

To: Council
Date: 23 March 2026
Report of: Deputy Chief Executive – City and Citizen Service
Title of Report: Petition submitted in accordance with Council procedure rules – Keep the Museum of Oxford free

Summary and recommendations	
Decision being taken:	To consider the petition “ Keep the Museum of Oxford free ”
Key decision:	No
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Culture
Corporate Priority:	None
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy

Recommendation(s):
That Council resolves to:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Note the contents of the report 2. Hear the address by the petition organiser; 3. Debate the proposal contained within the petition and any relevant motion or recommendations submitted by Members in relation to the petition by the deadline; 4. Agree the action it wishes to take, if any, subject to a further report to Cabinet

Information Exempt From Publication
N/A

Appendix No.	Appendix Title	Exempt from Publication
Appendix 1	Appendix 1 of 5 January 2026 Officer Decision Form – Charging model for	No

	entry into the Museum of Oxford	
Appendix 2	Risk Register	No
Appendix 3	Equalities Impact Assessment	No
Appendix 4 (to be published in the briefing note)	Public Address received from the Petition Submitter.	No
Appendix 5 (to be published in the briefing note)	Motions to Petitions received in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 11.14	No

The Petition

1. An ePetition titled 'Keep the Museum of Oxford free' was submitted on 24 February 2026 in accordance with the Council's Petition Scheme.
2. The petition is available to view on the Change.Org website [here](#) and states in full:

Oxford City Council has made a decision to introduce an entrance fee to the Museum of Oxford. This is in spite of hundreds of members of the public signing a petition objecting to this decision which was made without proper consultation. The museum is now celebrating its 50th year and in this time the museum has gone from strength to strength and is a welcoming, friendly and free place which is full of an exciting range of social history objects, personal stories and interactive displays. The museum has recently undergone a refurbishment and now there is even more space, a shop and a room in the basement which is well used for talks, schools and plays. In this museum we learn about the famous Cutteslowe Walls demonstrations led by Olive Gibbs. We learn about the Cowley Road Carnival, the Windrush community, Morris motors, the Pressed Steel factory, Oxford Pride and much more. There are other museums which are free as they are owned by the University but this is the only museum which tells the history of the Oxford people from its founding by Alfred the Great in the 9th century up until the present day. The people of Oxford and its visitors should not have to pay to learn about their own history. Introducing an entrance fee will discourage many people from visiting the museum and, of course, will hit the poorest hardest. Please sign this petition and help to persuade Oxford City Council to keep this gem of a museum free to the citizens of Oxford and to our many international visitors. Please join the campaign to overturn the decision to impose an entry charge and access our website at www.saveourmuseum.weebly.com

Keep our Museum free!

3. As of 10 March 2026, 1,942 people have signed the ePetition.

Constitution Rules and Procedure

4. The Council's Petitions Scheme (Part 11, Annex 1 of the Council's Constitution) outlines the procedure for handling petitions. The scheme specifies that a petition containing at least 1,500 signatures will be debated at Full Council if the petition organiser makes a request for a debate in writing directly to the Director of Law, Governance and Strategy at least three weeks prior to the Council meeting.
5. The Constitution states that the petition organiser may address Council upon the petition for up to five minutes before the debate upon the petition at the meeting. The submitted address is attached at Appendix 4.
6. The petition for debate is set out above in paragraph 2.
7. An alternative substantive motion/recommendation must be proposed if councillors wish to take any action other than adopting the proposal in the petition, not adopting the proposal in the petition, or deferring, referring or noting the issues raised by the petition. Following debate on the petition, Council must pass a resolution agreeing the action it wishes to take, which will be subject to a further report to Cabinet.
8. If a member wishes to propose a substantive motion/recommendation on the petition they must let the Director of Law, Governance and Strategy have that motion or recommendation by 5pm on Tuesday, 17 March 2026 (three working days before the Council meeting). These would then be published in the Council briefing note. Any amendments to a motion or recommendation on the petition would have to be with Committee and Members' Services Team by 10am on Monday 23 March 2026 (the day of the Council meeting).

Introduction and background

9. The Museum of Oxford (MOX) reopened in 2021 following a £2.8m redevelopment which tripled the size of the museum space, provided a new shop, improved facilities and hiring spaces. The Council was grateful to receive a grant of £1.86 million from The National Lottery Heritage Fund to help to support the costs of the redevelopment.
10. Feedback about MOX has been excellent including being rated an average of 4.6/5 on Trip Advisor. Museum staff are regularly praised in reviews and MOX was awarded a Trip Advisor 'Travellers' Choice' commendation in 2025.
11. Estimated footfall has increased year on year after reopening and MOX recorded the estimated footfall of 55,547 in 2024-5, which is a good result for a museum of its size in the current climate. See table 1 below:

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
April	6006	8112	6579	4696	6092	243	466	583	2589	3819	3718
May	5198	6564	4834	4964	105	753	566	526	1779	2270	3541
June	5471	7304	6874	5882	32	2976	992	580	2179	2955	4009
July	8266	10241	9104	7779	56	4415	814	1264	3003	4533	6699
August	7617	8661	9315	8719	19	4524	435	324	3529	4546	6499

September	6526	12361	7246	5931	127	3211	464	412	2358	3362	3949
October	7749	7706	8299	5914	3468	3737	615	2402	2534	2954	4646
November	7320	6287	4969	5124	2659	2929	637	1783	2251	2383	4285
December	4429	3723	4607	3773	1952	1251	290	1305	1647	2177	3207
January	3756	3142	2569	2698	2262	1577	518	1285	2588	3393	5331
February	6705	4944	5174	5887	2834	1536	2371	1868	2463	3366	5519
March	7743	5120	4053	4921	328	0	900	1629	2823	3237	4144
Total	76786	84165	73623	66288	19934	27152	9068	13961	29743	38995	55547

Table 1 – recorded footfall in the museum 2014-15 to 2024-5

12. However, the business plan for the museum assumed there would be significantly higher footfall and an increase from the 73,623 footfall recorded in 2016-7 (see table 1 above) to 109,306 in 2024-5 (see Table 2 below):

Visit Projections for Museum of Oxford 2017- 2026

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
	Yr 1	Yr 2 closure May to Sept 2018, OE gallery open- 7 months of op	Yr 3 closure capital works, OE gallery open for 12 months	Yr 4 Open July 2020 - 9 months of ops, OE gallery open for 3 months previous	Yr 5 1st full year of opening	Yr 6	Yr 7	Yr 8	Yr 9
Visitor figures	75000	21750	37500	85313	106313	111628	107163	109306	111492
Tours	150	150	150	281	300	360	432	518	622
Events	1500	0	0	2250	3000	3450	3554	3660	3770
Hire space (museum maker and learning space)	3400	0	0	3188	4250	5313	5472	5636	5805
Formal Group Visits to MOO incl schools	1500	0	0	1350	2625	3150	3245	3342	3442
Total onsite	81550	21900	37650	92381	116488	123901	119865	122463	125132
Other outreach	3600	3780	4536	5443	5552	4164	4164	4164	4164
TOTAL	85150	25680	42186	97824	122039	128065	124029	126627	129296

Table 2 – Museum of Oxford Business Plan 2018-25 projected figures submitted as part of the National Lottery Heritage Fund Bid

13. Predicted visitor figures were significantly higher than the actual recorded figures. In the last three full financial years the difference was 81,885 in 2022-3; 68,168 in 2023-4 and 53,739 in 2024-5. Whilst the gap is narrowing, the difference has had an impact on the income generated.

14. Prior to implementing charging, methods of collecting footfall data have meant that visitors may have been counted more than once during their visit. For example,

prior to the redevelopment, there was a museum gallery which is now the collaboration space at the back of the café. This had one door with a laser counter – a figure was recorded at the end of the day and halved for visitor movement in/out. Explore Oxford (the space that housed the exhibits prior to the redevelopment and where the shop is now) had one door with a laser counter and the figure was recorded at the end of the day and halved for visitor movement in/out. The Gallery and Explore Oxford figures were added together and combined with figures for activities and events in the Old Museum in order to calculate the total visitors. Therefore, it is possible that someone who attended an event and visited the gallery and the Explore Oxford space may have been counted three times. After the museum reopened in October 2021, staff counted people into the museum manually and this figure was combined with those who attended activities, events and hires through ticket sales and attendance numbers, therefore leaving open the possibility of duplicate counting.

15. From the introduction of charging on 26th January 2026, footfall is being counted via gallery entry ticket sales (both online and through the till) along with ticket sales for activities and attendance numbers for hires (as none of these will need to buy a museum ticket to attend) which will avoid any duplication.

Financial overview

16. In 2024-5, the difference between controllable income and expenditure for the museum, prior to apportioned overhead contribution, amounted to minus £218,928. After the agreed budget contribution of £141,867.49 had been accounted for, this left an unbudgeted revenue pressure for the Council of £77,060.54 – see Table 2 below:

Account	Approved budget	Actual spend	Variance
Employees	£269,934.49	£256,729.20	-£13,205.29
Premises	£900	-£6,791.60	-£7,691.60
Transport	£200	£159.60	-£40.40
Supplies and Services	£22,583	£74,460.03	£51,877.03
Income (excluding recharge income)	-£151,750	-£105,629.20	£46,120.80
Total	£141,867.49	£218,928.03	£77,060.54

Table 3 – Approved museum budget, actual spend and variance 2024-5

17. Adding in the budgeted overhead costs for 2024-5 of £32,614 = a total cost of £251,542. The actual cost of the overheads in 2024-5 was £113,045, however accounting conventions would match the overhead budget to the actual cost still leaving the budget gap of £77,061.
18. Ahead of a BBC interview in October 2025, Cllr Hollingsworth was briefed that £4,843 had been raised in the museum shop via the ‘pay what you like’ entry donation in 2024-5. The focus had been on what people had donated at the shop desk as the entry point to the museum and that figure had its own budget line.
19. The briefing figure didn’t include £7,624 which had been raised in additional cash donations made in separate donation boxes in the same year with messaging

including a more programme orientated focus: “any donation you give today will ensure we can keep collecting, researching, protecting and sharing the objects that connect you to over 1,000 years of life in our city.” This figure was recorded in a separate budget line. Taken together, the total of £12,467 was still £10,894 under the projected amount of £23,361 in the Business Plan projections:

MOO APPENDIX TO BP: FORECAST INCOME AND EXPENDITURE STATEMENT FINAL 11.10.17									
	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-2024	2024-25	2025-26
	Yr 1	Yr 2 closure May to Sept 2018, OE gallery open 7 months of op	Yr 3 closure capital works, OE gallery open for 12 months	Yr 4 Open July 2020 - 9 months of ops, OE gallery open for 3 months previous	Yr 5 (first full year opening)	Yr 6	Yr 7	Yr 8	Yr 9
INCOME (covering main MOO cost centre budget AJ01 unless stated otherwise)									
EXTERNAL INCOME - FUNDRAISING incl in budget code AJ01 K									
Grants/Trusts/Foundations for staffing or specific activity programme separate to HLF project	-	-	-	22,500	30,000	30,600	31,212	31,836	32,473
Patron and friends support for staffing, activity programme or conservation	-	-	-	3,000	4,000	4,080	4,162	4,245	4,330
Fundraising from special events	-	-	-	4,000	4,200	4,410	4,631	4,862	5,105
Donations									
- Donation boxes	8,000	1,958	3,375	17,063	21,263	22,326	21,433	21,861	22,298
- Donations from free activities and events	-	-	-	750	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000
- Donations from outreach activities once HLF funding ceases	-	-	-	-	-	500	500	500	500
Gift Aid	-	-	-	-	1,058	1,111	1,106	1,142	1,179
<i>Fundraising sub-total</i>	8,000	1,958	3,375	47,313	61,520	64,026	64,043	65,446	66,886

Table 4 – Museum of Oxford Business Plan 2018-25 submitted as part of the National Lottery Heritage Fund Bid

20. Four years on, after a reasonable adjustment period following reopening, a new model of operation was required to close the budget gap, maximise the benefits of the museum and secure its longer term sustainability.
21. At the Cabinet meeting on 22nd October 2025, the Cabinet received a report setting out the options for charging a small entry fee to visit the museum and considered options for eligibility for concessionary and free entry. It resolved to:
 - Charge an entry fee for entry to the Museum of Oxford;
 - Approve the standard entry fee charges that were proposed;
 - Approve the concessions eligibility and concessionary charges that were proposed;
 - Approve the eligibility for free access that were proposed;
 - Delegate the implementation of charging from January 2026 and the authority to make minor changes to the charging model for the museum to the Director of Citizens and Community Service
 - The Director of Communities and Citizens amended the charging model on 5th January 2026 to:
 - Give free entry day tickets including to: children under 5, Oxfordshire school bookings, carers with a Disabled visitor, attendees at pre-booked museum events/activities, Museum Association and Art Pass members;
 - Give a free one-year entry pass to the museum to: those who are registered Disabled, foster carers, those in receipt of state benefits and people with no

recourse to public funds in line with the eligibility criteria for people receiving a discount for the Council's leisure services;

- Ensure those who have donated an object and all museum volunteers who regularly assist the museum (whether creating an exhibition or working as front of house) have free entry with a plus one for a year
- Enable free entry on at least 12 free entry days per year for everyone

22. This provides for a wide range of free and discounted entry; the full list can be found at Appendix 1 – which is Appendix 1 of the 5 January 2026 Officer Decision Form – Charging model for entry into the Museum of Oxford.

Rationale for charging

23. The decision to charge sits firmly within the Council's current medium term financial plan, and any deviation from the decision means that any revenue implications will need to be mitigated against to make an alternative option viable.

24. Developing the museum to become more sustainable and, by extension, more innovative and relevant is the objective. Residents deserve a regenerative museum that has a higher profile in Oxford and beyond, strengthens social cohesion, boosts local economies and preserves the city's unique cultural heritage for future generations to come.

25. Latest sector research, including the Association of Independent Museums (AIM) [*Fragile to Flourishing – Museum Operation Models in an Uncertain World*](#) Report in January 2026, recognises that traditional operating models for museums are no longer fit for purpose and that museums need to adapt operating models, enhance financial skills, and embrace social enterprise and partnerships to flourish.

26. Many other local authorities have introduced an entry fee for their museums including Lancaster City Museum and the Museum of Chelmsford, and it has been standard practice for other local charity run museums to charge for entry too – including for the Museum of Cambridge.

27. Key benefits include increasing revenue to secure operations and enhancing visitor engagement. Indeed, becoming more financially sustainable allows museums to better align their services with the real needs of the community rather than relying on diminishing grants and public subsidies.

28. In October 2025, the Council was able to actively utilise a Museum Renewal Fund grant it received from the Arts Council/DCMS of £227,952 to recruit the specialist skills, capacity and IT systems needed to enable the museum to move to a more financially sustainable approach.

29. The full programme of work undertaken as a result includes:

- Creating Philanthropy & fundraising plans and tools for the Museum, including a case for support and a new part-time Philanthropy Lead role to deliver the plans up to the end of December 2026;
- Delivering a comprehensive city-wide and out-of-home marketing plan and campaign to raise the profile of the museum and encourage visits;
- Undertaking a website accessibility check and embedding recommendations;
- Purchasing a ticketing system and implementing the charging structure approved by the Cabinet focusing on ensuring accessibility for those who

may not be able to afford to visit. This includes a range of free annual passes / discounts and free entry day for all once a month – see <https://museumofoxford.org/visiting/plan-your-visit/>;

- Staff training and development including research/visits to other museums; Museum Association membership; sales, marketing and messaging training for ticket sales and venue hire; ticketing system training;
- Creating a new business plan for the Museum including realistic financial projections in a different economic climate;
- Providing a contribution of up to £77K for any budget shortfall 2025-6

30. Embracing a partnership approach to drive footfall into the museum is critical to the museum's objective. This crucially ensures the culture and history of the people of Oxford is shared with a wider audience, and that an expanded visitor base generates more income to further feed the cycle of strengthening cohesion through education, engagement and better data collection, all improving the visitor experience.

31. An open procurement process has already cemented City Sightseeing as a major partner. From 28th March 2026 City Sightseeing is set to offer a combined ticket to their customers that includes the Museum of Oxford. The Museum of Oxford will benefit from City Sightseeing's wider-reaching national and international marketing and continue to receive £4 / £2 concessions as part of the financial arrangements.

32. Another vital foundation for any thriving enterprise is having verifiable customer insight and data. It is hard to deliver a service built around local communities when the demography of museum visitors is unknown. The data from the new ticketing system will enable better business decisions; improved understanding of the museum's performance, more efficient problem-solving improved processes and a better understanding of the market and visitors.

33. Data from the ticketing system will also put the Museum in a better position to apply for grants and to fundraise for additional activity to meet community needs.

34. As predicted, footfall did reduce following the introduction of the new entry fee. In February 2025, the footfall count was 5519 visits and in February 2026 the footfall count was 1534 which represents a reduction of 70%, however a direct comparison cannot be made given the following variables:

- the programmes were different – in February 2025 funded activity was being undertaken with community groups and older people; no funding was available to run this activity in February 2026;
- in February 2025 there were visits by English Language schools and visits were not made in the same month in the current financial year;
- in February 2025 there were more hire events which attracted over 500 more people;
- in February 2025 there was no congestion charge in the city but by February 2026 the charge had been implemented;
- in February 2026 the whole of the Town Hall was covered in scaffolding giving the appearance that the building was being redeveloped;

- in February 2026 there was significant local and national negative press and protests led by the anti-charging campaign which delayed partnership development

35. In spite of this, from 26th January – 6 March 2026, 1497 tickets were booked and £3732 revenue taken – see table 5 below:

Ticket Sales Summary 26 January 2026 – 6 March 2026

Ticket Type	Ticket Numbers	Revenue
Museum Entry – Adult Day Ticket	726	£2,900.00
Museum Entry – Student Day Ticket	150	£300.00
Museum Entry – Child/Young Person (5–17) Day Ticket	139	£278.00
Museum Entry – Blue Light Card Holder Day Ticket	65	£130.00
Online Sales	74	£124.00
Online Free Entry	27	£0.00
Free Annual Pass – Registered Disabled	3	£0.00
Free Entry – Art Pass Member Day Ticket	32	£0.00
Free Entry – Carer Day Ticket	11	£0.00
Free Annual Pass – Community Partner	3	£0.00
Free Entry – OCC Day Ticket	1	£0.00
Free Entry – Under 5 Day Ticket	67	£0.00
Free Entry – Free Museum Day	179	£0.00
Free Entry – Eligible Groups Day Ticket	20	£0.00
Total	1497	£3,732.00

Table 5 – Ticket Sales 26 January 2026 – 6 March 2026

36. Averaged over the 35 days the museum was open during that period, this = an average of 43 visitors per day and an average of £107 taken in ticket sales per day.
37. The context for these sales was in a cold and wet out of season period with scaffolding on the building and with negative publicity about the entry fee being regularly in the local and national media.
38. Increased sales are expected when the negative publicity subsides and in the peak seasons e.g. the summer for tourist visits and in other holiday times, including Christmas, for residents.
39. If the current figures alone were multiplied over the 300 days the museum is open per year, this would equate to 12,900 gallery ticket sales with £32,100 income.
40. Sales in partnership with City Sightseeing will start on 28 March 2026 and these will generate additional income for the museum which will be monitored closely on a monthly basis.
41. New philanthropy schemes will be launched later in 2026 and will also raise additional funds.

42. At least 12-18 months will be required to assess the impact of introducing an entry fee giving an opportunity to monitor sales across the seasonal calendar without additional variables such as the anti-charging campaign and the Town Hall being clad with scaffolding.

Alternative Options Considered

43. The following options were also considered by the Cabinet alongside charging for entry:

- Digital and virtual experiences – this will be considered again after the charging model framework has been embedded; it could help to supplement a second income stream especially targeted at education services
- Hiring more of the space for events – this is ongoing, but bookings fluctuate and it would not generate sufficient income alone given the space is limited in size and only available during the day
- Creating new exhibition space for free or ticketed exhibitions – this option was discarded as the space is needed for staff offices and involves prohibitive refurbishment costs versus any likely return on investment
- Converting space for a family play area – this was discarded due to prohibitive refurbishment costs versus likely return on investment
- Using space for parties – this was discarded due to out of hours staffing costs, and risks regarding safeguarding, health and safety and possible damage to the museum's collections
- Friends of, loyalty and legacy schemes – whilst these proposals wouldn't generate sufficient income to close the budget gap alone, these are all considered viable and will be introduced later in 2026

44. In summary, charging entry at MOX and for MOX in partnership with other attractions was considered to be the most viable option to mitigate the current revenue budget shortfall alongside a philanthropy campaign which will be launched once the charging model has been embedded. The Museum Renewal Fund grant has been used to assist the museum to make the necessary changes to become a more financially sustainable entity.

45. There is no viable alternative plan that will enable the budget gap to close that doesn't include a charging model, therefore all who are passionate about the museum's long-term future need to get behind the change in order for it to work.

Financial implications

46. The implications of this report will depend on Council's recommendations, if any, and Council should be mindful of the possible costs in formulating its recommendations. Any implications would be subject to a decision that will need to be made by Cabinet.

Legal Implications

47. Pursuant to section 13 of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, the Council may make a charge for admission to a museum maintained by it under section 12 of that Act. In determining whether, and in what manner, to exercise its powers under section 13 of the Act in relation to the museum, the Council must take into account the need to secure that the museum plays its full part in the promotion of

education in the area and must have particular regard to the interests of children and students. In setting the charges for the museum the Cabinet did consider its duties under section 13 of the Act.

48. In accordance with Rule 4.5 of the Constitution, agreeing the strategy for setting fees and charges and setting fees and charges for executive functions (to the extent that the budget has not set fees and charges) is a decision that must be made by the Cabinet. Should the Council determine that it wishes to recommend that the decision on charges be revisited by the Cabinet a recommendation to reconsider the proposal to charge would be made. A further recommendation to the Council may be required if consequential changes to the budget are required. (EG/80930/13/3/2026)

Level of risk

49. Competing narratives/communication in the public domain has sought to undermine the new charging approach, and in turn could therefore harm the future of the museum.
50. See Appendix 2 – Risk Register. The anti-charging campaign has been added as a new risk.

Equalities impact

51. See Appendix 3 – Equalities Impact Assessment.

Report author	Paula Redway
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Background Papers:

List the background documents and, if possible, link to them.

All background papers must be listed in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act and The Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012. This includes, any material which discloses facts or matters on which the report or an important part of it is based and which have been relied on in the preparation of the report. Each document must be listed and a copy of each document made available to members and the public on request, (or they should be directed where to find it if it is already published on the Council's website). All confidential, exempt, copyrighted and published works are EXCLUDED from this requirement.

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| 1 | 5 January 2026 Officer Decision Form – Charging model for entry into the Museum of Oxford |
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