

Wasting Monet? Local authority artworks

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Introduction

Local authorities own a significant amount of artwork. Museums, galleries and libraries are part of the public sector and often under the remit of their local authority. Some authorities' pieces of art are of significant value.

Local authority art collections extend far beyond galleries and museums, with only some of it actually on display to the public. Instead, local authorities keep large collections for use in council premises or for the benefit of council staff. In addition, many pieces are left in storage.

At a time when savings need to be made across the board and some local authorities complain about lack of funds, it is important that councils assess what they do and do not need to hold on to and act accordingly, ensuring that taxpayers money is not being wasted on old canvasses gathering dust in a storage room, or hanging in the office of a council chief executive.

Key findings

- Local authorities in the UK own at least **1.9 million** pieces of art.
- This artwork is worth **nearly £1.9 billion**. The average value of collections for each council is **around £7 million**.
- On average **only 30.2 per cent** of the art is on public display.
- Between 2016-2017 and 2018-2019 **Bassetlaw** district council purchased the most artwork with **201 pieces of art bought**, despite only **8.5 per cent** of their collection being on public display.¹
- The council with the largest collection of artwork was **Middlesbrough** council with **more than 250,000 items**. However, this authority has decided to withhold the value of their collection and number of pieces on display.
- The highest value art collection was held by Manchester city council, being valued at around **£369 million**. Only **7.6 per cent** of its collection is on display.
- **Eight** local authorities did not display any of the artworks they owned, with **Wiltshire** owning 2,099 yet not displaying any.

[Click here to see how much artwork your council has](#)

¹ In 2017-2018 Bassetlaw purchased one collection of 200 early colour photographs by local photographer, Stephen Pegler. In 2018-2019 they purchased a contemporary painting of a local scene by Retford artist, Beardsall's Row by Mick Thomas.

Table 1: top 10 local authorities with the largest collections by number of items

Local authority	Total owned
Middlesbrough	250,000
Northampton	165,000
Herefordshire	120,000
Cotswold	85,000
Worthing	75,000
Hampshire	71,024
Dover	70,000
Ceredigion	60,000
Rosendale	50,000
Norfolk	42,356

Table 2: top 10 local authorities who purchased the most artwork between 2016 and 2019

Local authority	Total purchased
Bassetlaw	201
Brighton and Hove	92
Richmond upon Thames	78
Glasgow	78
Leeds	61
Edinburgh	58
Preston	49
Bristol	45
Belfast	43
Sheffield	43

Table 3: top 10 local authorities with the largest number of items by value

Local authority	Total value (£)
Manchester	369,281,268
Leeds	146,500,000
Bristol	117,000,000
East Ayrshire	65,256,000
Derby	65,000,000
Leicester	60,970,090
Sheffield	54,750,000
Brighton and Hove	44,540,000
Kirklees	44,368,000
Westminster	42,000,000

Table 4: top 10 local authorities with lowest proportion of their collection on display

Local authority	Total number of artworks	Number on public display	Proportion on display (%)	Notes
Wiltshire	2,099	0	0	
Hinckley and Bosworth	189	0	0	None of the artwork is on permanent public display however they are displayed on occasion within a number of public buildings.
Caerphilly	53	0	0	
Wyre	53	0	0	
Allerdale	15	0	0	
East Hampshire	15	0	0	
High Peak	15	0	0	
Daventry	1	0	0	
Chesterfield	5,336	1	0.02	Only one item on permanent display the rest is on rotation. No figure was provided for the number on rotation.
Islington	26,378	6	0.02	

Sources and methodology

This research was fulfilled by issuing freedom of information (FOI) requests to all 408 councils in the UK. The request asked the following:

Please provide the following information:

- *How many artworks have been purchased by the local authority in 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19?*
- *How many artworks are in the possession of the local authority?*
- *What is the estimated value of the artworks?*
- *How many of the artworks are on public display?*

Public display includes those that can be viewed by the members of the public in local authority buildings such as council headquarters, libraries, sports and leisure centres, and schools that are under local authority control. It would exclude areas of council properties that cannot be readily be entered into by members of the public (such as, for example, the office of the head of paid service).

Artwork includes, but is not limited to, paintings, photographs, sculptures and electronic art.

Of the 408 councils contacted, 392 fulfilled the request by providing partial or full responses by 15 November 2019. Of these 392, however, the information supplied was inconsistent. Not every council provided the full range of data requested. Additionally, it is common for local authorities to make use of group insurance policies which means many were unable to provide specific insurance figures.

When providing an estimated value for their collection many councils gave the insurance value, rather than assessed or assumed market value.

A number of organisations refused to provide valuations for high value items under section 31 of the Freedom of Information Act. This says it would increase the risk of crime relating to the items if disclosure occurred.

The following local authorities reported that they possessed no artwork:

- | | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| ▪ Amber Valley | ▪ Fenland | ▪ Slough |
| ▪ Angus | ▪ North East Derbyshire | ▪ South Hams |
| ▪ Babergh | ▪ North Warwickshire | ▪ South Holland |
| ▪ Breckland | ▪ Oadby & Wigston | ▪ South Norfolk |
| ▪ Cherwell | ▪ Pendle | ▪ South Oxfordshire |
| ▪ Chiltern | ▪ Ribble Valley | ▪ Telford and Wrekin |
| ▪ Derbyshire Dales | ▪ Richmondshire | ▪ Test Valley |
| ▪ East Devon | ▪ Rother | ▪ Wealden |
| ▪ East Lindsey | ▪ Ryedale | ▪ West Devon |
| ▪ East Northamptonshire | ▪ Sedgemoor | ▪ Wokingham |
| ▪ East Renfrewshire | ▪ Selby | ▪ Wychavon |