

MUSEUM AS MUCK

IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON WORKING CLASS MUSEUM STAFF

DATA COLLECTED 2021



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INTRODUCTION

What is Museum as Muck?

Museum as Muck was founded in 2018 as a response to the lack of working class people in museum, gallery and heritage organisations. Beginning as an informal community providing support and solidarity for working class museum professionals, we are now a network with over 800 Muckers spread across the UK, Ireland and beyond.

In addition to operating as a place of belonging for Muckers, we actively push to improve the socio-economic diversity of staff within the sector, along with new approaches to interpretation, programming and collecting.

What is this research?

During 2021 we focussed on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our members. We surveyed the network to find out more about their experience of the pandemic and its effects. We asked about people's living situations and caring responsibilities, working conditions on site and at home, what support they received from their employers, and how the pandemic affected their finances. We had 100 responses.

- Some responses are hard to read but reflect our members' experiences.
- It is vital for us to understand these impacts in order to make change.
- Many of these impacts are ongoing and have deepened due to the cost of living crisis.

Thank you to all those who contributed.

What do we mean by 'working class'?

For Museum as Muck the term working class describes people who come from a background of low social (who you know), cultural (what you know) and economic (how much money you have) capital.

We talk about 'background' rather than current circumstances because we understand that the circumstances that you grew up in have a significant impact on later life, including on your mental health and well-being, your earning potential and your career choices. This is important in the context of the pandemic because our members come from working class families who were more at risk from the pandemic, and were themselves experiencing loss of income, while people from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to have had family support to fall back on.

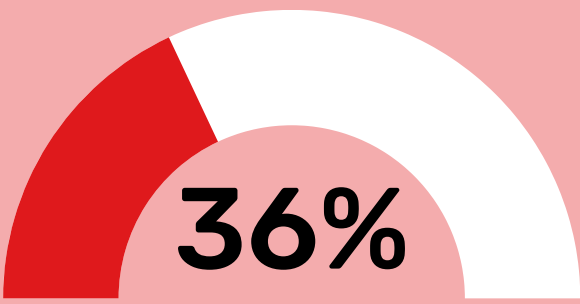


HOUSEHOLD

Many respondents discussed having complicated living arrangements, living with parents, siblings and dependents or in shared accommodation. 40% of respondents' households contained 3 people or above.

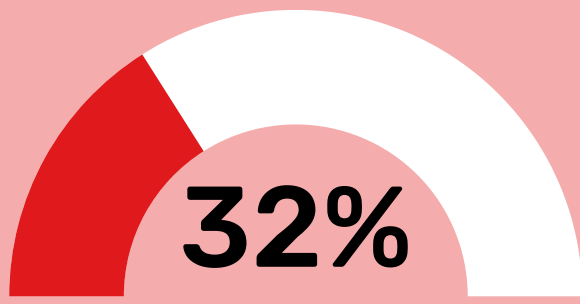
“

I don't have children but do have caring responsibilities for other family members, something that is definitely exacerbated by a lack of financial resources and has been hugely impacted by the pandemic- shielding, anxiety, having care staff come into our home without PPE. So often, the assumption is made that as a woman in my 30s without children, I don't have caring responsibilities and I don't feel there's adequate understanding of the impact this has.



36%

of respondents had caring responsibilities.

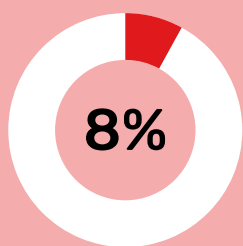


32%

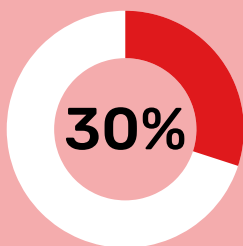
of respondents were in or living with someone in a vulnerable category during the pandemic.

JOB SECURITY

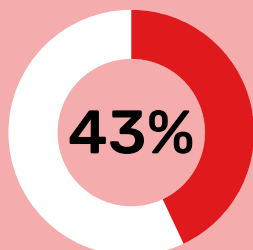
A third of respondents lost work or were made redundant. Many members do not have a financial safety net, and cannot be supported by family. Uncertainty from short term contracts and last minute communication about whether contracts would continue caused stress and anxiety. People not knowing how much they were going to earn month to month due to the furlough scheme added to this uncertainty. Participants spoke of feeling pressure from the government and in the media to retrain to work in a less "luxury" job.



Museums Association Research* suggests that **8%** of employment in Museums across the UK has been lost due to the pandemic.



30% of respondents said they have lost work or been made redundant due to the pandemic



43% of respondents said they have experienced a drop in income due to the pandemic.

“
I was made redundant shortly after returning from maternity leave. The Curatorial lead in the organisation told me that they wanted to *“prioritise traditional curatorship”*. No one from a working-class background - or with an accent beyond the home counties was retained within their large curatorial team.
”



FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Financial support was a big issue for respondents, with the numbers increasing to claim a benefit from 11% to 22%. Issues that were highlighted included being able to plan and manage the money that was available to them. This caused great stress to members especially with no safety net to fall back on.

“
For most of 2020 I didn't know exactly how much I would earn each month. My org changed its furlough and top ups multiple times but often without much notice.”

“
The benefits covered my rent and left me with roughly £60 per month to live off afterwards.”

“
As a freelancer I had to claim HMRC funding. I could not claim anything else. I had to continue to pay for medical prescriptions etc.”

Some context on Universal Credit* (UC) support:

UC is an amalgamation of 7 previous benefits. This means it isn't very straight forward - but to give you an idea...

£411.51 was the monthly standard allowance during COVID-19 if you were over 25 years old. This amount has now reverted to £324.84 for a single person over 25. For couples the amount of support during COVID-19 was £596.58 between both, which has now reverted back to £509.91. Those under 25 are entitled to less support per month.

Extra support available includes:

- Support for 2 of your children to a maximum of £237.08 per month, £118.54 for each child.
- Housing support depends on the number of people, and the maximum amount for local social housing rate. If you own your own house you need to cover your own mortgage cost.
- For example if you live in Bristol as a single person over 25 you would be entitled to around £390 towards private rental cost.

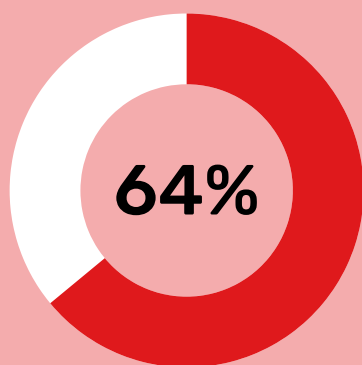
If you are claiming alongside work, deductions to the support will be made depending on how much you earn. This is called the earnings taper.



WORKING FROM HOME

Members were working from home amidst a backdrop of additional pressures, such as caring responsibilities (36%), homeschooling (20%) suffering a drop in income (44%) or losing work (31%). Some respondents were forced to relocate or were at risk of homelessness (26%). Highlighting again that people from working class backgrounds are less likely to have safety nets to fall back on.

“
We are in private rental and rely on housing benefit. I couldn't afford a 3 bed so I sleep on the sofa in the living room so the girls can have a room each. This means we have very little space to all spend time at home, especially working from home on computers and doing artwork.



did not have access to a separate working space that was not their bedroom or kitchen and shared with other members of their household.



1 in 5 did not have access to a garden or outside space.

WORKING ON SITE

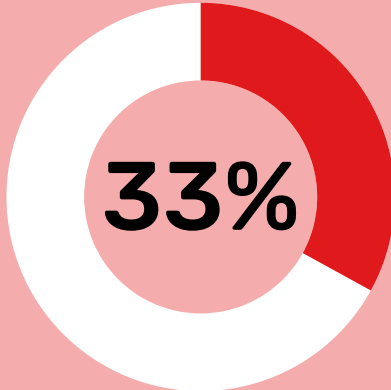
Several respondents did not have the option to work from home during the lockdown periods, despite not feeling like their work was essential. They described how using public transport increased their levels of stress and anxiety.

“
It was incredibly stressful traveling on public transport and working on site in central London, having returned to work in July 2020. The work did not feel like it was essential to be putting staff at risk for, and the workload had increased massively. We didn't feel like our work was appreciated and often felt like the focus was on those employees working from home, while we were struggling to get basic facilities fixed on site.
”



45%

Of respondents said that the type of work they do meant they still had to travel to their work site during the pandemic.

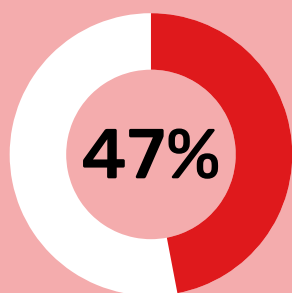


33%

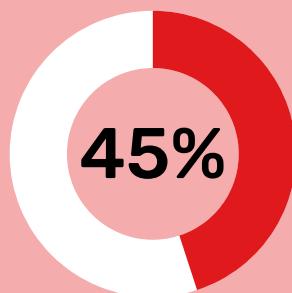
Of those who went to work on site had to use public transport.

EMPLOYEE SUPPORT: PRACTICAL

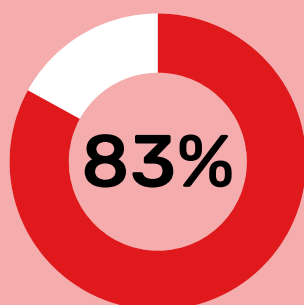
Many respondents felt that only basic needs were met in terms of equipment and support and this often came too late. Communication was extremely poor and there was a lack of clarity, for example around furlough. Back of House staff were perceived as receiving favourable treatment compared to Front of House staff, who felt disposable and were at greater risk of redundancy. Additional support was often discovered via 'word of mouth' through friends, rather than from employers.



Were not provided with the necessary resources and equipment to work from home.



Were not able to easily access government advice and support.



Said employers did not signpost them to external sources of financial support.

“
I work part time in a museum and part time freelance. As my freelance was not my main wage I wasn't eligible for any government support.

“
I am on zero-hours with a number of museums and galleries. One honoured work promised and made an effort to give online work. Most cancelled all work without info on if or when it would resume.”

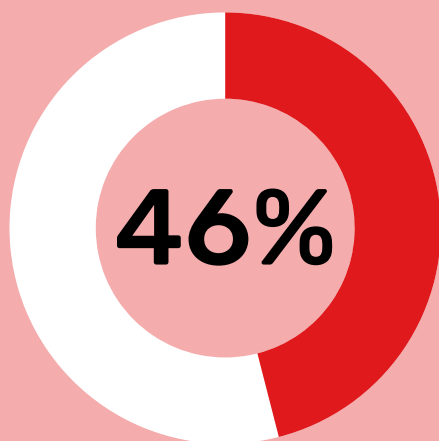
EMPLOYEE SUPPORT : PASTORAL

There was an increasing sense of isolation. Individual experiences and situations were overlooked. People felt there was a high degree of insensitivity and that their concerns, eg about travel by public transport, were being dismissed. Respondents mentioned a lack of empathy, something which can go a long way to improving employee morale. There was a fear of being judged for accessing support. Many respondents were extremely dissatisfied and want to leave the sector. Self-esteem and enthusiasm decreased, while anxiety increased. Managers have lost the respect and trust of colleagues.

“
Communication was extremely poor and there was no empathy demonstrated by senior leadership.”

“
There was too much emphasis on keeping up appearances and no understanding of what was happening with people’s lives...”

“
My bereavement was ignored, didn’t even get a ‘sorry for your loss.’ They have no idea of my homelessness.”



Of respondents said their museum or heritage organisation did not offer them any mental health support or welfare guidance during the pandemic.

MENTAL HEALTH

Respondents described experiencing poor mental health due to factors including financial insecurity, bereavement, and the stress of keeping themselves and their vulnerable loved ones safe.

“

My dad has dementia, he's high risk, but as soon as lockdown ended I had to go back to my public facing job, knowing that if I get covid he'll almost certainly get it too and probably die from it. Add that constant worry to being his main carer, and the only earner. My mental health is fucked.

Mental health was a recurring theme mentioned by survey participants.

**Across 100 responses:
Mental health was mentioned 44 times
Anxiety was mentioned 11 times
Depression was mentioned 3 times
Stress was mentioned 14 times**

CONCLUSIONS

Although each respondent experienced the pandemic differently, there were several key themes which emerged from our survey:

- There was not enough consideration of caring responsibilities outside of parental responsibilities (For parents, the burden fell disproportionality on women)
- Lower paid workers felt they were expected to be onsite for non-essential work while managers worked from home – there were lots of mentions of stress and anxiety around this unnecessary potential exposure.
- Financial pressure was another major cause of stress. People from working class backgrounds are less likely to have safety nets in the form of savings or family members they can rely on for support.
- There was a lack of support from employers in terms of equipment for working from home, managing workload and understanding the furlough scheme.
- There was a significant lack of mental health awareness, and continuing stigma around accessing mental health support.

“Working around privileged people that this pandemic has not affected whilst my whole life was turned upside down is the worst experience of my life. I'm still in it now and coming back into these workspaces my tolerance for small talk, or what people have spent their extra money on and how they are oblivious to what is going on in the world is traumatic and disturbing for those of us that are working class. The divide is more evident than ever.

These results highlight some of the ways working-class museum people have been disproportionately impacted during 2020-21. We know that since this time inequality has only increased. The longer-term effects for working-class individuals, and for the representation of working-class people in the museum workforce are unknown. **We are asking you to not let this increase inequalities but to build a more equitable future now.**

'The virus doesn't discriminate – but the UK labour market certainly does.'



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