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BY JORDI BALTÀ PORTOLÉS

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What Is the Impact of Free Admission to Museums?



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United Kingdom's **Association of Independent Museums (AIM)** has just published **new research to help museums understand the impact of charging for admission**, or not, on all aspects of operating a successful museum. The revealing results dispel some myths that persist around this issue and will enable museums to make evidence-based decisions in this sometimes contentious area – but one that is vital to museums' future sustainability. The research report is **accompanied by a practical guide that museums can use to help them make decisions** about whether an admission charge is right for their museum and if so, what price they should set. AIM commissioned the study, *'Taking Charge: evaluating the evidence'*, and its accompanying guide for people running museums *'Successfully Setting Admissions Policy and Pricing'* from DC Research, in partnership with Arts Council England and the Welsh Government. The aim of the research was to **understand the experience of museums that have moved from free admission to charging, or vice versa, or to hybrid models**, and to investigate pricing strategies and their impact on visitor numbers, diversity, income, visitor satisfaction, and reputation and relationships. **Key findings** from the research included:

- A large proportion of independent museums provide free admission, and a large proportion of local authority museums charge, so **there is no 'typical' charging or free-entry museum**.
- **What a museum charges has no effect on the diversity of its audience** - both charging and free-entry museums have similar demographic profiles for their visitors.
- Spend in shops and cafes, as well as donations from visitors, are **more impacted by other factors than whether a museum charges for admission or not**.

The research is very timely as an increasing number of museums are thinking about introducing admission charges, in response to reductions in local authority funding. However, it also has valuable information for museums considering introducing free admission and for those that already have an admission charge. The research showed **there was usually little impact in terms of visitor number or diversity when prices were increased** and a wide range of charging structures, some very innovative, are highlighted. AIM Chair, **Richard Evans** said: “I warmly welcome this important report and hope it will help all of us that work in the sector – guiding us to make much better decisions in the future. In the experience of many AIM members I know its key findings will ring true. **There is a wealth of practical information in the report to help anyone considering making changes to their admission policy** – helping us understand much better the impact of our decisions. Those museums that do not charge have highlighted the importance of this policy to their local stakeholders and funders, for example. Those museums that do charge benefit from longer visitor dwell time and often a higher visitor spend in shops and cafes.” The research included a review of previous literature on the subject, a sector-wide survey of museums across the UK, visits to **20 case study museums** and one-to-one consultations with key museum stakeholders. “Crucially, the report highlights that the diversity of a museum’s audience is not affected by any decision to charge entry or allow free access. This is really important because museums that charge are sometimes seen as providing less benefit to the public than those that allow free entry. Cost is sometimes understood to be a barrier to access – but the research highlights that this is not the case,” said Richard Evans, AIM Chair. The **report, accompanying guide and other documents** related to the research are freely available, in English and Welsh, at http://www.aim-museums.co.uk/content/evaluating_the_evidence_the_impact_of_charging_or_not_for_admissions_on_

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