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Which museums to fund? Exploring local government decision-making in austerity

Abstract

This paper considers how decisions are made about museum provision in local government in austerity, specifically why some museums are identified for community asset transfer while others are not. Drawing on ethnographic observation of decision-making practice, as well as interviews and document analysis, the paper presents an analysis of decision-making across two case study local authorities. In both cases budget cuts have impelled them to restructure their museum services by maintaining regular funding for some museums at the expense of others. This article provides specific knowledge about the range of material and ideational factors involved in these decisions. It shows how certain types of museum are particularly vulnerable to funding withdrawal because of the financial pressure local authorities face to both save and generate money from their museums. It also illustrates the influence of dominant ideas about the non-cultural ends to which publicly-funded museums should contribute, arguing that the further prioritisation of economic growth and pro-business strategies by local authorities is a particular form of instrumentalism that leads to the belief that museums which contribute to these goals should remain part of the museum service, to the concomitant marginalisation of museums deemed less relevant to these agendas. What is important here is that officials draw on assumptions in making these distinctions, preferring decisions that feel ‘plausible’ in an organisational environment that does not allow for the time or uncertainty that would come from gathering new evidence or considering alternative perspectives. Assumptions about the characteristics of groups living in certain areas also played a role as officials conferred both advantage and disadvantage on affluent groups whose entitlement to a local authority museum was assessed on the basis of whether they had the resource and could be relied upon to provide it themselves. Scrutinising these practices is difficult but necessary, as the reasoning informing these decisions raises important questions both about the way austerity is forcing local authorities to channel resources towards a particular type of museum whilst also transferring museums that may be intrinsically financially unviable without state support.

Keywords

Austerity; local government; museums; community asset transfer; decision-making; evidence-based policy
Introduction

The recent global and financial crisis has raised fundamental questions for UK cultural policy. November 2017 saw the publication of the DCMS-sponsored Mendoza review in which the funding environment is cited as a pressing challenge for museums, particularly those funded by local authorities (Mendoza 2017, 31). The data on reductions in local authority culture budgets is far from comprehensive. For example, data published by the National Audit Office indicates a reduction in spending on culture and heritage of 30% in real terms over the period 2010 to 2015 (NAO 2014, 9).1 This paints an accurate picture of decline, yet analysing spending change at the aggregate level (e.g. ‘culture and heritage’ or ‘cultural services’) means changes to specific service areas such as museums are at risk of being overlooked (ibid, 6), save for quantitative surveys and analysis such as the Museums Association’s annual ‘Cuts Survey’ (Harvey 2016).

Another element to this is the complexities attached to the term culture, which Raymond Williams termed ‘one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language’ (1983, 87). Local authorities do not tend to define what is understood by ‘cultural provision’, meaning statements about contraction or expansion lack clarity. For example, reports claiming zero spending on culture as a result of budget cuts have later been dismissed by officials who cite ecological conservation projects as evidence of continued cultural spend.ii

This does not mean officials are deliberately circulating inaccuracies. But what it does mean is that whilst we know that councils are spending significantly less on discretionary areas such as culture now as they were before austerity cuts, we lack the evidence on which to assess the effects of these developments on discrete forms of provision such as museums. This is an area that remains under-researched by scholars of public administration (Hammond 2018) and cultural policy alike. Existing debates regarding the changing role of the local state as an increasingly entrepreneurial and decreasingly redistributive entity (Harvey 1989; Ward 2003; Fuller 2018) are highly relevant to the findings presented here. Yet museums have been left out of this work and within the study of public administration itself (cf. Gray, 2002, 2017). This is particularly surprising given that support for museums by local authorities pre-dates central government efforts, as well as that some local authority museums pre-date
compulsory secondary state education (compare the Fisher Education Act 1918 with the 1857 opening of Derby Museum to the public).

Based on a case study enquiry into the decision-making practices of two local authorities, The aim of the article is to discuss the material and ideational factors informing decisions and to highlight the potential implications of this approach to restructuring museum services. The article draws on a research project that investigated who makes decisions in parallel to how they do so. Being grounded in detailed empirical work it would difficult not to generate these findings, but as the objective here is to explore how and on what bases decisions are made, findings relating to the type of stakeholders involved in these decisions are presented in the methodology.

Arguing that austerity has further justified an existing programme of public sector restructuring is an important point (Whiteside, 2018), however important too is to understand how people working within local authorities affected by spending cuts act and make decisions in this context. Studies about local government decision-making have been neglected to date, a point acknowledged by key authors in the field (Gray 2011, Durrer 2017) whereas decision-making, particularly around policymaking in central government, has been more thoroughly examined (Naughton 2005; Wyatt 2002; Stevens 2011; O’Brien 2016). This article draws on well-established perspectives relating to the ‘bounded rationality’ of decision-makers (Cairney 2015; Wells 2018), identifying what is foreclosed by the decision-making environment that is austerity.

The findings are organized in three sections – present constraints, dominant ideas and emerging assumptions. Each section explores the content and context of decisions, examining the information and ideas decision-makers drew on to explain (or justify) a decision taken about the museum service. While there is considerable scope to investigate the 68 museum closures that have taken place since 2010, this article explores decisions taken where there was an expectation that the museum in question would be subject to an asset transfer process, meaning a community group would become responsible for its upkeep, development and day-to-day management in place of the council.

The article shows that decisions are being made about museums based on a combination of factors: the pressing need to renounce responsibility for museums that represent financial
liabilities to the council; an imperative rather than a preference for available funds to be spent on museums which seem to hold the potential to generate financial returns; and, a tendency to prioritise those museums which more obviously align with overarching council priorities and fit within dominant framings justifying funding museums based on the economic benefits they have been claimed to generate. These last two courses of action are not underpinned by evidence the gathering of which is impeded by time and resource constraints. Similarly, it is assumptions about a community’s capacity to undertake transfer and, it appears, the relative weight given to their right to retaining a subsidised museum compared to groups of different social class, status and income levels that make it more likely for museums located in areas considered to be of greater affluence to be designated for transfer and the withdrawal of regular public funding this involves. On these grounds, the article argues that austerity has prompted change as its policies have caused local authority museum services to be restructured. Yet much of the groundwork for these changes was already laid. Spending decisions made prior to austerity create problems that decision makers may not have anticipated but that they can no longer ignore as previous policy changes stipulating the setting of balanced budgets (Local Government Finance Act 1992) leave local authorities with little choice other than to shift financial responsibilities onto communities they assume can or ought to shoulder them.

A note on the role of human agency is important here, particularly in light of debates in this journal and elsewhere of the concerted efforts of council officers to mitigate the effects of austerity (Clayton et al., 2015; Gardner 2017). Are studies that omit discussion of the positive outcomes achieved in spite of and occasionally as resistance to austerity in danger of endorsing a narrative of ineffectual, weak local government that stands to benefit from the opportunities scarcity creates for ‘innovation’? The critical reflection offered in this article must be premised on the recognition that leeway is ‘temporally constructed’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 970). This study refers to a period of time where the distribution of power between central and local government is profoundly unequal, as has been discussed in some detail (Gray and Barford, 2018). Such a distribution of power undoubtedly shapes the ability of officials working in local authorities to consider alternatives to budget cuts (Davies and Thompson, 2016) or to make arguments for the continued funding of museums that mimic but do not mirror the ideological positions of government. A sense of discomfort and begrudging acceptance is discernible in some of the empirical material presented here. As such, a critical appraisal of the implications of decisions taken in this environment such as the
one offered in this piece is a necessary task but one that needs to acknowledge the limited leeway those interviewed had in taking another path. The next section outlines the methodology and research context.

Method and context

This article is based on a doctoral research project examining the use of the Community Asset Transfer (CAT) process in a context of austerity. Parks, libraries, village halls, sports clubs and community centres have all been transferred using this method and although there is no comprehensive database of how many local authority museums have been transferred, a recent study undertaken by the Museums Association (MA) noted an ‘ongoing trend among local authority museums to transfer operations outside council control’ (MA 2017: 10).

Despite being an initiative of the previous New Labour government (1997-2010) with its legislative and policy origins in the early 2000s with the General Disposal Consent (England) 2003 and the Quirk Review 2007, it is austerity policies that have prompted local authorities to turn to CAT as part of cost saving measures. Policies developed prior to 2010 acknowledged the community development activity needed to ensure groups beyond the already powerful had the support they need to pursue transfer. The community development function of the local state has been significantly depleted by austerity measures, replaced only by centralised support agencies that do not have the resources or staff capacity to offer the sustained support needed to open transfer up to wider networks. These developments have led many to cast transfer as part of broader attempts to ‘hollow out’ the state. Through financial and discursive measures, governments have created the conditions to prompt local authorities to shift responsibility for public services onto external partners and communities (Jessop 2002). There is a large body of work critiquing these developments (e.g. Clarke and Newman 2012), yet there is still scope for empirical work investigating how local authorities are responding to austerity.

This paper considers local government decision-making about museums using data from empirical studies of the use of the CAT process by two local authorities of different types (an urban unitary local authority area and a metropolitan district). While both had experienced variable reductions in their spending power in the period covered by the research (2010-14), cuts were sufficient to prompt significant change to the nature of museum provision in the area in the form of transfer. Each authority investigated as part of the study had or was in the
process of implementing an asset transfer for one or more museum building. Notably, the type of transfer studied involves small scale groups formed for the purpose of averting the closure of an individual museum rather than partnership approaches where entire services are transferred to leisure trusts. In both cases, the council retain ownership of the building and collection, with the former leased to the transfer organisation. Though other studies address important matters of sustainability, accountability and community capacity (Nichols et al. 2015; Findlay-King et al. 2017) relating to transfer in general, museum asset transfer has received meagre attention in its own right. Questions of the bases upon which museums end up as candidates for transfer are also overlooked. As this article will argue in its closing stages, this is unfortunate as the roots of the sustainability issues transfer groups face lie in precisely the bases on which these decisions are made.

Fieldwork used a mixed-methods approach, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation and document analysis. A total of 24 interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2015, and 21 meetings observed in one case where transfer negotiations proceeded in parallel to the research period. Given its focus on decisions leading up to transfer, this paper draws on analysis of interviews with senior service managers, council leaders, frontline officers and elected representatives with cultural portfolios. Reflecting the limited influence of museum officers or external groups on these decisions, empirical material mainly relates to managers and officers located in departments with responsibility for economic development, regeneration and asset management. Document analysis was based on the view of documents as constitutive of rather than an outcome of decisions (Rex 2018). As such, only those documents identified by interviewees as pertaining to a decision were studied. To preserve anonymity, documents are referred to as ‘internal documents’ but are not fully referenced. The analysis is thematic as the aim is to address the bases upon which decisions are made and the role of evidence within that, rather in-depth cases of individual local authority practices.

With these aims in mind, this article reports on instances where a decision to withdraw funding is taken on the assumption that the building in question will not close or be passed into private ownership but will be subject to a successful CAT process where the financial and operational responsibility of the museum is transferred to an organisation outside the public sector. While this paper is based focused on museums identified for transfer, the conclusions drawn as to the factors that result in or influence a council to withdraw funding from a particular site could provide the basis for further studies based on museum closures or,
indeed, the transfer of other public services (e.g. allotments, parks, libraries) outwith local authorities.

**Local authority museums: show and tell**

To tell of the wide and fluctuating range of variables effecting those who work in local authority museum services or who have responsibility for their ongoing functioning is a truism. Clive Gray has helpfully identified the range of cultural, social, political and economic pressures affecting change in the sector as exogenous (demands from external actors such as government policy) and endogenous (demands from internal actors such as professional standards and organisational culture) (2015). The identification of the range of factors with an influence on how individual museums function, the different roles they are expected to play and the political objectives they are believed to serve (both national and local), as Gray argues, needs to be coupled with empirical work which shows the consequences arising from these effects in terms of what is happening across the sector and, as in this article, at the level of individual museum services. In more recent work, Gray and McCall have called for ‘a more explicit focus on museums as organizational units rather than adjectival entities’ as part of an argument that by viewing museums as ‘exemplars of standard bureaucratic practice’ (2018: 134) researchers can start to explore the many features museums have in common, which are partly explained by the economic relations and social and cultural norms museums are embedded within. Indeed, there is significant potential in situating the practices and actions of museum staff and other staff whose choices have a bearing on museums within a context where changing social and economic conditions are refracted through the institutional norms and frames of meaning that shape behaviour and agency in these settings.

Analysis of this sort has been lacking in the discipline of museum studies, where a concentration on the ‘poetics of display’ (Morse et al. 2018: 114) has taken precedence over situating museums in their social, economic, legal and political contexts. Those with an interest in linking the internal functioning of museums to broader developments, whether in government policy or professional arguments deployed to make the case for continued subsidy or investment mostly capture a time before austerity (Lawley 2003; McCall 2016; Gates 2012; Gray 2016). Studies which concentrate on austerity and museums have begun to emerge but tend to concentrate on changes within policy texts and political statements and
consequently neglect how these developments affect individual museums (Lagerqvist 2015, 2016; Kloosterman 2014). An updated perspective is therefore required, not as part of an assumption that austerity has prompted a paradigm shift but to consider the extent to which it has intensified dynamics already at play or created new ones. The analysis presented here attempts to demonstrate the potential of research approaches that situate the decisions made about museums within wider developments within and beyond the museum sector.

**Present constraints: avoiding financial liabilities**

There is evidence to suggest transfer is motivated by a local authority’s need to divest from the financial liability an individual museum building presents, with interviewees noting the atmosphere of economic restriction they faced:

‘if we end up in a position where we outsource all these buildings but we retain all of the financial liabilities that go with it then we are not making any budget progress and we have to make progress, we have to take a total of £200m out of the budget. If they can’t take on the financial liability then there’s no point doing it’ (senior officer, metropolitan district council, interview July 2015)

‘mundane things, electricity, gas, insurance, all those things have to be worked through…the council wants to encourage groups and organisations to take these on wholeheartedly as part of budget savings’ (officer, unitary council, interview March 2015)

Reference to the ‘financial liability’ a building represents must be understood as bound up in historical judgements of value and worth rather than a purely ‘pragmatic’ choice given contemporary economic conditions. This is because a present state where a building is considered a ‘financial liability’ is often the result of historical prioritisations and judgements with maintenance costs building up over the years. The quotes below indicate this as well as the emotion felt by the second officer towards the inability of the council’s resources to keep up with maintenance:

‘we do have in our property programme a list of properties that we anticipate being disposed of over the next 3-5 years and every maintenance task is checked against
that list. For instance, we are investing in sustainable heating in most of our core building stock but if a building is designated as going in three years’ time or isn’t a priority for other reasons then we don’t do it’ (senior officer, metropolitan district council, interview July 2015)

‘it’s a matter of priorities. I’ve had conversations with people in FM [Facilities Management], when we get heavy rain we know that they’re patching roofs on schools and old folk’s homes and ours will come way down the list and in summer, we don’t stand a chance because they’re all deployed into schools to do all of the repairs through the holidays. It’s really sad and really hard’ (officer, metropolitan district council, interview February 2014).

A longer-term analysis would be necessary to the investigate the bases on which choices to prioritise the maintenance of other buildings in the property portfolio were made. However, in terms of understanding why certain museums are prioritised for transfer over others, the removal of financial risk is clearly an important aspect of this decision, as evidenced by the comments above. Asset transfer is understandably attractive to local authorities under pressure to cut costs. The main reason this matters is due to the nature of groups who participate in museum asset transfer. The groups sampled for this research all formed as a reaction against closure and were making judgements about the viability of their income-generation models on the hope of philanthropy, where the demographics of the area made this possible, or other public funding sources. The extreme financial constraint that characterises austerity makes it difficult for local authorities to explore other possibilities, yet selecting museums for transfer that the local authority themselves are unable to afford to maintain raises serious questions about whether asset transfer is financially viable or ethically sound. However, it is not only asset transfer groups who are thinking about income-generation.

**Present constraints: financial viability in a context of austerity**

In addition to an aversion to buildings which present imminent or future financial risk, equilibrium between the cost of a museum and the income it generates was also a concern. This raises questions as to the local authority’s capacity to fund even those museums it retains as part of its portfolio, indicating that the potential to generate revenue may explain why museums are retained as part of the museum service:
‘I don’t think it was financially viable, I do not think there was an ability to make money out of running that museum sufficient to pay for the cost of running the museum even working with volunteers’ (senior officer, metropolitan district council, interview July 2015)

Although this rationale can be held up as an example of the long-run trend to reform the public sector to be more market-like, with full-cost recovery and commercialisation strategies becoming less the exception than the rule, these interviewees have little control over broader developments such as this which have their origins in the visions of political parties. While identifying the rationales this reasoning echoes is important, it is equally important to take a step further to question the type of museum likely to meet the criteria of financial viability in a context where financial returns take priority over the benefits museums provide. Not only does this type of analysis lead to hypotheses about potential commonalities across local authority museums that have closed since austerity, it also provides further evidence for the claim that many museums selected for transfer may be inherently financially unviable.

While we should be wary of generalising, if a museum needs to have the potential to self-generate income or attract public income from sources other than the council, then some museums are better placed than others to succeed on these terms. The potential for self-generated income in a city centre location compared with a suburban or rural location will be different. Relatedly, the internal organisation of the museum and size is also a significant factor because some museums simply have the space to accommodate shops and cafes whilst others do not, or would require significant investment in order to do so. The demographics of an area matter, as increasing entrance fees or event rentals is only a possibility where this is unlikely to vastly decrease visits from tourists or local populations or where there is sufficient interest from local user groups with the ability to pay. This comment encapsulates the double bind councils are driven by the need to save and make money simultaneously:

‘All of this is about saving money…but it’s not just about saving money, it’s about considering how that space can grow and access other funding whereas others can’t’ (officer unitary council, interview March 2015).
Dominant ideas: instrumentalism intensified

The account of how and why certain museums are selected for transfer over others given so far has concentrated on practical factors. It is austerity policies and long-run trends that create the conditions for these factors to become significant and interviewees had little control over these matters despite being significantly constrained by them. Certain museums, due to their maintenance needs, location, and size are more vulnerable to being removed from public museum services in a climate of austerity, and the quotes in the previous two sections clearly illustrate this. However, particularly notable within council documents and during moments where interviewees appeared to be offering the ‘official’ narrative explaining a decision was a tendency to underscore the priorities of the council and the degree to which an individual museum had the requisite characteristics to contribute to these agendas.

A language of economic benefit permeated documents. For example, the objectives of the estates and property service of one local authority were listed plainly as ‘to reduce the running costs of Council’s buildings; to maximise the performance of the Council’s investment portfolio, generating additional revenue to support the Council’s finances’.

Similarly, senior figures commented on the priorities they were working towards, indicating or clearly stating that decisions about whether to continue funding a particular museum was partly based on the extent to which they felt a museum had the potential to contribute to these goals:

‘We’ve got something called the ‘Mandate for Change’, which is all about the city being a working city again. Our ambition is to move from dependency in terms of what comes in from government grants to being a net-wealth creator’ (senior officer, unitary council interview March 2015)

‘The underlying ethos of all of my work is economic development so it’s about driving forward the economy, creating more and better jobs and I look at culture within that context. I don’t look at it within the context of developing the arts, or providing arts because it’s a good thing, it’s very much about driving forward the economy…in terms of the economic benefits that culture can bring… [it’s about]’

1 Internal document
major events programmes in the city centre that draw people into the city, fill hotel beds, create jobs in restaurants and bars, so everything I do is about that’ (senior officer, metropolitan district council, interview July 2015).

Officer: ‘It wasn’t a priority for us, you know, it’s…[stopped talking]’
Interviewer: ‘Why was that?’
Officer: ‘Erm…well I think as a product it wasn’t one of the most important parts of our overall cultural portfolio if you like’ (senior officer, metropolitan district council, interview July 2015).

Instrumentalism is alive and well within the decision-making rationales of local authorities. However, this finding is of analytical import only if we probe further into the type of instrumentality at play here and its implications for how funding is allocated and whose needs are prioritised. It is well-established that governments have long considered museums and other forms of cultural provision as contributors to their political, economic and social agendas and as expressions of power (Belfiore and Bennett 2007; Gibson 2008). The extent to which this situation is cast in a positive or negative light depends on the type of museum in question. For example, a national museum making a case for its role in cultural democracy may be able to make the argument and secure the funding without obvious detriments (Nisbett 2001). However, those advocating for a local museum service based on the internal rewards gained by its visitors or other kinds of benefit it is part of realising may find itself unable to justify its existence given the dominance of economic arguments (Gray 2002).

There are two main points to make here. First, the quotes above are a clear illustration of the local authority priorities which preoccupy decision-makers. Fuller terms this the dominance of pro-growth imaginaries and the marginalisation of social regeneration priorities (2018, 581). These circumstances have been shown here to provide clues as to which types of museum will survive austerity given as the interviews suggest considerable weight is given to whether a museum is felt to fit within the overarching strategies of the local authority. While belief in the idea that benefits will trickle-down is likely to underpin this approach (e.g. the creation of fulfilling jobs), the fact is that museums which do not fit these agendas are more vulnerable to having their funding withdrawn, raising questions about who stands to benefit from this approach to allocating resources. Secondly, both quotes indicate the favouring of the ‘city’ as the target for intervention. In the case of the museums selected for transfer in this
study there is a tendency for local authorities to select museums located in the suburbs used by residents (a similar tendency is discernible in museum closed since 2010 also), indicating an emerging concentration of museum provision in city centres as local authorities become increasingly ‘selective towards particular social groups and geographies’ (Fuller 2018, 571 citing Brenner 2004, see also Ward 2003, 121).

The quotes also indicate that it is the needs and spending of the tourist that takes precedence, with museums cast as a commodity instead of a resource. A desire to command the attention of external visitors by promoting a ‘cultural offer’ which foregrounds selective aspects of a region’s past (often to the exclusion of other aspects) or features museums with retail and hospitality facilities makes for easy classification of museums into those which can serve these objectives and those which cannot. This shows a clear prioritisation of an economic function for local authority museums, with funding being withdrawn from those that cannot compete on these terms. These findings build on the work of others who have shown similar prioritisations within policy (Lagerqvist 2015, 2016), demonstrating the ‘actually existing’ impacts of austerity at the level of practice. The data I have presented do not allow for an assessment of implications, but the work of others indicates that we should be concerned by an approach which seems to imply a future scenario where museum provision is concentrated in cities and in fewer, more commercially friendly buildings (see Brook 2016 on accessibility and participation). Yet there is a further concern to highlight here which has to do with how these decisions were made.

**Dominant ideas: evidence-based decisions?**

The analysis above illustrated the influence of whether a museum was *felt* to fit within the overarching strategies of the local authority. Several empirical studies have provided a clear sense of the myth of evidence-based policy in Whitehall and drawn attention to the hierarchies of evidence that mean the way decisions are made, problems identified and solutions proposed need to be seen as deeply political, both in their ideological underpinnings and imbrication in the politics of career progression (Stevens 2011; O’Brien 2016). Plainly, decision-making does not happen in a vacuum. Examining the decision-making practices of local authority officers in this research demonstrated that this is one amongst several others capabilities that have been restricted by political decisions made within central government. Interviews illustrated the very limited evidence council officers had to assess a museum’s
previous or anticipated contribution to the local economy or its income-generation record with no reference made to this data when prompted. Analysis of council documentation found a similar lack of such evidence. This suggests a situation where it has become less important for museum professionals or other stakeholders to be able to demonstrate or evidence returns to the economy. In a context where evidence is unavailable (or undesirable) and local authorities lack the resources to obtain it, decisions are made based on common-sense notions of what ‘makes sense’ or ‘feels right’ as illustrated in this reflection from a museum manager:

‘I think, and this is not my view, but it was the view of the people who were making decisions at the time, that they saw a [subject matter] thread that weaves the others together and is attractive to external visitors and [museum] doesn’t really fit that…so that was the simplistic way they were looking at is, [museum] is not a natural fit’ (officer, unitary council, March 2015).

The data interviewees did refer to took the form of visitor numbers. In one case, a graph appearing to demonstrate the low visitor numbers of a museum the council had earmarked for transfer compared with the other museums they operated took on a life of its own. Despite being based on outdated data and making invisible the fact that the museum in question was considerably smaller, open less and difficult to access than its apparent counterparts, the graph appeared in several documents and was referred to by senior officers as evidence that the museum was insufficiently valued by the public, rendering the withdrawal of funding justifiable. One officer based in the museums team and consequentially not a decision-maker felt the low visitor numbers indicated that to transfer this museum would have the least impact on users.

In spite of the explicitly identifying the economic benefits that a region obtains from museums as influential on how resources were allocated, not one of the documents analysed contained data pertaining to outcomes, expected or achieved and not one of the interviewees had this information at their disposal. A combination of factors has led to this. Understanding the relationship between cultural activity and economic performance is challenging to say the least and data on these matters has been consistently lacking or prone to being cast as methodologically unsound (see Crossick and Kaszynska 2016: 86-95). While austerity has not changed this, it has forced local authorities to make quick decisions as budget cuts have
to be delivered on annual basis, blocking the possibility for this data to be obtained or perhaps creating an environment where new information would introduce unwelcome uncertainty. Further research would be necessary to examine whether enabling local authorities to develop a broader comparative perspective of the contribution of museums to the local economy and the people who inhabit it would result in more desirable decisions. What this research has shown is that austerity forces decision-makers to act quickly and with limited information. Consequently they are heavily influenced by dominant narratives where the worth attributed to a museum has to do with its contribution to the economy.

Emerging assumptions: entitlement to public culture

The transfer of museums categorised as public to groups outside of the public sector raises questions about how far commitments to shared ownership and universalism have been further unsettled by these developments. One interviewee spoke about the decision to propose transfer of a museum in an affluent area and the influence of expectations about community capacity on their decision:

‘The other thing that brought the [museum] forward was that we felt that there was strong community engagement, the local population seemed more able, for us to engage with, the wealth of the town, the strength of the Friends Group…there was the finances, the maths and then there was the “well if we’re going to do it anywhere in the district then this area might be better able to support it’ (officer, metropolitan district council, interview February 2014).

Local authorities have little choice about who to transfer a museum too; it was rare for more than one group to register an interest in the task. But local authorities are not indifferent when it comes to selecting localities it assumes are willing and able to accommodate transfer. Viewing this as a pragmatic approach to keeping museums open is misleading. This is because, or so I would argue, this obscures an emergent politics of resource allocation, where local authorities provide museums where it believes the community will not. Public cultural provision thus becomes conditional on assumptions about the economic, social and cultural capital of persons and places (Findlay-King et al. 2017).

Affluent communities are simultaneously disadvantaged and advantaged by this reasoning. Existing studies correctly identify that these groups have their interests privileged by being
given the opportunity to operate museums themselves, should they be able to marshal the resources necessary (Matthews and Hastings 2012; Reid 2018). However, they are simultaneously deprived of access to a publicly-funded museum provided by the local state, and have little choice but to shoulder the responsibility of transfer should they wish to retain a museum in their area.

A similar dynamic of advantage and disadvantage is at play for those who live in places considered to be comparatively less affluent. The presumption that they are less likely to have access to the financial resources necessary for transfer or the personal resources it requires means they are precluded from involvement. Although this reasoning may be well-intended, it serves to further entrench inequalities in relation to who engages with museums by extending the invitation (however unwelcome) to participate in their management to certain sections of the population only. The local authority this interviewee worked for continued to provide museums in other areas in the district, suggesting a degree of advantage. Yet this is not always the case, leading to the hypothesis that museums closed since the introduction of austerity policies have been sold or repurposed partly due to assumptions about the possibility of transfer working, thus disadvantaging localities considered less capable.

This could be viewed as a considered approach with the aim of protecting certain people from the responsibilities of transfer. There is no reason to believe that this reasoning is channelled towards the intentional advantaging or disadvantaging of some groups over others, and recognising the power imbalance between central-local government underpinning austerity policies it is important to acknowledge the limited latitude of decision-makers operating in this context. Nevertheless, such reasoning represents a clear unsettling of the idea of universalism as ‘public museums for all’ is reformulated so as to confer disadvantage on sections of the population conceived of as affluent (who retain a museum by providing it themselves) and disadvantage of a different modality in those cases where transfer is presumed to be an inappropriate or unviable option (who lose a museum by being denied the possibility to provide it themselves). Whereas there are good grounds to scrutinise the gap between universalism as an ideal and as an outcome in relation to publicly-funded museums (Warwick Commission 2015) and indeed the relevance of the concept to contemporary social life (Anttonen et al. 2012), the assumptions that form part of how decisions about museums are being made represent a clear move away from the universalism embedded within the institutional identity of public museums.
Conclusion

This article has identified the bases on which decisions about museums have been made since the introduction of austerity policies, a service area that is under-researched within the academic literature. By using a methodological approach that allows for a fuller and less reductive account of the range of factors involved in producing a decision, the analysis has attempted to reflect the range of variables with a bearing on decisions, highlighting that financial considerations, normative ideas about which priorities will be pursued and assumptions about who should be asked to operate museums following a transfer all play a role here. These findings are an important contribution to existing studies which have illustrated the filtration of austerity discourses into cultural policy (Lagerqvist 2016) leaving considerable scope for studies which move towards understanding how these pressures are negotiated at the level of practice. Scholars with an interest in decision-making practices relating to other areas of service provision centred around buildings (e.g. libraries) may wish to consider the range of material and ideational factors underpinning a decision, as well as the heeding the need to avoid fetishizing the distinction between ‘pre’ and ‘post’ austerity without attending to the way decisions made in the present often have their origins in the past.

In addition to offering an explanation of why particular museums are selected for transfer, an outcome which follows from a decision to cease its funding, the article has sought to contextualise how these decisions are made. Austerity policies were shown to have not only limited the capacity of local government to maintain existing levels of museum provision but also made it more likely for decisions to involve assumptions and aspirations rather than views and perspectives gathered purposively. In this environment, dominant narratives of the non-cultural benefits of museums were shown to be influential with the perception that a museum had the necessary characteristics to contribute to the overarching objectives of local authorities, argued to be increasingly economic in orientation (Fuller 2018), lent considerable weight.

If we consider the pervasive uncertainty as to when austerity might end (Coleman 2016; Hitchen 2019) coupled with the incessant pressure to deliver a balanced budget annually with failure to do so risking central government intervention, then leaning on assumptions is understandable. By avoiding the further uncertainty that comes with seeking other views and
gathering evidence, decision makers effectively use what have been called ‘shortcuts or heuristics to assist them in making decisions that feel both ‘good enough’ and plausible (Cairney 2015: 25-26). This approach raises challenges for evaluation frameworks promoting evidence-gathering relating to ‘social and cultural returns’ (Walters et al. 2018). However well-developed such frameworks are, current conditions may limit their use.

In this particular case, resources were channelled towards museums that seemed likely to succeed, with success conceived of as being compatible with growth strategies or selective narratives of place. While it is true that ‘all policies are expected to achieve something or relate to something’ (Nisbett 2011: 566), this article has demonstrated the need to identify the particular forms of instrumentalism at play to highlight both how the financial restrictions of austerity impel local authorities to prioritise certain non-cultural ends from museums and to highlight the implications of these prioritisations for different types of museum.

The power imbalance between central and local government necessitates a situated approach to analysing decisions. Those interviewed for this study are engaged in a practice of accommodating the effects of policies that they did not devise and which are underpinned by highly political beliefs about the appropriate role of the state and how best to order society with which they may not agree.

Acknowledgement of their limited agency cannot preclude critical reflection on the implications of the decisions they take, particularly as they risk privileging museums which are attractive to transient audiences given their location or content of the permanent displays, or that pose limited financial risk by offering opportunities for trading or by virtue of being comparatively low-cost. How notions of universalism, equality, access, and inclusion shape and are shaped by the decisions taken in the wake of austerity in specific museum settings and the full implications of identifying museums for transfer in this way beg further research.

What this article has shown is that austerity has led local authorities to restructure museum services by a combination of closure and asset transfer. The decision to pursue this end (delivering a balanced budget by restructuring services) was taken by central government. Local government is restricted in the kinds of approaches to restructuring available to them, and their decisions provide further evidence of these dynamics. Fractured museum services, some of the more commercially viable ones remaining the responsibility of local authorities,
some closed, others continuing but at a remove from the public sector and with risky futures considering why they were transferred and with what level of interaction with those people and groups not managing them or helping to sustain them, all of these are reverberations of austerity and the reluctant decisions taken to subsist within its means.

References


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[1] Quoted figures relate to the research period, more recent figures are available: https://www.nao.org.uk/report/financial-sustainability-of-local-authorities-2018/
