

The Value Of 'Free For All'

The Price of Charging Overseas Visitors Admission
to UK National Museums

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BACKGROUND

Charging for general admission to UK national museum and galleries for non-UK nationals and residents is being considered as a way of significantly boosting revenues at a time of constrained public funding. An entry charge of approximately £20 for tourists was proposed last year by the outgoing Interim Director of the British Museum, Mark Jones¹ and the idea has resurfaced in recent months.

Proponents argue that it would make these high-profile institutions more self-sufficient and sustainable at a time when corporate and private funding sources and museums' ethical policies often collide, hampering external fundraising efforts. With no extra government money on the table, the argument goes, our great national museums should find additional ways to help themselves. Charging overseas visitors is one suggested route – while still preserving the principle that UK taxpayers go free.

However, implementing a charging system that discriminates in this way will be challenging without an identity card system, and could prove both detrimental and costly to the UK's museum ecosystem and reputation, when compared with alternatives such as a tourist accommodation levy (see '[City Tourism Charge](#)' Report). This paper outlines the main reasons why introducing museum entry charges for non-UK nationals and residents would be unsuitable for the UK, focusing on fundamental issues of principle, as well as on logistical, financial and social implications. It also highlights how other countries handle distinctions between nationals and non-local tourists when it comes to museum entry, offering insights into our particular cultural approach and the potential difficulties the UK might face.

It is worth noting that although most of Europe's most popular museums charge tourists for entry, the comparison is not as straightforward as it seems. At the Louvre in Paris, for example, most French citizens (with some

exceptions) must pay as well, and Dutch citizens have to purchase a museum card (full price 69 Euros) to get free access to museums in the Netherlands (which effectively excludes those that are not in the habit of visiting). The UK, however, currently offers free admission to all, aligned to a deeply held belief in what museums are for.

KEY POINTS

Britain holds its national collections for the world – not just its own residents. The national museums and galleries are treasure houses of history, art, science, and things of beauty, places for civic debate and revitalising the spirits. In a world of disinformation, growing inequality and division, everyone – from wherever they come – should have access to them. Opening them up to the world is part of our 'soft power', and there would be reputational damage to the UK if we reversed this.

Without identity cards, how will museums decide who is entitled to free entry? Compared with other European countries, the UK has a uniquely diverse population, with large numbers of long-term residents who are not UK nationals. Happy co-existence is fragile and precious, and this measure would prove both challenging to implement and divisive.

The capital costs of remodelling entrances to accommodate machinery and queues is large – as are the staff costs of administering such a system.

Our free museums are a "top motivator" for international visitors. These tourists support jobs and business growth across the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors.

THE STATUS QUO – UPHOLDING A FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE

In the UK, 15 national museums and galleries – those sponsored directly by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) – offer free entry to their permanent collections. Like public libraries and parks, these museums are owned by the public and are regarded as an integral part of building a healthy civil society. The principle that access to knowledge, and to the greatest things created by humankind, should be equally available to all has been largely upheld by all British public collections since Parliament created the British Museum, the first national museum/library in the world, in 1753.

The British model was expressly copied by the United States when their national collections were established in Washington DC – all of them are also free, to US visitors and foreigners alike. The People's Republic of China has recently adopted the British model of free museums, so that citizens can inform themselves about the world at large.

This cardinal principle of universal free admission was reaffirmed in 2001. The preceding Conservative governments (under Thatcher) had given Boards discretion to charge, with some Boards of Trustees unilaterally deciding to impose charges: the Labour government insisted that free admission to national museums and galleries in England, Wales and Northern Ireland be reintroduced. The Scottish government similarly reasserted free admission in 2006. The UK's policy of free admission is seen **as part of our national education system – a cornerstone of making culture and information accessible to all** – and has been zealously maintained by successive governments ever since. Moreover, the national museums now enjoy special status (under Section 33A of the 1994 VAT Act), which has allowed them to reclaim VAT on many elements of their core business since December 2001.

As part of their current management agreements with the DCMS, these DCMS-sponsored museums must provide free entry to their permanent collections. To be properly used, these collections should be visited easily and often. So, there is **an underlying and important 'walk-in' principle to the public**, which is a bedrock of the policy. There is also evidence that free admission attracts huge numbers of international visitors to the UK.

The policy has allowed museums to remain open, welcoming and inclusive, enabling diverse audiences, including people from lower-income backgrounds, to access cultural resources at their convenience and leisure. Moreover, **the reintroduction of free entry in 2001 saw audience numbers jump**, both at those national museums who had dropped a temporary period of charging, and at those that had steadfastly maintained free admission: in 2002 the DCMS reported a 62 per cent increase in visitor numbers. The V&A saw a 157 per cent increase in footfall, and national museums and galleries recorded an overall increase of 2.7 million people year on year.

On the 10th anniversary of the reaffirmation of free admission for all, the Conservative-led government cited findings confirming that the UK's free museums and galleries were **"a key motivator for many international visitors** and earn the country £1 billion a year in revenue from overseas tourists." ² Since then, the policy has also generated considerably higher visitor numbers, with over 50 million visits to national museums in 2019 alone. According to the Association of London Visitor Attractions (ALVA), our unique cultural and heritage offer is still the "top motivational" factor in UK tourism. At a time when the UK is working hard to enhance its position in the world, and to attract more people to visit and spend money here, the role played by our major free cultural offer is even more essential.

In the meantime, **our free national museums have developed finely-tuned business models**, consisting of a mix of government grants, private

donations, sponsorship and commercial activities – notably special exhibitions, membership schemes and opportunities for valuable ancillary spend (in museum cafés and shops). Not only would selective admission charges have a negative impact on visitor numbers, particularly among budget-stretched individuals and families, but there would be a significant cost to replacing this model with a charging infrastructure, not to mention the negative impact on the wider public role of our national institutions themselves.

UNRAVELLING LABOUR'S BIG VICTORY

The guarantee of Free Admission for All remains one of the greatest policy victories of the last Labour government, crucial to its mission for expanding formal and informal life-long education and equalising access to opportunity. Introducing a new tiered system for access would set a precedent that threatens the legitimacy of the policy, which has proven hugely successful over the past two decades. In a recent *Times* report, on the occasion of Secretary of State for Culture, Lisa Nandy's inaugural Jennie Lee lecture (20 February 2025), Nandy appeared to rule out admission charges for tourists.³ The sections below outline the complex set of issues, challenges and unintended consequences if such a system were to be introduced.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

Introducing a system that distinguishes between UK nationals/residents on the one hand, and non-nationals and non-residents on the other, would be logistically complex as well as ideologically at odds with the global collections that the UK has accumulated (as a former imperial power). Without identity cards, determining UK residency status can be difficult and open to abuse and discrimination, creating administrative burdens

and perceptual as well as physical barriers. Systems would need to verify nationality or residency status for each visitor, which would require significant investment in infrastructure, staff and technology. While digital ticketing or apps may seem like the smart solution, digital exclusion is a significant issue in the UK, particularly for the over 65s and for those on lower incomes. And though proof of residency such as passports/driving licences may seem straightforward, travelling abroad and owning a car is not a given for those with insufficient resources.

Charging admission at the door would also significantly reduce visitor numbers overall, as it would introduce turnstile barriers and longer queues for everyone. Research has shown that charges deter domestic visitors,⁴ and perceptual barriers – like queues – are as off-putting as physical barriers. The introduction of charges could also discourage international tourists, who may feel that the UK's cultural institutions are no longer as welcoming, accessible or affordable as they once were. Tourists may also choose to visit alternative paid cultural attractions.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF A DISCRIMINATORY CHARGING MODEL IN THE UK

The proposal to introduce entry charges at UK national museums – although intended to raise additional revenue – is fraught with significant financial, economic and experiential risks. The following points summarise some key concerns:

Reduced Grant-in-aid (GIA) from Government: The UK's default position when commercial income goes up, is for GIA to be reduced. This then begs the question what is the unique social mandate of our national museums?

Negative Financial Impact: The shift from a free-admission model to a paid-entry system is likely to reduce overall visitor numbers, impacting ancillary revenue from ticketed exhibitions café and shop sales and membership schemes. The reduction in exhibition income – and flexibility on exhibition pricing – could hit finances hard. For example, the National Gallery charged £26 (full-price ticket) for entry to the recent 'Van Gogh: Poets and Lovers' exhibition and benefited from a record 334,589 visits. Paid membership of the National Gallery doubled in size as a result of this exhibition and the Gallery's Bicentenary celebrations.

Cannibalisation Risk: A museum, such as Tate Modern, which currently benefits from high international visitor spend, helps subsidise its smaller sites like Tate Liverpool and Tate Britain, which have fewer international visitors. Charging may cannibalise this cross-subsidy mechanism.

Budget Constraints and Visitor Behaviour: Tourists typically operate within focused leisure budgets. If they must allocate a portion of their budget to entry fees, they may choose only one or two high-profile institutions (e.g. the British Museum or the National Gallery), leaving smaller museums – or those off the beaten track – with significantly reduced visitor numbers. Museums would also have to compete with other paid attractions, such as St Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and The Tower of London. And if museums are the main beneficiaries of tourist spend, there could be an adverse impact on the paid-for attractions that receive no government funding at all, creating an iniquitous marketplace.

Operational Problems and Increased Queues: Introducing fees will create real friction points at entry – long queues, increased staffing demands and potential delays – that could diminish walk-in spontaneity, which is a commonly overlooked factor in visitor engagement, particularly among families, as well as overall visitor satisfaction. This 'walk in' principle – the importance of the spontaneous or frequent short visit – is one of the principal planks of Labour's free admission policy.

Risk to Philanthropy and Sponsorship: Free entry has become a cornerstone of the cultural ethos in the UK. Some big international sponsorships and many artist and private donors are attracted by this open-access model. For example, sponsors like Hyundai, who support Tate's Turbine Hall commission, are attracted by the large numbers of visitors who are made aware of their sponsorship. A commercial approach risks diluting the unique DNA of our institutions.

Uncertainty Over Revenue Gains: Preliminary analysis indicates that even if entry fees for overseas visitors are implemented, there is no guarantee of a revenue spike. Post-Covid trends show that tourist numbers are volatile, and any charging mechanism may fail to compensate for losses in ancillary revenue, with some envisaging a break-even result.

'London in the World' and World Museums at Risk: The British Museum is a trenchant advocate for universal free admission. Its founding purpose was to be a place where people from all over the world could see the cultures of the whole world together: the collection has always been about fostering knowledge and understanding. The Museum would also be placed in the unenviable position of having to charge Nigerians to see the Benin Bronzes or Egyptians to view the Rosetta Stone (while diaspora Nigerians and Egyptians living in the UK could come for free).

FINANCIAL IMPACT AND BUSINESS MODEL DISRUPTION

Visitor Numbers and Ancillary Revenue

- **Current Visitor Base:**
 - Major institutions such as Tate Modern enjoy high visitor numbers (4.742 million in 2023, according to *The Art Newspaper's* annual 'Visitor Figures' 2023 survey)⁵ which drive

significant revenue not just from admissions but from in-museum sales (ticketed exhibitions, café, retail and memberships).

- In contrast, institutions like MOMA in New York, which charge an entry fee, record around 2.839 million visitors for the same period. This comparison suggests that charging will lead to reduced overall visitor numbers overall.

- **Ancillary Income Streams:**

- Ticketed special exhibitions, membership schemes and retail/café operations are closely linked to high footfall. A drop in visitor numbers, at institutions like the V&A for instance, will likely reduce these critical revenue streams.
- There is a strong risk that charging could force museums to lower prices for these supplementary services, which would further erode the cross-subsidy that supports smaller sites (e.g. Tate Liverpool, Tate Britain).

BUDGETARY CONSTRAINTS AND TOURIST SPENDING PATTERNS

- **Tourist Budget Limitations:**

- Many tourists have a limited leisure budget and introducing an admission fee could compel them to choose only a few 'must-see' destinations.
- This scenario would likely lead to a concentration of visitor traffic at flagship institutions (e.g. the National Gallery or British Museum) while depriving smaller museums such as the Wallace Collection, Soane Museum and the National Portrait Gallery of crucial footfall.

- **Impact on National Museum and Visitor Attraction Ecology:**
 - A free admission model currently supports a logical flow of visitors across multiple institutions, ensuring a balanced distribution of cultural tourism.
 - Charging risks creating an uneven ecosystem where only a few popular sites benefit, and where museums and paid cultural attractions compete for audiences.

SPONSORSHIP AND PHILANTHROPY

- **International Sponsorships:**
 - Major sponsorship deals, such as Hyundai's support for Tate Modern, are closely linked to the footfall associated with free entry for the public.
 - Changing the free-entry model risks alienating key international partners and donors who are attracted by the open-access ethos.
- **Artistic Donations and Special Bequests:**
 - Institutions like Tate and the National Gallery have benefited from high-profile donations and bequests because they are free e.g. works from the Cy Twombly Foundation (donated free to Tate, whereas MOMA was required to purchase them), or the 2010 Denis Mahon bequest. Under the terms of Mahon's bequest, the collection (25 paintings) would have to be withdrawn by the Art Fund and placed elsewhere, should charging be introduced.
 - A more commercial model might force institutions to reassess or even reduce the prominence of certain collections, potentially eroding the unique identity and cultural heritage of the museum.

GOVERNANCE AND BOARD DYNAMICS

Trustee and Director Concerns:

- DCMS could refer the decision on charging overseas visitors to the trustees of the individual institutions (this is what led to some institutions introducing charges in the 1990s). But this is a decision that will have an impact on cultural institutions across the board. The decision requires alterations to DCMS management agreements along with changes to the terms of the relevant VAT Act.
- There is a risk that trustees may be faced with a decline in grant-in-aid following the forthcoming Spending Review – and that a charging option might be forced upon them. At present informal soundings suggest that most national museum boards would vote against such proposals, as they could jeopardise the finely balanced business model derived from a diverse revenue mix, including grant-in-aid, sponsorship and ancillary income, as well as overturn a cherished principle.

BROADER CULTURAL IMPACT

- **Tourist Revenue Volatility:**

- The recent post-COVID experience shows that national institutions like Tate have seen fluctuating visitor numbers, with the loss of millions of visitors across national museums as a whole. UK recovery has been slower than in other European countries.

- **Cultural Ethos and Public Access:**
 - The free-access model is an intrinsic part of the identity of many UK museums. It not only promotes inclusivity but also encourages a diverse mix of visitors, enriching the cultural dialogue.
 - A commercial approach risks undermining this ethos, making museums less accessible and reducing their role as open world collections and museums for a broad global audience.

THE VAT FACTOR

The provisions that enable museums to reclaim VAT in relation to offering free admission to the public are outlined in Section 33A of the VAT Act 1994 (inserted by Section 98 of the Finance Act 2001). The Act has subsequently been amended. HRMC's VAT Notice (last updated September 2024) explains the VAT refund scheme for national museums and galleries under Section 33A and provides detailed information on the operation of the scheme, including a useful definition of 'free admission'. **Even a system of pre-booking would fall foul of its definition.**

Eligibility for VAT refunds is applied to the specified bodies that "offer free admission to the public". Ordinarily, it is not possible to recover the VAT incurred on goods and services purchased to support non-business activities. Section 33A reimburses this otherwise irrecoverable VAT.

Free admission (2.2) is defined as:

"Admission is free where the public can enter a museum or gallery (without pre-booking), view the collections on display and use freely available facilities free of charge. This includes, for example, access to common areas and facilities such as play areas for children, lectures and instructional classes provided for no charge."

The museum must:

- Be open to the general public for at least 30 hours a week
- Offer free entry, without prior appointment

Recoverable VAT under the scheme includes, for example:

- Buying, acquiring or importing the items and collections to which the public has free access
- Storing, cleaning and restoring them
- Repairing and maintaining that part of the museum or gallery where they're housed, including cleaning and security
- Building a new wing to house them
- Advertising and promoting them

INTERNATIONAL STATUS QUO

While many countries have adopted a system where non-nationals pay for entry to museums and nationals benefit from free or discounted access, each country has designed its own approach and has very different business models – including a higher level of government subsidy.

Identity cards are a common feature in the EU: for background, a new compulsory identity card system was introduced by law in France in October 1940, for everyone over 16. (A revised non-compulsory card – the *carte nationale d'identité* was introduced in 1955, after the addition of the word "Jew" in 1942 led to mass deportation during the Holocaust.) Over the last few years, France has been modernising its identity cards and has introduced an electronic version (the current format dates to 1995). An EU regulation concerned with strengthening security (adopted 20 June 2019), required other Member States to bring compliant identity cards into circulation by August 2021.

France

France's model of museum admission offers free entry for specific groups rather than a blanket free policy for all EU citizens. In practice, all visitors under the age of 18 are admitted free, regardless of their residency, while those aged 18 to 25 can also gain free access – but only if they can provide valid proof of residency in a European Economic Area (EEA) country. Tourists from outside the EEA must pay the full admission fee. In contrast, many museums managed by the City of Paris, such as the Musée Carnavalet and the Petit Palais, have long offered free admission to all visitors, a policy that has led to dramatic increases in local visitation.

- **Example:** Standard entry to the Louvre costs €22 for non-EEA tourists, but it is free for visitors under 18 and for those aged 18 to 25 who can demonstrate EEA residency.
- **Challenges:** Although the system encourages cultural access among young residents, it relies on a detailed verification process for both age and residency. This can lead to long queues and increased operational costs during peak seasons. Moreover, even with these concessions, major institutions like the Louvre continue to face challenges in attracting local Parisians.

Italy

Italy employs a dual-pricing system in which many museums and historical monuments charge non-Italian residents a higher fee than local citizens. In many cases, such as in Rome and Florence, local residents, youth, and students benefit from reduced rates or free entry, while non-residents are charged the full price. For example, the Colosseum in Rome charges non-residents approximately €18 for entry, with children under 18 admitted free and local residents sometimes benefiting from special promotions. However, the Vatican Museums operate under a distinct pricing scheme

since they are located in Vatican City, a state outside Italy and the EU. The standard admission fee at the Vatican Museums is around €20, with concessions for children under the age of 6 and lower fees available for students and pilgrims.

- **Example:** The Colosseum charges non-residents €18 for entry, while Italian policies allow free admission for children under 18 and occasionally offer free or reduced admission for local residents. Meanwhile, the Vatican Museums maintain a separate pricing structure that does not extend the local residency discounts.
- **Challenges:** Although Italy's dual-pricing system is designed to balance revenue generation with public access, it has faced criticism for complicating the visitor experience. The need for additional staff and infrastructure to verify residency and other statuses can lead to higher operational costs and logistical challenges, particularly during busy periods.

The Netherlands

The Netherlands offers various pricing options for museum visitors rather than an outright free admission for residents. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam charges adult visitors €25 for entry. While there isn't a policy that automatically grants free access to Dutch nationals or residents, there are alternative ways to enjoy discounted or free entry:

- **Example:** Dutch residents and other visitors can purchase the Museumkaart, which provides unlimited free entry to the Rijksmuseum and many other museums. Additionally, children under 18 are usually admitted free of charge. International tourists typically pay the full admission fee of €25.
- **Challenges:** The reliance on verifying residency status can cause delays and logistical difficulties, especially during high-tourist seasons. Moreover, the large number of international visitors to

museums in Amsterdam presents a financial challenge in ensuring that the museum can cover operational costs through admissions alone.

Spain

In Spain, many national museums offer free access to residents, but tourists must pay for admission. The Prado Museum in Madrid is free for Spanish residents and citizens, while international tourists must pay up to €15.

- **Example:** The Prado Museum has free access in the evenings, but it is generally limited to Spanish nationals or residents. Tourists are charged up to €15 for a regular admission ticket.
- **Challenges:** Although discount programmes like the Museumkaart offer a cost-effective way to visit, managing eligibility and the distribution of these passes can be challenging, especially during peak tourist seasons. Moreover, the high number of international visitors to museums in Amsterdam places pressure on these institutions to generate sufficient revenue from admissions to cover operational.

Free Days

The international practice tends to favour the first Sunday of every month as a free day for all tourist and domestic visitors. There are also occasional 'free days' associated with specific national days (e.g. Bastille Day in France and King's Day in the Netherlands). This can lead to considerable overcrowding and a 'bad experience' that discourages repeat visits.

Macron's New Charging Policy

President Emmanuel Macron has announced extensive renovation plans for

the Louvre, the world's most-visited museum, including a special room to house the 'Mona Lisa'. From 1 January 2026, visitors to the museum from countries outside the EU will pay higher entrance fees to help fund this grand project. Macron said that the same principle would likely be applied to other national museums in France.

CONCLUSION

Charging entry fees to non-UK nationals and residents undermines a foundational principle that has existed in this country, almost uninterrupted, for over 250 years, together with a landmark Labour policy that dates to 2001. It is likely to significantly reduce visitor numbers, with negative knock-on effects on ticketed exhibitions, memberships and ancillary revenue. Cross-subsidisation between high-traffic institutions and smaller sites is also at risk. The friction introduced by charging (queues, increased staffing, pre-booking, physical barriers) would significantly detract from the visitor experience and contradict the government's own definition of 'free admission' with its important 'walk-in' principle. Free entry has supported a unique cultural ethos that is widely admired across the world, together with a visitor flow that benefits the entire museum ecosystem. Moreover, introducing charges that discriminate – with all the infrastructure costs that would incur - could well be the thin end of the wedge in terms of maintaining free admission for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Preserve the Free Admission Principle for All:**
 - Uphold the UK's unique cultural ethos of openness, inclusivity and accessibility – founded on a centuries' old principle
- **Engage with Stakeholders:**
 - Work with trustees, directors and cultural partners to reinforce the value of free admission.

- Advocate for alternative revenue models that do not compromise visitor numbers or the operational and philosophical integrity of our institutions.
- **The Better Alternative:**
 - A City Tourism Charge ([See Report](#)) is proposed as the alternative means of generating tourist revenue to support cultural infrastructure across the country.

HISTORICAL FOOTNOTE

Aside from a brief period in the early 1970s, the British Museum has maintained a centuries' old tradition of free admission for everyone, as has the National Gallery, which has just celebrated its Bicentenary. Even when the Conservative government gave Boards the discretion to charge, the British Museum, National Gallery, and Tate notably refused to do so. Free Admission for All, a policy reasserted by Labour in 2001, has survived two world wars and more than a dozen recessions, because it supports the vital principle of enabling citizens – as citizens of the world – to inform themselves, as well as develop their studies and creative practice.

As a group of our most prominent contemporary artists wrote, in a letter to *The Independent* (December 1997): 'The high reputation of British Art internationally follows a period of over 150 years of free admission to some of the world's greatest collections – not for leisure or recreation but for real study, often of individual works, in concentrated short visits.'⁶

Broadcaster Jon Snow's words, which greeted the announcement of the reintroduction of universal free admission to national museums in 2001, are even more resonant today: "This is the ultimate mark of a civilised society. It runs counter to all sorts of currents that have been in vogue for too long. A miraculous achievement."⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Times*, [The plan to shore up British Museum: make overseas visitors pay £20](#), 30 June 2024.

² DCMS, [Ten years of free museums](#), 1 December 2011.

³ *The Times*, [Lisa Nandy denounces 'virtue signalling' book festival boycotts](#), 20 February 2025.

⁴ *The Independent*, [Museums which charge lose a third of visitors](#), 27 November 1997.

⁵ *The Art Newspaper*, [The 100 most popular art museums in the world—blockbusters, bots and bounce-backs](#), 26 March 2024.

⁶ Letter to *The Independent*, 3 December 1997; signatories include David Hockney and Bridget Riley.

⁷ *Art Quarterly*, 'Free at Last', Winter 2001, p.32.

Key Contacts

Please feel free to [Contact Us](#) with any questions

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She is also a writer, journalist and art historian, having completed postgraduate study at The Warburg Institute, London. Her books include 'Michelangelo: The Taddei Tondo' (2017) and 'Italian Renaissance Courts: Art, Pleasure and Power' (2016).

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As a writer, he has also contributed to Labour Together reports and published political commentary in The New European. He was trained as a playwright at the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, from which he has maintained a keen interest in policymaking within the arts and cultural sector.

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