

## 2020-03-25 Museums Aotearoa public statement

### Museums still operating in Aotearoa's COVID-19 shutdown

He waka eke noa – We are all in this together

Arts, culture and heritage are essential expressions of who we are as the people of Aotearoa and of our place in the wider world. Public museums and art galleries are kaitiaki of objects and knowledge that inform and reflect our understanding of who we are.

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing social disruption on a global scale. Public museums and galleries are a key part of our society, contribute positively to our economy and will be a vital part of our recovery. Our people and organisations need a commitment of the ongoing support of local and central government to ensure we can continue to strengthen our communities during the current crisis and in a post-COVID-19 world.

The commissioned report on *The value museums, art galleries and heritage properties contribute in Aotearoa New Zealand*<sup>[1]</sup> illustrates the benefits that our institutions provide to communities and to the economy. The cultural value of ngā taonga tuku iho that rest within our institutions and are kept connected to their whānau hapū iwi by support people and systems to ensure their mauri is safe cannot be overstated.

The importance of arts, culture and heritage venues in maintaining community cohesiveness and wellbeing has already been demonstrated during and after the Canterbury earthquakes and the 2019 Christchurch terror attacks. These institutions will have a key role in collecting and recording the memory of this time for future generations, as they have done through time.

### Immediate effects on the museum sector

Museums Aotearoa has been in contact with galleries and museums around Aotearoa over the past weeks as the COVID-19 situation developed. As well as the immediate responses of closing institutions of all sizes and preparing staff for alert level 4, museums and galleries are already developing plans to continue to provide access to cultural experiences and inter-generational learning opportunities during the time of shutdown and beyond.

We applaud the government's recent initiatives to protect and support our people and our visitors. The Wage Subsidy and Leave Support Scheme will assist some public museums and galleries, and a very small number will be able to access Creative New Zealand's Emergency Response Package. It is hoped that the mortgage payment holiday just announced will also help museums to retain staff if they have to take unpaid leave or a pay cut, although the impact of this on those who rent is not yet known.

Some public galleries and museums are currently well supported by local councils. Even with their doors closed and no entry fees, donations or events income, many will be able to retain permanent staff, although at what level over a longer term is unknown. In many cases staff are able to continue to do useful and proactive work from home to ensure the collections are safe, they are researched are shared with our public in new ways, and that their institution is in a good position to reopen when that time comes.

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[1] Museums Aotearoa 2018. <https://www.museumsaotearoa.org.nz/research#VALUE>

However, there are already some redundancies announced and there will be more, beginning with front of house and part time staff. For organisations without the active support of local government, or where there is not the capacity for additional external support to weather this crisis, there is serious potential for closures.

As well as staffing and loss of income, Museums Aotearoa members report a range of specific areas of concern, depending on the particular type and scale of museum or gallery:

Loss of income from	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- admissions, events and retail/hospitality operations</li> <li>- grants and sponsorship for projects that cannot proceed (which often includes staff time)</li> <li>- special events such as fundraisers</li> </ul>
Staff retention and wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- inability to retain front of House and retail/events staff</li> <li>- loss of sector and institution-specific knowledge</li> <li>- need to retrain new staff before reopening</li> <li>- need to support staff (and volunteer) wellbeing during closure/enforced leave</li> </ul>
Static outgoings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- continuing costs of climate control, insurance, electricity and security</li> <li>- ongoing care of live exhibits such as kiwis, butterflies and plants</li> </ul>
Volunteer issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a prolonged disconnection from the museum will inevitably lead some volunteers not to return after this crisis</li> <li>- museums are concerned about their elderly volunteers on a personal level, and some fear that this population could be badly impacted if COVID-19 causes significant numbers of deaths</li> </ul>
Business interruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- disruption to building, fundraising and other non-business as usual projects</li> <li>- probable redirection of public and philanthropic funding streams</li> <li>- expect building costs will rise further</li> </ul>
Other concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- security and monitoring of collections during closure</li> <li>- uncertainty about LEOTC contracts</li> <li>- looking for advice and guidance on support, entitlements and obligations, eg to employees, for tax, financial reporting etc</li> <li>- museums that rely on tourists fear that post-pandemic visitation will take a long time to recover</li> </ul>

### Future opportunities

On a more positive note, some museums are already finding new opportunities. Online and social media presence has been growing in recent years and we expect it to expand rapidly, for example Christchurch Art Gallery has been live streaming talks via Facebook, and many museums regularly post and blog about topical collection items.

The extent of online collection access has also been growing, and those in a position to do so have said they will step this up during the work from home period. However, this work is now constrained for those with no access to collections not already digitised and accessible online – at least by staff if not the public – and by available technology and expertise. We hope that at some point after the immediate alert level 4 period there will be limited staff/volunteer access to workplaces which will enable more of this kind of activity to be supported.

Looking to a time post-COVID-19, the museum sector will be working alongside others across the arts, culture and heritage sectors to support our recovery. There is some initial thinking and sharing of ideas around collecting relating to the pandemic, informed by events

such as Christchurch earthquakes and mosque attacks, as well as international experience. We also expect a strong emphasis on community engagement, especially locally.

Our museum and gallery professionals are well-connected nationally and internationally, leading the way in many areas of museum practice; we do, and will continue to, support each other. As well as working with our members and the international museum community, Museums Aotearoa will be reviewing with the Ministry for Culture and Heritage what leadership, guidance and support they can provide to the sector so that Aotearoa has a coordinated approach as we work our way through the impact of COVID-19.

### **Museum sector needs**

Museums Aotearoa strongly advocates that our people and our organisations need the ongoing commitment and extended support of both local and central government to ensure we can come through the COVID-19 crisis and continue to strengthen our communities.

Nā tō rourou, nā taku rourou ka ora ai te iwi  
With your food basket and my food basket the people will thrive

Phillipa Tocker  
Executive Director, Museums Aotearoa  
25 March 2020

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## **COVID-19 pandemic – concerns for museum sector 25 March 2020**

**Source:** Museums Aotearoa members' survey 17-24 March 2020; personal communications; MA sector data.

### **1 General concerns across the sector**

#### **1a Loss of income**

Institutions closely aligned with local councils are feeling relatively well supported, although many are concerned that council budget pressure in this crisis will push them down the priority funding list. Others rely heavily on income from admissions, events and retail/hospitality operations – which has now completely ceased. In addition, there is loss of income from:

- grants and sponsorship for projects that cannot proceed (which often includes staff time)
- special events such as fundraisers

#### **1b Staff retention and wellbeing**

This is the most serious concern for museums of all sizes. Retention particularly applies to Front of House and retail/events staff, many of whom are on casual or zero hours contracts. After they are made redundant – which has already happened in some cases – they may not return. There are widespread concerns about staff and volunteer wellbeing.

- inability to retain front of House staff
- loss of sector and institution-specific knowledge
- need to retrain new staff before reopening
- need to support staff (and volunteer) wellbeing during closure/enforced leave

### **1c Static outgoings**

When closed, museums and galleries have continuous expenses aside from staff costs – they cannot simply turn out the lights and lock the doors. Climate control, insurance, electricity and security all need to be maintained. Some have live exhibits such as kiwis, butterflies and plants, which need ongoing care. Those that are dependent on admission income to operate will need immediate financial support.

## **2 Specific concerns affecting some museums and galleries**

### **2a Volunteer issues**

Aotearoa's 350+ smaller museums and galleries rely heavily on volunteers to do everything from governance to cleaning, including specialist roles. Most of the medium-large museums also have strong volunteer input which is a vital part of their community engagement. The average volunteer age is estimated to be at least 70.

- a prolonged disconnection from the museum will inevitably lead some volunteers not to return after this crisis
- museums are concerned about their elderly volunteers on a personal level, and some fear that this population could be badly impacted if COVID-19 causes significant numbers of deaths

### **2b Business interruption**

Building, fundraising and other non-business as usual projects will be seriously affected. Not only are they put on pause, but there will be new challenges once they resume. Pre-pandemic public and philanthropic funding streams are likely to be redirected, and building costs will rise further.

Examples are large projects such as Rotorua Museum with its earthquake strengthening requirements, and other kinds of projects such as collection digitisation. One smaller museum says that it may have to close permanently as it will be impossible to re-establish visitation as well as re-start its heritage building strengthening project without significant ongoing support.

### **2c Other concerns**

Some other specific issues include:

- uncertainty about LEOTC contracts
- looking for advice and guidance on support, entitlements and obligations, eg to employees, for tax, financial reporting etc
- museums that rely in tourists fear that post-pandemic visitation will take a long time to recover

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## **About Museums Aotearoa**

Museums Aotearoa, Te Tari o Ngā Whare Taonga o Te Motu (MA), is the independent professional association for New Zealand's museums, galleries and their employees. We support the museums of Aotearoa to be thriving, sustainable institutions. MA members comprise some 200 public museums and galleries and over 1500 individual members who work or volunteer in or for the sector.

The 'museum sector' includes art galleries, museums, historical societies and science centres made up of 470-500 institutions throughout New Zealand, including 20 large (20+ staff), 60 medium (5-20 staff), and 400+ smaller and volunteer run institutions. The MA membership represents over 94% of staffed institutions.

[www.museumsaotearoa.org.nz](http://www.museumsaotearoa.org.nz)