the CULTURAL POLICY UNIT

September 2026

The Value Of 'Free For All'

Why UK National Museums Should Not Introduce Entry Fees for 'Tourists'

By Alison Cole and Nathan Lloyd

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UPDATE: September 2026

The following is an update to The Cultural Policy Unit's 'The Value of 'Free for All' report, published in March 2025 (see below), which presented the case against introducing admission fees for overseas visitors to UK national museums and galleries, citing financial and logistical reasons, together with major points of principle. A CPU report produced in parallel ('A City Tourism Charge', March 2025) argued instead that international visitors should be charged a small 3-5% levy on overnight hotel accommodation, which would generate more than £1bn annually for cultural infrastructure and placemaking. Government is now pursuing such a visitor levy, with powers proposed for the Mayoral Strategic authorities.

In March 2026, however, Keir Starmer's government formally opened the door to charging foreign visitors entry to the UK's national museums. This followed a recommendation in Baroness Hodge's independent Review of Arts Council England (December 2025) that asked the government to consider charging international visitors once a universal ID card system was in place. The government accepted the recommendation for further exploration and began the process of working with the 15 museums and galleries *concerned on financial modelling and charging options. The principle of free admission for UK residents remained unchallenged.*

The government had indicated that this modelling work could take until Christmas 2026 to complete.

In the meantime, there have been significant reservations voiced by the national museums themselves and several leading cultural commentators and donors. All 15 national museums are now opposed to introducing charges for foreign visitors.

Public opinion also favoured using a tourism tax instead of charging tourists at the museum door. New Art Fund polling, conducted in April 2026, found that 72% of Britons supported using some revenue from a tourist tax to keep national museums free, while 76% supported maintaining or increasing government funding for national museums. The Cultural Policy Unit has campaigned publicly for the principle of universal free admission to be upheld. In April 2026, CPU Director Alison Cole published an article in London's Evening Standard arguing that free museums are a distinctive national asset and reflect our country's unique *cultural ethos. In August 2026, Mayor of London Sadiq Khan argued strongly, in an LBC op ed, for national museums to remain free for UK residents and visitors alike.*

On 17 July 2026, Andy Burnham succeeded Keir Starmer as Labour Prime Minister, announcing that plans for identity cards would be dropped. Lisa Nandy remains as Culture Secretary, with an enhanced brief, which now encompasses digital as well as culture, media and sport, and with an enlarged ministerial team. Baroness Ruth Mackenzie is the new arts minister, with responsibility for the arts, museums and libraries.

*NOTE – the figures in the following report were accurate as of March 2025. In a few instances, more recent figures have been released. These are as follows: the standard non-resident rate to visit the Louvre has gone up from 22 Euros to 32 E*uros; *Tate Modern enjoyed high visitor figures of 4.5 million in 2025 (according to* The Art Newspaper's *annual Visitor Figures 2025 survey – 31 March 2026), while MoMA in New York, which charges an entry fee, recorded around 2.8 million visitors in 2025.*

Background

Charging for entry 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. Proponents argue that it would make these high-profile institutions more self-sufficient and sustainable at a time when corporate and private funders and museums' ethical policies are often at odds, hampering external fundraising efforts. With no extra government money on the table, the argument goes, our major national museums should find additional ways to help themselves. And charging tourists is one possible route. An admission charge of c£20 was proposed in 2024 by the outgoing Interim Director of the British Museum, Mark Jones[1] and the idea has resurfaced in recent months.

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 when compared with more straightforward alternatives such as a City Tourism Charge (a levy on overnight visitor accommodation).[2] This report outlines the main reasons why introducing museum entry charges for non-UK nationals and residents would not be suitable for the UK, focusing on fundamental issues of principle, as well as on the 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.

Key Points

Britain holds its national collections for the world – not just its own residents. Museums are sources of knowledge and inspiration, places for civic debate and refreshing the spirit. In a world of disinformation, growing inequality and division, we want everyone – from wherever they come – to have access to them.

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 divisive.

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

Other countries and cities operate a tourist accommodation levy, a small sum added to hotel bills. This can be easily administered – for example, in Berlin it applies to all guests, regardless of nationality (with the exception of business travellers).

The Status Quo – a Foundational Principle

In the UK, 15 national museums and galleries (those sponsored directly by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) currently 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 and a vibrant public realm. The principle that access to knowledge and to the greatest things created by human beings should be equally available to all has been largely upheld by all British public collections (with a very brief interlude in the early 1970s) 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 re-affirmed in 2001. The preceding Conservative governments (under Margaret 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 re-introduced. The Scottish government similarly re-asserted 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 from December 2001.

As part of their current management agreement 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. These tourists support jobs and investment across the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors.

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 re-introduction of free entry in 2001 saw audience numbers jump, both at those national museums who had temporarily introduced charging, and those that had steadfastly maintained free admission**: in 2002 the DCMS reported a 62% increase in visitor numbers. The V&A saw a 157% 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 re-affirmation of free admission for all, the Conservative-led government cited findings 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."[3] Since then, the policy has also generated considerably higher visitor numbers overall, 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 drives 90% of all 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 (something that has proved challenging with the 2021 axing of VAT-free shopping for tourists), 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 cafes and shops). Not only would admission charges have a negative impact on visitor numbers, particularly among budget-stretched individuals and families, but there would be a significant cost to replace 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 guaranteeing of Free Admission for all remains one of the greatest policy victories of the last Labour government, crucial to its mission for expanding 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 been 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.[4] 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, IT poverty is a significant issue in the UK. For example, National Trust visitor research has revealed that 28% of the Trust's 5.8 million visitors do not have an email address. 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,[5] 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 attractions.

UK: Unintended Consequences of a Discriminatory Charging Model

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 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 for entry to its '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: Museums such as Tate Modern, which currently benefit from high international visitor spend, help subsidise their 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 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-for 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 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 children, 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 artists 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 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: to monetise it would be a betrayal of a much-admired British principle. The Museum would 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. Indeed, the British Museum is the exemplification of the idea of being universal.

Financial Impact and Business Model Disruption

Visitor Numbers and Ancillary Revenue

- **Current Visitor Base:**

- Major institutions such as Tate Modern enjoy high visitor figures (4.742 million in 2023, according to *The Art Newspaper's* annual Visitor Figures 2023 survey)[6] 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 (e.g. around £100) 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 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 while others suffer from neglect.

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 acquire 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 attractions 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 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 precious principle.

Broader Cultural Impact

Domestic and International Visitor Impacts

- **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/non EU 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 is another example of a country that distinguishes between residents and tourists in terms of museum charges. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam charges international tourists approximately €25 for entry but provides free access for Dutch nationals and residents of the Netherlands.

- **Example**: The Rijksmuseum is free for Dutch residents on Fridays, which encourages local engagement with cultural heritage. Non-residents, however, must pay for entry, with ticket prices often as high as €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**: The practice of offering free entry to locals, while charging tourists, has raised concerns over fairness, particularly during peak tourist seasons. Like other European museums, implementing such a dual pricing system requires additional verification and can sometimes lead to longer wait times for visitors.

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.

Key Points:

- **Target Audience:**
- The new fee structure will primarily affect international visitors.
- French nationals, students and low-income groups will continue to enjoy free or reduced access.
- **Revenue Projections:**
- The government estimates that the revised fee policy could generate an additional €30–40 million per year.
- Revenue will be dedicated to reinvesting in museum modernisation and enhanced visitor services.
- **Policy Rationale:**

- Macron stresses that the policy is not intended to restrict public access.
- The primary goal is to establish a more sustainable financial foundation for France's cultural institutions.

Conclusion

Charging entry fees to non-nationals and non-residents in the UK undercuts a foundational principle that has existed, almost uninterrupted, for over 250 years, together with a Labour policy reasserting free admission that dates to 2001. It is likely to seriously 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 undermine 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 edge 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 separate report] is proposed as the alternative – and preferable – means of generating tourist revenue to support the UK's cultural infrastructure across the country.

Historical Footnote

Aside from a very brief period in the early 1970s when all museums were obliged to charge (the 1974 Labour government immediately abolished these charges), the British Museum has maintained an over 200-year tradition of free admission for everyone, as has the National Gallery – which has just celebrated its Bicentenary. Even when Thatcher gave Boards the discretion to charge, the British Museum, National Gallery, Tate and the Wallace Collection refused to do so. This free admission policy, re-asserted by Labour in 2001, had been upheld through two world wars and has survived more than a dozen recessions, because it supports the vital principle of enabling citizens to inform themselves, as well as promoting study and stimulating thought and creativity.

As a group of our most prominent artists wrote in December 1997, when the prospect of charging loomed: '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.'[7]

Broadcaster Jon Snow's words, which greeted the announcement of the free admission policy 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."[8]

Endnotes

1. *The Times*, The plan to shore up British Museum: make overseas visitors pay £20, 30 June 2024.
2. Cole, Alison. Lloyd, Nathan, The Cultural Policy Unit, A City Tourism Charge: The Case for a Progressive Levy on Overnight Visitor Accommodation, March 2025.
3. DCMS, Ten years of free museums, 1 December 2011.
4. *The Times*, Lisa Nandy denounces 'virtue signalling' book festival boycotts, 20 February 2025.
5. *The Independent*, Museums which charge lose a third of visitors, 27 November 1997.
6. *The Art Newspaper*, The 100 most popular art museums in the world—blockbusters, bots and bounce-backs, March 26 2024.
7. Letter to The Independent, 3 December 1997; signatories include David Hockney and Bridget Riley.
8. 'Free at Last', Art Quarterly, 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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