

Strategic Evaluation of the Museum Futures Programme

Draft Early Insights Report



Social Research



Service Design & Innovation



Strategy & Collaboration



Evaluation Support



Social Impact Measurement

December 2025



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1. Introduction

The early insights stage provides an initial view of how Museum Futures is developing, the conditions shaping delivery, and the emerging patterns in engagement and organisational response. The purpose at this stage is to understand trajectory and the functioning of core programme mechanisms, rather than to assess outcomes. Evidence sources include:

- Information on sector context, including funding pressures and structural fragility
- Programme documentation outlining rationale, design, funding mechanisms and delivery structures
- The Theory of Change workshop, ongoing refinement, and indicator mapping work
- Early discussions with organisations receiving support through the programme
- Analysis of initial programme data and Organisational Health Checker (OHC) activity
- Early implementation reflections from Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) staff.

The programme is delivered through a model of shared ownership and shared risk between MGS, Scottish Government and The National Lottery Heritage Fund (Heritage Fund). This partnership is designed to increase reach, create coherence across funding systems, and enable a kind of multiplier effect across the different options for support.

This is a real-time evaluation project that combines formative, process-based elements in the early phases with an outcome focus in later stages. We have therefore developed an iterative, test-and-learn approach. As this is an early stage in the process, evidence remains incomplete and should be interpreted as indicative.

2. Summary of the Programme

Museum Futures is a national intervention designed to strengthen the resilience, sustainability and long-term viability of Scotland's museums. It responds to well-documented structural pressures in the sector, including financial fragility, uneven organisational capacity, workforce constraints and challenges in maintaining core functions. The programme aims to help organisations move from short-term firefighting toward strategic planning and proactive development.

The programme model combines a consistent diagnostic entry point with a flexible package of capacity support, skills development, and targeted investment. Organisations follow different routes depending on their needs and readiness, but all begin with a structured process for building understanding of their current position.

The model is intentionally flexible and non-linear: organisations enter at the point most relevant to their needs, with the OHC guiding recommended pathways. There are different ways to group activities, we now propose the following:

1. Diagnostic and readiness tools:

The OHC, supported by follow-up conversations and triage, provides a structured assessment across governance, finance, workforce, buildings and operational practice. It establishes a shared evidence base and informs the sequencing and pathway of support for each organisation.

2. Leadership, Governance and Organisational Development:

Support aimed at increasing strategic capacity and strengthening organisational foundations. This includes leadership capacity grants, governance and board development, workforce development, and targeted organisational development assistance.

3. Skills Development and Wraparound Support:

A broad set of skills pathways and advisory support designed to address specific capability gaps. This includes sector-wide training (e.g., HR support, digital skills, marketing, retail), mentoring and coaching, peer learning, action learning sets, knowledge exchange events, and specialist consultancy where appropriate.

4. Investment and Innovation Funding:

Targeted financial mechanisms aligned to diagnostic evidence, including:

- Unlocking Potential Fund (£10k–£100k), supporting organisational strengthening such as digital development, governance, fundraising, training, staffing and consultancy.
- Innovation Fund (£20k–£250k), supporting new commercial activity, venue adaptations, partnerships, digital offers, retail/catering innovation and renewable energy projects.
- Pathfinder projects, including collaborative or place-based development work.
- Aligned Heritage Fund funding, providing additional options for organisational resilience, development and project delivery.

3. Evaluation Framework

This section describes the main outputs from the “baseline sprint” in terms of establishing a framework for ongoing evaluation activity.

3.1 Theory of Change development

We have developed a Theory of Change model to guide the evaluation, based on discussions at the first stakeholder workshop and further refined in the Inception Report. An updated version of this is reproduced below, describing long-term sector outcomes, the intermediate changes that can be expected and the mechanisms through which these are to be achieved. It also takes account of the interests and needs of the key stakeholder groups¹.

It will be useful for the ongoing evaluation activity to consider a set of linked assumptions, for example:

- Museums need structured support to understand their organisational position before capacity-building can be effective
- Some organisations may be too fragile (and may still fail) to achieve long-term sustainability even with the support available
- Different organisational pathways will create a varied and diverse picture of impacts
- Effective alignment of partner expertise and support is central to reach, consistent support and sharing risk
- Internal delivery capacity within MGS might affect the quality and consistency of support
- External pressures (inflation, workforce constraints) may affect programme effects

3.2 Indicators

The Inception Report also began to develop a set of indicators for these outcomes, the early signs of success from this document have been mapped against the Evaluation Questions in section 5.

The most relevant early indicators focus on understanding, confidence, early engagement and participation data. Data collection is intentionally light-touch and makes the most of existing interactions (e.g., OHC, follow-up discussions, early enquiries).

¹ For the purpose of this evaluation, secondary stakeholders can include local authorities, other funders and support agencies, wider culture and heritage organisations, communities and representatives, local businesses, tourism or economic development bodies, regional and informal networks, education providers, third sector organisations, environmental organisations, elected members, service providers and freelancers.

Outputs		Outcomes -- Impact		
Activities	Stakeholders	Short	Medium	Long
1. Diagnostic and readiness tools 2. Leadership, Governance and Organisational Development 3. Skills Development and Wraparound Support 4. Investment and Innovation Funding	Museums and Galleries	Improved understanding of organisational position, strengths and weaknesses	More confident and evidence-informed strategic planning	Museums develop new ways of working and increase organisational resilience Museums are more connected and relevant to their communities A more coherent framework for learning, collaboration and support The value of museums is better communicated and more widely appreciated
		Clearer articulation and evidence of development needs and priorities	Ability to address skills and governance gaps through training, recruitment or structural change	
		Early confidence among leaders and initial application of learning	Adoption of more inclusive, agile and effective governance and leadership practices	
		Increased awareness of skills, governance and workforce issues	Stronger internal systems and increased capacity to plan beyond immediate pressures	
		Early willingness to collaborate and participate in peer learning	Stronger, more consistent partnerships and collaborative working arrangements	
		Initial trialling or testing of new approaches	Sustained experimentation, adaptation and implementation of new models	
		Early identification of operational or financial risks	Initial improvements in operational or financial sustainability	
	Communities and the Public	Improved engagement and participation		
		More locally relevant and responsive programming		
		Clearer visibility of museums' contribution to local ecosystems		
		Improved accessibility and inclusion		
		Emerging place-making activity between museums and local partners		
	Programme Partners (MGS, SG, Heritage Fund)	Early intelligence on sector needs and conditions	Better-targeted and more coherent support mechanisms	
		Emerging shared understanding of programme purpose and direction	Stronger alignment of funding priorities and decision-making	
		Early reflection on patterns, gaps and opportunities across the sector	Clearer articulation of system-level needs and priorities	
		Initial recognition of where support mechanisms may need refinement	Adaptation of systems, criteria and processes based on evidence	
Early coordination and communication between partners		More consistent cross-funder collaboration and shared analysis		
Greater understanding around need for evidence-based advocacy		Greater advocacy capacity supported by credible, shared evidence		
Secondary stakeholders	Stronger partnerships and more consistent engagement with museums			
	Participation in collaborative pilots, shared services or joint initiatives			
	Better alignment of external activity with programme learning			
	Greater shared learning and coordinated planning			

4. Early Insights

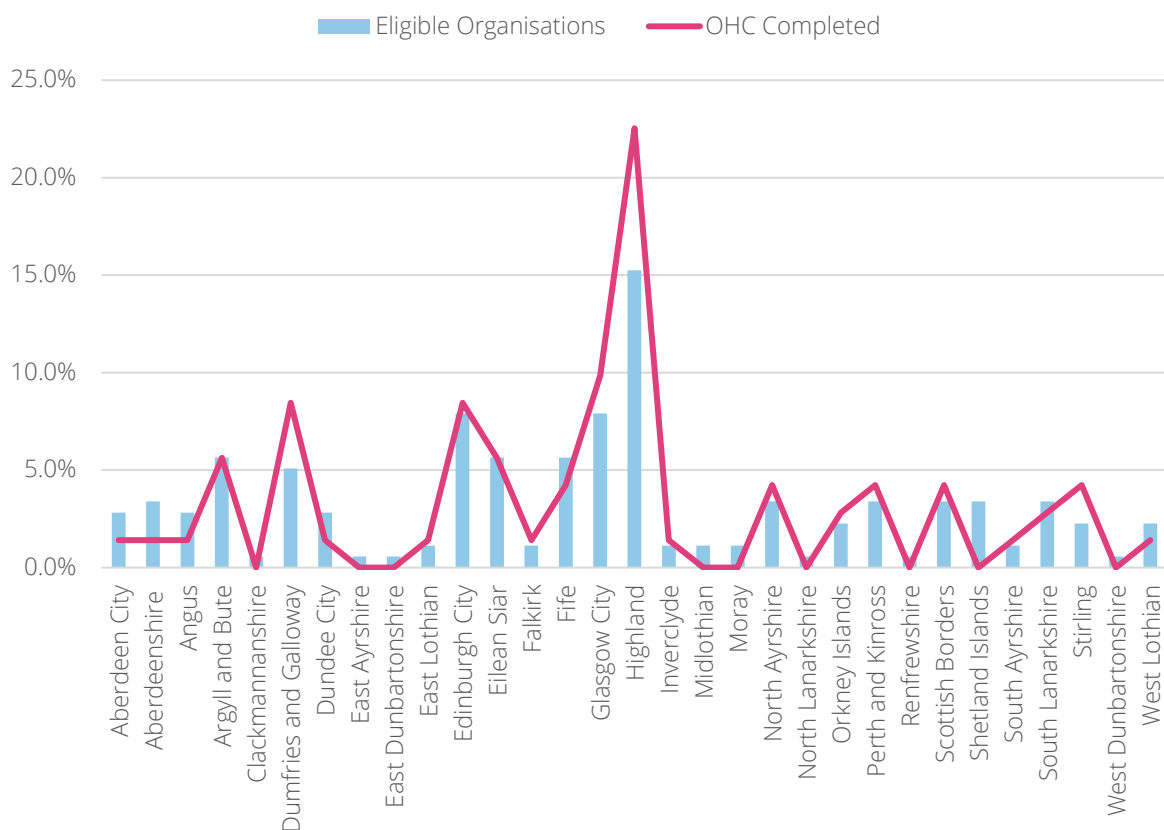
This section outlines the analysis of early data and consultation with MGS staff and organisations involved in the programme to provide early insights around direction of travel.

4.1 Emerging patterns from documents and early data

Patterns in OHC Completion

As Figs. 4.1-4.4 demonstrate, in line with MGS staff views, there is evidence of strong uptake of the OHC from a diverse mix of organisations. Additionally, based on available demographic data, OHC uptake is broadly representative of the wider sector, with the makeup of organisations completing OHCs largely mirroring all eligible organisations across Local Authority area, museum type, and accreditation status.

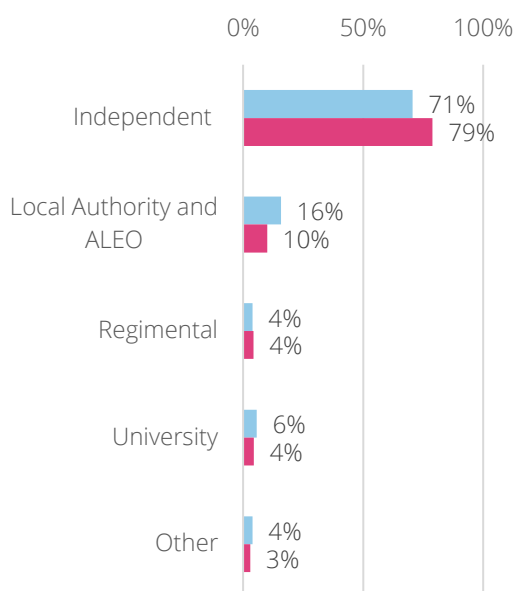
Fig 4.1: OHC Completion by Local Authority Area



By Local Authority area, most variation isn't significant – typically within a couple of percentage points. The most notable outlier is Highland which is slightly overrepresented (+7.3%) in OHC completions, there is but nothing to suggest a fundamental issue (particularly given relatively small sample of 72 organisations). There are a number of areas (Clackmannanshire, East Ayrshire, East Dunbartonshire, Midlothian, Moray, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, Shetland Islands, West

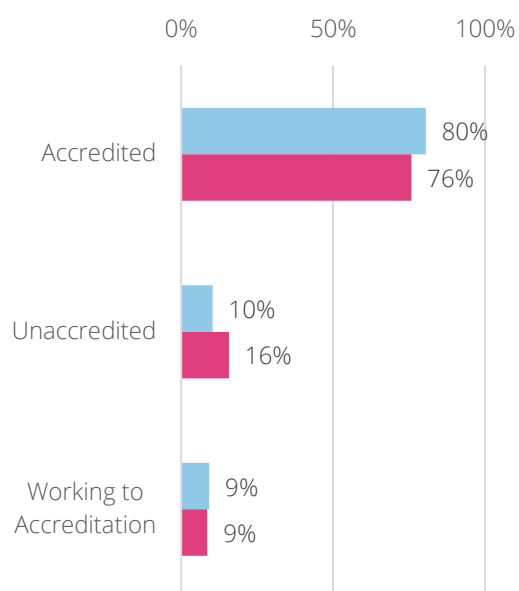
Dunbartonshire) with no OHC completions at all, though these areas represent a small percentage of all eligible organisations.

Fig 4.2: OHC Completion by Museum Type



■ Eligible Organisations ■ OHC Completed

Fig 4.3: OHC Completion by Accreditation Status

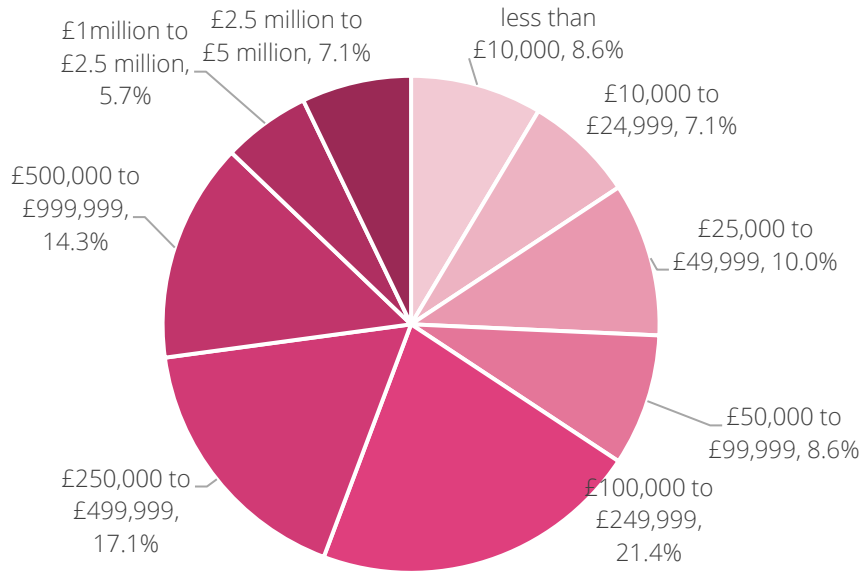


■ Eligible Organisations ■ OHC Completed

There are a slightly higher percentage of independent museums and a slightly lower percentage of LA/ALEO organisations comparative to the wider list of eligible organisations, though these are relatively minor. This is partly attributable to initial difficulties expressed by Local Authorities in how they should complete the OHC, which have been addressed by MGS.

Similarly, there are slight variations by accreditation status, but these do not detract from OHC completions being broadly representative of the wider sector.

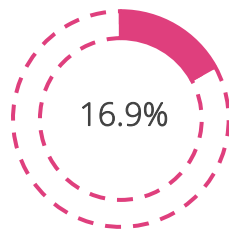
Fig 4.4: OHC Completion by Income/Operating Budget



Though there was no comparative data for all eligible organisations, OHC completions show significant representation from smaller to larger museums (based on self-reported income/operating budgets).

While not possible in the timescales for this report, further analysis on the basis of staffing and volunteer numbers would be possible in future.

Fig 4.5: % of OHC Completions from Orgs on 'Museums at Risk' List



Just under a fifth of organisations completing the OHC were identified as being on the 'Museums at Risk' list.

Organisational Health Checker: Support Needs and Priorities

The OHC captures data across each theme through a series of closed (yes/no) and ratings questions (1-4 Likert scale responding to competency statements). Currently this data is not aggregated, so it has not been possible at this stage to present a baseline across each OHC theme and question.

However, the rankings of museums' support priorities have been collated and these, together with analysis of qualitative data included in OHCs and records of MGS staff's follow-up conversations provide an overview of the challenges facing museums as they begin their engagement with the programme.

Table 4.1: Support needs from OHC completions

OHC Theme	OHC Ranked Priorities		
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd
<p>Governance</p> <p>Key Themes from OHC and MGS follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board and trustee recruitment is often challenging - with vacancies, lack of diversity and lack of key skills • Governance maturity varies widely across the sector, and several museums are consolidating new governance structures • Induction processes are often inconsistent or absent and succession planning is widely missing • Boards are committed but often stretched and lack clarity around their role • Museums request board development support, governance reviews, and training in legal responsibilities. 	10%	11%	2%
<p>Organisational Planning and Management</p> <p>Key Themes from OHC and MGS follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many museums hold clear strategic ambitions but lack operational capacity to implement them – strategic work is often displaced by day-to-day tasks and staff changes. • Internal systems (e.g. policies, procedures, decision-making frameworks, strategic and business plans, evaluation frameworks) are often missing, outdated or inconsistently applied, but museums lack time and specialist expertise to update them. • Change initiatives (e.g. redevelopment, digital transformation) place significant strain on governance and staff. • Where museums have experienced significant instability or staffing changes, confidence in strategic delivery is reduced. • Organisations want help prioritising activities across short-, medium- and long-term horizons, and also want audience insight, consultation and EDI frameworks to inform future plans. 	12%	15%	11%

OHC Theme	OHC Ranked Priorities		
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd
<p>Financial Management / Funding</p> <p>Key Themes from OHC and MGS follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many organisations have no core funding and rely on project grants which are short-term and do not address long-term sustainability. Where core funding is available, it is often insufficient to meet rising operational costs. • Limited capacity restricts efforts to diversify income or pursue commercial opportunities. • Financial planning capability varies; some museums lack multi-year planning tools and many lack a fundraising strategy or confidence in approaching donors/sponsors. • Skills and infrastructure gaps exist in bookkeeping, reporting, longer-term financial forecasting, board-level financial literacy and lack of accounting software. • Capital pressures (e.g., building repairs) further undermine financial resilience and create major uncertainty. 	7%/47%	6%/16%	5%/16%
<p>Risk Management and Mitigation</p> <p>Key Themes from OHC and MGS follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many organisations report no formal risk management, continuity planning, or defined risk processes. • Where they are present, risk registers are often outdated and/or not actively reviewed, and emergency and disaster preparedness is inconsistent. • Staffing shortages and lack of succession planning hinder risk management and increase organisational risk • Cybersecurity, digital storage, and IT vulnerabilities are emerging areas of concern. • Building and environmental risks are often beyond organisational control. 	0%	3%	6%
<p>Workforce / Human Resources</p> <p>Key Themes from OHC and MGS follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce capacity is a cross-cutting constraint, with staff covering multiple roles. In addition to reducing capacity for strategic development, this affects staff wellbeing and can lead to burnout. • High staff turnover, short-term contracts, and unfilled vacancies undermine continuity and volunteer-based museums struggle with recruitment, ageing volunteer bases, and role clarity. • HR systems (policies, appraisal processes, wellbeing measures) are often underdeveloped or outdated. 	8%	18%	21%

OHC Theme	OHC Ranked Priorities		
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skills gaps exist in digital, fundraising, evaluation and collections management. Organisations request leadership development, management training, EDI training, and conflict-resolution skills. 			
<p>Collections</p> <p>Key Themes from OHC and MGS follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Storage limitations and environmental control issues are widespread. Collections work is often constrained by staffing and skill shortages. Digitisation and rationalisation are recognised as necessary but difficult to resource and often require specialist support. Documentation standards vary; many museums have backlogs or legacy systems which restrict access and research. 	2%	6%	3%
<p>Museum Buildings, Stores and Other Assets</p> <p>Key Themes from OHC and MGS follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many museums operate in ageing buildings with significant maintenance backlogs. Major maintenance issues (leaking roofs, damp, failing HVAC, structural repairs) and lack of amenities threaten operations. Capital and redevelopment projects are necessary but place heavy strain on staff capacity and finances. Museums often lack clarity or expertise in procuring and managing capital projects. Storage is frequently at or beyond capacity and environmental conditions are inadequate for collections care. Improvements in accessibility and environmental sustainability are needed but often challenged by cost, building condition and tenancy constraints. 	10%	8%	11%
<p>Communications, Marketing and Advocacy</p> <p>Key Themes from OHC and MGS follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communications activity is often ad hoc and dependent on limited staff capacity. Marketing capacity is often very limited and few museums have dedicated staff. Digital engagement remains underdeveloped for many museums – websites, social media and digital communications are often outdated or inconsistently maintained. Audience insight is collected informally and not systematically used in planning. 	5%	15%	22%

OHC Theme	OHC Ranked Priorities		
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocacy relationships with local authorities and funders, travel trade engagement and tourism partnerships are underdeveloped. 			
Networks and Partnerships Key Themes from OHC and MGS follow-up: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Museums recognise partnerships as essential but lack time to cultivate them strategically. Many rely on informal networks or existing relationships. External support is often needed to build confidence and capacity for partnership working. 	0%	2%	3%

How access to support compares to need/priorities

Some early reflections on support options are discussed in Section 4.2, though their relevance and effectiveness in addressing organisations' support needs will become more of a focus in later phases of the evaluation.

For now, to reflect the relatively early stage of delivery and the fact that certain elements of the wraparound support will be bound to particular dates or take a cohort approach, a light-touch mapping of priority needs to the availability of relevant support was undertaken. This approach has accounted for all forms of engagement – from an expression of interest through to completion of a course or successful funding application.

Table 4.2: Uptake of Wraparound Support

Support Provider / Course	uptake / enrolment / EOI (% of all OHC completed orgs)
Association for Cultural Enterprises (ACE)	51%
Arts Marketing Association (AMA)	47%
Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisation (SCVO)	32%
The National Arts Fundraising School (NAFS)	28%
Lunch and Learn Travel Trade (L&L: Trade)	23%
Visit Scotland 'Connect' event ticket (VS Ticket)	19%
Museums Galleries Scotland Mental Health for Managers Webinar (MH4M)	11%
Visit Scotland Webinar (VS Webinar)	11%
Evaluation	7%
Museums Galleries Scotland Climate Course (Climate)	5%
Lunch and Learn Culture and Business Scotland (L&L: C&BS)	4%
Resilient Heritage Business Modules	Unknown*

*As no data on actual uptake of the Resilient Heritage Business Modules was available, we have assumed that all organisations have been able to access these should they be interested. We understand that this data may be available in the future.

Table 4.3: Uptake of Funding Support

Fund	Interest / Application (% of all OHC completed orgs)
Leadership Capacity Fund	51%
Innovation Fund	44%
Unlocking Potential Fund	38%
Micro Grants 1	31%

The following table sets out how the *availability* of support compares to the priorities expressed in OHC completions. Once again, for the Resilient Heritage Business Modules – an online self-directed learning programme – we have assumed all organisations *could* access this if they wished.

‘Collections’ and ‘Museum Buildings, Stores and Other Assets’ are not included in the table. This is due to the fact that currently there is not a specific course or resource for either within the wraparound support package. We would assume that these themes would cross over with other areas (for example in the climate course or in individual funding applications), but without this information it hasn’t been possible to quantify.

Table 4.4: Mapping OHC support priorities to relevant support

OHC Theme	Top 3 Priority (% of orgs)	Have accessed / have access to relevant support (% of orgs)	Relevant wraparound support options
Communications, Marketing and Advocacy	39%	45%	AMA; VS Webinar
Financial Management	17%	100%	ACE; Resilient Heritage Modules; L&L: Trade; NAFS
Governance	21%	100%	Resilient Heritage Modules
Networks and Partnerships	5%	28%	VS Ticket; L&L: Trade; L&L: C&BS
Organisational Planning and Management	35%	100%	ACE; Resilient Heritage Modules; Climate Course; LCF
Risk Management and Mitigation	9%	100%	Resilient Heritage Modules
Workforce / Human Resources	44%	32%	SCVO; MH4M
	Top 3 Priority	EOI/ Surgery/ Application submitted (LCF; IF; UP; Micro 1)	Successful Application (LCF; Micro 1)
Funding	73%	63%	41%

4.2 Emerging themes from consultation and interviews

In addition to a conversation with members of MGS staff involved in the Museum Futures programme, we conducted eight interviews with organisations who have engaged with the Museum Futures programme. Interviewees were purposively selected to provide a mixed sample on the basis of museum type, geography and priority rating (a score of 1-4 assigned by MGS based on an assessment of the severity of support need).

Sector and organisational needs

MGS staff outlined that the museum sector is characterised by structural fragility driven by financial pressures, workforce capacity issues, governance challenges, and building maintenance needs. Many organisations lack strategic headroom and would struggle to initiate change without external support. This was echoed by organisations who have engaged with the programme so far, who highlighted that the museum sector has faced significant challenges over a number of years, with particular challenges arising post-Covid. Broadly, the main issues currently facing the sector mentioned by organisations were funding, with a lack of core funding in particular; and capacity, particularly as a result of staff losses primarily due to funding challenges.

"I think funding is a major issue. I think funding is a big one because all the funding that we're given is project-based funding. So, you're given funding that lasts for about, you know, a year or two years or 18 months or something like that ... you can't really sustain that because that then ends and it goes away."

"Our paying visitor numbers have never recovered to pre-Covid levels. And as with any organisation like ours, we've had significant annual increases in costs. So, the graph has got costs and income going in the wrong directions towards each other."

Some interviewees spoke about how, though they appreciated the programme and did feel it matched well to organisational need, there was also a need for more broad, structural, sector-wide conversations to be had. This would help to identify and align what the goals and underlying structures of the museum sector are for the future to ensure that museums know what is needed for them to sustain and thrive.

"I think it's a huge opportunity. Like I said, I'm hoping there is some fireworks, not too many and it's more about embedding practice, embedding structural change that needs to happen. Questions asked of the sector, hard questions. Because we're very good at slapping ourselves on the back, but we're not that good at asking ourselves hard questions."

There was consensus across interviewees that, with the Museum Futures programme, they felt that MGS had really listened to them and the needs of the sector and that this programme is responding to those identified needs. They felt that everything on offer was relevant and targeted to their real-world, current stresses.

"We're very much tapping into all the opportunities that are available... we're finding that funding that's coming through [from Museum Futures] is aligning better with our business plan and our aspirations for what we want to do as a business."

"I think MGS are very much on the ball and have listened to what people are finding challenging and kind of acted accordingly and put in place various support ... So it feels like there's a wide range of things which are designed to really support the problems that have been raised."

Awareness and understanding

The majority of organisations interviewed (all bar one) had completed the OHC. Though, for most, they felt they were already aware of the main challenges their organisation was experiencing, interviewees found the process of identifying and outlining it all on a document to be useful in providing clarity. They also found the process of discussing this with a member of the Museum Futures team to be an important component in identifying the main areas on which they need to focus. Additionally, interviewees noted that it was a helpful tool to align different perspectives from across the organisation – for example, it highlighted differences in perspectives between museum staff and board members and opened up conversations about this, leading to better internal consensus on areas of need and next steps.

This was also reflected by MGS staff who felt that the OHC helps organisations to clarify challenges and priorities and allows boards and staff to engage around shared evidence. For example, for one organisation, the health checker highlighted weaknesses in marketing and, as a result, they commissioned a social media audit and obtained a quote for a digital marketing plan.

"I'm not sure that anything surprising emerged through it [the OHC], but I think what it certainly did was helped us all to just make sure that we really were all on the same page internally and it enabled us to just make sure that we were having that conversation where we needed to have it within the organisation."

"We found it really useful. So, myself and two of the board members did it together, well, they did it first and then I did it. And, you know, my views were different to theirs, and then we sort of compared. You know, it was a really useful exercise and really highlighted where our weaknesses and strengths were."

Interest and intentions

MGS staff have found that interest in leadership capacity, governance improvement, workforce development and stabilisation support is strong. Many organisations are signalling intent to undertake more strategic planning once capacity and clarity are in place.

The majority of organisations interviewed had successfully applied for the Leadership Capacity Fund, and there was general positive consensus about the concept and value of the fund. Interviewees felt that it was directly addressing one of the key needs they had identified, capacity, and, for some, the fund had led to them being able to implement changes relatively quickly. For example, one organisation brought in a new member of staff for administrative support, while another increased existing staff hours, both of which allowed leadership staff to shift some of their focus towards leadership development and long-term planning.

"The other thing that I really liked about it [the programme] was the fact that they were thinking of the whole organisation. It wasn't just a thing I was doing ... particularly the leadership capacity thing I thought was outstandingly good idea, outstandingly good."

Though still at an early stage, organisations were enthusiastic about other funding opportunities available through the Museum Futures programme and the available wraparound support. Interviewees felt what was on offer was relevant and related well to areas in which they required support, with HR, marketing and governance support all highlighted as particular areas of interest. The Unlocking Potential and Innovation Funds were also seen as progressive and opening-up avenues for development in the sector, providing a space for organisations to develop and trial new ideas that they would have struggled to implement previously.

“The Innovation Fund and the Unlocking Potential Fund really, I think, spoke to the needs of museums across the sector who need the opportunity to try things that are untested with such a risk averse sector ... And so having the opportunity to try new things out or to develop areas of specialism that we don't currently have are much needed, I think, if we're genuinely looking to be resilient. So I was delighted when I saw that fund being introduced.”

Engagement, support and barriers

Relational Approach:

Interviewees found the input from MGS staff to be a key component of the programme so far. Most already had good pre-existing relationships with MGS, but felt that these were strengthened further through their engagement with the Museum Futures programme. Interviewees felt supported by MGS staff and appreciated follow-up conversations post-OHC, surgeries and check-in conversations. These were found to be useful in helping navigate options and get the most out of the programme offer. Several interviewees also described a general sense that MGS staff were genuinely interested in providing them with the right support for them, helping them to achieve their goals and become more sustainable. From MGS staff's perspective, they have also found that relational guidance and continuity of contact appear critical in supporting honest engagement.

“Oh MGS are faultless. I'm a big fan, really helpful, lots of support. So we've had an informal surgery with one of the investment managers just to talk through ideas and to see, to get his steer on whether they were in keeping with what the programmes are both trying to do and had lots of pointers from him about what to think about filling in the expression of interest and the kind of information that the panel will need to assess.”

“One of the first things that [MGS Staff Member] said to me was ‘So what can we do for you?’ And I was like, pardon? I said, what do you mean? He said, I'm here to see what I can do for [Organisation] ... And I was like, oh, my word, this is different ... You've still got to drop in an expression of interest. You've still got to do your full project. But I think the fact that they're kind of telling you what they're looking at, it makes you think about it differently because you're thinking in a longer-term situation rather than just short-term, you know?”

“It feels like you can be honest with [MGS] about the challenges that you're facing.”

“We have to be honest, because that is what communicates where we need support.”

Leadership Capacity Fund:

For most organisations interviewed, as a result of funding and staffing constraints, leaders are involved in many different roles including operational and administrative tasks. This has reduced their time and capacity to focus on strategic planning for the future. The fund is allowing some of that time and capacity to be freed up, allowing them to begin to redirect their focus to wider planning. However, some interviewees did mention that there are still challenges with capacity even with the fund, due to overlapping responsibilities, unexpected staff changes and difficulties in delegating to minimal staff.

“We also received £30,000 from the Leadership Capacity Fund that has allowed us to secure funding to recruit a new admin officer for the team because up until now I've been doing a lot of plate spinning and a lot of trying to make things work, mainly because we couldn't afford to have these people otherwise.”

“We basically came up with a proposal, which we were successful with, to release some of my time, some of my finance manager's time and some of my development manager's time ... Personally, I found that really difficult because we're a small organisation doing a vast range of things and the bits and pieces I do that you could take away and give to somebody else is often so integrated, it so depends on having quite an intimate knowledge of the organisation that if you're not careful, you're asking somebody to do a few days work, but the time taken to brief them and get them to do that work would be just as long as doing it yourself.”

Barriers:

The main barriers to engagement highlighted were around capacity to engage with the programme. For example, one interviewee highlighted that their organisation had to make the decision to not apply for one of the available funds because they did not have the time or capacity to do so within the application window. There were similar concerns about finding the time to attend courses and engage with wraparound support, and also about the competitiveness of the field and whether they would be able to secure places.

“So this latest funding release, the Innovation Fund, we've actually had to take a decision ... We actually just have not got the capacity to process that. I'm sure we could make a very, very good application. It would be money that a bit like that Turkey dinner would probably make us sicker rather than better. And actually, if it's going to be spent, could probably be spent better ... We know exactly, we know pretty well what we might have done with it, but we need more evidence. We need more time. We need to have more conversation.”

Early impacts

Though interviewees stated that it was too early to be able to identify and describe substantial outcomes, there were some early indicators and signs of change. MGS staff reported early signals from organisations including clearer articulation of organisational priorities, early governance discussions, and increased motivation to develop realistic improvement plans.

Confidence and Optimism:

One of the main things mentioned by several interviewees was that the programme had provided them with a new sense of hope and optimism for the future and a confidence about the direction in which they should be going. Many spoke about how, previously, they had been focused on survival and crisis management. However, the Museum Futures programme is providing them the space and opportunity to think and plan for the future in a tangible way.

"I'm excited. I'm actually, I'm really excited about it and I'm not ashamed to say it ... I find it refreshing, you know, what they're doing and I feel hopeful because of it. You know, it's really given us hope for the future"

Increased Time and Capacity:

Principally as a result of the Leadership Capacity Fund which was, for most, the most significant involvement with the Museum Futures programme to date, an increase in time and capacity available for organisation leaders was reported in interviews. This allowed them to spend more time on planning and strategic thinking. For example, some used the time to begin to develop or refine ideas to apply for the other Museum Futures funds, and others used it to look at their current business offer and start to identify ways of increasing revenue. However, as described above, organisations did face some challenges in the practicalities of freeing up their time, which meant, for some, the benefits have been limited so far.

"I've already started hiring stuff off to somebody I've got in to do like, even just to revamp the cafe menus, to look at their rotas. They've saved me 1000s of pounds already."

"Freeing up their time by allowing existing members of staff to work some more hours has proved really, really helpful. And you know, it's allowing them a little bit more, a little bit more freedom"

Planning and Development for the Future:

Some interviewees described how Museum Futures had allowed them to start to clarify and solidify strategic and future planning. For example, identifying and fleshing out ideas which may be suitable for one of the larger funding pots, or thinking about what support their organisation requires to become more stable and sustainable, both financially and in governance. In addition to future planning for individual organisations, some interviewees also described feeling like the programme offered something new and signified the intention to shift the wider sector towards a more positive, sustainable future.

"We will be looking to apply to some of the new funds that were announced, the Innovation Fund and the Unlocking Potential Fund to try and fund some of the ideas that are coming out of the time that we've had during the leadership capacity programme. So yeah, we're really at a kind of critical stage now where we need to look towards the future as to where we're going, to where we want to be and how do we get there? And I think Museum Futures is very much going to be helpful in terms of getting there."

"It does feel like MGS are trying to move the bar a little bit on in terms of being responsive and being pre-emptive and that's, that's great. That's what you want from your sector body ... So yeah, there's a bit of a feeling of the, at least the intention of trying to shift the sector, almost the background of the sector in the right direction."

Challenges and Improvements

Overall, organisations interviewed were very positive about the programme, felt it met their needs and the needs of the sector well and described no fundamental challenges or gaps in the programme. However, interviewees did describe some difficulties they had experienced regarding capacity, the fit of elements of the programme and how long support will be available for.

Timelines and Capacity:

As described above, some organisations have had to miss out on opportunities to apply for funds and wraparound support because they don't have the time or capacity to apply or attend a course. While they appreciated the speed at which support was being offered, some interviewees also described that the programme felt a bit rushed, particularly with rapidly approaching deadlines to apply for funding. Some felt they would have benefited from a slower approach to allow them more time to develop their ideas and therefore make better use of what is on offer.

"I suppose going forward, again, I appreciate that this is the first year, but I think if it was to roll round again, it might be nicer to have that more longevity in the ability to get funding and it feels all a bit rushed, if I'm honest, at the moment. It's like here's all the money, let's get it all distributed and there's this kind of pressure to spend it and justify it, quite rightly, as to why the government are giving it. But it's not giving us a lot of time in the sector, I think, to really put it all to good use in terms of, like, really thinking it through about how we could use some of these bigger pots."

"Or it could put people off, I suppose, because I'm sitting there going, oh, I've got this great idea. And then it's like, OK, could you get that in for sort of January? I'm sort of thinking, OK, that's only a month away. I've got quite a lot of other things to go on, and I absolutely want to grab it, but to the detriment of, I'll probably have to leave something else behind to focus on this. And that's sometimes just the way you have to balance things, but I suppose it does feel kind of rushed a little bit."

Organisational Fit:

Overall, interviewees described Museum Futures as a flexible and adaptable programme, more so than other programmes and other funding opportunities. However, though not a major issue, there was acknowledgement that the OHC was more geared towards independent organisations than, for example, local authority or university museums. This was also mentioned by MGS staff who are aware and addressing this during ongoing development of the OHC. Additionally, in some cases, organisations sought more flexibility on who could access leadership support provided through the Leadership Capacity Fund (e.g. using opportunities to upskill future leaders rather than current ones).

"I was a wee bit taken aback about the fact that ... because we've taken the leadership capacity stuff, they're going to put me through some sort of training and support. Now I've been around the block a few times, so, I'm not, you know, I mean I'm at the end of my career, not the start. So, I almost wish I could send the likes of [staff member] on that ... Because I will not be here forever and I almost would like that to be different in that it's somebody that you want to take that role on is going through that rather than me. But I totally understand that that's the programme."

Future Sustainability:

Though interviewees were enthusiastic and optimistic about the programme, there was recognition that there are no guarantees of continued funding or support long-term, so some spoke about the risk of organisations producing strong plans without the resources to implement them. Several interviewees also described that more structural clarity across the sector and longer-term, multi-year funding opportunities would be beneficial.

“At the moment there's a bit of a, you know, a cross purposes between that sustainability, but the need for sort of quick wins almost and quick things, things to happen more quickly.”

“I know obviously with any publicly funded organisation like MGS that they won't know what their funding will be in a year's time, so you're kind of going into it finger in the air and seeing whether, in the hope that there might be some support there from the likes of MGS, but for the implementation of it. Otherwise, all you end up with is a fantastic plan that you may not be able to implement fully.”

5. Summary of Early Insights

This section contains a brief synthesis of what is emerging about the programme and how this relates to key evaluation questions (see appendix) which will continue to guide the ongoing evaluation of the programme.

5.1 Evidence against Evaluation Questions

The programme is generally operating as intended in its early stages and organisations are keen to be involved. Organisations value the sequencing of understanding before action, and OHC conversations are identifying and clarifying issues that have previously limited progress. Early signs of change include clearer prioritisation, emerging governance conversations, and increased motivation to plan strategically.

No fundamental gaps or areas for improvement have been highlighted, and the main barrier to engagement with the programme is also one of the key issues it is designed to address: organisational capacity.

EQ1 – Organisational resilience, effectiveness and long-term sustainability

Early evidence indicates that participating museums are operating under conditions of significant organisational fragility. Across OHC data, interviews and delivery reflections, common pressures include insecure and short-term funding, limited staff capacity, governance challenges and, for some organisations, substantial estate and maintenance liabilities. Many organisations describe having little strategic headroom prior to engagement with Museum Futures, with leadership time largely absorbed by day-to-day operational management, administration and maintenance rather than forward planning.

The diagnostic and relational elements of the programme appear to be functioning as intended at this stage. Completion of the OHC, combined with follow-up conversations, has helped organisations clarify priorities, identify risks and align staff and board perspectives around evidence of need. While it is too early to identify changes in financial sustainability or organisational stability, some early shifts are evident, including clearer prioritisation, increased strategic intent and greater confidence in navigating available support.

EQ2 – Contribution to communities, places and local systems

Museums emphasise the importance of community relevance and place-based engagement. Early evidence suggests that organisations value their role as civic and community assets, particularly in rural and local contexts, and see stronger community connection as a key part of their resilience.

Capacity constraints, limited staff time and lack of specialist expertise are frequently cited as barriers to translating ambition into practice. While some organisations report early reflective discussions about accessibility, relevance and local engagement, as expected there is limited evidence so far of substantive changes to programming or delivery. This is an area where meaningful effects are likely to emerge later in the programme and will require targeted follow-up.

EQ3 – Leadership capability, skills and capacity across the sector

A lack of leadership time and capacity emerges as one of the main constraints. Interviews, OHC data and early take-up patterns point to leadership overload as a barrier to change. Demand for leadership capacity support has been strong, suggesting that the programme is addressing a clearly articulated need.

Early evidence from recipients of the Leadership Capacity Fund indicates that additional capacity has enabled some leaders to step back from day-to-day operational pressures and engage in strategic thinking, planning and exploration of new options. Reported early effects include improved clarity of direction, increased motivation and, in some cases, the initiation of governance or organisational development discussions. At the same time, practical challenges remain, particularly in small organisations where tasks are tightly interdependent and difficult to delegate. Evidence of wider knock-on effects for staff teams or boards is not yet visible and can be investigated in future phases.

EQ4 – Innovation, new models of practice, and test-and-trial activity

There is strong early interest in innovation and experimentation, particularly where risk is shared and learning will be as important an outcome as project success. Museums view the Innovation and Unlocking Potential Funds as providing rare opportunities to explore new models that would otherwise be too risky under current conditions. At this stage, innovation activity is primarily oriented towards idea development rather than implementation, so evidence of change is not yet available. This will also need to be mindful of the ability and capacity of organisations to develop innovative practices while they are experiencing organisational and financial challenges

EQ5 – Collaboration, coordination and coherence across the sector

Early evidence suggests that the programme's relational and partnership-based approach is a significant enabling factor. Museums report that ongoing dialogue with MGS staff supports navigation of funding and support landscapes and builds trust. The involvement of multiple major funders is widely seen as strengthening confidence, particularly for organisations facing acute challenges, by signalling shared ownership and shared risk.

Collaboration is strongly supported in principle, and early conversations around joint working, networks and shared learning are evident. However, current evidence relates mainly to exploratory discussions rather than established collaborative activity. Whether these early connections develop into sustained shared delivery or system-level coordination remains to be seen and represents a key area for ongoing evaluation.

EQ6 – Emerging learning about what works, for whom, and in what contexts

Early data highlights significant variation in organisational capacity, stability and readiness to engage. While OHC uptake suggests broad reach across the sector, smaller and volunteer-led museums often face multiple, overlapping pressures that may limit their ability to engage fully or at pace.

At this stage, evidence is insufficient to draw conclusions about differential effectiveness of specific types of support by museum type, size or location. Emerging learning relates more to process conditions, such as the value of diagnostic clarity and relational support, than to outcomes.

EQ7 – Implications for future funding, policy and support infrastructure

Across interviews and early engagement, museums consistently articulate dissatisfaction with short-term, project-based funding and express strong interest in multi-year, sequenced support aligned to organisational readiness. There is clear demand for support that recognises capacity constraints and allows time for planning, learning and implementation.

Early evidence also points to tensions between speed of delivery and meaningful engagement. Some organisations report missing opportunities due to limited capacity or compressed timelines. At programme and partner level, there are emerging discussions about the evidence needed to inform future funding decisions, but questions remain about scalability, delivery capacity and long-term sustainability. These issues are likely to become more prominent as the programme progresses and should be revisited in subsequent phases. This is also dependent on the development of the programme. For example, if the programme continues for a longer term there may be more opportunities for organisations to engage in a way that suits them and with less urgency.

5.2 Implications for Museum Futures programme

At this early stage, evidence suggests that the core design principles of Museum Futures are sound. The diagnostic-first approach, relational delivery model and combination of capacity-building with investment appear to be operating as intended and are valued by participating organisations. Early engagement patterns indicate that demand is strongest around leadership capacity, governance and organisational stabilisation, which aligns with initial assumptions about sector need.

However, evidence also points to several emerging considerations for programme development:

- Capacity constraints within participating organisations are shaping the pace and depth of engagement. Some museums are unable to pursue available opportunities despite clear relevance, raising questions about sequencing, timing and expectations in the early phases of delivery.
- Variation by museum type suggests that certain elements of the programme, particularly the Organisational Health Check, may require continued adaptation to ensure relevance for local authority, ALEO and university museums.
- While early collaboration discussions between museums are promising, it is not yet clear how (or when) these will translate into sustained shared activity.

At this stage, implications for programme development are provisional and support continued flexibility and monitoring rather than significant redesign.

5.3 Next Steps for Evaluation

The next phase of evaluation should continue to test key assumptions and mechanisms. Early evidence highlights several follow-on questions that can now be used to structure evaluation activity.

First, the evaluation should examine whether organisational priorities identified through the OHC align with the support accessed, and whether early actions address underlying causes of fragility

rather than short-term symptoms. This will help assess whether early engagement is likely to contribute to meaningful improvements in organisational or financial stability.

Second, there is a need to understand how leadership capacity support is being used in practice. While early signals suggest increased clarity and confidence, the evaluation should explore how leadership time is deployed, whether benefits extend beyond individual leaders, and whether this leads to changes in governance, decision-making or organisational direction.

Third, innovation activity should be evaluated in terms of what is realistic under conditions of pressure. This includes examining the role of shared risk, the types of experimentation organisations are able to attempt, and how learning is captured when projects do not progress as planned.

Fourth, the evaluation should track whether early collaboration discussions develop into sustained shared activity, and whether the programme improves coordination across the sector and between funders, not only between individual organisations.

Finally, the evaluation should pay closer attention to differences in experience and pathways by museum type, identifying who is most and least able to engage or benefit, and why. This will inform both interpretation of findings and future programme design.

Overall, these priorities imply an evaluation focus on mechanisms, sequencing and differential pathways, using targeted qualitative follow-up and selective quantitative tracking to support adaptive learning as the programme develops.

Appendix: Key Evaluation Questions

EQ1: Organisational Resilience, Effectiveness and Long-Term Sustainability

Core question: To what extent is Museum Futures contributing to improved organisational resilience, effectiveness and long-term sustainability for participating museums?

Areas of focus:

- Do organisational priorities identified through the OHC align with support accessed, and are actions addressing underlying fragility rather than symptoms?
- What evidence exists of improved financial sustainability, governance, and strategic planning capability?
- How do capacity constraints shape pace and depth of engagement, and are there identifiable readiness thresholds affecting programme effectiveness?
- Are organisations moving from reactive firefighting toward proactive strategic planning and longer-term thinking?
- How do sustainability challenges and responses differ across museum types?

EQ2: Contribution to Communities, Places and Local Systems

Core Question: How is Museum Futures enabling museums to strengthen their contributions to communities, places, and local ecosystems?

Areas of focus:

- Are museums developing clearer understanding and articulation of their community role and civic value?
- What evidence exists of museums initiating or deepening partnerships with community organisations, local authorities, or anchor organisations?
- What accessibility and inclusion improvements are museums making (physical, digital, social)?
- How does community contribution differ across rural, urban, and island contexts?

EQ3: Leadership Capability, Skills and Capacity Across the Sector

Core Question: What changes are evident in leadership capability, skills, and capacity as a result of Museum Futures interventions?

Areas of focus:

- How are museum leaders deploying time freed through leadership capacity funding, and does this lead to changes beyond the individual leader?
- What changes are observable in leaders' confidence, capability, and willingness to take strategic action or advocate for their organisations?
- How do external pressures (funding uncertainty, operational demands) affect leaders' ability to apply new learning and maintain strategic focus?
- Is there evidence of succession planning or investment in future leadership development?

EQ4: Innovation, New Models of Practice, and Test-and-Trial Activity

Core Question: To what extent is Museum Futures stimulating innovation, enabling experimentation, and supporting the development and testing of new operating models?

Areas of focus:

- What proportion of innovation activity progresses from idea development to pilot implementation, and what factors enable or prevent progression?
- What types of innovation and experimentation are realistic for museums operating under resource constraints?
- What evidence exists of museums exploring collaborative models, shared services, or joint delivery approaches?
- Which innovative approaches show potential for replication, and what conditions are necessary for successful transfer?

EQ5: Collaboration, Coordination and Coherence Across the Sector

Core Question: How effectively is Museum Futures enabling collaboration among museums, improving coordination across support systems, and strengthening sector-level coherence?

Areas of focus:

- What evidence exists of museums initiating collaborative conversations, joint working, or sustained shared activity?
- How effectively are MGS, Scottish Government, and Heritage Fund collaborating, and is there aligned decision-making?
- How effectively does MGS's relational delivery model support museums in navigating funding landscapes, and is delivery capacity adequate?
- What evidence exists of cross-sector partnerships beyond the cultural sector (local authorities, health services, community organisations)?

- Are peer networks and shared learning mechanisms operating effectively and sustainably?

EQ6: Emerging Learning About What Works, For Whom, and In What Contexts

Core Question: What is the evaluation learning about which approaches, mechanisms, and models are effective, for whom, under what conditions, and with what implications for programme adaptation and future delivery?

Areas of focus

- Which elements of the Museum Futures delivery model are working most effectively, and what adaptations are needed for different organisational contexts?
- How does programme effectiveness vary by museum type, organisational capacity at entry, and geographic context?
- What is the appropriate pace and sequencing of support given sector capacity constraints?
- Which combinations of support (diagnostic, capacity funding, training, innovation) are most effective, and what organisational pathways generate strongest outcomes?
- What barriers consistently prevent organisations from accessing or benefiting from support, and how can these be addressed?

EQ7: Implications for Future Funding, Policy and Support Infrastructure

Core Question: What are the implications of Museum Futures learning for future investment decisions, policy development, and the design of sustainable support infrastructure for Scotland's museums?

Areas of focus:

- Does Museum Futures demonstrate proof-of-concept that strategic capacity investment can generate sectoral change, and what conditions are necessary for success?
- Is the Museum Futures model scalable and sustainable, and what infrastructure and resources would be required?
- How does Museum Futures align with wider policy priorities and what evidence exists of cross-cutting contributions to these priorities?
- What are the critical success factors for multi-funder partnership delivery, and what role should MGS play in future sector support?