

To: Council
Date: 23 March 2026
Report of: Director of Law, Governance and Strategy
Title of Report: Petition

Addresses in relation to Petition

Avril Alexander

We represent nearly 2000 Oxford residents who were horrified to discover that the Council had decided to introduce entrance fees to the Museum of Oxford.

I started this petition and have been amazed to see how it has grown organically as word has spread. On the final day before charging started, people flocked to the museum to leave messages against charging. You can read them on the Save Our Museum website.

Today we want to set out three main areas of concern:

1. Introducing charges is the wrong decision for the museum and threatens its long-term viability
 - The museum will not be able to compete with the much larger and higher-profile university museums, which are all free
 - We will likely see a serious drop in footfall which means the funding gap will not be filled - this is the conclusion the council's own commissioned research came to, but it seems to have been ignored.
 - Meanwhile this has created barriers to entry for the local people of Oxford. All of us should have the right to access our own history. Furthermore, requiring people on benefits and seeking asylum to prove their status in such a public place to gain free entry is undignified, embarrassing and potentially dangerous in the current climate.
2. The decision was taken in an undemocratic and untransparent way
 - The introduction of charging was decided by Cabinet, not the full Council
 - There was no consultation amongst museum users or museum staff

- But funding was applied for from the Arts Council, on the basis that charging was going to be introduced, even before Cabinet discussed and agreed it. This means the decision was actually made behind closed doors by senior councillors and officers with no transparency and accountability at all.
3. Councillors have been undermining the museum to make their case in the press, using inaccurate and inconsistent figures
- Councillor Hollingsworth said to the BBC the museum's visitor numbers have significantly dropped. Actually, they have been rising steadily since the museum reopened and no doubt would have continued to rise. He is comparing them to pre-redevelopment visitor figures that, according to the Council itself, were counted in a different way and are not comparable
 - Councillor Hollingsworth also claimed *'the museum received around £5,000 in voluntary donations from visitors last year'* but actually it was nearly £12,500
 - Councillor Hollingsworth claims the funding gap is £77,000 and Councillor Brown claims it's nearly £100,000. Our FOI request showed a gap of closer to £50,000 that didn't take into account nearly half the museum's income. Why are different councillors using different numbers? Which is correct?
 - The council argued in the Oxford Mail a month ago that if the funding gap cannot be filled the museum may have to close, as it's taking funds away from other community groups. This is cynical and divisive when the museum itself is an amazing community resource, partnering with groups across the city on educational and outreach activities. Trying to pit community-focused organisations against each other like this is outrageous. We want a Council that will champion and support local history and community groups, not try to turn them against each other.

In conclusion, we would like to see the entry fees dropped immediately.

Ultimately, Councillors need to recognise that the Museum of Oxford is a wonderful community resource that they should be proud of. Instead of this negativity and divisiveness, we want to see a Council prepared to work in partnership with the talented and hard-working museum staff, and the Museum Development Trust, to find alternative ways to secure its future.

If you don't know the museum well, please take 10 minutes out of your day to go and wander round. Read stories you will not find anywhere else in Oxford about events that have shaped our city:

- like the Cutteslowe Walls and the Florence Park Rent Strike
- ancient artefacts such as our Patron Saint Frideswide's gravestone
- a celebration of our industrial past such as the Cowley plant
- a tin of Cooper's Oxford Marmalade that went all the way to the Antarctic with Scott

The Museum of Oxford was never designed to have an entrance fee. It was designed to be a free resource for the people of Oxford. Please keep it that way.

Response from Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Partnership Working

Thank you for addressing Council today and for the significant commitment shown by the nearly 2,000 residents who signed the petition. I want to begin by recognising the depth of feeling expressed. The Museum of Oxford is a cherished institution, and your passion for protecting its accessibility speaks to the strong sense of community engagement that has always defined it.

I also want to acknowledge the concerns raised about fairness, transparency, and the museum's long-term sustainability. These concerns are sincerely felt, and I appreciate the opportunity to respond clearly and respectfully.

The decision to introduce a small entry charge was not taken lightly. The petition report presented to Council outlines the financial reality facing the museum. In 2024–25, even after the Council's planned contribution of £141,867, the museum recorded an unbudgeted revenue pressure of £77,060.54, reflecting the gap between controllable income and expenditure (Table 3 in the report). Rising costs and the continued shortfall in footfall compared to the optimistic projections made during the redevelopment have placed the museum in a challenging financial position.

It is precisely because we value the museum that we had to consider how to protect its future. The charging model approved by Cabinet in October 2025 was designed with accessibility at its core. The model provides free annual passes for residents in receipt of benefits, people with no recourse to public funds, disabled visitors, foster carers, and under-5s. It also provides free entry to all Oxfordshire school groups, carers, attendees of pre-booked activities, volunteers, and object donors. At least 12 free entry days per year for everyone ensure that no-one is excluded from engaging with their city's history.

I understand concerns about dignity and the process of verifying eligibility. That is why the model mirrors the approach already used for our leisure services, ensuring a consistent and respectful process, and why museum staff have been trained to support visitors sensitively and appropriately. Anyone wishing to visit for free without verifying eligibility can do so once a month.

Questions have also been raised today about transparency. The report makes clear that the decision followed a formal Cabinet process, supported by detailed financial analysis and in accordance with the Council's constitutional requirements. I recognise, however, that some residents feel they should have been more directly involved earlier in the discussion. Unfortunately, the timescale for applying for the funding required to make the change didn't allow for that but we will continue to monitor feedback and the impact of the change over the next 18 months.

On the issue of visitor numbers and financial figures, I recognise there has been frustration about data being presented in different ways. Some of this reflects the difference between the budgets managed day-to-day by staff teams and the end-of-year figures which apportion central overheads to those cost centres. Some of this also reflects historic counting methods, where visitors could be counted more than once before the introduction of charging. The new ticketing system now provides accurate, unduplicated data so that future reporting is consistent, transparent, and verifiable.

Finally, I want to be clear: the museum's future matters deeply to this Council. The decision to introduce charging was taken to protect the museum, not undermine it. The Museum Renewal Fund grant has enabled additional marketing, new philanthropy plans, and combined tickets

with other partners which are all part of a wider strategy to ensure the museum reaches residents across the city, improves its financial resilience, and enables the stories of Oxford's communities to continue to be shared for generations to come.

I want to thank everyone who has taken the time to raise their concerns. Even where we may differ on the best solution, we share the same goal: a thriving, welcoming Museum of Oxford that is sustainable, accessible, and rooted in the communities it serves. I give my commitment that we will continue to monitor the impact of charging as we collect financial data and customer feedback over the next 18+ months. In the meantime, I hope that all those who care about the museum will help to spread the word about it and encourage people to visit and continue to support it.

Thank you.