

Costing exhibitions

A toolkit for museums

headland design associates



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government





Introduction

This toolkit has been put together by Headland Design as part of Welsh Government's work to understand capital needs for exhibitions and displays in museums in Wales.

Our research shows that many museum displays are outdated and have not been refurbished recently. Of the 40 museums that responded to our survey, 42% had not received any capital funding in the past 5 years and a further 22% had received less than £10,000 to improve museum displays.

For museums that have had investment in the past 10 years, some noted during consultation that the displays needed updating as a refresh that would encourage repeat visitors but also in order to tell new stories, in particular those of people whose story is not often told. Some of these updates could be done on a small or limited budget. Displays of objects can be changed easily, and object labels can give a change of tone or perspective, refreshing the story being told. New graphic panels can provide a new narrative or story and can be produced with a small design and print budget.

Working with designers

For larger refurbishment work and new galleries, many museums choose to work with exhibition designers. This can start with the development of an interpretation plan, which sets out the story and how they would like to tell it alongside research and analysis of potential and current audiences. It should also outline designs and cost estimates. Estimating costs for interpretation is difficult and can be supported with input from exhibition designers.

When it comes to fit out of new interpretation, most companies will charge design and management fees which are often a percentage of the overall costs.

A good brief starts the conversation with prospective consultants or design teams. It should include:

- introduction and context
- purpose and aim of the new interpretation
- outputs (you might need to specify the number of showcases or graphic panels)
- project team and support or information available
- opportunities for questions and site visit
- evaluation of quotes/bids
- timescales
- contact information.

Cost estimates

Industry standard guidelines use a cost per square metre to provide an outline or ballpark figure to help museums estimate costs for exhibition fit out. This provides a range of costs with low, medium and high levels of specification. These were recently reviewed by the Heritage Fund in their recent guidance notes.¹

The estimates are based on the size of space and ambition for the interpretation but do not take into account the number of showcases or variety of collections to be displayed. The figures might be a bit low and not account for recent price increases.

As part of the research for the report to Welsh Government, these costs have been tested against recent refurbishment projects for museums in Wales. They provide a suitable foundation for the expenditure forecasts in our analysis and reporting.

Low-specification display Without showcases (or reusing existing cases), mainly graphic panels, mix of new and stock lighting, no AV or interactives, simple networks and furniture	Allow £1,000 per m²
Medium-specification display Including some museum-grade showcases alternating with Perspex covers, lighting, simple AV or interactives, graphics, simple networks and furniture with some higher spec items, mounts and accessories	Allow £2,500 per m²
High-specification display Including museum-grade showcases, AV or interactives, lighting, graphics, networks and furniture with higher specifications, framing, mounts, and accessories	Allow £4,000 per m²

The sample costs below provide an indication of costs for individual elements within an exhibition. VAT must be added to all costs shown and, if working with a design company, design and management fees will be proportional to the cost of the exhibition. The costs are a guide only and reflect 2025 prices.

Element	Outline cost
Exhibition design consultant fees (charged as % of project budget)	15%
Content research and development	£60 per hour
Script/text writing and editing	£60 per hour
Illustration/picture research, copyright	£50 per hour
Graphic panels: Graphic design Graphic art working 12 mm digital wrap MDF graphic panel 900 mm × 1400 mm or: Direct print to substrate – 5 mm Foamex graphic 900 mm × 1400 mm	£300 per panel £300 per panel £250 £125
Low-tech hands-on mechanical interactive Interactive design	£5,000–£8,000 £60 per hour
Low-tech interactive (like jigsaws) Interactive design / art working	£500–£1,200 £60 per hour

Element	Outline cost
Audio point with headset excl. content	£450
32" digital screen with inbuilt player	£500
32" touchscreen with inbuilt PC	£1800
Exhibition high spec grade showcase 2000 mm w × 2000 mm h × 600 mm d with internal lighting – no shelving	£15k–£18k