw a museum being well run by volunteer trustees

Cartoon Museum keeps a clear-eyed focus on the strongest areas for income generation, avoiding scattershot activity. At the Mary Rose: when a promising idea hits a speedbump, rather than abandon the idea, they ask, “How else can we do it?”

The F2F research talks about ‘transforming’ business models. I translate this as achieving a better *balance* of income from diverse sources, in which public funding – seen as investment – remains just as valid a part of the mix as other fundraised or earned income.

The Scottish Maritime Museum (SMM) case study reports how, back in 2006, the Scottish Executive identified that SMM would be unsustainable without adequate public funding. This was put in place and remains essential. Core funding is at 62% today (down from 72% in 2014), now with almost 40% income generated via admissions, commercial profit, and fundraising: real progress in rebalancing income streams. This is linked to ‘infectious energy and effort’ in partnership building and increasing relevance for today’s SMM audiences.

AIM members are characterised by a can-do attitude, so my emphasising this common thread of mindset might feel like preaching to the choir.

However, when things do feel fragile – the utility bill has gone up, the roof is leaking, there is an HR issue but no HR support – it is hard to maintain focus, optimism, and the confidence to act for the long-term. The F2F team and the case study museums provide heartening examples of organisations that, even in uncertainty, are changing their perception of reality, to see what happens.

Steve Gardam

www.linkedin.com/in/stevegardam



who gave a huge amount of time and energy to their responsibilities, with some real success. Their resources didn’t allow them to escape a sense of pushing against the odds, but they were making real progress within the parameters available. Another had one and a half full time members of staff, and a high calibre board. In this case the energy and talent of the Museum Director palpably drove forward the development of the museum and in effect provided for the board all of the vision it needed. And in another, a tight – and smaller than average – group of very engaged trustees who had been involved for many years worked robustly and collaboratively with their museum director to carry things forward.

If I think about where these museums sit in relation to the operating model – from fragile to flourishing – I could argue that they were completely at both

ends of the spectrum. On paper they would definitely seem fragile – running to very tight budgets, and with no idea how much funding might decline once their key sponsors went through their next budgeting round. But in behaviour they were doing many things relevant to the flourishing museum. From a governance point of view, I saw huge amounts of collaborative working and flexibility – doing what needs to be done as opposed to rigidly following procedures. And embracing appropriate risk and openness to new approaches that will diversify income. More than visionary governance, I would say it is pragmatic governance that is carrying them through.

And the bit missing for me – although it is a much larger topic – in the Chair/CEO document is around the importance of aesthetic alignment between the two characters in terms

of key strategic questions such as risk, innovation and partnerships, all of which might fundamentally change the nature of the organisation whilst attaining sustainability and serving the community.

These two documents provide excellent and thoughtful models which can help guide and structure governance where possible. But are they models that many of our most interesting and different museums might never fit?

Like football managers are fond of saying, “you have to work with the cards you’re dealt”, and we should celebrate the diversity of organisations and approaches that emerge from this.

Ben Tucker

www.minervasearch.com

Minerva are Gold sponsors of AIM Conference, drop into the Expo to meet Ben and the team.



© the artist. Image credit: Paul Francis/Art UK

Building Peace, 2024 Karl Read (b.1980) West Street, Bristol.

AIM members, Art UK has completed a major national project to record and digitise murals and street art across the UK, with volunteers recording more than 6,600 artworks.

The project offers an unprecedented cultural snapshot of the UK's public murals, ranging from medieval wall paintings to brand new street art. The findings reveal clear themes, including:

- 19% of the recorded murals are commemorative, reflecting national events, sporting triumphs, protest movements, and times of mourning
- Animals, which appear in 23% of the recorded murals, from domestic pets to much loved wildlife
- 11% reflect heritage and industry, recalling coal, steel, textiles, and pottery industries, many of which have now gone, but which have defined specific regions of the UK
- Others cover nature, climate and societal cohesion – key concerns reflected in contemporary muralism

The project highlights disparities and opportunities in representation. While murals still depict more named men than women, murals show far greater diversity than public sculpture, better representing individuals from the global

majority, community leaders, activists, educators, and local heroes.

The project coincided with a major rise in muralism across the UK. Once a subversive, underground art form, street art is now widely commissioned by councils and business improvement districts to re-energise town centres, support tourism and reduce graffiti tagging. Research has shown that murals can help create safer, more welcoming environments while stimulating the local economy.

While most of the murals recorded through the project were formally commissioned, the nature of street art means that not all works originate from commissions or organised festivals. Excluding all uncommissioned artworks would have excluded many striking and culturally significant artworks. It did not, however, document artworks that are clearly graffiti or tagging.

The programme captured artworks of all scales and mediums including:

- The largest – a 16 storey abstract mosaic in Gosport, Hampshire

- The smallest – a 50cm-high artwork of a man walking on a utility box in Aberdeen and a series of mini murals across five bollards in Shrewsbury
- The oldest – medieval church wall paintings cared for by the Churches Conservation Trust
- The newest – 2025 murals, some recorded as they were being painted

Katey Goodwin, Deputy Chief Executive & Director of Community Engagement, Art UK, said: 'This project captures a remarkable moment in time. Public murals reflect who we are, our heritage, our concerns, our humour, and our creativity. Thanks to our volunteers and our funders, we now have a lasting public record of works that are often fleeting, and sometimes under threat.'

Scotty Irving, mural artist, Brave Arts, said: 'Street art connects people to true stories. Just this week I was painting a new mural and a local school passed by in a big group, on foot. The kids were buzzing and the teacher immediately used it as a live lesson, gathering the children and encouraging their interests. By that evening, through social media, they were already aware of Art UK's free resources. This project isn't just an archive; it's a tangible bridge between the artist on the street and the next generation in the classroom, making our craft accessible to everyone, everywhere.'

artuk.org

Shared practice, honest conversation

Attending the Welsh Museum Leaders Group meeting was energizing. My morning started with a dawn walk along the Albert Dock, the historic warehouses and waterfront putting me in a reflective mood. Passing the “Fab Four’s” statue, I was struck by how creativity and collaboration define both Liverpool and our roles as museum leaders, a spirit that carried into the meeting.

We were hosted at Tate Liverpool’s temporary location at RIBA North on Mann Island, where the day included a guest offering fresh insights into the Tate’s redevelopment and creative approaches to audience engagement. I reconnected with longtime colleagues and conversations quickly moved to our challenges: limited resources, high expectations, and the ongoing task of motivating our teams through uncertainty. What makes these sessions stand out for me is the openness: participants speaking frankly about setbacks, lessons learned, and how they might approach things differently next time.

A highlight was Kate from The Revels Office facilitating the session. Her method combined strategic focus with an inclusive pace, ensuring every voice was heard. She also helped us turn our concerns into priorities and actionable steps.

The agenda encouraged honest conversation about key issues, especially funding: the time, complexity, and emotional labour involved in grant applications, as well as the challenge of meeting requirements while serving audiences. A mix of realism and laughter kept discussions constructive and showed that collective problem-solving makes daunting issues more manageable. One colleague’s story about deeper community partnerships bringing new energy to their organisation was a reminder that innovation often starts at the grassroots.

It was wonderful to have Victoria Rogers, Head of Museums and Collections at Welsh Government, in attendance. Victoria’s background, having once been in our position, gives her a unique understanding and empathy for the sector. Her insight, support, and the backing of Welsh Government remain invaluable to us as we navigate challenges.

My time in Liverpool showed this isn’t a one-off conversation and there was a proposal to meet again before the upcoming MA conference. I left energised and clear on the value of peer support as both reassurance and a source of ideas to take back to our teams. Like Liverpool’s anthem, ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone,’ the day reminded me that our collective journey as museum leaders is best travelled together.

Darren Macey,
Rhondda, Cynon, Taf Heritage Service



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Kiplin Hall's refurbishment

Kiplin Hall is an independent historic house and gardens located in the heart of rural North Yorkshire, established as a visitor attraction in 1971. Following Covid and changes to our marketing approach and ticketing, we grew our visitor numbers from 19,000 per annum to 34,000. Our tearoom and shop were already underperforming at our lower numbers and were overwhelmed at the higher ones. They were both crammed into a small room in the hall along with admissions, 44 covers for food and three sideboards for shop. We saw visitors walk away during busy periods as we were full up, and despite the visitor growth the shop remained at the same income level.

We decided to build a new visitor centre. Refurbishment on a recently vacated stable block began in 2024 and we opened in 2025. The tearoom was rebranded as a café and occupies the majority of the stable wing. Covers were increased to 70 indoor plus another 40 in the courtyard which is a real sun trap. The same staff and broadly the same menu were retained, but we moved from waited table service to counter service, reducing the high demand on staff time. We added new offers like bacon sandwiches and retained lots of high quality locally supplied cakes, ice cream and coffee as well as our freshly made soups and scones.

The shop was moved into the old garage for the coaches. It still shares a

space with admissions meaning one volunteer can manage admission and shop sales. Display space is roughly four times what we had previously and uses professionally designed shelving and lighting to display the products to best effect. We continue to focus on hyper local arts and crafts as well as all the standard museum fare.



Crucially, we rerouted the visitor route, making it exit through the gift shop.

The change in location was dramatic; café income doubled to £300,000 and shop income quadrupled to £40,000. Obviously only a portion of this is profit, and setting up costs reduced these in the first year, but we have definitely put ourselves in a much better financial position.



We have also begun to develop the café especially as a destination in its own right, attracting cycling groups and coast to coast walkers who never used to come when the café was inside the pay barrier.

The total cost of the project was around £1.8million, though we raised around £800,000 from a bequest and some external fundraising. The remainder came from our endowment fund which represents a risk for the organisation as the

dividends from it are part of our funding mix, but the income from the revised offer has definitely offset the risk. The project wasn't entirely about raising commercial revenue, though that was a large part of it. We also rerouted the visitor journey to ensure people couldn't come onto site without going past the ticket barrier, and the building we refurbished allowed us to move our staff offices and reserve collections out of our main hall freeing up space to be developed as more visitor offer soon.



We definitely learned some lessons along the way. We put in a takeaway window which we thought would be very popular but ended up not being needed much.

We also put in a coffee machine (never had one before) with 150 cups per day throughput but definitely wish we had gone for a bigger size. We had been concerned the change in ambiance (from faux Jacobean wood panelling to a much more modern and airy feel) would cause issues, but while a few regulars lamented the change in atmosphere, our strong comms and the retention of our service and menu definitely helped. The shop has some lovely bay windows for display of product to the outside, but we didn't account for how the hot sun would affect the candles and wax melts we decided to display there!

There is a lot more we could touch on, but I think as ever, having the right offer in the right place and with the right size and space for the visitors paid considerable dividends for us both in terms of improved visitor experience but also financially.

James Etherington, Director
www.kiplinhall.co.uk

SORP 2026: new rules, new shared responsibility

Charity Finance Group's Policy and Communications Team explains why the most significant update to charity financial reporting in years is not just a job for your finance team.

As a leader of an independent museum, the phrase 'Charities SORP' may feel like something you can safely leave to your treasurer or finance manager to understand. That could be a mistake.

SORP 2026 – which came into force for accounting periods beginning on or after 1 January 2026 – is one of the most significant updates to charity financial reporting in years, and its implications reach well beyond those who work in accounts.

What's changing and why does it matter?

Alongside Financial Reporting Standard 102 (FRS102), the Charities Statement of Recommended Practice (SORP) 2026 introduces substantive changes that not only have many technical aspects that finance professionals are now getting to grips with, but strategic, governance and communications dimensions too.

The introduction of a new tiered framework based on organisations' annual gross income is one of the most talked about changes. It will affect the information you will be expected to

disclose, so it's important to know which tier your organisation falls into. For example, the tiering determines how (and if) you report on the scale of activities undertaken by your volunteers. It could also affect your sustainability reporting.

Alongside this significant change, two others also deserve attention. The first is lease accounting. In 2026, leases will move from the notes onto the balance sheet (although, as is often the case, there are exceptions!) You'll need to recognise a right-of-use asset (the space or equipment you control) and a lease liability (the obligation to make future lease payments). And instead of a single, straight-line rent expense, lease costs will be split into depreciation of the right-of-use asset and interest on the lease liability.

Lease length directly affects the size of both assets and liabilities, so decisions about how strategically important a building is, or how costly it would be to exit, now have direct accounting consequences. This could mean that your balance sheet looks materially different (even if nothing about your situation has changed).

The next big change is income recognition. The new five-step model for recognising income from grants and contracts introduces important distinctions about when income should be recorded and may affect how multi-year grants from funders appear in the accounts.

How your museum structures grant agreements, manages funder relationships and plans its cash flow all intersect with how income is now recognised. These are not purely technical decisions – they involve the whole leadership team. Some charities

may find they'll need to be audited for the first time.

These are just a few examples of how SORP 2026 and FRS 102 could change how your museum prepares and presents its annual report and accounts – and what you might need to communicate with stakeholders. As trustees carry legal responsibility for the financial health and reporting of their charity, these conversations should ideally happen at board level, not just among finance experts.

Don't panic – prepare now

CFG's expert corporate partners have been fielding questions not just from trustees and executives, but from experienced charity finance professionals. So, if you are finding the new SORP complex or confusing, you're not alone. The simplest, most common advice CFG can give is to start preparing now.

CFG's Accounting Helpline is available free of charge to all CFG members, and CFG membership is free to you through our partnership with AIM. Our helplines offer confidential, practical support on all your charity finance related questions. We are also developing more dedicated SORP 2026 training sessions, so keep your eyes open for more on those. In the meantime, you'll find several helpful SORP articles on our online knowledge hub.

www.cfg.org.uk/AIM

Disclaimer: The information in this article is intended as general guidance only and does not constitute professional financial, legal or accounting advice. Every organisation is different, and we strongly recommend consulting a qualified, relevant professional to understand how your organisation could be affected by SORP 2026, FRS102 and related issues.

AIM Bulletin

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