

The "Freeness" of the UK's National Museums & Galleries

CAMPAIGN FOR THE ARTS

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Authors

Dr Helena Hollis
Katy Bremner

Thanks to

Stefano Cattaneo
Jennifer Chiu
Liam Gesoff

Report design

Tim Jukes
timjukesdesign.com

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"Making our national museums and galleries free for everyone has transformed hundreds of thousands of people's lives. It brings cultural and historical experience closer to everyone. It means we all regard these treasure-houses of our nation's story and identity as ours.

On the day they went free, the Science Museum invited me to come and cut a ribbon and throw open the doors. We had a lovely ceremony. And I remember vividly, half an hour later, I was wandering around in the foyer of the museum, and a young man carrying his little daughter on his shoulders was making a bee-line towards me. As he came up to me, he turned his face to his daughter and he said "I want you to say thank you to this man; it's because of him we're able to be here today."

That was the moment when I knew we'd done the right thing."

Chris Smith (Lord Smith of Finsbury)
Culture Secretary 1997–2001



Science Museum, London.
Photo: Jun Huang

Executive Summary

On 1 December 2026, universal free admission to the UK's national museums and galleries turns 25.

Few cultural policies have had such visible effects: visits to England's national museums and galleries have almost doubled since 2001, and in 2025 the Natural History Museum became the UK's most-visited attraction of any kind. But much less is known about what free admission has meant to the people who walk through the doors.

To mark the anniversary, the Campaign for the Arts set out to understand the value of the policy to people and the difference it has made in their lives over the past quarter-century.

To do this, we conducted detailed surveys: an in-person survey at several national museums and galleries in London, followed by an online survey with nearly 1,500 members of the public responding from across the country.

Taken together, our findings suggest that universal free admission produces a distinctive and special quality that we are terming "freeness". Freeness is about more than not paying at the door. It changes how people feel about national museums and galleries, how they use them, and what the visit itself is like. It sets the UK's national collections apart from others abroad, removes barriers to access, embeds the institutions more into everyday life, and produces a distinctive cultural experience that the public values and takes pride in.

The "freeness" of national museums and galleries...

... creates national pride.

Our survey respondents expressed strong feelings of pride for how the UK shares top-quality arts and cultural experiences for free with everyone through our national museums and galleries. We asked online respondents to finish the sentence: "Today, anyone can walk through the doors of any UK national museum and gallery and experience their permanent collection for free. That makes me feel...". "Proud" was by far the most common answer, used more than twice as often as "happy", the second-most common answer. In a context of declining national pride, how people feel about free national museums and galleries appears to buck that trend.

> "I think free entry is a real star in the UK's crown. It signals that culture belongs to everyone."
>
> (Caroline, Manchester)

... makes people feel like they are "for them".

People who remember the policy's introduction described feeling welcome for the first time in places that had seemed meant for "a certain class of people". Many from low-income families said free entry made culture possible for them. It helped them feel they belonged, at a time when the arts risk becoming the preserve of a small elite.

> "As the youngest member of a low-income, single-income mining family, museums and galleries were not regarded as a place that was for us. The free museums and galleries allowed me to visit in my late teens on my own and recognise that actually they could be a safe space where we could shirk the feelings of not belonging."
>
> (Kay, Leeds)

... integrates them more into everyday life.

Free, barrierless entry makes UK national museums and galleries part of everyday life, whereas paid counterparts abroad feel more like tourist attractions to tick off a list. Visitors contrasted a selfie photo outside the Louvre with "hundreds of small trips" into museums and galleries in London. People described lunch-break visits, birthdays and first dates. For families on low incomes, a free museum may be the only warm, dry, child-friendly place to meet.

> "A city's museums are part of its community, its history. Free entry allows local people to feel that it belongs to them."
>
> (Andrew, Edinburgh)

... changes how it feels once you're in, making the experience more open-ended and pressure-free.

With no ticket to "make the most of", people feel free to stay briefly, leave and return. Two-thirds said compulsory pre-booking would have a moderate or strong impact on their visit. Disabled visitors stressed the value of short visits with no queue to drain their energy. Short, open ended visits also felt more creative and inspiring, and created a better atmosphere among museum visitors. Without the pressure of a ticket price, museum goers also found they could be more open and receptive, discovering things outside of the best-advertised main works or pieces.

> "When my whole family from rural North Wales visited me in London, they only agreed to come to a gallery with me because it was easy to enter and spontaneous. When they were there, they enjoyed art they would never have considered before."
>
> (Georgia, London)

... encourages people to visit others too, or to come back sooner.

Many said that if they had to pay, they would choose just one museum per trip. Free entry means neighbouring museums and galleries feed one another rather than compete for visitors. Some people who would not call themselves "into art" went to several galleries because they were free. In this way, free admission can spark new experiences and interests in art and culture.

> "I met my partner (now spouse) in London and the Natural History Museum was a fantastic part of our 'first date'. We also visited the V&A, the Tate Britain and Tate Modern. Without the free entry to these wonderful places we would have not been able to afford to have such a jam-packed weekend. We both fondly remember these visits nearly 15 years on."
>
> (Jodie, York)

... fuels children's education and development.

Parents described free entry as taking a cost out of an expensive stage of life, and building curiosity that lasted into their children's adult lives. Adults recalled childhood visits with their own parents, and now bring their children. A visiting teacher told us that free museums were a main reason for bringing a school trip to London. As inequalities in arts education persist, free access to museums and galleries forms a vital opportunity for children and young people to engage with arts and culture.

> "As a child I have fond memories of my parents taking my siblings and I to various museums in Glasgow. As a student in Edinburgh I found peace and solitude in the many national museums and galleries. And as a parent I have loved sharing these experiences with my children."
>
> (M, Glasgow)

... inspires arts and cultural career journeys, and supports artists.

Artists described sketching from the collections and making repeat visits to develop their practice. Others said a free visit when they were young first made a creative career seem possible, especially those from working-class backgrounds. As access to arts experiences can be exclusionary, free admission helps open the arts to working-class people and can spark a creative career.

> "I have devoted my life's work to making, curating, teaching & engaging with art. This would never have happened without access to free museums to inspire & inform both my practice, career & soul."
>
> (Laura, London)

... benefits people's mental health and wellbeing.

Many respondents described using free museums and galleries to manage their mental health. Examples included calming down before a job interview, escaping a difficult home, and coping with grief, loneliness or anxiety. Parents of young children and neurodivergent people described them as safe spaces. The collections, not just the buildings, had this effect. In the context of a mental health crisis with services under strain, free spaces offering a special environment like these matter.

> "In bad times, I have used free museums & galleries as an emotional shelter, to forget my lack of funds, prospects etc. Centring & grounding me in the broad context of time & society, pulling me out of myself."
>
> (Olivia, Edinburgh)

Free admission: A cause for celebration

After 25 years, free admission is still a landmark of UK cultural policy. It has turned national museums and galleries into civic spaces, places of solace, launchpads for careers and places where families learn together.

Free admission to museums and galleries makes many people proud of our nation, for sharing excellent cultural experiences with everyone. People value the free admission policy highly and would mostly agree with the government's recent decision to renew their commitment to its future. Ultimately, based on our analysis of many thoughts, feelings, and experiences, this policy has created a new quality in our national museums and galleries, their "freeness", which people value highly and want to keep.



Queer Frequencies at V&A East, London. Photo: Chanelle Johnson

Background

1 December 2026 marks a quarter of a century since free admission was introduced at national museums and galleries across the UK.

April 1999	Free entry for children was introduced at charging national museums and galleries in England.
April 2000	Free entry was extended to people aged over 60.
April 2001	Universal free admission was introduced at the National Museum of Scotland and all Amgueddfa Cymru (Museum Wales) sites by the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales. The National Galleries of Scotland and the Ulster Museum in Northern Ireland were already free.
December 2001	Universal free admission was fully introduced in England, made viable by new VAT rules letting free national museums and galleries recover VAT – a change that also helps sustain free admission in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

National museums are publicly-funded museums and galleries that are sponsored by the UK Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government or the Northern Ireland Executive, and hold collections considered to be of national importance. The term is often used to refer to the 15 DCMS-sponsored museum groups in England. However, all seven national museums in Wales are also free, as are the three National Galleries of Scotland, the National Museum of Scotland, and the Ulster Museum (one of the four national museums in Northern Ireland) and we include them when we use this term unless otherwise stated.

There is a full list of the 46 free national museums and galleries in our survey on pages 28–29, and a map on page 30.

What do we know about the impacts of the free admission policy?

Visitor numbers grew substantially from 2001, until the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. While some museums have just posted a record year, across the sector recovery from the pandemic is not yet complete.

Within the first decade of free admission, visits to formerly charging museums in England rose by 151%, with increases of more than 180% at the Natural History Museum and V&A, and 269% at National Museums Liverpool.[1] Since the policy came in, visits to England’s 15 national museums have risen by 96%, according to research by Art Fund and the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA). [2]

That growth has continued: in 2025, the Natural History Museum became the UK's most-visited attraction of any kind for the first time, welcoming 7.1 million visitors - a 13% rise on 2024, and the third consecutive record-breaking year for the museum.[3] More broadly, the free national museums dominate the top 10 list of the UK’s leading visitor attractions.[4]

Across all 409 ALVA member attractions, which span the whole country, total visits reached 165 million in 2025, up 2% on the previous year, but still below the 170 million recorded in 2019, meaning the sector has not fully recovered from the pandemic even as individual museums break records. ALVA's director, Bernard Donoghue, put the pattern plainly: the public are 'more tactical than ever in deciding how they spend their leisure pounds and their leisure hours'.[5]

What don't we know about the policy's impact?

The socioeconomic mix of who actually visits is uncertain.

The available data does show that people from all socioeconomic groups increased their museum participation between 2005/06 and 2015/16[6]. However, despite 25 years of free entry, data from DCMS's own Taking Part Survey which covers England (later replaced by the Participation Survey and, more recently, the Community and Engagement Survey) shows that those from upper socioeconomic groups are more likely to have visited a museum than those in lower socioeconomic groups. This is often referenced to show that free entry has made no difference to visitor demographics, although it isn't quite this simple.

These surveys collect data from people all across England, and do not include questions about visits to specific museums or galleries. This means we don't know which, if any, of the free national museums and galleries participants in the survey are thinking of when they say they've attended a museum. This data can show that the proportion of working-class people across the country who report visiting museums in general hasn't changed, but more granular research would be needed to see if there have been any changes in the localities where there are national museums available for people to visit for free. Although it is also possible to look at performance indicator statistics (e.g. visitor numbers) self-reported by each museum, we can't draw definitive conclusions from this data as they are separate reports from different sample groups.[7] This knowledge gap is now the subject of a major, 4-year (2026-30) UK research programme that seeks to address any gap and inequality in who visits.[8]

Free entry to the national museums and galleries removed a financial barrier, but a quarter-century on, researchers still can't say how inclusive 'access for all' has actually been.

Additionally, while museums and galleries often survey their own visitors to improve their services, and studies ask people for their experiences of specific exhibitions or programmes, more holistic experiential research on free access is hard to find. The broader question of what free admission may or may not have changed about what it's like to go to a national museum or gallery across the country remains difficult to answer.

Is free admission to museums and galleries here to stay?

During 2026 there has been some debate within government around the possibility of altering the policy to bring in entry charges to the national museums and galleries for visitors from abroad, while maintaining free admission for UK residents.

This debate concerned England only, since free admission in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is a matter for the devolved governments. Even so, free admission is a UK-wide story: Scotland and Wales introduced it in April 2001, England followed that December, and Northern Ireland's Ulster Museum was already free. UK-wide VAT rules help sustain it in all four nations, and a decision in one nation can strongly influence choices in the others.

The recent debate was triggered by Baroness Hodge's independent review of Arts Council England, published in December 2025, which recommended that international tourists could be charged for entry once digital ID checks become the norm.[9] In its formal response, DCMS confirmed it would "explore options" for charging international visitors, arguing this "could provide significant benefits" and calling it consistent with the government's commitment to accessible, representative culture.[10] Separately, it has been reported that the Treasury tried to end free entry for overseas visitors as part of Chancellor Rachel Reeves's 2025 budget spending cuts, and reportedly modelled ending free entry for everyone during those discussions.[11] This received "strong pushback" from the DCMS ministers and was not taken forward.

Free entry to the DCMS-funded national museums is policy, not statute. This means any of these institutions could, in principle, reintroduce charging for UK residents without new legislation, and is central to why the current debate matters.[12] However, the proposed change to free admission proved unpopular with the sector.

The Royal Armouries in Leeds, for example, wrote on LinkedIn: "We must be candid: we have serious reservations about this proposal… A two-tier entry system would fundamentally undermine our commitment to universal access, and risks projecting the United Kingdom as a nation lacking in confidence and generosity of spirit."[13] Its director general, Nat Edwards, added: "This proposal is a superficial, short-term response to a deeper problem and offers considerably more challenges than benefits. The right answer is to make the full-throated case for properly and sustainably funding institutions that belong to everyone." Museums Association director Sharon Heal has raised similar concerns about the practical cost of ID checks and ticketing systems.[14]

Public and institutional support for free entry is strong and largely cross-sector.

Art Fund polling ahead of the 25th anniversary found that 72% of the public believe ringfenced revenue from a potential tourist levy should be used to help keep national museums free, and 76% say the government should maintain or increase funding for national museums.[15] The same research found little public appetite for charging tourists directly at the door. Sector leaders have echoed this. Art Fund director Jenny Waldman said the free national museums are "one of the great success stories of UK cultural policy" but need additional funding given rising costs and declining grant-in-aid, arguing "charging tourists at the door risks putting up barriers for everyone".[16]

During the Labour Party Conference in September 2026, Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy announced that the government would not in fact bring in charges for foreign visitors, and the free admission policy would remain unchanged.[17]

What's next?

For now, the free admission policy looks set to remain in place unchanged under the current government.

However, better evidence is needed about the impacts of the policy, especially in terms of what it has meant for the diversity of museum and gallery visitors, and in terms of how it has been felt and experienced by people all across the country.

At the Campaign for the Arts, we have collected some evidence to begin addressing this gap, in particular taking an interest in how free admission has been felt and experienced, and what it means to people who have visited a national museum or gallery for free.



The Field of Cloth of Gold at The Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds

What we did and who took part

What does the “freeness” of museums and galleries mean to people?

As we approach the 25th anniversary of the policy that made all the UK’s national museums and galleries free, we at the Campaign for the Arts wanted to learn what people who visit these institutions think, and how they experience free museum and gallery visits.

To find out, we conducted 2 surveys:

1. In-person, at London museums and galleries, having conversations with visitors.
2. Online, across the country, gathering a wide range of views.

Because we did our in-person survey first, we were able to use what people said to us in designing our online survey. This meant that we could take some of the things we heard in-person in London, convert them into statements, and put these to a much wider range of people across the country to see to what extent they would agree. Our online survey also included open responses to give us a richer base of experiences to learn from.

The two surveys gathered different kinds of response. A face-to-face conversation with a researcher is very different from filling in an online form. Talking about a museum or gallery while you're inside it, or just outside, is also different from reflecting on past visits. In this report, we present the findings by theme, drawing on both surveys together, and make clear which survey each view comes from.

In-person survey

The Campaign for the Arts team ran an in-person survey of visitors at five London institutions: Tate Britain, the National Gallery, the Science Museum, the Natural History Museum, and the V&A. Surveying took place on weekdays, inviting voluntary in-person participation, with street surveying at Tate Britain and in South Kensington, and inside surveying at the National Gallery. Surveying took place between 16/06/2026 and 30/06/2026.

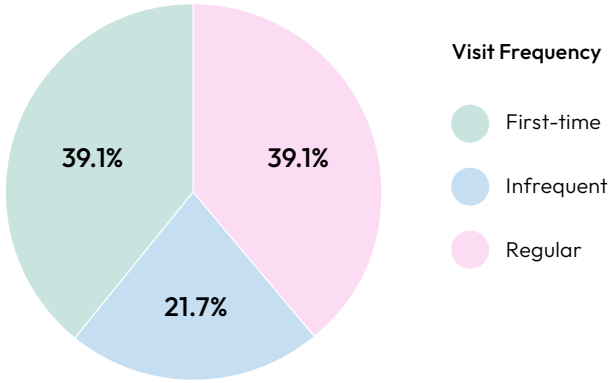
We spoke to 69 people in total, and heard a range of views about free admission, and many different experiences of visiting national museums and galleries for free.

Our in-person participants were:

- 35 from the UK; 34 from other countries
- 47 female; 21 male, 1 non-binary
- The UK participants lived in areas covering the full spectrum from most to least deprived
- All participants came from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds
- We also asked people if it was their first time at the museum or gallery, and how often they visited. We had a good balance of different visiting patterns:

Visitor Frequency Breakdown

Proportion of first-time vs. regular and infrequent visitors



Online survey

We hosted an online survey on our website between 15/09/26 and 9/10/2026.

We only sent the survey to Campaign for the Arts supporters who live in the vicinity of a national museum or gallery. In England, this meant:

- Greater London, and around the Natural History Museum at Tring
- Merseyside and Greater Manchester
- West Yorkshire, York and Harrogate
- County Durham, Darlington, and Teesside

The survey was not sent to any supporters in the Midlands or the South West of England for example, or most of the East, North East or South East of England.

We only sent the survey to supporters living in the South, West, and North of Wales, near to Amgueddfa Cymru (Museum Wales) sites, and since the National Museum of Scotland and the 3 National Galleries of Scotland are all in Edinburgh, we only contacted supporters in Scotland's Central Belt, Dundee & Angus, and the Scottish Borders. In Northern Ireland, only supporters in Belfast and Counties Antrim, Down, Armagh, and East Tyrone with easy access to the Ulster Museum in Belfast were contacted with the survey.

We also shared the survey via our social media channels, but the spread in responses we received across the regions of the UK was largely determined by our decision to focus on surveying supporters in the vicinities of national museums and galleries. We did not set out to hear from people with no experience of these institutions, and because we recruited mainly through our own supporters, respondents are likely to be more engaged with the arts than the public as a whole.

We received 1,482 responses.

A crucial part of our survey design was open-text fields where we invited people to leave comments sharing their views, experiences, and feelings. 987 (67%) people who took the survey commented, while 495 (33%) left the comments fields blank.

Where were our survey respondents from?

We asked our online survey respondents to tell us the first half of their postcode, which we can use to see the regional breakdown of where they came from across the UK.

We looked at the index of multiple deprivation for each nation, to see what kind of neighbourhoods our respondents came from. In England, we reached a balance across all levels of deprivation. In Scotland and Wales, we had responses from all deciles of deprivation, but a slight skew towards the least deprived, with about 30% from the least deprived fifth and 15% from the most deprived fifth of neighbourhoods. In Northern Ireland our sample was too small to meaningfully compare.

The Triumph of Fortitude at Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.
Photo: Pete Carr

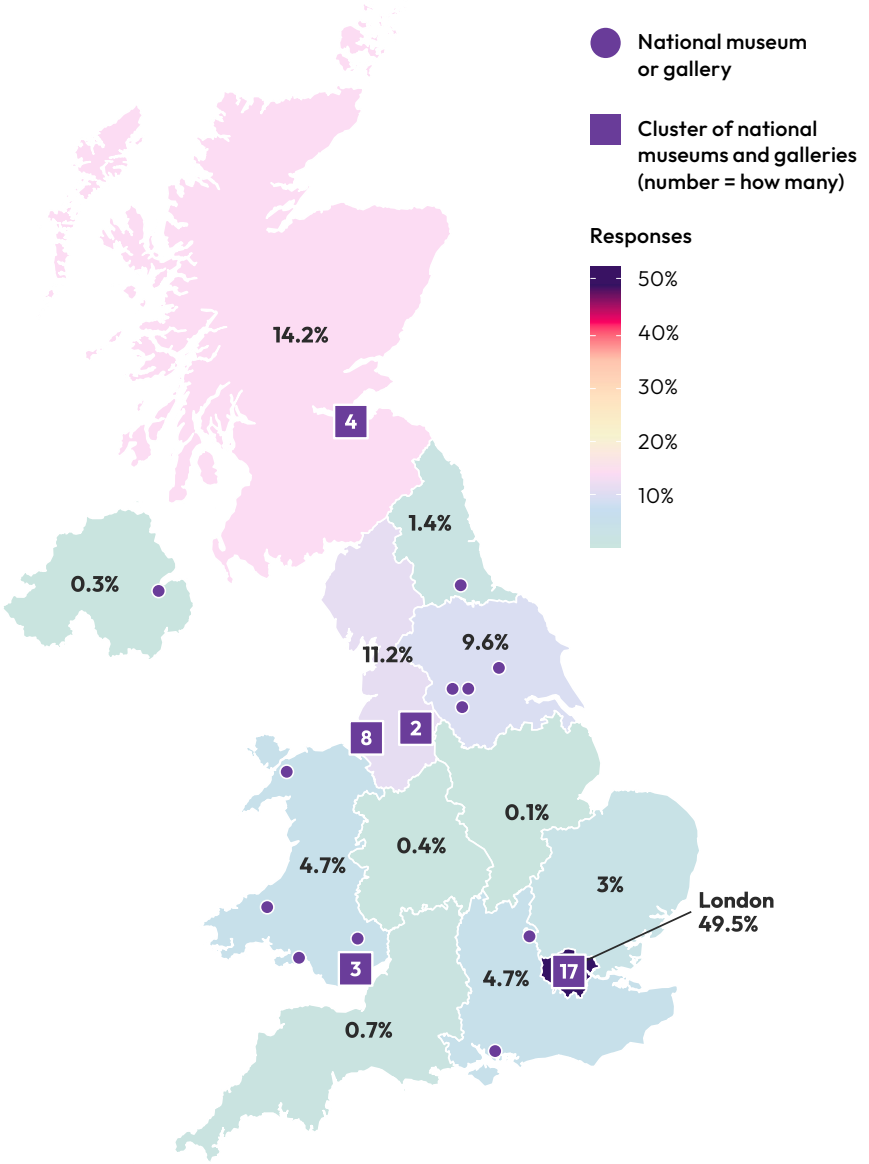


Region	Number of responses	Percentage of respondents
London	733	49.5
Scotland	210	14.2
North West England	166	11.2
Yorkshire and The Humber	142	9.6
South East England	70	4.7
Wales	70	4.7
East of England	44	3
North East England	21	1.4
South West England	10	0.7
West Midlands	6	0.4
Northern Ireland	5	0.3
Unknown / Invalid	4	0.3
East Midlands	1	0.1

We can see from this that just under half of our survey respondents came from London. Because we actively emailed Campaign for the Arts supporters who live near national museums and galleries asking them to take part, our response rates in different regions somewhat reflect this.

Survey Responses Across UK Regions

Regional percentage distribution of respondents



We can also look at how many national museums are in each region, and compare the number of respondents we had regionally against the number of museums (note that regions with 0 national museums are omitted here):

Region	Respondents	Museums	Respondents per museum
South East	70	1	70
Scotland	210	4	52.5
East of England	44	1	44
London	733	17	43.1
Yorkshire and the Humber	142	4	35.5
North East	21	1	21
North West	166	10	16.6
Wales	70	7	10
Northern Ireland	5	1	5

This shows that we had the greatest number of respondents per museum in the South East of the country, and the smallest number of respondents per museum from Northern Ireland.



National Galleries Scotland: Modern One

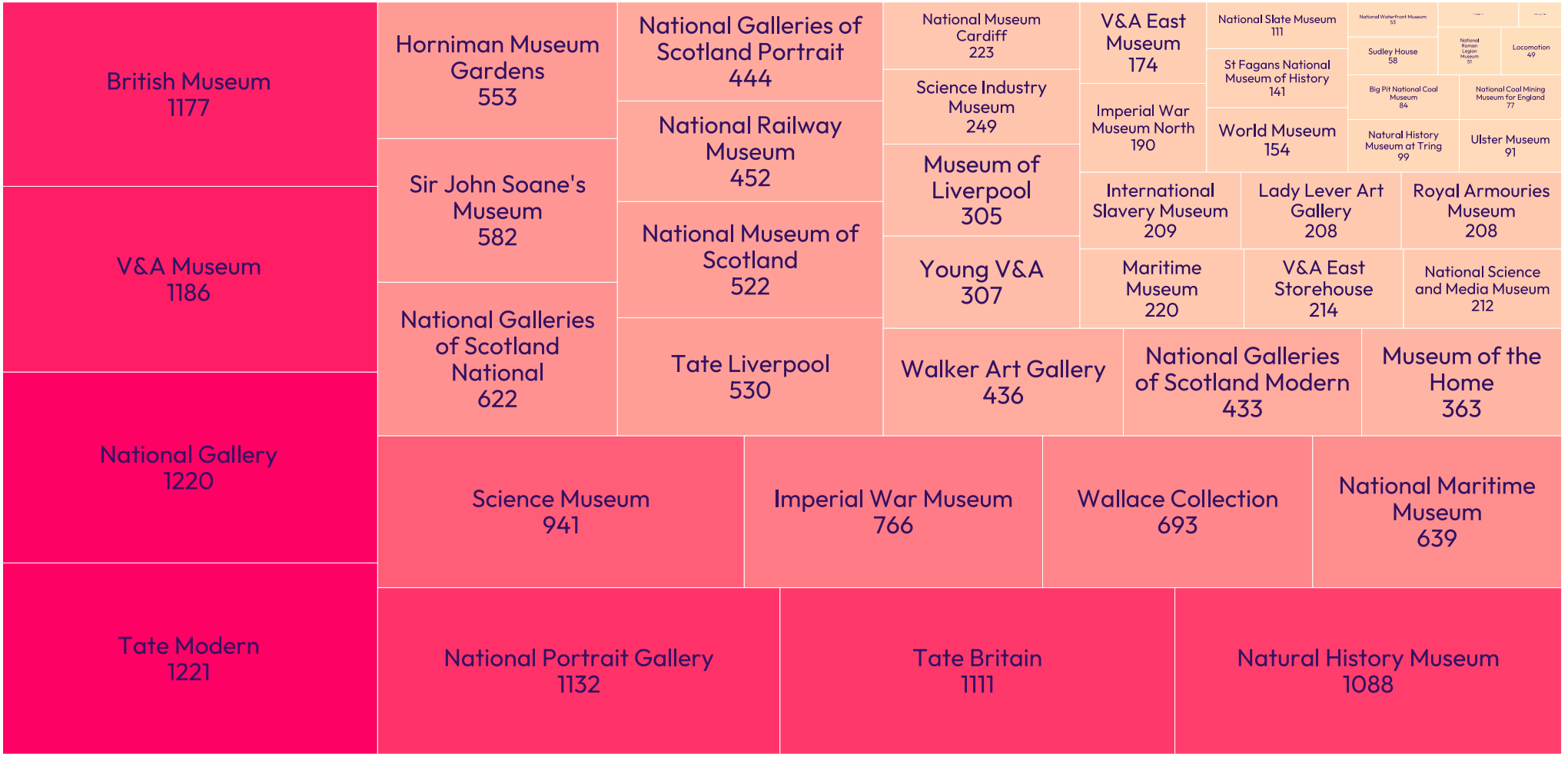
Which museums did our respondents visit?

We asked our online survey respondents to check boxes against any free national museums or galleries they had visited.

The table overleaf shows the number of respondents who said they'd visited each museum or gallery, both as a total and as a percentage of all responses. It also includes a letter key linking each venue to the map of the UK's free national museums and galleries on page 30.

Proportional percentage distribution of respondents

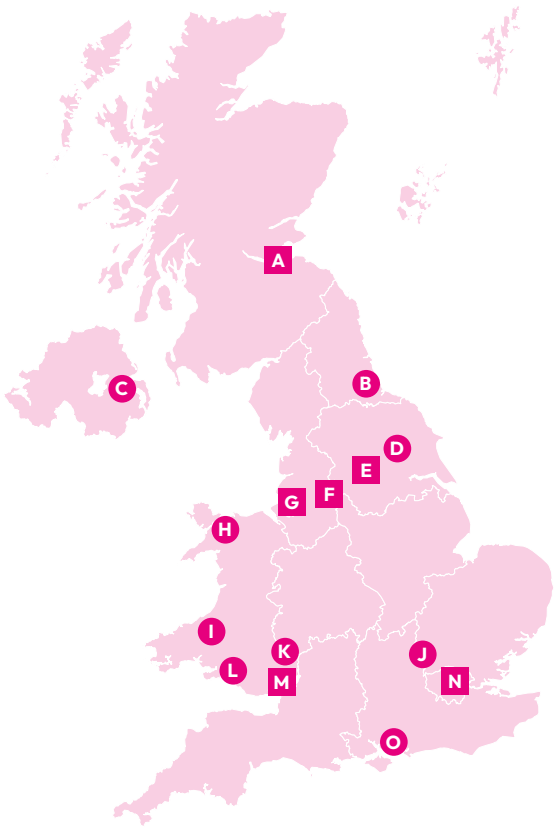
Box area corresponds to the total number of participants who visited



Map Key	Museum Name	Number of visitors	Percentage of respondents
N	Tate Modern	1221	82.4
N	National Gallery	1220	82.3
N	V&A Museum	1186	80
N	British Museum	1177	79.4
N	National Portrait Gallery	1132	76.4
N	Tate Britain	1111	75
N	Natural History Museum	1088	73.4
N	Science Museum	941	63.5
N	Imperial War Museum	766	51.7
N	Wallace Collection	693	46.8
N	National Maritime Museum	639	43.1
A	National Galleries of Scotland National	622	42
N	Sir John Soane's Museum	582	39.3
N	Horniman Museum and Gardens	553	37.3
G	Tate Liverpool	530	35.8
A	National Museum of Scotland	522	35.2
D	National Railway Museum	452	30.5
A	National Galleries of Scotland Portrait	444	30
G	Walker Art Gallery	436	29.4
A	National Galleries of Scotland Modern	433	29.2
N	Museum of the Home	363	24.5
N	Young V&A	307	20.7
G	Museum of Liverpool	305	20.6

Map Key	Museum Name	Number of visitors	Percentage of respondents
F	Science and Industry Museum	249	16.8
M	National Museum Cardiff	223	15
G	Maritime Museum	220	14.8
N	V&A East Storehouse	214	14.4
E	National Science and Media Museum	212	14.3
G	International Slavery Museum	209	14.1
G	Lady Lever Art Gallery	208	14
E	Royal Armouries Museum	208	14
F	Imperial War Museum North	190	12.8
N	V&A East Museum	174	11.7
G	World Museum	154	10.4
M	St Fagans National Museum of History	141	9.5
H	National Slate Museum	111	7.5
J	Natural History Museum at Tring	99	6.7
C	Ulster Museum	91	6.1
K	Big Pit National Coal Museum	84	5.7
E	National Coal Mining Museum for England	77	5.2
G	Sudley House	58	3.9
L	National Waterfront Museum	53	3.6
M	National Roman Legion Museum	51	3.4
B	Locomotion	49	3.3
I	National Wool Museum	34	2.3
O	Royal Armouries Fort Nelson	18	1.2

National Museums and Galleries in the UK



- **A** Edinburgh (4)
- **B** Shildon
- **C** Belfast
- **D** York
- **E** Leeds, Bradford & Wakefield (3)
- **F** Manchester (2)
- **G** Liverpool & Wirral (8)
- **H** Llanberis
- **I** Dre-fach Felindre
- **J** Tring
- **K** Blaenavon
- **L** Swansea
- **M** Cardiff & Newport (3)
- **N** London (17)
- **O** Fareham

People who took part in our survey had visited the full spectrum of the UK's national museums and galleries. The mean and median number of museums ticked from the list were both 13.

In the findings that follow, we quote online respondents with the name or nickname they chose to give us and the region where they live, based on the first half of their postcode. We did not ask our in-person surveyees for names or any other personal information, to maintain a more anonymous conversation. We therefore only quote them noting the gallery or museum at which we spoke to them. We have also used different colours for ***online*** and ***in-person*** quotes.

Online quote In-person quote

What we learned

We learned that universal free admission produces a distinctive and special quality that we are terming **"freeness"**. Freeness is about more than not paying at the door. It changes how people feel about national museums and galleries, how they use them, and what the visit itself is like. It sets the UK's national collections apart from others abroad, removes barriers to access, embeds the institutions more into everyday life, and produces a distinctive cultural experience that the public values and takes pride in.

This key finding is expanded upon in each of the following sections sharing our thematic findings.

The Great Hall at National Galleries Scotland: Portrait



The “freeness” of museums and galleries...
...creates national pride.



Several people we spoke to in-person in London expressed pride on the UK's behalf, describing free entry as something to boast about to visiting friends, evidence of British generosity:

> “It’s fantastic that it's free. It's a proud policy to have.”
> (Tate Britain visitor)

We heard positive ways in which British self-image is bound up with being the kind of country that shares its national collections freely. One person at the V&A said:

> “I'm so proud, in some sense – and I'm not proud to be English in many ways – but that all museums are free, and so many people that come to visit me in London are like, ‘It's amazing all the museums are free’. It's like a city where everything is open.”

We heard a sense of joy and amazement from many visitors, connecting the freeness of the museum or gallery with a *“wow factor”* for the excellent experience received:

> “I think free entry is a real star in the UK's crown. It signals that culture belongs to everyone.”
> (Caroline, Manchester)

> “I'm proud to be British in a country that welcomes everyone to enjoy our cultural heritage together."
> (AG, London)

> “I feel incredibly proud that we as a country have been able to offer all visitors, regardless of origin, free entry to national museums, and very grateful to have been able to access them myself for free.”
> (Jacquie, Stirling)

Kara Walker's **Fons Americanus** at Tate Modern, London.
Photo: Garry Cook

In our online survey, we gave our respondents a sentence to complete with a short response:

"Today, anyone can walk through the doors of any UK national museum or gallery and experience their permanent collection for free. That makes me feel..."



We can see that pride is very strongly in the lead as the top answer.

Recent research by Demos has pointed to a significant decline in national pride in Britain. Between 2011 and 2026, pride in British history has fallen from 65% to 39%. Pride in national life has declined by 17%, and pride in symbolic national institutions is down by 19%.[18] Our findings suggest that our freely accessible national museums and galleries may buck this trend. This is important for policy makers concerned with bolstering national pride, as the ways in which our participants told us that these institutions are important to them and matter in their lives can be seen as ingredients for creating the kinds of spaces that make us proud to be part of British society.

Luke Jerram's **Museum of the Moon** at National Museum Cardiff.
Photo: Matthew Horwood



The “freeness” of museums and galleries...
...makes people feel like they are ‘for them’.



In our online survey, we received some comments from people who remembered the free admission policy coming in, and could reflect back on how this changed museums and galleries for them. Some described feeling welcome for the first time, and free entry marking a shift away from these institutions seeming like places intended only for a certain class of people, towards accessibility for all. As one online respondent put it:

> “if I had to pay to go, I probably wouldn't have visited as ‘it's not for me’.”
>
> (Roxana, Doncaster)

and as another described:

> “Free entry makes me feel that I belong there, whereas if I have to pay for entry (eg to historic houses) I feel that I am only there on sufferance, because the owners need money.”
>
> (Peter, Edinburgh)

We also heard similar views when we spoke to people in-person. For example, one visitor to Tate Britain described the importance of free admission as a core feature of national museums and galleries, in contrast to the availability of some free content in otherwise paid-for spaces:

> “I think it just makes it feel a lot more accessible to everyone. But even with private galleries, often they're free too – anyone can walk in, but it doesn't necessarily feel like that, because there's an air of, I don't know, it feels a bit more inaccessible. So I think the fact that these are free and everyone knows they're free removes that, and it feels a lot more, like, accessible just to just to walk into and just come in with anyone, and everyone feels welcome in them.”

Martin Parr's **The Last Resort** at Tate Liverpool.
Photo: Garry Cook

In our online survey, we also received many comments sharing experiences of how free entry to museums and galleries expanded access that would otherwise have been impossible. This access provided a cultural richness, as one person aptly put it:

> "We didn't have much but we were culture rich."
>
> (Be, Greater Manchester)

Many others online shared their experiences of the access to culture that free admission gave them. For example:

> "Free entry to Tate Liverpool made art (& the world) accessible to me when my parents were not interested in taking me or able to have given me an entry fee whenever I wanted to visit an exhibition. Instead, I only required a bus fare to travel into the city."
>
> (Sarah, Liverpool)

> "As the youngest member of a low-income, single-income mining family, museums and galleries were not regarded as a place that was for us. The free museums and galleries allowed me to visit in my late teens on my own and recognise that actually they could be a safe space where we could shirk the feelings of not belonging. In West Yorkshire, I have already directly felt the impacts of charges to venues [...] which disproportionately affect low-income families and have reintroduced perceptions of exclusivity rather than inclusivity."
>
> (Kay, Leeds)

These experiences show how important free and barrierless access as a matter of policy is for enabling different kinds of people to attend cultural spaces, and feel safe and welcome there.

Furthermore, this expanded accessibility was felt by many to have real impact on their life, as one online comment poignantly put it:

> "I believe the last 25 years of access to culture has empowered children and families to be lifted out of poverty resulting in more accessing employment and higher education. My family are a testament to this."
>
> (Sharon, Manchester)

Though it can be difficult to assess the impact the free admission policy has had on diversifying museum and gallery visitors from the available data (as discussed in our introduction), our findings strongly show that many people have directly experienced an increase in accessibility thanks to the national museums and galleries being made free.

Making people feel welcome and included in museums and galleries is important. Recent research has found that young people from working-class backgrounds, and girls, are discouraged from pursuing arts at school as something "not for them".[19] Creative careers are also increasingly inaccessible to working-class people.[20] Against a backdrop of increasing wealth inequality in the country,[21] this raises major concerns about a trajectory towards the arts being more and more the preserve of a small elite. Our findings demonstrate that free admission to museums and galleries can be an equalising bastion of access for all. However, we also need to remember that not everyone lives in the vicinity of a free museum or gallery, which in and of itself forms an inequality.

Ugo Rondinone's **Liverpool Mountain** at Tate Liverpool.
Photo: Lamar Francois



The “freeness” of museums and galleries...
...integrates them more into everyday life.



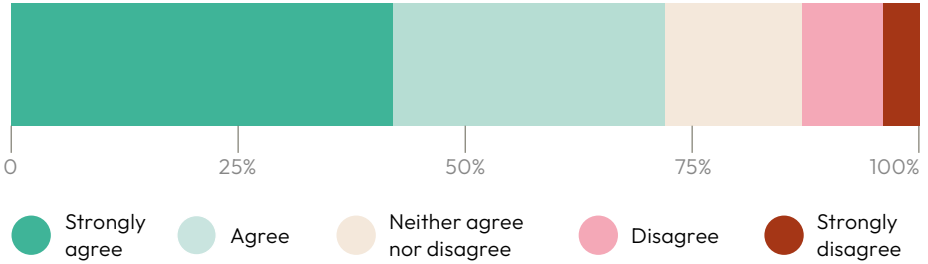
In our in-person survey, the people we spoke to often felt that the UK’s free national museums and galleries were a different kind of institution, offering a different experience, to museums and galleries that have paid entry. We summarised this sentiment into a simple statement:

> “The free and barrierless entry to UK national museums makes them more a part of everyday life, whereas paid museums abroad feel more like a tourist attraction to tick off a list.”

and put it to our online respondents to see how much they would agree:

Free museums are part of normal life

Percentage breakdown of agreement levels



We can see that most agreed, with 42% strongly agreeing and a further 30% agreeing, versus only 4% strongly disagreeing and 9% disagreeing.

For many of the people we surveyed, free entry transformed museums and galleries from destinations for a one-off visit into places woven into daily life:

> “A city's museums are part of its community, its history. Free entry allows local people to feel that it belongs to them.”
> (Andrew, Edinburgh)

For many of our participants, by being free and barrierless, the UK’s national museums and galleries are a different type or category of museum/gallery than those people know from other countries.

Station Hall at National Railway Museum, York.
Photo: Lamar Francois

Visitors in London repeatedly contrasted UK institutions with the Louvre or MoMA, describing those as more of *"a destination to tick off a tourism list"*, while the UK's free, barrierless museums were experienced as more fluid, more woven into the ordinary rhythm of the city, and valued for a broader cultural role rather than as a tourist attraction.

Similarly, one interviewee compared his experience to museums in Berlin, where *"it costs money, and there are queues... you decide to cherry-pick whatever you want to see"*. A group of young women at The National Gallery told us:

> "When we go to other countries in Europe, I feel like art is not accessible. It's not. Like we just went to the front of the Louvre, took a picture, and went away. Because it's like 30 euros."

And an online respondent contrasted:

> "Once in a lifetime trip to the Rijksmuseum versus hundreds of small trips and a renewed and progressive experience in London."
>
> (Max, London)

As well as articulating a difference in the UK's museums and galleries from those abroad, many of our participants described the unique social role that free museums and galleries play, through being spaces that can be visited without barriers in a day-to-day, regular way.

> "With the diminishing of third spaces for people, free museums are the last bastion of community. A place to meet people from all over the world. A million first dates where the collections provide a handy distraction from your nerves. How many people have fallen in love hearing a painting described?
>
> Art and culture are normalised in Britain because it's so available. It's the last offline place for a new generation of adults that find it hard to put their phones away.
>
> I worry what future lights will go out if you let money stand between a constant source of education and [a] curious mind."
>
> (Su, London)

Through being free and barrierless, the UK's national museums and galleries were also described by participants as an integral part of life. For example, this survey respondent described the role of museums in both major life events and daily life:

> "I have celebrated most birthdays, including all of my milestone years, with a visit to a museum. Being able to invite all of my friends and family without fear of cost being a barrier to a place that feels so inclusive has made my birthdays truly special. I love being able to pop into a museum or art gallery for a short lunch break or gap between meetings and learn something new or connect again to an artwork that makes my soul soar."
>
> (Lizzy, Cambridge)

Finally, the freeness of museums and galleries plays an important role in the daily lives of people who could not afford to spend time in spaces which require payment, as one survey comment brought to life:

> "My best friend lives in York. She's on universal credit. I often pass through York on the train and we usually meet in the Railway Museum. We chat, our kids run around enjoying the exhibits. There's nowhere else we could meet that's free, child-friendly, warm and dry. Free third spaces are so important for friendships, for families, and for people on low incomes, who often cite loneliness as one of the hardest things about poverty."
>
> (Sally, Liverpool)

This shows us how the accessibility and inclusivity created through the "freeness" of national museums and galleries can directly change their role in the lives of the people who benefit.

Overall, our survey respondents paint a picture of free and barrierless entry into museums and galleries creating an open invitation to use these spaces whenever different needs arise, from the most mundane brief visit, to a special occasion, in a way that makes them part of our social fabric.

The “freeness” of museums and galleries...
...changes how it feels once you’re in, making the experience more open-ended and pressure-free.



Sound and Vision galleries at
National Science & Media Museum, Bradford

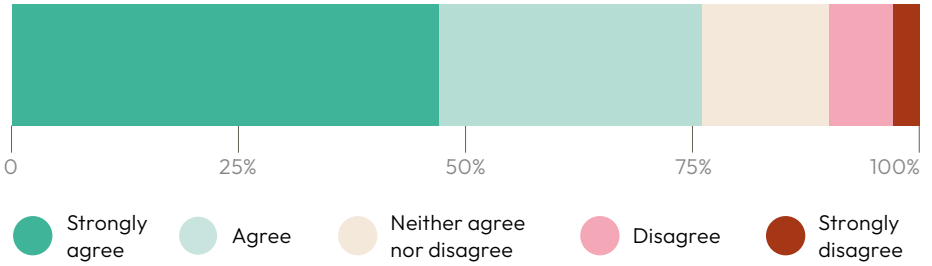
When speaking to people in-person, we heard how the free access to museums and galleries creates a low-stakes, easy opportunity to *“pop in”*, and this facilitates a more open ended experience for visitors that enables them to encounter unexpected objects and works and be more receptive to them.

We put this to our online survey respondents, to see if they agreed to this statement:

> “The museum or gallery being free changes how it feels once you’re in, making the experience more open-ended or pressure-free, or enabling people to encounter unexpected objects or works.”

There is less pressure and more discovery when free

Percentage breakdown of agreement levels



We can see that they overwhelmingly did: 47% strongly agreed, and 29% agreed, while only 3% strongly disagreed and 7% disagreed.

Because of the high value placed on being able to make spontaneous visits, both in-person and online, pre-booking proved unpopular - even among visitors who had used it. One Tate Britain visitor's account captures this well:

> “The pre-booking online thing is asking for trouble. I always have a look online to see how booked up it is, but I'm not going to be forced to book online and come and do it here. I don't like being tied to something. You know, I might change my mind half an hour before my due visit and things like that. It's all too fussy. I like being able to drift in, and I'm intelligent enough to choose the less busy times.”

In our online survey, when asked to rate the impact on their visit from 0 as the least and 4 as the most impacting, 43% of respondents felt pre-booking would have a strong impact with a further 23% selecting a moderate impact. Across our surveys, many participants expressed a strong appreciation for the spontaneity that free and barrierless admission enables:

> "When my whole family from rural North Wales visited me in London, they only agreed to come to a gallery with me because it was easy to enter and spontaneous. When they were there, they enjoyed art they would never have considered before."
>
> (Georgia, London)

Participants sometimes described this as a different type of museum/gallery experience, which is more creative and inspiring, and less burdened by value judgements. One National Gallery visitor told us ***"It feels more creative if you can just roam freely"*** and that the gallery would be ***"less intriguing"*** if you had to pay to enter, even if the charge was very low, as this would turn the experience into more of a planned visit.

For many survey respondents, the fact of the museum or gallery being free created a feeling of there being less or no pressure, either to spend more time, or to see specific items in the collection. This was greatly valued. For example, one online respondent said:

> "You feel more relaxed, because once you're inside, you could leave and return without being financially penalised: you don't feel trapped and needing to 'make the most' of what you paid."
>
> (LH, London)

It also changed how some people behaved, as one National Gallery visitor described it:

> "If people are paying, they'll want to want to see everything and then they're going to be rushing around, they're going to be barging through. It's just going to change the energy of the space."

There was also an appreciation for the discovery that the freeness enabled, as visitors chanced upon items they hadn't actively come to see. For example, a visitor to Tate Britain told us:

> "It broadens your horizons, I think, because you can just stop by and maybe see some art that you wouldn't have thought of or known that existed."

Finally, many of our online respondents commented on how important barrierless and low-stakes visits are for disabled people, for example:

> "I love being able to pop in and see as much or as little as I need - as a disabled person this is very helpful. I would find queuing to show ID or pay would sap my limited energy before I got to the good bit. Making entry to our treasures free was such a warm and inclusive thing to do and it delighted me: such a positive act.
>
> Today, my autistic grandsons can enjoy museums (and they do) without their parents/grandparents having to pay a fortune all whilst knowing they will only be able to manage a short visit. Not paying means they can make short, but enjoyable and meaningful visits."
>
> (Pauline, Yorkshire)

We can see therefore how free entry reduces pressure in different ways for different people, and creates a more open experience for all. Accessible social infrastructure that enables connection and participation for everyone in society to live culturally rich lives is essential to any inclusive and fair society.[22] Our survey findings point to an important role for free museums and galleries in providing this.

By enabling spontaneity and removing the pressure that a paid ticket brings to a museum and gallery visit, free admission changes the museum and gallery experience in ways that increase both accessibility and discovery.

The “freeness” of museums and galleries...

...encourages people to visit others too, or to come back sooner.



Liverpool Pier Head waterfront
Photo: Pete Carr

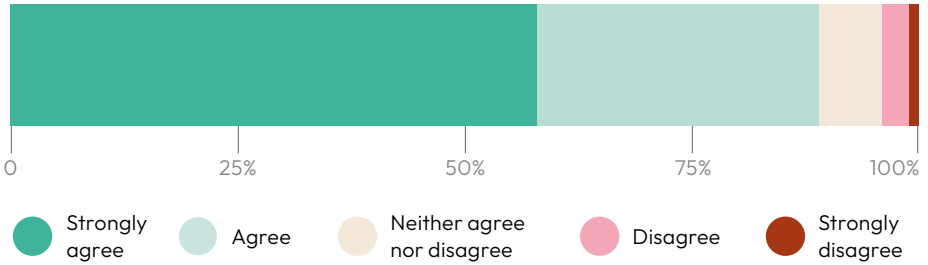
Freeness also meant many visitors moved between multiple institutions in a single trip, rather than committing to just one. Some people also told us about making several visits to one museum or gallery, valuing the opportunity to revisit favourite items in the collection, or breaking down very large collections into manageable sections.

Our online respondents very strongly agreed that this was the case when presented with this statement:

> “Because they are free, visiting one museum or gallery encourages people to visit others also, or to come back to the same gallery sooner.”

When free, visiting one gallery inspires more visits

Percentage breakdown of agreement levels



58% of our respondents strongly agreed, and 31% agreed, in contrast to only 1% strongly disagreeing and 3% disagreeing.

In our online survey, we asked respondents if they had a special memory to share about museums or galleries. We received many comments sharing stories about visiting different museums, or revisiting collections again and again, as meaningful memories, for example:

> "I met my partner (now spouse) in London and the Natural History Museum was a fantastic part of our 'first date'. We also visited the V&A, the Tate Britain and Tate Modern. Without the free entry to these wonderful places we would have not been able to afford to have such a jam-packed weekend. We both fondly remember these visits nearly 15 years on."
>
> (Jodie, York)

Furthermore, many participants told us they would only visit one museum or gallery on a given trip if they had to pay. This would create competition between museums and galleries located near each other, where currently a positive experience in one free venue motivates visitors to try others also. For example a young couple we spoke to outside the Science Museum told us:

> "We'd maybe centre the day more around just going to the Science Museum, rather than spending a day in South Ken, for example."

And a visitor from abroad at the National Gallery commented:

> "I spent five days here and I went to five galleries and I saw a bunch of different things that probably with the budget I have I would not have been able to, I would have to choose one or two."

This suggests a mutual benefit among free museums and galleries, versus being in competition with one another.

Our in-person conversations especially highlighted how free admission to one museum, for someone who doesn't consider themselves a museum-goer or art enthusiast, can open the doors to more visits creating a new interest. For example, we spoke to a visitor from Europe who had planned a hiking trip in Cornwall, but had cancelled these plans and remained in London due to very poor weather. Though she told us ***"I'm not into art"***, she visited Tate Britain, Tate Modern and National Gallery because they were free and easily accessible. She contrasted this with the Sky Garden as the ***"sort of place that feels quite unwelcoming to me, because you have to book it online"***. This points to increased discovery through free admission.

We can see from these findings how free admission increases the possibility of visiting a museum or gallery, both to see different institutions and to revisit collections over and over again. For many of our participants, a positive experience in one museum or gallery motivated a visit to another, and for some this became a lifelong habit. This buildup of visiting behaviour benefits museums and galleries by bringing people in, and benefits visitors who make art and culture part of their lives.

V&A South Kensington, London
Photo: Lamar Francois



The “freeness” of museums and galleries...
...fuels children’s education and development.



Many respondents to our online survey shared experiences about children and their education and development through museum and gallery visits.

> “Regular and repeated free entry to the Museum of Scotland, the National Galleries in Edinburgh and other locations around the UK gave us the chance to take our children to stimulating and educational exhibitions while they were growing up, with cost not being a barrier during what was already an expensive phase of life. This instilled a sense of curiosity and awareness of the world that has continued into their adulthood. My son and daughter, now in their 20s, both revisit the local museums and galleries often today, which as young people on limited incomes they would not do if it was paid entry.”
>
> (Heidi, Edinburgh)

We also heard recollections from our respondents' childhoods, and the importance of museums and galleries to both their education and their family relationships, such as:

> “Visiting Museums/Galleries with my dad when we were children widened our knowledge and encouraged us to dream. He would explain things as we walked around which enabled us to ask questions thus giving us another slant on history and our place within it.”
>
> (Bernadette, Manchester)

They also shared their experiences of passing down their relationship with the museum or gallery to the next generations in their family, by bringing children to visit. This shows us how free access to museums and galleries can make art and culture a deep rooted, intergenerational part of people’s life journeys.

Family Art Club at Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.
Photo: Pete Carr

> "Being able to visit museums for free has been a brilliant opportunity for my family to experience and explore so much culture, history and art first hand. As a child I have fond memories of my parents taking my siblings and I to various museums in Glasgow. As a student in Edinburgh I found peace and solitude in the many national museums and galleries. And as a parent I have loved sharing these experiences with my children. Free museums also made a family trip to London so much more affordable. Access to the arts should be available to everyone regardless of their background."
>
> (M, Glasgow)

The fact that this thematic area was absent in our in-person survey data is most likely because we did not approach people who were busy looking after young children to ask them to talk to us.

However, in our in-person surveying we did speak to a teacher on a school trip from France at the Science Museum, who shared how essential free and barrierless entry was to the viability of their trip: ***"it helps us to bring kids to museums they wouldn't go [...] Because they don't go with their parents. We bring them to culture, to science."*** He also shared the cost challenges already inherent in school trips, pointing to London's free museums and galleries as a major rationale for choosing the city as their destination.

Our findings show the importance of free access to museums and galleries for children's exposure to art and culture, as a crucial component of their education and development. They also paint a picture of the role free national institutions play in family relationships and whole life courses.

The role of free museums and galleries in children's arts education is crucial, as we have seen significant declines in the opportunities young people otherwise have to engage with the arts. Between 2013-14 and 2019-20, on average, between 44% and 57% of 11-15 year olds in England only engaged with arts activities at school, and not outside of school.[23] Yet within schools arts provision has been in dramatic decline.[24] For young people who can attend a museum or gallery for free, therefore, these spaces offer a sadly rare opportunity to have an authentic and enriching arts and cultural experience.

However, access to museums and galleries is not available to all young people growing up in Britain today. Research by Art Fund in 2023 found that only 52% of lower socioeconomic status pupils have visited a museum in the past year, compared to 70% of those growing up with higher socioeconomic status.[25] The same research found a reduction in school museum and gallery visits, with a third (36%) fewer teachers reporting undertaking school trips than before the pandemic. More recent research found over 60% of teachers reporting they have not taken their class to a museum on a school trip in the past year, as of 2025.[26] When considered with the benefits our participants described, these figures highlight concerning and persistent barriers to cultural access for young people today.



Young At Art's Belfast Children's Festival at Ulster Museum, Belfast.
Photo: Carrie Davenport

The “freeness” of museums and galleries...
...inspires arts and cultural career journeys, and supports artists.



While surveying inside The National Gallery, we spoke to a young artist who was there to sketch from the paintings, to develop his skills. He reflected on the importance of free access enabling him to visit regularly and spend time drawing, but also for the way it influenced the atmosphere of the space, which invited casual encounters and made people seem friendlier towards him.

In our online survey responses, we received many more comments sharing ways in which attending museums and galleries for free had shaped artists’ creative practice. For example:

> “I was able to practice my own art and teaching of art by repeat visits with my children to Tate Liverpool to draw sculptures and create new art influenced by art works on display. Without the free access this would have been much more limited.”
>
> (Maria, Merseyside)

For some, free access to museums and galleries also sparked an interest in the arts and made a creative career seem possible. Often, our respondents described free museum and gallery entry as pivotal:

> “As a young adult the free entry to the Tate Modern set about opening my ways to modern art and is a key factor in what shaped my life to want to teach art, especially the Tate[‘s] Louise Bourgeois ‘towers’ exhibit. If these were paid exhibits or had charges on entry these experiences would have been completely shut off to me and kept behind a closed door. I do not know the path I would have taken without access to these frankly life changing experiences.”
>
> (Jodie, York)

> “I have devoted my life's work to making, curating, teaching & engaging with art. This would never have happened without access to free museums to inspire & inform both my practice, career & soul.”
>
> (Laura, London)

Eurovision ArtSlam at Museum of Liverpool.
Photo: Pete Carr

> "I am an artist and arts worker from a working-class background and with no familial history of cultural/arts work; I was introduced to museums and galleries as a small child because they were somewhere my mum could take me for a few hours for free by using public transport, and have since become a huge part of my life – I would not have the career or interests I have now if I had not had access to these spaces, and I would not have visited had my family had to pay for them. The arts and cultural sector in the UK is still overwhelmingly driven by class and money; if barriers to access start even from early childhood we have even less of a chance to change this."
>
> (Helen, Sheffield)

These experiences give us an insight into how free museums and galleries feed into the wider arts and cultural ecosystem, and diversify it.

Access to experiences that make a career in the arts matter. Creative careers have become alarmingly inaccessible to people from working-class roots, with fewer than one in 10 arts workers having working-class origins, and working-class representation being worse now than in the 70s, with some estimating half the proportion of working-class actors, musicians and writers now than we had then.[27] Our findings provide evidence that free admission to museums and galleries can make arts and culture more accessible to working-class people, and can spark a desire to enter creative careers.



Olafur Eliasson's **In Real Life** at Tate Modern, London.
Photo: Garry Cook

The “freeness” of museums and galleries...
...benefits people’s mental health and wellbeing.



Many of our participants shared experiences of visiting museums and galleries which benefited their mental health and wellbeing. This extends the role of museums and galleries in everyday life into a specific emotional purpose:

> “I have had fortune & misfortune in life. In good times, the free galleries & museums of the UK share the endless colour of life – imparting the potential energy of history & culture, for one to turn into kinetic energy in one's life. In bad times, I have used free museums & galleries as an emotional shelter, to forget my lack of funds, prospects etc. Centring & grounding me in the broad context of time & society, pulling me out of myself.”
>
> (Olivia, Edinburgh)

Comments in our online survey included experiences of being calmed by a museum or gallery visit, and transported away from stressful life circumstances.

> “Museums can be a solace.”
>
> (Abi, London)

These included someone popping into a museum to calm themselves before a job interview, through to someone else escaping a difficult home situation by spending a day in a gallery.

Many respondents also explicitly described going to museums and galleries for their mental health benefits, as a means of self-help, support, and as safe spaces. Some of these experiences included parents with small children needing a place to stave off isolation and depression, young people looking for safe and comforting spaces to manage anxiety, and neurodivergent people seeking an environment to meet their needs.

Mark Leckey’s **Felt Tip** at Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.
Photo: Pete Carr

Some pointed to these benefits as an important argument for safeguarding free access:

> "When I've been heartbroken, lonely or fearful of the precarity of life, visiting museums has helped me to feel more connected to the meaning of life. I've also spent some precious hours in them with friends, memories I will always treasure. History, culture, animals and art are an intrinsic part of life and understanding of these realms should be made available for all people. It's as important as healthcare, indeed it IS a form of healthcare, if you want to be value driven in the assessment of their necessity."
>
> (Mela, Manchester)

The mental health benefits of free entry to museums and galleries came through far more strongly in our online findings than in-person. This may be because talking about mental health can be easier online, than face-to-face with a researcher you have only just met.

Our findings show that many people experience mental health and wellbeing boosts from going to museums or galleries, enabled by free access. Many also actively use the museum and gallery in order to manage their emotions and deal with all kinds of life situations. This is not just about having a free building to be inside, but about the ways in which the collections provide a unique experience.

The UK has seen a decline in mental health, leading some to identify a mental health crisis unfolding. Demand for mental health services is outstripping provision, with steep increases in those seeking support.[28] More than one in five adults have a mental health condition diagnosis, which is a 20% increase since 2014.[29] Yet a large body of research shows that engagement with the arts can significantly improve mental health and wellbeing.[30] Our research supports this, and points to the importance of freely accessible arts and cultural spaces where all kinds of people feel welcome, and find a safe space of solace and peace.



Gather Around the Frame: A Celebration of Hand Quilting
at National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.
Photo: Andy Catlin

Additional findings in light of possible change to the policy

The bustle of a busy museum is positive, but no one likes a crowd.

At the time of our survey, the government was considering bringing in charges for museum and gallery entry for visitors from abroad. Many of our respondents considered how this would impact visitor numbers.

Some participants felt a reduction in visitor numbers resulting from charging or pre-booking requirements might be positive, making the museum calmer and emptier, which was a view often shared in the comments in our online survey. However, most of the people we spoke to in-person saw this as a negative that would undermine the atmosphere of the museum or gallery, and signal a reduction in accessibility, in contrast to the vibrancy of a museum as a well-used public space.

For example, one visitor to the V&A told us seeing fewer people attending *"would make me a bit sad, because you can sometimes walk around the V&A and it's empty. It's not as full as it should be anyway."*

One husband and wife visiting from the USA we spoke to at The National Gallery disagreed on this, and highlighted how contentious the issue can be:

> A: "Look at the crowds we've had here, it's unbelievable. [...] I think the crowds would be thinner, because you'd have to pay."
>
> B: "It would be, and that's the unfortunate part about it. That's the same in the States. Some people are, let's be honest, they're excluded. People don't have access. You know, they don't have that in their monthly budget, to go spend $18 or $28 to go look at art. And so, those people are cut out."

In our online survey, in the open comments section, we received some views sharing concerns about crowding in museums and galleries, with some respondents feeling that entry charges would be welcome as a means of reducing overall visitor numbers.

> "Many museums are just too crowded; the experience of simple viewing and appreciation is much diminished by too many people."
> (Annie, Stockport)

The crowding of museums and galleries can also come as a flip-side of their role in daily life, as one online respondent observed:

> "On wet days in central London it becomes very difficult to navigate museums and galleries crowded out with people simply taking shelter and who show little interest in the collections."
> (Robert, Yorkshire)

These views and feelings provide a counterpoint to those who valued accessibility and the ease of "popping in" to museums, and their role in daily life. While these views could be strongly expressed, crowd concerns featured in the free text comments of 22 online survey participants only.



Egyptian Death and Afterlife at British Museum, London.
Photo: Garry Cook

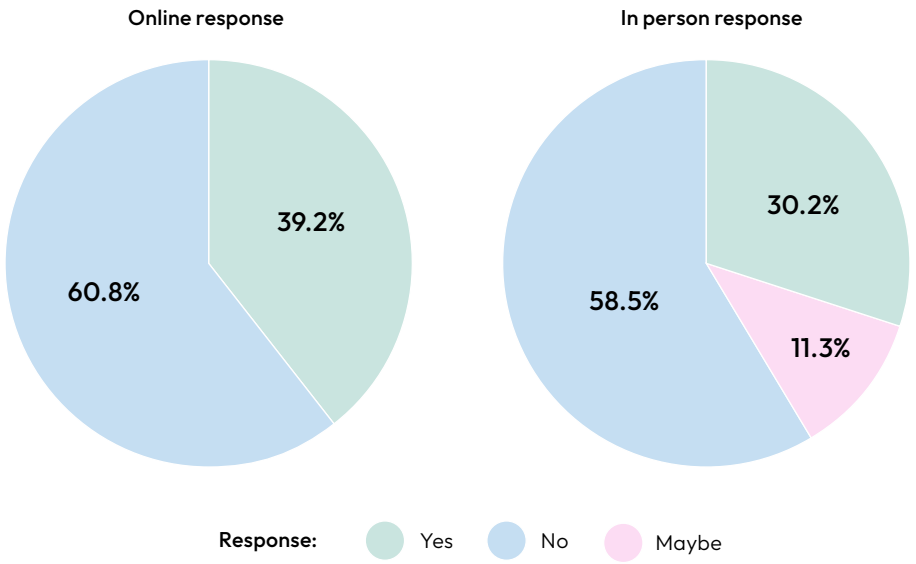
Did people agree with charging tourists?

Our survey was designed during a period of time when the government was considering bringing in entry charges to national museums and galleries for visitors from abroad (while maintaining free entry for UK residents). We therefore asked our participants whether or not they would support an entry charge for tourists.

When we were talking to people in-person, some preferred not to give a yes or no; this is why we had some maybes. Online, we only gave people a yes or no choice.

Would you support an entry charge for tourists?

Percentage distribution of overall response to charging tourists



The reasoning for people's answers fell into some common themes:

Principled objections included:

- the idea that art and culture should be free for all;
- that a two-tier system is inherently wrong;
- and that many collections contain international and donated items held on the understanding that we can all access them freely.

Practical objections focused on:

- the risk that charging would simply reduce visitor numbers;
- that tourists are already spending significant money to be in London.

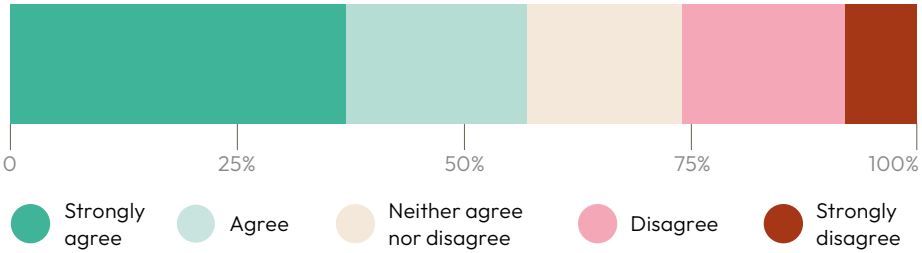
Support for charging often came from:

- a 'better them than us' instinct among UK residents, acknowledging the need for proper museum funding;
- a familiarity with paid entry at museums abroad, and a sense that if we need to pay abroad tourists ought to pay here;
- a desire to bring in more funding for museums and galleries, for a variety of purposes including:
  - Supporting conservation work
  - Maintaining and improving buildings
  - Increasing and expanding their offer, such as by increasing talks and guided visits

We put the suggestion that creating a two-tier system for museum and gallery admission charging is wrong to our online survey participants, and they broadly agreed:

It's wrong to make a two-tier system

Percentage breakdown of agreement levels



However, views were most mixed on this out of all the statements we tested, with 37% strongly agreeing and 20% agreeing, while 8% strongly disagreed and 18% disagreed, and 17% remained neutral.

Some of the people we spoke to in-person tried to come up with alternative ideas for how to bring in money for museums and galleries, acknowledging that they need more funding, but wishing to avoid the tourist charge as the solution.

For example, some suggested a small charge for everyone, entry via a touch-in public transport-style system, multi-museum passes, etc. This was tied to a sense that the museums and galleries do need more money, and that they serve important functions like conservation which should be properly funded.

However, support for all of these alternative ideas fell short of support for free admission, and we also heard concerns that introducing any charge would degrade the experience and be a stepping stone towards price increases and the expansion of who gets charged over time.

One visitor to the National Gallery said:

> "Oh, if I had to pay, I don't know, £5 to be in here, like, I guess I would still do that. But I wouldn't do it unprompted. I would only do it if somebody else was like, "Hey, want to do this with me?"

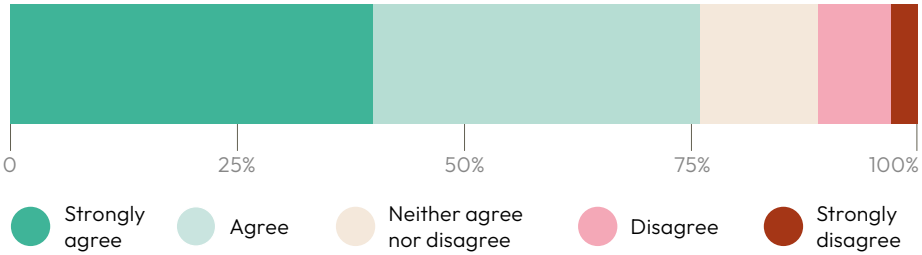
For some of the people we spoke to, any charge, however small, would be perceived as a barrier and something that degrades the experience of coming to the museum or gallery. As one online respondent put it,

> "Even a seemingly low charge can have an impact when it is applied to a family."
>
> (John, Hertfordshire)

We sense-checked this with our online participants, and found that most agreed that even a small charge could be a meaningful barrier:

Even a small charge would be a barrier

Percentage breakdown of agreement levels



40% strongly agreed, and 36% agreed. In contrast, 3% strongly disagreed while 8% disagreed.

Overall, our findings show that people value the free and barrierless access to museums and galleries, and while many share concerns about the funding of our national arts institutions and want to see them well resourced, change to the free admission policy would mainly be unpopular and would raise significant concerns around accessibility and fairness.

Conclusion

A quarter of a century on, the free admission policy for national museums and galleries remains a landmark achievement of UK cultural policy.

However, it has to be noted that because national museums and galleries are concentrated in major urban centres, particularly London, their benefits are currently distributed unevenly. Expanding barrierless access to free cultural experiences across all regions of the UK must remain a key priority, ensuring that the transformative benefits of our national collections are truly accessible to everyone, everywhere.

While national dataset gaps persist regarding demographic shifts in museum attendance, our research offers rich qualitative evidence of the policy's transformative impact. Visitors across the UK describe a profound sense of inclusion and welcome that free admission creates, contrasting this experience today with previous exclusion before the policy came in, or contrasting barrierless UK institutions with paid-for destinations abroad.

By listening to and reading people's thoughts, feelings, and experiences of these institutions, we began to see a picture emerging that was more than just a reflection on the policy. We termed this the "freeness" of museums and galleries, a special quality created by free admission which changes our relationship with these spaces.

Free admission changes the way we feel and behave when we visit national museums and galleries. Their "freeness" opens up the possibility of "popping in", as removing the financial commitment removes the pressure to see everything at once, encouraging spontaneous exploration, repeated visits, and deeper engagement with art and culture as part of daily life.

Free and barrierless access has fundamentally reshaped the social function of these institutions. The "freeness" of museums and galleries has woven them into the fabric of our lives, transforming them into civic spaces, places of solace and mental wellbeing, career catalysts, and crucial intergenerational environments for education and development.

Crucially, free entry fosters a deep sense of national pride and collective ownership, with the public viewing these institutions as shared cultural treasures.

Twenty five years on, free admission is no longer just a policy but a quality, the "freeness" that turns national museums and galleries from places we visit into places we belong, and it is a quality every community in the UK deserves to share.

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