



Association of  
Independent  
Museums



The AIM  
Hallmarks  
of Prospering Museums

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AIM Guides for Boards

# An introduction to museums for new trustees

Author: Tamalie Newbery

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## Introduction

This guide is intended for new trustees of museums and heritage organisations who are not familiar with the museums and heritage sector.

There are many guides to being a charity trustee and some key resources are listed at the end of this briefing. This guide offers an introduction to the museum and heritage sector, and highlights responsibilities that are particular to museum trustees.

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## The Museum Sector

There are over 2,000 museums, art galleries, science centres and heritage organisations in the UK. In 2016 UK science and heritage attractions welcomed more than 100 million visitors. (This guide uses the term 'museum' to include all cultural, heritage and science attractions, art galleries, historic homes and so on.)

Over the past 30 years there has been a huge change in the way museums work, and most have become visitor-focused, interactive and participatory places. They have had to adapt in order to compete with other attractions, school activities, and a wide range of demands on the public's leisure time and finances. This necessity has led to a greater resilience in operations, business planning and governance for many.

There are currently around 20,000 people in paid employment in the UK museum sector. Salaries and wages in museums are generally lower than average. A large proportion of those working in museums are volunteers. The workforce generally has high levels of educational attainment. It is less diverse than the general population because people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds are under-represented, as are disabled people and people from less affluent backgrounds. This is something that museums collectively wish to address.

As well as their role in preserving heritage for future generations, museums are recognised for their educational and skills development roles, for helping to create a sense of place and identity, for their contribution to tourism and to local economies and increasingly for their work in supporting well-being.

Of the 2000 museums in the UK, around 1600 are Accredited, meaning they are recognised as having met key baseline standards for looking after collections and providing access to them. Accreditation is an important and distinctive feature of the museum sector in the UK and has been emulated in many places around the world. In some cases access to funding and support is dependent upon being Accredited or officially working towards it.

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## Independent Museums

Museums can be governed in a number of different ways. 'Independent' museums are usually charities and make up approximately two thirds of all museums. They are independent of local or central government in terms of their governance, but approximately a third of them have important relationships with local authorities, often including some funding.

The Association of Independent Museums (AIM) was founded in 1977 by people running independent museums, to provide a network to share experiences and to represent them to policy makers and funders. Today it has 1200 members across the UK. Independent museums are extremely varied in size, collections and in their origins, but they frequently share characteristics of self-reliance, passion and an entrepreneurial approach to sharing their heritage with the public and securing the resources they need to do that.

Around a third of AIM member museums have no paid staff, but they range though to those with turnovers over £5m. Volunteering is extremely important to independent museums, with research commissioned by AIM suggesting there are over 100,000 people volunteering in independent museums.

Running a prospering, independent museum requires a very wide range of skills. Staff and volunteers need to welcome people effectively, in person and online, and provide excellent customer service. They interpret collections for the public, presenting their stories in clever, funny and innovative ways. They market their museum and connect with communities. They provide education and outreach services for schools, families and adults. They generate income to support their core purpose by trading effectively in their shops, cafes and online, through venue hire and licensing and in many other ways. They attract external funding through grants and fundraising programmes and are supported by government tax breaks such as Gift Aid on admission tickets and Museums and Galleries Tax Relief.

Around half of museums charge for admission and half do not. In the independent museum sector both models work successfully, with about two thirds of independent museums charging.

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## Support and funding for museums

Organisations offer training, advice and/or access to funding in different parts of the UK. In England, Arts Council England supports museums with funding directly and through regional Museum Development teams, which offer support, training and smaller funding streams. Similar support is offered by the Museums Archives and Libraries Division (MALD) of the Welsh Government, Museums Galleries Scotland and Northern Ireland Museums Council. Much of this support is particularly relevant to small and medium size museums and there is more information at: [museumdevelopmentnetwork.org/](http://museumdevelopmentnetwork.org/)

The Heritage Lottery Fund is the main Lottery distributor supporting museums, and there are also a number of trusts and foundations which offer funding.

There are also UK-wide organisations that can support museums in specific areas of their collections or their work and links can be found on the AIM website.

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## Running a successful museum

Trustees are responsible for setting a strategic framework and direction which enables their museums to deliver benefits to the public, to achieve their goals and to flourish. The AIM Hallmarks of Prospering Museums highlight the key areas that museums need to develop in order to be successful and the accompanying publication, *Preparing to Prosper*, highlights some of the areas trustees and other people leading museums should be actively considering and developing. To download these publications, see [www.aim-museums.co.uk/aim-hallmarks/](http://www.aim-museums.co.uk/aim-hallmarks/)

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## Collections and the Museum Code of Ethics

All charity trustees have responsibilities to act ethically and the Charity Governance Code outlines what this means (see Further resources, below). But there are particular ethical considerations for museum trustees, around the way that museum collections are treated, including how they are acquired, used, preserved and disposed of. Disposal from collections is possible, but only within a framework which prioritises public benefit, not financial motivation. Trustees must be particularly aware of ethical considerations here.

The Code of Ethics for the museum sector highlights key principles which museums and those who work in and with them should agree to uphold. [www.museumsassociation.org/ethics/code-of-ethics](http://www.museumsassociation.org/ethics/code-of-ethics)

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## Public engagement & public benefit

- actively engage and work in partnership with existing audiences and reach out to new and diverse audiences
- treat everyone equally, with honesty and respect
- provide and generate accurate information for and with the public
- support freedom of speech and debate
- use collections for public benefit – for learning, inspiration and enjoyment

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## Stewardship of Collections

- maintain and develop collections for current and future generations
- acquire, care for, exhibit and loan collections with transparency and competency in order to generate knowledge and engage the public with collections
- treat museum collections as cultural, scientific or historic assets, not financial assets

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## Individual and Institutional Integrity

- act in the public interest in all areas of work
- uphold the highest level of institutional integrity and personal conduct at all times
- build respectful and transparent relationships with partner organisations, governing bodies, staff and volunteers to ensure public trust in the museum's activities

### Further resources

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AIM's website has a section of information for museum and heritage trustees, including the guide to Successful Governance in Independent Museum, which also includes more extensive suggestions for further reading.

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You can also sign up for AIM's regular newsletter, specifically for heritage trustees. See [www.aim-museums.co.uk/for-trustees/](http://www.aim-museums.co.uk/for-trustees/)

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The Charity Governance Code was developed collaboratively by all the organisations representing UK charities and is the best starting point for understanding general responsibilities of charity trustees: [www.charitygovernancecode.org/en](http://www.charitygovernancecode.org/en)

### About the author:

Tamalie Newbery has worked in the museum sector for twenty years. In the past she has been a Chair, Vice Chair or Trustee of a number of organisations. As a consultant she worked with trustees of both large and small organisations. From 2013-2017 she was Executive Director of AIM and she is now the CEO of AIM member, Brooklands Museum.

### Association of Independent Museums (AIM)

3 Chestnut Grove, Ludlow  
Shropshire, SY8 1TJ  
[www.aim-museums.co.uk](http://www.aim-museums.co.uk)

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