

Early responses to the impact of COVID-19 on the heritage sector in England

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Abstract – This paper sets out how the heritage/archaeological sector in England responded to the challenges thrust upon it by the Covid-19 global pandemic. It is based on a presentation given at the annual meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists in Budapest in 2022.¹ The authors of this paper were heavily involved in authoring the early plans which set out ways of assisting the heritage sector in England during this crisis period.

Key words – archaeology; COVID-19; recovery; England; cultural heritage

Titel – Frühe Reaktionen auf die Auswirkungen der COVID-19 Pandemie auf den Kulturerbesektor in England

Zusammenfassung – In diesem Aufsatz wird dargelegt, wie der Kulturerbe- und Archäologiesektor in England auf die Herausforderungen reagiert hat, die sich ihm durch die globale Pandemie Covid-19 stellten. Er basiert auf einem Vortrag, der auf der Jahrestagung der European Association of Archaeologists in Budapest 2022 gehalten wurde. Die Autoren waren maßgeblich an der Ausarbeitung der ersten Pläne beteiligt, die Wege zur Unterstützung des Kulturerbesektors in England während dieser Krisenzeit aufzeigten.

Schlagwörter – Archäologie; COVID-19; Pandemie; Genesung; England; Kulturerbe

Background

The pandemic impacted on all walks of life including England's heritage and the systems in place to sustain it. The Government imposed three national lockdowns in England - March to June 2020, November 2020 and January to March 2021. During the lockdowns, "non-essential" businesses and visitor attractions were closed. People were ordered to stay at home within their household "bubble" and permitted to leave for essential purposes only, such as buying food, for medical reasons or for essential work purposes where people could not work at home. The periods in between these national lockdowns were also subject to restrictions, where businesses could only operate according to "Covid secure" regulations. To assist this, a huge amount of government guidance was published including "Working safely during the coronavirus (COVID-19) - Heritage Locations", first published by the Dept for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in May 2020.²

The impact of these lockdowns and restrictions was profound. Income streams dried up threatening the very existence of many heritage organisations and businesses, workforces (both paid and voluntary) were depleted, research programmes were cancelled, and essential cyclical repair and maintenance work on heritage assets was disrupted. By "heritage" we are here talking both about people and places (assets).³ Heritage people include those that:

- Operate heritage sites open to the public or host events at heritage sites (e.g. castle, historic house, historic park, garden or landscape, industrial heritage monument or open-air site/museum including mobile heritage);
- work or volunteer in sites or places open to the public that occupy an historic structure, site or landscape (including places of worship);
- undertake heritage specialist activity (digital engagement, professional advice, planning advice, inspections, surveys, excavations, fieldwork, repair, conservation, construction in/on historic buildings or on sites with heritage significance);
- own or occupy a heritage asset;
- operate businesses (profit and not-for-profit) in historic premises, for example an events business in a listed building;
- participate in community engagement activities including research, stewardship and public education.

Heritage assets - both protected (designated) and not protected - include:

- Nationally listed buildings, scheduled monuments, registered parks and gardens and registered battlefields;
- cultural world heritage sites;
- conservation areas;
- other non-designated sites such as archaeological sites, locally listed buildings, historic landscapes, marine environments, other historic areas, collections of historic buildings etc.;

- historic buildings that contain museum and/or archive collections;
- mobile heritage.

We do not include museums in England in this paper as they were subject to separate plans in England during the pandemic.

The Historic Environment Forum (HEF)

The HEF was first set up some 20 years ago, but since 2020 was enhanced with additional resources and dedicated staff. It covers England and brings together senior representatives of all the key national organisations involved in the heritage/archaeological sector (although not the museums sector). The HEF aims to encourage collaborative working and provides a direct and collective link from the sector to Government, and currently is hosted by the Heritage Alliance – a membership body with over 170 members that represents the independent heritage sector in England. It is funded by Historic England – England’s state agency for heritage – which is an arms-length body of the UK Government sponsored by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Historic England is tasked with protecting and providing advice on the historic environment of England.

Between 2020 and 2022, HEF members discussed a wide range of issues. HEF task groups and other sub-groups tackled issues relating to climate change and sustainability, planning reform, and skills, but of course the key topic discussed was the impact of Covid-19 on the heritage sector in England.

The HEF Covid-19 Task Group

The HEF Task Group to cover this was established in April 2020 – soon after the initial national lockdown was initiated at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in England. A part-time Manager was appointed to support the Group,⁴ with funding from Historic England.

Weekly meetings of the Task Group were held with senior managers from a wide range of heritage organisations (not just HEF members) representing organisations that owned, protected, managed and ran heritage sites as visitor attractions and heritage assets.

Archaeology organisations were not specifically represented on the Task Group as that part of the sector was less impacted by Covid-19. Construction work (and its associated archaeological mitigation) was deemed to be an essential industry which carried on working through the pandemic,

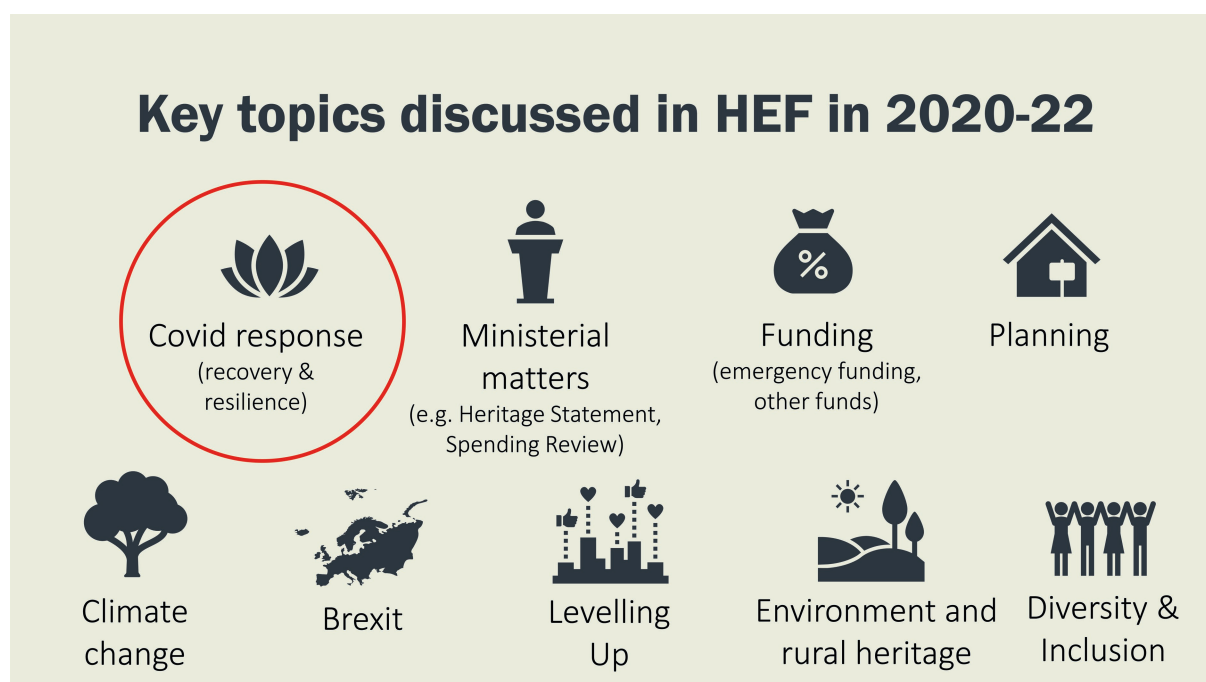


Fig. 1 Key Topics discussed in the HEF 2020-22.



Fig. 2 The heritage sector's 2021 Heritage Recovery Plan.

albeit under strict Covid regulations. However, the Task Group kept in close touch with this activity and represented any issues which emerged, for example in relation to promoting practices to support safe working on excavations.

The Task Group supported regular meetings with the government's Heritage Minister (Nigel Huddleston MP) and his officials, which were important opportunities to share current experience and advocate for additional support the sector needed to survive the lockdowns.

Heritage Recovery Plan

Heritage is one of England's most precious assets. The public identify heritage as one of the top three things that makes them proud of Britain, (the other two being the British countryside and our health system).⁵ The pandemic brought this to the fore, with heritage playing a vital role in providing safe places for people to engage with each other and connect with their local environment, helping to reduce the negative impact on their wellbeing caused by the pandemic.

Heritage and the systems in place to sustain it suffered hugely as a direct result of the pandemic. As a response, HEF members worked with Historic England to draft a sector recovery plan which

covered a range of relevant issues (re-opening, resilience, skills and return to growth). The plan was published in early 2021 and articulated how the heritage sector could get back on its feet and play a full part in helping the country recover from the social and economic damage caused by Covid-19.

The Recovery Plan articulated actions which the sector could take and also actions for Government, both in the very short-term and the medium-longer term. This Plan worked alongside more general measures such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, where employees received 80 % of their current salary for hours not worked. The Government also published plans for other sectors, such as Tourism. The Heritage Recovery Plan was therefore part of a suite of Plans trying to get the country back on its feet.

Culture Recovery Fund (CRF)

The work of the HEF Covid-19 Task Group was a key part of the sector advocacy effort which led to the announcement of the dedicated Culture Recovery Fund. Announced in July 2020, initially this Fund included some £1.57bn to help the broader cultural sector survive, and when possible, reopen. Later in 2020 and 2021, the Culture Recovery Fund was extended, bringing the total

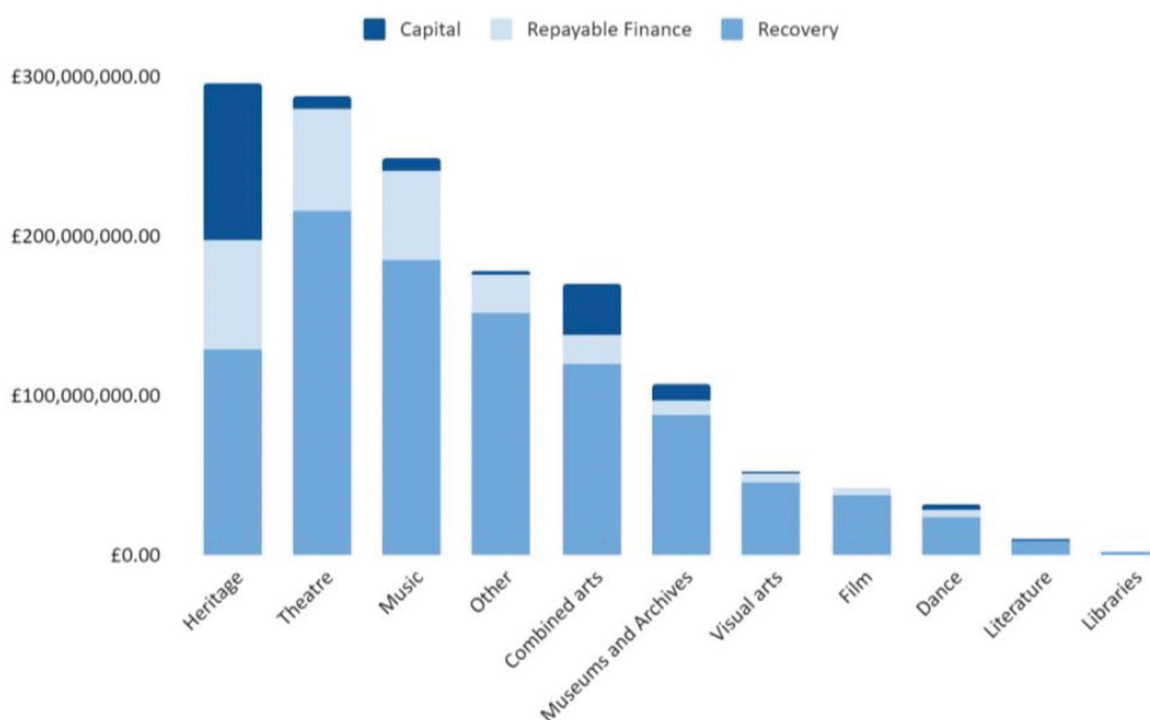


Fig. 3 CRF discipline funding by funding strand (including capital). Source: DCMS, 2023.

cash support package made available for culture during the pandemic to close to £2bn.

Culture Recovery Fund (Heritage)

The CRF covered a wide range of sectors, including arts organisations, museums, and archives, as well as the heritage sector. Funding specifically for heritage was distributed through the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Historic England. There were revenue streams and funding for essential capital work to conserve and sustain heritage assets. This Government financial support was crucial and fundamental to the survival of the heritage sector in England during and after the pandemic. An independent report has shown that the Government’s £1.57 billion package of emergency cultural funding during the pandemic was delivered efficiently, helping support nearly 220,000 jobs and 5,000 organisations.⁶ The greatest beneficiary was the heritage sector, as can be seen in Fig. 3.

Heritage Sector Resilience Plan

As England moved out of the re-opening phase and back to normality, many elements of the Recovery Plan were superseded yet many challenges remained. A second plan – the Resilience Plan – was drafted by HEF members working in close collaboration with Historic England and published in summer 2022. This included some remaining elements from the earlier Recovery Plan, but also dealt with many structural issues within the heritage sector that were evident before the Covid-19 pandemic. The Resilience Plan covers five key themes: skills, strong governance, climate change, diversity & inclusion, and embedding heritage in wider public policy, and these articulate with elements of government policy. A Delivery Plan is now in preparation to detail how the sector can work together with Government to become more resilient in coming years.

Bridge over troubled waters

The new HEF ‘model’ and its outputs worked well in very challenging times to support the her-



Fig. 4 The Heritage Sector Resilience Plan 2022-24.

itage sector in England. Collaboration was crucial during the difficult period of the Covid-19 pandemic – the sector had to work together and present a united front to Government in order to receive support. We are now well placed to take advantage of any further government action to strengthen the sector and recognise explicitly its contribution to national life. This experience has also equipped the heritage sector to respond rapidly to the new challenges posed by the energy and cost of living crisis that face us all today.

Notes

¹ “Responding to the impact of Covid-19 on the heritage sector in England” by Francesca Benetti & Mike Heyworth (Historic Environment Forum) and Amanda Chadburn & Tess Gale (Historic England), presented by Adrian Olivier, held during the session “The Role of Archaeology (and Archaeologists) in the Covid-19 Recovery Plans across Europe and beyond [EAA ExB]”, 28th EAA Annual Meeting in Budapest (31 August-3 September 2022).

² The Heritage Locations guidance was jointly owned and updated by the government and the national state heritage agency, Historic England. One of the authors of this paper (Chadburn) was seconded to government to assist in this task.

³ Historic England (2021). Heritage Recovery Plan, p. 2.

⁴ One of the authors of this paper, Mike Heyworth.

⁵ Historic England (2021). Heritage Recovery Plan, p. 1.

⁶ DCMS (2023). Culture Recovery Fund data report. 21st April 2023.

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