

Association of
Independent
Museums

AIM Success Guide: Donation boxes

Judy Niner, Development Partners

Contents

Introduction	03
Cash or cashless?	04
Buying or leasing your donations box or contactless device	06
Location, location, location	08
Management and record-keeping	10
Messaging	12
Suggested donations	14
Donation box results	16
Gift Aid and the Gift Aid Small Donations scheme (GASDS)	18
In conclusion	20
References	21
Case studies	23



Introduction

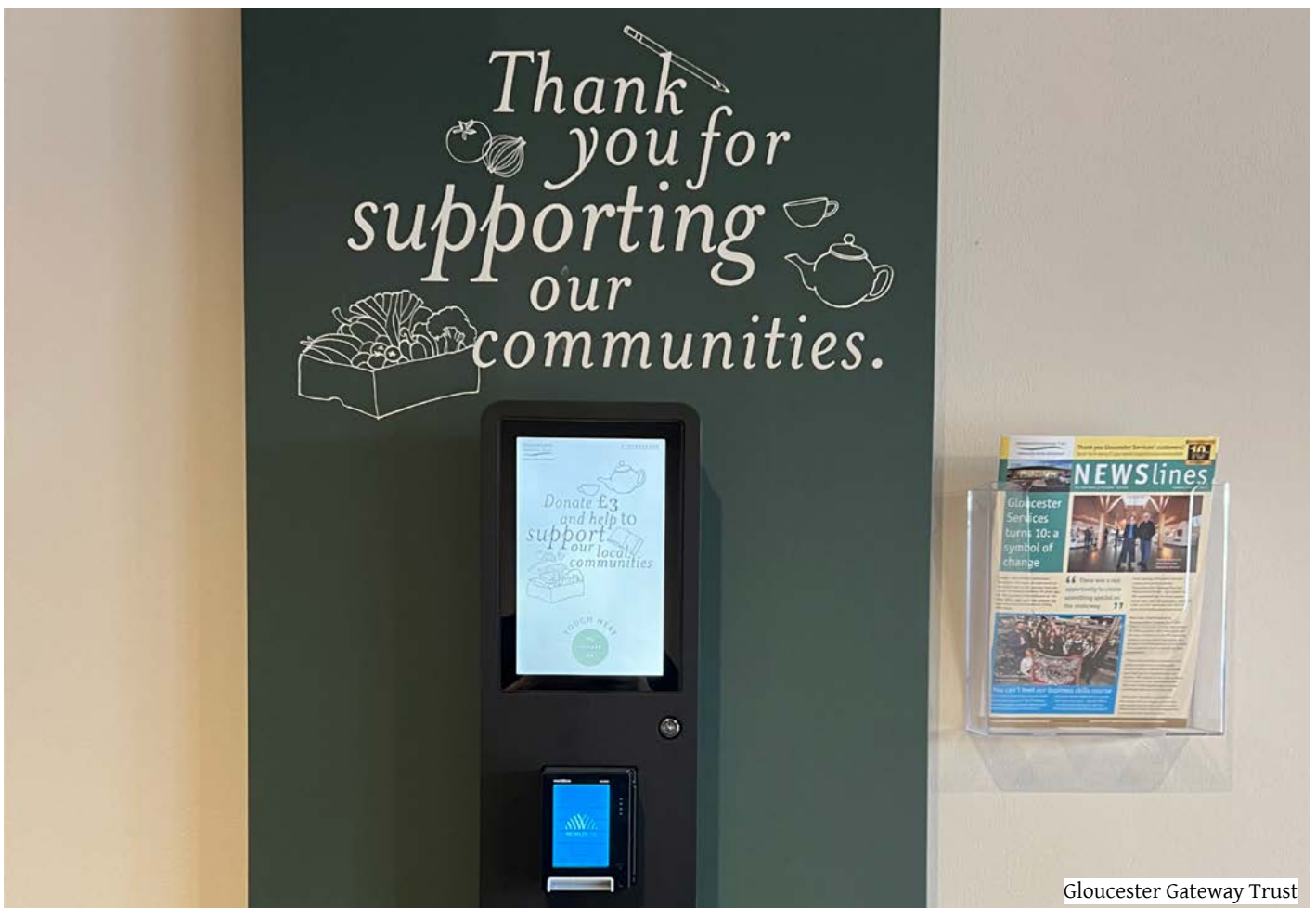
On-site donations can play an important role in a museum's overall fundraising strategy for two principal reasons. Firstly, the very presence of a donation box or device reinforces the charitable nature of the museum. Secondly, the income itself (with or without Gift Aid) can be significant, whether unrestricted or raised for a specific project.

There are definitely some dos and don'ts to understand if you want to get the best results. Donation boxes are a significant investment but, managed well, can return that investment over and over again.

This Success Guide, prepared for AIM by Development Partners (DP), updates an original guide written in 2014 with fresh information gathered from a survey of AIM members in summer 2025. Collectively this sample of 60 organisations welcomed 3.5million visitors in 2024: 67% charge for admission, 33% are free to enter. This feedback is combined with other research and DP's experience of working with museums, large and small, across the UK.

The principal change since the first paper was written is the rise of digital technology and contactless donation devices. More and more museums have been using these devices, usually supplementing rather than replacing traditional cash boxes, and we are beginning to learn useful lessons from these experiences.

This guide will give you practical advice on the use of donations boxes and contactless devices and we would like to thank the 2025 survey respondents who have allowed us to share their experience.



Gloucester Gateway Trust

Inspired by what
you've seen today?

As a charity, we rely on your support to:

- spark a child's lifelong love of learning
- set a researcher on a journey of discovery
- create a manuscript for future generations

Suggested donation: £5/\$5

Donate online at
bl.uk/support



PLEASE
DONATE
TODAY

PLEASE
DONATE
TODAY

Help us open up a world
of ideas and inspiration
for everyone

**DONATE
TODAY**

bl.uk/support

Cash or cashless?

Image Credit: British Library



Cash or cashless?

According to a 2025 Finder survey, 1 in 8 people in the UK use cash every day whilst nearly 1 in 10 never use it. So most of us are still using cash some of the time.

Cash was used to make just 12% of all payments in the UK in 2023, and that is expected to fall to 6% of payments in 2033. However, most people continue to carry cash in case they want to shop at places that only accept cash or in case of emergencies, such as losing a debit card or phone.

The rise in people relying on digital payments has encouraged many museums to install contactless donation devices. These devices allow visitors to donate using debit cards, Apple Pay, Google Pay etc. From our survey of AIM members, just over 40% of responding organisations now have contactless devices.

Companies supplying digital devices make various claims regarding the success of their products to raise donation levels. Feedback from members was not, generally, as positive. Primarily this is because digital devices can incur ongoing charges, both for device rental (if they are not purchased outright) and service subscriptions, in addition to transaction costs. There are a number of cases where the costs have been higher than income and museums have cancelled their contactless device contracts.

However, evidence also indicates that the factors that determine the success of digital devices are exactly the same as those that can impact the performance of a cash box, namely:

- Its position and location
- Messaging
- Whether staff/volunteers are actively asking for donations

Hybrid units accept cash as well as having tap-to-donate functionality, catering for all visitor preferences.

Digital devices offer some additional benefits, but can also raise problems:

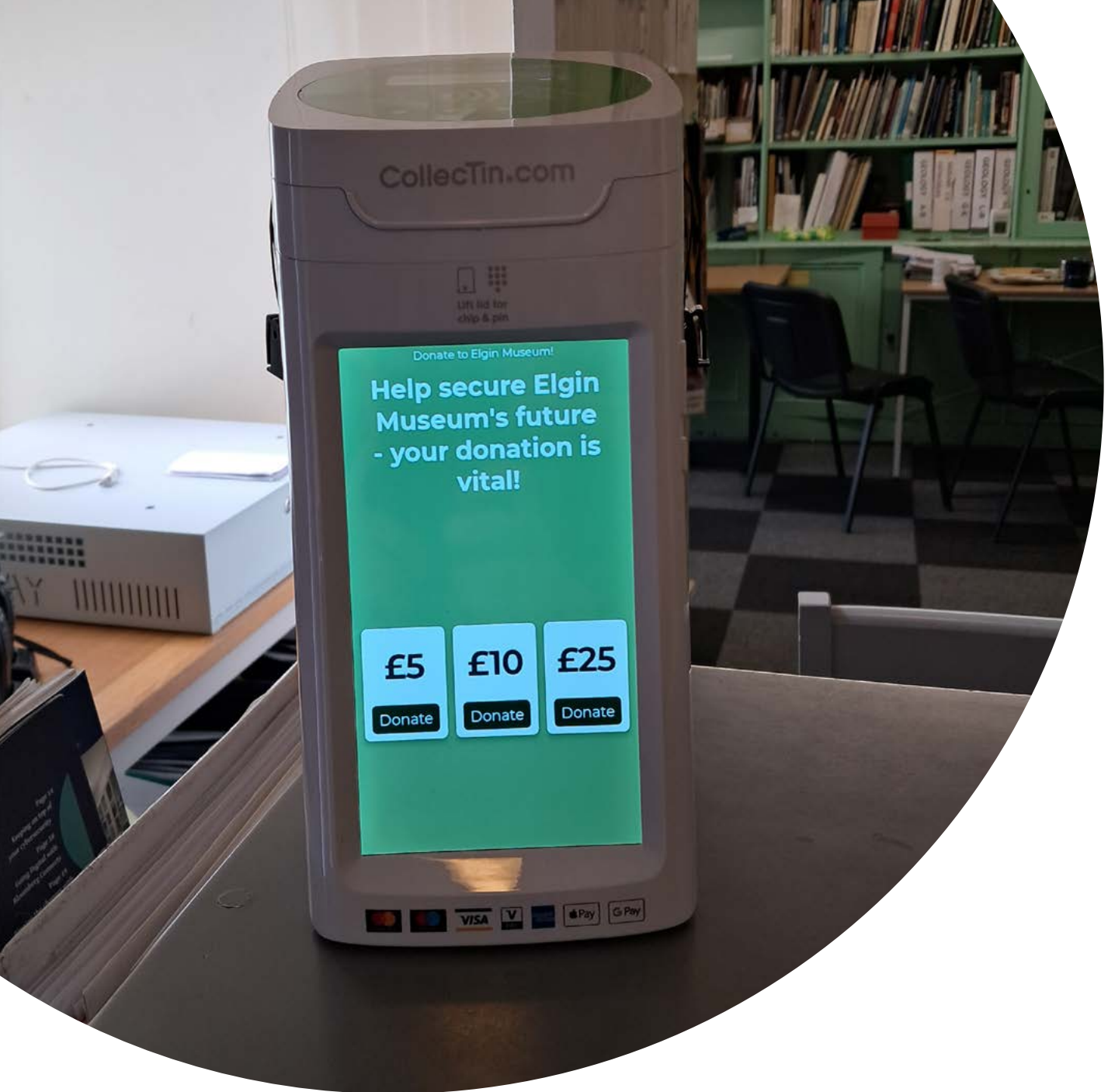
Benefits

Can be easy to claim Gift Aid
No need to count/manage cash
No risk of cash being stolen
Opportunity to gather personal data

Potential problems

Needs electrical point
(or battery charging)
Ideally needs good Wifi
(or a SIM card)
Ongoing costs

Between them, survey respondents have 174 donation boxes or devices, of which just over 70% are for cash. These continue to raise vital funds, even for those organisations with digital devices.



Buying or leasing your donations box or contactless device

Image credit: Elgin Museum



Buying or leasing your donations box or contactless device

There are a number of things to think about before buying or leasing your donations box or device:

- Cash, digital or hybrid?
- Where's it going to go?
- What's your budget?

There are several reputable UK providers of digital devices and cash donation boxes, each with slightly different products and services. Cash boxes come in a wide range of shapes and sizes, with price tags to match. With digital devices, you can get started for a little as £25-50/month renting a counter-top contactless device (presentation, branding and payment processing fees in addition), but the cost of a branded free-standing podium with an inbuilt contactless device is currently over £1,000 (with monthly service fees and transaction fees in addition).

It's important to compare quotes and talk to suppliers about your organisation's needs. For digital, choose a supplier that offers support and flexibility—especially if you're new to digital fundraising.

If you are choosing a cash donation box, the design you choose will have an impact on the value of donations you'll receive. We are often asked whether a box tailored to the theme of a museum, such as a whisky barrel in a distillery museum, would result in more donations than a clear, Perspex box, or whether child-friendly, interactive 'boxes' are more successful.

The answer is clear: Professionally presented, transparent, Perspex boxes on plinths are the best way to secure the greatest donation amounts. Research shows that:

- The psychology of giving indicates that people are less likely to put money into 'a black hole'. They want to see where their money is going.
- Visitors' donations are greatly affected by the perceived donation behaviour of previous visitors. Therefore, it is important that previous donations can be seen clearly as this encourages giving.
- Interactive donation boxes, specifically those aimed at children, can result in a large number of donations. However, these are usually in the form of small change. As these coins are nearly always provided by accompanying adults, those adults may be less likely to make an additional, more valuable donation because they feel they have already given. Also, this sort of device can trivialise the serious business of asking for charitable support of your organisation. If you've already got a whizzy interactive donation device that you don't want to lose because it's a popular exhibit, move it away from the key donation box areas (e.g. entrance and exit) and remove charitable messaging, except for 'thank you'.

Cash donation boxes should be heavy enough to be secure, but possible to move. This enables you to change the location of the box if you have a temporary exhibition, or if you wish to experiment with the location to increase donations. Small, desk-top donation boxes generally look insecure and tend to encourage small coin donations.



Location, location, location

Image credit: HMS Warrior, Portsmouth Historic Dockyard



Location, location, location

The positioning of your donation box or device could have a significant impact on how much money you raise. Ideally, it will be close to where staff and/or volunteers can ask visitors to donate. Otherwise, near the entrance or the exit tend to be most successful. If you want to raise money for a particular exhibit or activity, position a box/device in an appropriate location and be clear about what the donation will go towards. Remember though, if you request donations for a specific purpose, money raised needs to be spent on that purpose alone.

“Donation boxes at the front desk with a visible donation ask works well.”

“We definitely get different results from different locations of donation points, one box is located at the end of a volunteer tour which does the best.”

AIM members

It is best to locate a donation box/device against a plain background so that the graphics and charitable message are clearly visible. Don't hide a donation box in amongst a jumble of other messages, notices or interpretation.

You need to think carefully about where to position a digital device which may need a strong Wi-Fi signal and electricity supply.

Try different locations. Some of the survey respondents have actively tried moving their boxes/devices to different locations, carefully monitoring results. The result has been significant improvement in donation income.



Management and record-keeping

Image credit: Mary Rose Museum



Management and record-keeping

Once you have decided on the type and position of your donation boxes/devices, plan the processes and tasks required to manage them.

A donation box should be emptied regularly, but never entirely - the money visible in the box can have an encouraging effect on donors and has a significant impact on the amount you receive. In field experiments carried out by Professors Martin and Randal (2008), comparisons between empty boxes and those containing a float showed that boxes without a float received up to 50% less in donations than those with a float.

The composition of the float also has an effect on donation behaviour. In the same experiment, Martin and Randal showed how donation amounts are affected by how generous other people are perceived to have been. Comparing three boxes with differing numbers of coins, and small and large currency notes, the box with a large number of coins led to the highest propensity to donate but generated smaller donations per visitor. By contrast, the box with the largest notes resulted in the fewest donations but the average donation per visitor was the highest. In general, people donate what they see has been donated by previous visitors, so ensure that the contents of your box reflect the donations you would like to receive and that you consider to be most appropriate for your audience. We recommend never leaving a float with coins of lower value than £1.

Every time each donation box is emptied (never less than weekly) the amount received should be recorded. Not only will this allow you to measure the results, work out average donation per visitor figures at different times of year and try changes to position and messaging, but you may also be able to claim under the Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme (see below) on up to £8,000 of donations.

Record-keeping for digital devices is much more straightforward – it's done for you! A dashboard allows you to log in and view real-time insights such as how much you have raised, when and where. Some devices have Gift Aid capture built in and will automatically claim the Gift Aid for you.



Canal &
River Trust
Making life better by water

Touch here
to donate



VISA



Apple Pay

Google Pay



As a charity we
urgently need
your support to
keep the canals
you love alive.

Messaging

Image credit: National Waterways Museum



Messaging

As soon as people arrive at your site, they should be made aware that you are run by a charity (assuming you are). There is much confusion amongst the public about how museums and heritage sites are funded - a clear, simple message communicating your form of governance prepares people to spend in the shop and café, as well as to donate.

The communications on and around each donation box will have a direct impact on results, and an indirect impact on your wider fundraising success. An important role of the donation box is to reinforce the fact that your museum is a charity.

“Both our contactless and cash boxes have strong imagery - the contactless screens have a slide show of 9 different images which are displayed on a rolling basis until a donor touches the screen.”

AIM member

We recommend experimenting with the text and format of your donation box messages, finding out what works best. Don't be coy! Make it clear that you are asking for donations.

Never forget to say 'thank you'.



Suggested donations

Image credit: Ashmolean Museum Oxford



Suggested donations

The promotion of a suggested donation amount can increase total donation amounts and is particularly relevant in free admission museums. What you set as the suggested donation level is critical: too low a price can devalue the museum visit, whilst too high a level may put people off donating at all. Be prepared to try different amounts, thinking about the make-up of your audience. For example, tourists may be prepared to donate more than locals - so you could try increasing the suggested donation level in high season. It could well be worth the small cost of printing new signage.

When setting up many digital devices you can select a default donation amount, with a user option to change the amount to be given. Again, don't be tempted to make the default the lowest amount offered - for example, if the options shown are £3, £5, £10, £20, perhaps make £5 the default. All devices should give the user the option to choose any amount they want.

MUSEUM DONATION
£5 VOUCHER



PRESENT THIS VOUCHER AT THE FRONT
DESK TO ADD A DONATION TO YOUR
SHOP PURCHASE.

Donation box results

Image credit: Andrew Carnegie Birthplace Museum



Donation box results

There are many variables when it comes to measuring and comparing the results of donation box fundraising but the survey results indicate that, in 2025, the average raised by non-charging museums was 20.9p: that dropped to 6.4p in museums with admission charges. There are plenty of museums, even those without an admission charge, that are only achieving average donations of 1p or 2p. There are others securing over £1 from their visitors. With the increasing use of digital devices it is hoped that museums will begin to be able to measure average donation per donor as well as per visitor.

Organisations that experimented with the position and communications around their donation boxes and measured performance were more likely to be reaping higher returns than those who were passive.

The single action that resulted in the biggest increase in donations was when staff and/or volunteers actively asked visitors to consider making a donation.

“We have struggled to get volunteers to ask for donations, but ... it very much depends on the person.”

“We recently appointed Visitor Facilitators who have been trained to make a donation ask, and this has increased the number of donations that we have received.”

AIM members

In order to do this with confidence, volunteers/staff need to understand themselves how the museum is funded and why donations are needed. They also need to appreciate the real value of the museum and its work.

After following the advice in an earlier version of this guide, the Fry Art Gallery saw their average donation per visitor double from 13.84p to 27.11p.



Gift Aid and the Gift Aid Small Donations scheme (GASDS)

Image credit: Clifton Suspension Bridge Museum



Gift Aid and the Gift Aid Small Donations scheme (GASDS)

All museums and heritage organisations with charitable status should be aware of the importance of claiming Gift Aid on donations, as doing so can increase the amount you receive by 25%.

Ideally, people giving to cash donation boxes should be asked to complete a Gift Aid form/envelope, but often this is not possible or is seen by potential donors as a hassle. Don't insist on Gift Aid details if this might stop people making a spur-of-the-moment gift, but if you do offer envelopes, remember to include a GDPR privacy notice reference (eg: referring to your website) and communications consent tick-box on the envelope. This is a useful way to collect data.


In 2013 HMRC introduced the Gift Aid Small Donation Scheme ('GASDS'), which allows charities to claim a Gift Aid top-up payment on small cash donations without needing Gift Aid consent from the donor. Charities can use the GASDS scheme for all cash or contactless donations under £30 each, up to a total of £8,000. At its maximum this can result in an additional £2,000 income.

Full details of the scheme are available on the HMRC website www.gov.uk/claim-gift-aid/small-donations-scheme

The scheme is subject to a few key conditions:

1. Your organisation must have been registered as a charity for tax purposes for at least the previous 2 complete tax years. You must also have made a successful Gift Aid claim in at least 2 of the previous 4 tax years.
2. Donations must be made in cash or through contactless payment and should not exceed £30 per donor.
3. GASDS claims must be matched by claims you have made in the Gift Aid scheme in the same year in a ratio of 1 to 10. Therefore, if you claim Gift Aid on eligible donations of £100 in a year, you can only claim on up to £1,000 under GASDS. As such, it is in your interest to ensure that you continue to collect Gift Aid declarations as frequently as possible (from any method of donation), as this has a direct effect on the maximum GASDS you can claim.
4. Benefits cannot be given to the donor in return for the donation.

Digital devices, depending on the provider, can be set up to collect Gift Aid information and even to submit the Gift Aid claim to HMRC. For those organisations securing higher levels of donations, it is worth encouraging people to use the digital devices so you can benefit from more Gift Aid than the GASDS scheme provides.

A white, textured card with the words "Thank You" on the first line and "Very Much" on the second line, both written in a black cursive font. The card is placed on a dark brown wooden surface. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Thank You
Very Much

In conclusion

Image credit: Unsplash



In conclusion

Other feedback from members

- A few museums have experimented with QR codes for donations. The results, according to our survey, have been extremely disappointing.
- Some organisations take donation boxes to where an event is taking place, whether or not the event is free of charge. This can prove very successful.
- Donations can also be taken at tills.
- Some local authority museums reported problems with procurement of digital devices where funds are collected by the provider.
- None of the museums in the sample are completely cashless.
- Seasonal museums need to be careful about taking on some of the monthly costs of contactless units.

The final word

Investment in donation boxes pays off if you follow a few golden rules:

- Location, location, location – experiment until you find the best position for your units. Try the entrance and exit, always facing the visitor flow. Don't position a box in a cluttered, visually noisy position - let it be the centre of attention.
- The message – trial different messages but make sure they're straightforward and personal. Steer away from desperation – people give less to organisations they think may fail. Make sure messages, written and spoken, are consistent, emphasising that the organisation is a charity.
- The ask – encourage and train staff and volunteers to ask visitors to donate.
- If you're going to install a digital device, take time to research a number of providers to get the right product at the right price.
- Make sure that cash donations can be seen - a simple, professional, Perspex-topped box is best.
- Empty cash boxes regularly but always start with a visible float that reflects the donations you want to attract.
- Consider allocating a box to a specific appeal.
- Move interactive/decorative donation boxes away from entrances/exits – they are not your principal 'ask'.
- If your museum is free-admission, consider suggesting an appropriate donation level.
- Keep records of how much you raise from each box and over what period of time. Know your average donation per visitor and set yourselves a target to increase it.
- Make it easy for people to Gift Aid, but don't force them. You may lose spur of the moment donations if you complicate the giving process.
- Use the Gift Aid logo on the box/device.
- Make sure you use the Gift Aid Small Donations Scheme.
- Always say thank you.



References

The Future of Giving -

www.culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Barclays-The-future-of-giving.pdf

Charity Times (2019) Charity technology trends to watch out for in 2019. [Online].

[Accessed June 2019]. Available from - www.charitytimes.com

LINK research -

www.link.co.uk/news/majority-of-uk-adults-still-value-cash-despite-digital-payments

FinTech magazine -

www.fintechmagazine.com/articles/barclays-uk-contactless-payments-hit-all-time-high-in-2024

Using contactless donations in parks – a Rethinking Parks project -

www.media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Contactless.pdf

A paper written by a major supplier of digital devices -

www.goodbox.com/2025/04/contactless-vs-cash-why-the-giving-landscape-is-changing/

Institute of Fundraising (2018) HM Treasury Call for Evidence on cash and digital payments in the new economy. [Online]. [Accessed June 2019]. Available from - www.ciof.org.uk

Martin, R. and Randal, J. (2008) How is donation behavior affected by the donations of others?

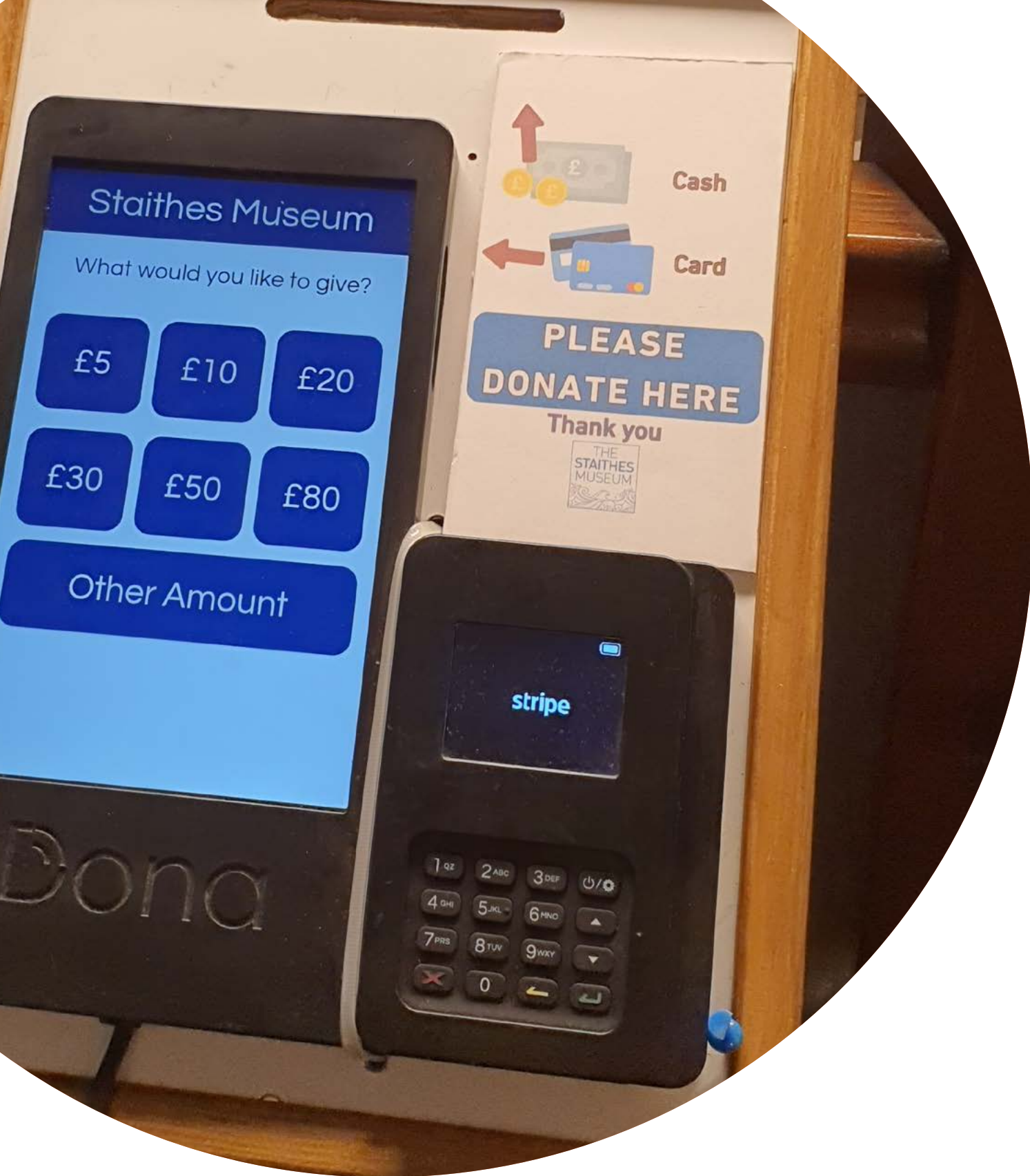
Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organization 67.

Third Sector (2017) Charities could raise more by offering contactless donations. [Online].

[Accessed June 2019]. Available from - www.thirdsector.co.uk

More and more suppliers of digital units have entered the market. They include but are not limited to:

- GoodBox - www.goodbox.com
- GWD - [Contactless Fundraising For Museums & Galleries | GWD](#)
- Toucan Giving (formerly Paya Liberty) - www.toucangiving.com
- Give A Little - www.givealittle.co
- CollectTin - www.collectin.com
- Donation Boxes - www.donationboxes.co.uk
- Tap Donate - www.tapdonate.co.uk
- Direct Fundraising - www.direct-fundraising.co.uk



Case Studies

Image credit: Staithe Museum

Case Studies

Staithe Museum

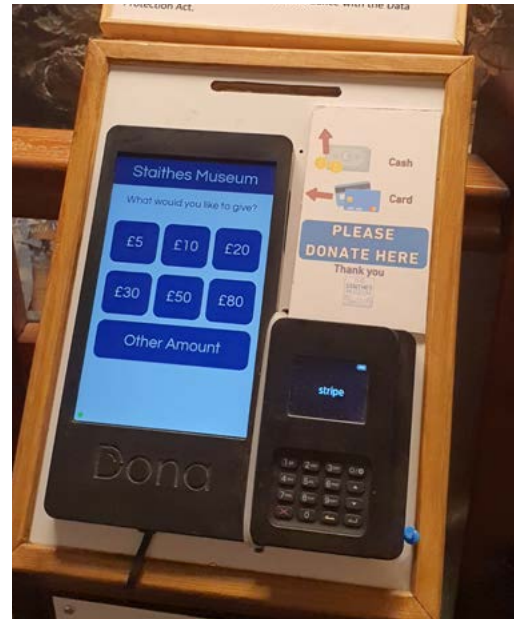
28,000 visitors | Free admission

The Museum raises an average of 75p per visitor in donations from four donation units – two cash, two contactless. Rosie Barnes, the Museum’s Manager/Curator says;

“The one thing that has the biggest impact on donations is whether or not there is a staff member or volunteer welcoming visitors, talking to them and explaining that we rely on donations. This is very visible in our donation statistics.”

Since the digital devices have been installed, Gift Aided donations have increased by 65% making a big difference to the Gift Aid rebate.

“Our old upstairs cash donation box used to have a see-through window that let people see the money collected – now that this has been removed, the amount of donations in that box seems to have decreased.”



Tiverton Museum of Mid-Devon Life

6,200 visitors | Charging (except for children)



With an average donation of 32p, Tiverton Museum is one of the most successful of the charging museums in raising funds from donation boxes and devices. Director, Pippa Griffith, says:

“Our donation boxes have worked best when they are clearly dedicated to a project within the historic buildings”.

The museum has three cash boxes around the site, with a simple Sumup contactless unit on top of the box in the reception area.

Clifton Suspension Bridge Visitor Centre

65,000 visitors | Free admission

Traditionally, the volunteers at Clifton Suspension Bridge Visitor Centre were cautious about asking for donations. But the recruitment and training of Visitor Facilitators has given volunteers the confidence they needed to raise the subject with visitors. The Centre has two cash boxes and three cashless devices. One of them is positioned next to the Bridge's public toilets. They receive cash from tourists in a variety of currencies with Visitor Experience Manager, Dr Laura Hilton, explaining that she uses the Leftover Currency website www.leftovercurrency.com to convert foreign coins into valuable donations.





About the Author

Judy Niner has worked with numerous UK museums and heritage organisations, large and small, primarily focusing on fundraising and income generation. Judy founded Development Partners in 2000 and has held senior positions at the Science Museum and Waddesdon Manor. She was Chair of Cogges Heritage Trust for its first 10 years, and has been a Trustee of the Waterways Trust and the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre.

www.development-partners.co.uk