



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Draft Museums Policy:
Departmental Briefing**

27 January 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr Declan O'Loan (Deputy Chairperson)
Lord Browne
Mr Thomas Burns
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Ken Robinson
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr Mick Cory)
Mr Stephen McGowan) Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr David Polley)

The Chairperson:

Good morning. We are joined by Mick Cory, the director of sports, museums and recreation in DCAL, and his colleagues Stephen McGowan and David Polley. You are all very welcome. Mick, we will move straight to your opening statement, after which members can ask questions.

Mr Mick Cory (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

Thank you, Chairperson. You have already introduced my colleagues. David Polley works in the

libraries and museum branch of the Department, and Stephen McGowan has been working in the Department on the creative industries side and is helping us with the finalisation of the museums policy.

The Department welcomes the opportunity to brief the Committee on the outcome of the public consultation on the draft museums policy. The process has achieved the objective of engaging a diverse range of stakeholders. It has instigated a considered and valuable examination of the issues and challenges facing the museums sector. The process has significantly helped the Department to develop ways in which a shared vision and agreed priorities can be articulated and addressed effectively in the final policy document.

To that end, the responses include the views provided by the Committee to date and ongoing engagement with other key stakeholders, all of which help to inform the Department's efforts to bring a final document to the Committee's attention. Today specifically addresses the Committee's expressed desire to be briefed on the outcomes from the consultation process. Members are aware that a final policy will be presented and discussed with the Committee on 17 February. I understand that the Committee has requested the Minister to attend on that date. That will provide us with the opportunity to elaborate on how the Department has addressed the issues and reflected the views highlighted during the consultation.

I would like to begin by providing background on the consultation process and I will invite my colleagues to provide an outline of the key issues emerging, addressing your specific request, before explaining the next steps in finalising the policy. We will then address any questions that the Committee may have.

I turn to the consultation process. On 28 June last year, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure published the draft museums policy for Northern Ireland for consultation. Notices were placed in a number of local newspapers encouraging people to respond and the document was available from the Department's website. The public consultation period was extended at the request of three of the consultees and ultimately ran for a total of three months until the end of September. In all, 26 responses were received; the majority from within the museum sector and a smaller number from a broader range of interests.

A children's version of the policy was developed in co-operation with the Participation Network, and consultation events were held with children and young parents in November. In December, we published a summary of the consultation responses on our website and have written to all respondents thanking them for their input to the policy process.

In the main, consultees felt that the draft policy had captured the main challenges which museums are likely to face over the next decade. My colleague David Polley will now provide a brief overview of the key issues and themes emerging.

Mr David Polley (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

Through analysing the consultation responses we identified a number of key themes and issues, which will be considered carefully when we are finalising the policy document.

The first is the issue of cultural rights. By some margin, it was the main issue raised in the consultation responses. Many respondents pointed to a lack of clarity around the definition of cultural rights and the obligations that might arise from that. Some held the view that the concept should be considered more as a principle that helps to shape the policy, rather than as a specific strategic priority. I know that the Committee was discussing that before we came in.

The second issue was resources. Many respondents, especially those in the museums sector, highlighted the need for increased resources to be made available to drive delivery of the policy goals and objectives. That issue will need further consideration in the light of the draft Budget. As you will also be aware, the Department directly funds only a small number of museums in Northern Ireland, so issues regarding resources are more broadly applicable across the sector.

Thirdly was the issue of partnerships. Many respondents highlighted the need for broader partnerships and a joined-up approach to service delivery and exploration of culture and heritage. Partnership working across the whole museums sector, and with other sectors and agencies, was seen as desirable and essential to achieving the policy goals.

Finally, the main area we identified was that consultees raised the issue of delivery

mechanisms and how success should be measured. Respondents were interested in the specific actions that would be required to deliver the policy goals and evaluate their success. The role that the Northern Ireland Museums Council might play in that is a recurring theme, often raised by the smaller museums that responded. Some respondents suggested that a structured action plan, clearly setting out roles and responsibilities, should be included.

On that general point, it was our intention that the museums policy would be a high-level document, giving strategic direction to the museums sector. After the policy is completed, further work will be needed around delivery, roles and responsibilities and measuring progress and success in delivery. I now hand over to Stephen McGowan who will brief the Committee on the specific issues that it raised in its letter to us last week.

Mr Stephen McGowan ((Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

In addition to the issues and the overview that David has provided, the Committee asked the Department to address four key questions or areas: on what aspects of policy were consultees in agreement; with what areas of policy did they disagree; what policy gaps were identified by the consultation; and what anomalies, if any, were identified during the process.

It is fair to say that there was broad agreement in that the consultees welcomed the steps that the Department is taking to introduce the policy, and the scope, ambition, issues and themes addressed in the policy. There was positive feedback on the goals and vision outlined by the policy and broad agreement that that presents a sound starting point to take forward further strategic plans and shared actions.

With regard to areas that consultees did not agree with, it is probably more accurate to say that there were reservations and concerns about cultural rights, which the Committee has alluded to thanks to Dr Hull's paper. The specific concern was whether cultural rights should be a strategic priority in the policy. There was a call for clarity on definition, on the obligations of cultural rights, relating to not only this policy but in broader discourse. There was a view by consultees that perhaps cultural rights and related issues should be an underlying principle in the policy.

With regard to gaps, issues were identified by consultees and more details are in the

submission. Some consultees wanted some areas included, and others wanted elaboration or more emphasis on areas already in the policy. Examples include operational issues with action plans, resources and volunteering. More emphasis was sought for a partnership approach, the role of museums and their value to and impact on tourism.

The consultation responses identified no clear contradictions or anomalies in the draft policy. We have been analysing the responses and taking steps to see how we can amend the policy and bring forward those issues and views, and, importantly, the insight that we gained from the process into redrafting the policy. Mick will outline the next steps in the process.

Mr Cory:

We are now working towards writing a final policy. We have been working closely with the key stakeholders in that process, the Northern Ireland Museums Council and National Museums. We also carried out more research in the area of cultural rights given that that was a key issue identified in the consultation. The Minister has set us challenging deadlines. It is clear that finalising and publishing a Northern Ireland museums policy by March is a departmental priority. We are working very hard to meet that deadline.

The Minister is due to appear before the Committee in three weeks' time to discuss the museums policy. We are working hard to be in a position whereby he will be able to present a final museums policy to the Committee at that meeting. The Committee indicated that it would like a chance to contribute further to the development of the policy. Given the significant engagement with the Committee on the museums policy already, we would welcome any further points that you would like to make.

Given the deadlines that we are working to, it would be very helpful if the Committee writes to us directly after this meeting with any further input. That will allow time for comments to be included in the final policy before approval by the Minister, and help us to send that to the Committee in good time before its meeting on 17 February 2011.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. Given the importance of reaching agreement with National Museums and the

museums council on a policy, what major concerns are they expressing?

Mr Cory:

We are working extremely closely with both organisations. Two people are on the small group that is doing the redrafting. We are in danger of violently agreeing with each other on the policy. These discussions and this briefing have also been discussed with them. Essentially, there is not a huge amount of difference between them. Stephen has worked much closer with them.

Mr McGowan:

Mick is right in saying that there have been positive developments in the partnership approach in taking forward the draft. Further work is ongoing on the vision for the sector and cultural rights. We are looking at those two areas in order to move forward with an agreed and shared vision.

The Chairperson:

How are you addressing concerns about cultural rights?

Mr McGowan:

The Deputy Chairperson highlighted that this is a deep and important area. There was no disagreement about that in the consultation; no one said that it was an issue that did not need to be explored or that it was one that should not necessarily have been included. The consultation emphasised to us that the area of cultural rights is of concern and importance to stakeholders.

Therefore, we are hoping to establish a framework that allows this to be, for want of a better phrase, a work in progress; something that sets a framework that allows those issues to be continued and explored by a variety of stakeholders.

Mr K Robinson:

Thanks, Stephen. While you were elaborating on that issue, the thought in my mind was about how many of the 26 or 27 consultees actually raised the issue of cultural rights.

Mr McGowan:

I do not have that figure to hand, but I can send it to the Committee.

Mr K Robinson:

Was it a significant number?

Mr McGowan:

Yes, it was.

Mr Polley:

It was certainly more than half of the consultees. That number included a lot of the museums sector, such as the two big organisations — the Museums Council and National Museums — and a lot of the smaller museums and museums' professional organisations that responded.

Mr K Robinson:

You, perhaps, were not aware of the discussions that we were having before this session. We were wondering whether the dead hand of officialdom should come down on this issue — that little boxes should be ticked to the detriment of people actually going to enjoy cultural experiences and forming their own conclusions, positive, negative or somewhere in between.

Mr Polley:

It was clear from the responses about cultural rights that some people were suspicious of the language of rights and the resulting obligations. That is why we need to do a lot more work on the issue to explore it properly.

The key document is the United Nations General Comment Number 21. I do not know if Dr Hull referred to that in his paper, but it was only produced in December 2009, so it is very new and was published after the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee's report. Cultural rights is an issue that applies to more or less everything that the Department does, not just museums, and it is something that the Department needs to get its head around more generally. The museums policy is just the first area in which the United Nations work will impact on what the Department does.

Mr K Robinson:

You are referring to international agreements. Looking at periods in recent world history,

particularly in Europe, it causes me concern that there are specific definitions of what happened. Those of us who lived in countries where events occurred and saw behind the accepted wisdom of what happened and how it happened can sometimes form a slightly different opinion on how conditions came together and conspired to give us historical events, such as the Holocaust, the tragedy of the Second World War or indeed that of the First World War. There are certain things in history there that never really emerge unless you go into cultures and have people speak freely to you instead of seeing the accepted wisdom of events that happened 50, 100, 150 or 200 years ago.

Mr Polley:

In the main, the issues set out by the United Nations as being relevant to cultural rights are possibly much more mundane than that. There are a lot of issues around access and ensuring access for groups of people who would not normally have access to culture, including women, young people and the disabled. There is a whole series of treaties that refer to access to culture for groups such as that.

There are other issues, such as making sure that people are not stopped from expressing their culture, and that cultural institutions cannot be allowed to ignore that culture and need to take everybody into account. The code of ethics for museums covers a lot of the issues around access, such as the Disability Discrimination Act and cut-price admission for children and families.

Mr K Robinson:

I do not want to prolong the discussion, but we were talking about respect and understanding of differences and other cultures and so forth. That is the ultimate aim, and we want to get to the position where people respect difference. Sometimes, if people are told that they must respect something, the opposite can happen and they find an alternative and pursue it to the point where it becomes almost an obsession.

Mr McGowan:

That is an important point. I emphasise that we are still working in partnership with stakeholders to take the policy forward. With respect to how we are developing the policy, I think that you are alluding to the dangers of someone referring to a specific article or piece of legislation. If we

could sum up the responses to the issue of cultural rights, it would be “what do you mean by cultural rights?” There are, perhaps, problems with government stating a definition of cultural rights in this policy paper. As I said, we are minded to look at a way of facilitating a framework that allows the stakeholders and communities to explore it in their own ways and bring their views and insight to it, rather than issuing an edict saying what is meant by cultural rights in the policy. From the research that has been provided to the Committee, it is very clear that this is an embryonic field that requires much more exploration and which is being explored all around the world. Therefore, it would be ambitious to try to crack it in this policy in our local context. We have to give due recognition to that debate in the policy and allow it to continue.

Mr K Robinson:

That is helpful, because that shows an awareness of the situation, rather than, as I fear, diktats coming further down the line where subjects can be approached only through a specified, objective definition. You have cheered me up a bit, Stephen. Basically, you are saying that there is flexibility in the framework.

Mr O’Loan:

Thank you for your documentation and for what you have said, particularly on your openness to looking at the issue around cultural rights. The consultation asked people to comment on five strategic priorities, and, across four of them, there is broad agreement. Your summation of the responses on each of the first four priorities states:

“It is fair to say that all respondents agree in general with the issues and goals in this section of the draft policy.”

It is quite clear that, on the fifth priority, cultural rights, you are not in a position to say that at all. You say:

“This section seems to be a challenging, strategic theme for many respondents. Some point to a lack of clarity around what are ‘Cultural Rights’ and a number also suggest that they should not be included as a stand alone priority within the museums policy.”

Your preamble quotes similar remarks and then states:

“Officials are continuing work to try and achieve greater clarity on this issue.”

You referred to a final policy being presented. To be clear, a draft policy was put out for consultation, and you envisage that the next phase is final. Final means final, so a written document will be produced. When the Minister comes before us, he will arrive with a finalised document in his hand. The discussion around that will be limited, and it might be a discussion about what that means. On the face of it, it would be written in stone at that time. Is that the situation?

Mr Cory:

Yes, unless we have missed something major. Over the past couple of years, we have gone through quite a long process, which started with the Committee's inquiry into the development of a museums' policy. There has been quite a lot of engagement on the matter, and we have had a public consultation. I suppose that it is our intent to bring a final policy to the Committee, because, at some point, we have to draw a line under this. Further work will be required, quite possibly in certain key areas. You have alluded to one already, and we had a discussion about that. There may have to be a bit of detail on the work on the implementation of it and the framework that we will put in place to implement it. As a policy framework, we are looking to finalise it, but, clearly, we will not be blindfolded entirely and as stubborn to assume that it is a fait accompli. That is our hope.

Mr O'Loan:

It seems to me that you had two ways forward on how cultural rights could be addressed in the policy, both of which might be acceptable to me. The first is that we need to do considerably more work on this section and consult on it because it does not recognise that cultural rights is a very difficult and important area. The second is that, if it is to be presented in the final policy, it should, rather than being dogmatic, be quite discursive and should present the range of difficulties that arise in that regard. I would not want it to end up, because it is difficult, as some kind of trivialisation and something that would be directional in a way that would not command respect politically or from across the professional museums sector. It would be disastrous if we were to end up going down that line. However, the other two routes present opportunities, and I could live with both of them.

Mr Sheehan:

I do not want to labour the issue of cultural rights, but I wanted to ask a question about the definition. Stephen, you, by and large, answered it. You made Ken quite happy, but you made me somewhat alarmed. If this is not nailed down and is just left fairly hazy, will it be worthwhile doing? Does it not then just become a paper exercise?

Mr McGowan:

Perhaps the objective is for me to make you both mildly pleased moving forward in that sense. Today's debate has highlighted the concerns and the importance. As the Deputy Chairman outlined, in relation to bringing a policy to the Committee in the weeks ahead, a considerable amount of work is going in to trying to establish a meaningful framework that is not hazy and does not pacify people, but which challenges people, engages them and makes them explore the issue. Without pre-empting the work that it still ongoing, the intention and objective is to crack that nut.

Mr Hilditch:

I declare an interest as the chairman of Carrickfergus Borough Council museum committee, which is part of the mid-Antrim museums section. I will move from cultural rights to infrastructure investment and resource. The document states:

“Self-generated income should be explored but not to the detriment of the museum ethos.”

Will you expand on that? I take it that it is not going down the road of entry fees? It is more like sponsorships?

Mr Cory:

It does not directly take us down the road of entry fees, although that clearly comes into being able to sustain a viable museums service. There is a tension in museums — we often discuss it with National Museums in particular — between maintaining the ethos and the public's value of our museums while being able to be commercially successful and raise enough money. As we see with the current Budget settlement, when there is a reduced pot of money, that tension becomes somewhat harder. Therefore, museums become increasingly reliant on alternative sources of income. That tension needs to be continually explored, particularly in these hard

times. However, it is recognised that the public ethos principle cannot be removed entirely to the god of commercialisation because, down that line, museums services tend to be quite against the “Disneyfication” of what they are trying to achieve. That, in essence, is really what it is. I do not know whether my colleagues want to say anything more about that.

Mr Polley:

That comment was made by a particular consultee. The concern is as you set out, but I do not think that it was National Museums.

Mr McGowan:

Although this is a much deeper conversation for a later date, my interest is in the creative industries. That sector has been prioritised as a key area for Northern Ireland. There is a strong view that the content, the artefacts and the collections in our museums can inspire new ideas, new creative products and new creative services that can help to grow Northern Ireland’s creative industries. There is the potential, and there are examples of it happening already, for engagement with museums and the creative industries to look at that type of economic development.

That area could be explored.

Mr Hilditch:

Many people who went into the sector in the 1970s and 1980s, when there was an explosion in interest in museums, are now retiring, which means that there will be a loss in the knowledge base. Did that issue raise its head? Is staff training and development an issue?

Mr Cory:

The consultees produced a range of responses on policy and on the operational side. Rightly, operational issues are for the sector to deal with, whether a national or a local museum. That is an important point when the intellectual capital of an organisation is being considered, as it must ask itself how its curatorial knowledge and expertise in the field can be sustained. That issue may not be addressed directly, although there is a skills section in the policy that will look at that issue from a policy point of view.

Mr Polley:

It was raised by some of the smaller museums' organisations. The Museums Council had an apprenticeship scheme to introduce young people into the profession.

Mr Hilditch:

There is also a scheme to retain some of the older folk for a short period to mentor.

The Chairperson:

The next presentation is from the Minister, who, I know, is time bound. I thank Mick, Stephen and David for their presentation.

Mr K Robinson:

Before you leave the building, have you seen our creative industries in the museum sector on the ground floor?

Mr McGowan:

I will do that now.

Mr K Robinson:

I recommend it.

The Chairperson:

Ken is ever the champion of this locale.