

Written evidence submitted by Anthony Grimshaw Associates LLP

DCMS Enquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on the heritage sector

I write in response to your enquiry. Please see my response below.

1) What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the heritage sector?

As a Conservation Accredited Architect with over 30 years of experience working in private practice in the heritage sector in the North of England, I can report that since the lockdown I have seen our workload completely cease overnight and we cannot currently see a future for our practice.

No new contracts are being advertised and we are receiving no new enquiries. Our existing clients have all gone to ground. The bulk of our work was grant aided repair contracts for listed churches in a deprived area of the North West. Until the lockdown we had numerous clients requiring help with grant applications to the National Lottery for urgent repairs to beautiful historic churches. We also had other conservation projects for private clients which are now postponed or cancelled.

I was therefore very concerned indeed to learn last week that the National Lottery have halted all grants until October 2020 (other than their very limited emergency grants programme).

In addition, the government's decision to close churches has meant that no decisions on either ongoing or new building/repair projects to churches can be taken. Parochial Church Councils are not meeting (even "remotely") and local Dioceses are largely closed. Dioceses are not accepting any Faculty applications.

2) How effectively has the support by DCMS and others addressed the sector's needs?

We are in receipt of the £10,000 Small Business Grant Funding. This will cover our operational costs for one month (it will not cover our costs even for the length of the lockdown).

We have deferred our VAT payment, but this is simply delaying expenditure.

We have also looked into the Business Interruption Loan scheme. According to the Chamber of Commerce the recommendation is for businesses to contact their own bank first. We have been in touch with our bank (NatWest) and been told that the interest payments on these loans are likely to be higher than for a normal loan, due to the interest free period, and repayment timescale.

I have heard that it takes about 5 hours to complete the application process.

I am not at all sure that we would be successful with an application, and am even less sure that we would be able to meet the repayments. Our turnover in the last financial year had dropped substantially from the previous year's figures (due to short term changes in lottery funding available to our clients). Before the current crisis however I was becoming more confident that things would improve, and we had made contact with some new potential clients. However, I cannot prove any future increase in workload, as it has not yet happened. We have however been trading uninterrupted as a family business since 1962. I don't think this means anything to the NatWest Bank.

We cannot “Furlough” our staff, as we would not be able to complete the work we were instructed to do prior to the lockdown.

The National Lottery have introduced an Emergency Fund. This is only open to organisations already in receipt of lottery funding. As we obtain grant funding for others, we are not eligible to apply.

Historic England have introduced an Emergency Response Fund. In order to apply for emergency revenue funds, applicants need to prove that they do not have sufficient reserves to cover operational costs for the next 3 months.

Just by chance (because it varies) we currently have sufficient funds in our bank account to cover operational costs for the next 3 months. This includes the £10,000 Small Business Grant funding.

This means we are not eligible to apply for Historic England’s £25,000 emergency revenue fund. In any case, it would only cover our operational costs for a couple of months or so.

The Historic England £50,000 grants for projects and activities is not relevant to what we do, or are currently able to do.

We have no funds to cover anything at all beyond 3 months. Nor do we at present have any future work, or any source of income whatsoever.

Whilst very welcome, the support currently offered by government is totally insufficient for our needs, if we are to continue trading.

3) What will the likely long term impact of Covid-19 be on the sector and what support is needed?

Due to the lockdown restrictions (and how organisations have chosen to interpret them) we are currently unable to plan or develop any further projects.

Client organisations are largely closed so no decisions can be taken on anything.

We cannot visit heritage buildings to assess what is needed.

The local Dioceses are not operating fully. No Faculty applications are being accepted, therefore cannot be granted for any repair or maintenance work on churches and Faculty applications take 3 months to process.

We cannot organise any on-site surveys, ladders, scaffolding or repair works (building companies and suppliers are closed).

We cannot organise consultations, as most groups are not operational and there is no way of contacting them (members are dispersed and we couldn’t be given access to databases or personal email addresses).

Contractors and subcontractors/suppliers are closed and therefore unable to provide tenders, either for existing or future work. (Tenders have been invited, but are not being returned).

The National Lottery’s own survey has found that 82% of organisations report high or moderate risk to the long term viability of their organisation, and 46% of organisations can survive for no more than six months. This means that voluntary and church organisations, (as well as conservation professionals, specialist contractors and suppliers) will all potentially cease to exist in 6 months’ time.

The National Lottery's response to this information (that they themselves have obtained) is to pull the plug on any new funding for capital projects for the next 6 months. Instead they have introduced a smaller "emergency" fund. The logic of this defies belief.

It appears to us to be yet another example of the crass stupidity and inappropriate decision making now prevalent at the National Lottery. They are simply adding to the problem by taking away yet another source of revenue from the church conservation sector.

The new "Heritage Emergency Fund" will offer existing grantees emergency grants of only £3,000 to £50,000 which appear to be just for operational costs.

All this "remote working" that we are currently "enjoying" so much could have provided an ideal opportunity for churches and other organisations to spend time collating information and writing draft applications, so that when the restrictions are lifted, work could be finalised and applications submitted promptly. Instead, there will just be a backlog of applications, and even less chance of securing funding, since the existing fund will have been depleted still further by these emergency grants.

Without any hope of even being able to apply for funding for urgent repairs, many churches running foodbanks, providing debt counselling and mental health support services will remain closed, as their buildings are becoming dangerous. We have churches where lumps of concrete and stone have fallen from high level, dry rot is accelerating and there is continual raining in. The heritage will be lost forever.

What is desperately needed (and was needed before the current crisis) is a dedicated repair grant scheme for listed places of worship. Without this a significant part of our heritage will be lost for ever, as will the dedicated professionals and other specialist companies whose skills will be lost for a generation.

In terms of our own survival until the conservation sector becomes fully operational, a low- interest loan would be very helpful.

4) What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS etc and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?

Without any end to the lockdown in sight, nor any knowledge being in the public domain regarding when or how it might end, it is impossible to plan for the future, or indeed to plan for anything.

Decisions cannot be taken on whether or not to wind up a particular business.

The lockdown and the lack of clarity, and information on how it will end needs to stop, otherwise the heritage sector will be destroyed for ever.

5) How might the sector evolve and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

It is desperately important that we get proper funding for historic buildings. Dedicated repair grants are essential otherwise our heritage will not survive.

We do not need "innovation", "skills training" or "digital programmes" until our physical heritage has been properly repaired and secured. This will also save the industry which surrounds it, with all the specialist skills and knowledge, which is so vital to the economy.

Thank you for reading these comments.

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