



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Review of the Value and Impact of
Museums in Northern Ireland**

10 February 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Review of the Value and Impact of Museums in Northern Ireland

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mr Gareth Maer) Heritage Lottery Fund
Mr Paul Mullan) Heritage Lottery Fund Northern Ireland

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):

I invite the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) officials to come to the table. I advise members that one of the witnesses has flown in from London this morning. We are grateful that Gareth Maer made such an effort at short notice. We appreciate it.

Mr Gareth Maer (Heritage Lottery Fund):

I am pleased to be here; it is better than being stacked over the Isle of Man.

The Chairperson:

I know. The Committee looks forward to a good thorough engagement. Paul Mullan, the head of the Heritage Lottery Fund here, will make an introductory statement.

Mr Paul Mullan (Heritage Lottery Fund Northern Ireland):

I am head of the Heritage Lottery Fund in Northern Ireland. Gareth is our research manager from London. I will make some introductory comments and then Gareth will talk, probably in a little more detail, about some of the harder, factual aspects of research in this area.

The Heritage Lottery Fund has invested nearly £30 million in museums in Northern Ireland through the regional network and National Museums Northern Ireland. We believe that museums are fundamental to any society's understanding of itself, its past and its future. Therefore, there is a strong intrinsic value to museums that, we feel, is fundamentally important. Museums help us to understand the past and to know ourselves, and they can help citizens' quality of life tremendously for the reasons that I mentioned as well as encouraging self-esteem. Those are, I suppose, subjective elements. It is good that a lot more research is going on across the water and some is happening here. Gareth will talk about the harder edged research and the economic and social value elements in more detail.

Mr Maer:

I am head of research at HLF. I have been there since 2004. Before that, I was in a similar role at British Waterways. So I have about 10 years' experience of seeing how this has developed in the cultural sector, at least in England. I will say a little bit about how that now looks, looking back as it were.

The cultural sector, including museums, did well out of the Westminster spending reviews in the 2000s under new Labour. But with that came more of an emphasis on showing the impact and on evidence gathering. I do not think that I am giving away any secrets by saying that the way this was done was not entirely logical. The money came first, and then there was a recognition that, if there was going to be money, there needed to be targets to go with it, and then, having set some targets, the Government needed some way of collecting data to show whether

those targets had been met. They got there in the end, although not necessarily in the right order.

What came out of that was the big Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) ‘Taking Part’ survey. It was a household survey. People in the sample could be phoned up at any time and asked how much they participated in defined cultural activities, including museums, doing — rather than watching — sport, arts and heritage. That gave a breakdown — geographically and by type — of participants. In parallel with that, although it was never part of any targets, more effort was put in on behalf of museums and other organisations in the cultural sector to try to get to grips with and say something about the social and economic impacts of their activities. There has been progress, and I will come back to that in a moment.

But before that, by way of laying down a marker, I will say that, the use of targets was never entirely willingly accepted by the sector, because it was always recognised that the sort of impacts Paul described were never going to be fully captured. There were things to do with cultural value that were never going to be picked up, however well we may be able to do economic and social benefit assessment. In the end, the sector felt that public policy should be to support the culture that people value. That was the justification for it.

Where are we? Interesting work has been done by individual organisations, such as HLF, and by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The DCMS culture and sport evidence (CASE) programme was referred to earlier. First, we now know how to measure the economic impact of heritage-based tourism leisure. We know how to measure the overall scale of economic activity that is based on heritage and museums in a geographic area. A lot of studies of that kind have been done. A year or so ago, we carried out a big study that covered the whole of the UK. Separate studies have been done in Scotland and in Wales, and one is planned for Northern Ireland.

But the tourism aspect is only one of the economic arguments for public investment in museums and in culture. Paul talked about the quality-of-life argument that exists. The evidence on that is harder to gather. It is being tested to death, really, because there are questions about whether those places that have had big cultural investments will do well as we come out of recession.

The other interesting aspect of research on economic impact is the idea of the role of museums and cultural institutions as part of the supply chain for those sectors and parts of the economy that we want to grow and are likely to grow in the future. So that includes the idea that some cultural organisations supply the raw material for creative cultural industries, and even the idea that some sectors and companies that are involved in scientific innovation rely on the collections management that lots of people in the museums sector do so well. I know that that is an idea that has interested the Arts Council in the Republic of Ireland.

The economic research has tended to be done first, but the social research has made a lot of progress in catching up recently. There is a lot more standardisation in the way that data is collected on visits and visitors' activities in the running of museums. Measurement of the impacts or benefits of learning is also widely accepted in the museum sector now, and it uses what are called learning outcomes. Those are a way of being able to recognise how the activities that are run in museums affect and develop individuals.

There is also work that has been referred to — derogatorily at times — as happiness studies. It involves research on well-being, and the work that DCMS has done on that is interesting. At HLF, we have done work that is, in a way, more interesting in that it has involved original fieldwork, and we have had some promising results. That is interesting and important because it has been more difficult for the cultural and museum sectors to make links between their work and well-being or health in quite the same way that the sports sector has been able to do in the past. There is probably more work to be done on that, and that will continue. The DCMS is putting its argument in government and to the Treasury in those terms, rather than in terms of the economic impact.

It is harder to measure the wider community impact, but we are beginning to get more case-study evidence on that. From our research, we think that inter-generational work comes through strongly from Heritage Lottery Fund projects, and that is an area of heritage work that is particularly strong. Research on cross-community impacts is, inevitably, based on case studies at this stage as well. There will be a lot more of that to get one's teeth into and to work up into case studies.

To sum up: on social impact, well-being will continue to be the focus of concentration for the Department in England. The other thing that will not go away is the ‘Taking Part’ participation survey, and you might want to think about whether that is something to join.

The Chairperson:

OK. Thank you. Would a universal model of measurement be beneficial in relation to the social and economic value of museums? Evidence so far tells us that there is great diversity in the methods used to ascertain that value. Is there a need for agreement on that among academics, the museum sector and Departments?

Mr Maeer:

That depends on what you mean. If you mean a universal model or coming up with a single methodology for saying what the value of museums is, I do not think so. However, there has been progress on and more agreement around methodologies for the different types of benefits that museums deliver. For example, widespread agreement has been reached among economists about how to work out the economic impacts of the tourism and visitor economy. There are a lot of studies on that, so there is a way of reality checking any new results. There is a need to get some sort of agreement on the methodologies used and the ways of measuring different social and economic benefits. That has certainly been done on the economic side. Measuring the learning benefits of projects and activities, which I talked about, is coming along as well, and there is a lot more agreement among researchers about recognising that type of thing. So, progress is being made on that.

The Chairperson:

How has the economic value of museums changed in the past five years?

Mr Maeer:

Are you asking whether they are having the same economic impact as was the case five years ago? I do not know.

Mr Mullan:

I can comment on that. There is a better appreciation of the broader economic benefits that museums can bring. We have genuinely seen connections being built. No doubt the representatives from National Museums will be able to talk about the connections with tourism, the Tourist Board and bodies in the broader sense. I think that awareness has been developed, and things are moving along in a more linked up way than in the past.

Mr Maeer:

I agree with that. There is recognition of the profile of museum and heritage-based tourism that did not exist five years ago, even among some of those responsible for making economic development money available. Tourism was not always seen as the most effective way of using that money. However, in the past couple of years, the tourism sector has become more confident, partly because of the research work that has shown that some of the economic contributions and associated impacts are greater than was widely recognised. The HLF work that I referred to was important, and that has been used a lot.

Mr McClarty:

Thank you to Paul and Gareth for their presentation and to Gareth for his efforts to get here this morning. Welcome to the mainland.

The Chairperson:

Did you come from Tory Island? *[Laughter.]*

Mr McClarty:

Do you believe that there is sufficient acknowledgement of the value and impact of museums? If not, how could it be improved?

Mr Mullan:

In the Northern Ireland sense, I think not. We can do so much more to recognise the true value of the role that museums can play in society. A lot of that will come from people, such as the members here, recognising and championing that value. Again, it is a bit like the connection between museums and tourism that has only really been built up over the past number of years.

We are starting to move in the right direction because the benefits of cultural institutions can be more clearly seen. However, that has to be backed up by investment and economic support. The fact that opportunities such as tourism are being developed will hopefully be acknowledged by those people who argue that there has to be an obvious economic benefit to investing in something. Hopefully, more will be done even on that narrowest argument.

Mr Humphrey:

Thank you both very much for the presentation. I welcome the thrust of protecting heritage. As we have lost so much of our built heritage in Northern Ireland, and given the rich tapestry that is our industrial heritage, investment in that area is vital, and I welcome it.

Earlier, we were discussing a potential project in the local Jewish community that aims to establish a museum and interpretive centre in Belfast. What is your organisation's policy as regards organisations that have a religious ethos or church-based projects?

Mr Mullan:

We can fund any organisation that comes to us with a good and sensible proposition. We do not exclude. There are certain religious groups that will not come to the Heritage Lottery Fund because they do not like the lottery. But, in very broad terms, we can fund any religious-type project, providing it is outward-looking and not inward-looking. One of the key tests to success in applications to us is that there are broader benefits to be achieved from an investment. If a community was looking at something simply for itself, that would probably not be enough. We would challenge them to tell their story on a wider basis, and if they can do that, they are certainly fundable.

Mr McCarthy:

Can you give the Committee any case study example where a positive social impact has been made as a result of Heritage Lottery funding to museums in Northern Ireland?

Mr Mullan:

It depends what you mean by museums. One of the most positive heritage projects that I can think of is the Diamond war memorial in Derry. Prior to investment in that project with the local

community, it had been seen as highly contested space. From a republican and nationalist perspective, it had been seen as something that had nothing to do with them. However, the research project that local community people engaged in, working with the museum bodies, identified that 47% of those commemorated on the war memorial were actually from a Catholic/nationalist tradition. The project allowed the nationalists in that area to recognise that they had a role to play in a much bigger story. There was a nationalist role in the Great War, in particular.

Since the investment in that project and the carrying out of that work, there have been no attacks on the war memorial. It has been opened up. On Remembrance Sunday, we have seen representatives from both communities going to the commemoration there. In fact, we have seen the Union Jack and the tricolour both being walked into the event on that day. Heritage, in its broadest sense, can achieve an awful lot through a better factual understanding of the past. That is where the role of the national and regional museums is so fundamental.

We have the decade of anniversaries coming up. We have the Ulster Covenant of 1912 and a whole range of different anniversaries that are incredibly controversial. A more objective understanding of our past will tell us stories that may challenge. For example, the fact that King Billy's win at the Battle of the Boyne was celebrated by the Pope in Rome is something that can confound us.

The Chairperson:

It did not go down well in Carrickmore. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Mullan:

Back in 1989, at the time of the 300th anniversary, National Museums ran an exhibition called 'Kings in Conflict', which put that story in a European context. The more we draw out the true facts and the things that did happen, the more we can throw away the myths and legends that do not help us to create a shared society in Northern Ireland today.

Mr McCarthy:

That is a very good answer to my question. Thank you very much, gentlemen.

Mr O’Loan:

Thank you for your presentation. Even if you were not talking about this issue, it is very good to have you here talking about what you do. It might seem embarrassing and almost rude to say it, but those of us who look at the various lottery funds, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, tend to think of them just as dispersers of cash, and we do not give much thought to the fact that they think about what they do. They have a research base and a policy analysis, and it is good to get that insight.

Can you say anything about comparability of regions as you look around England, Scotland, Wales and us? Do you see profound differences? We are a small, cohesive region with 1.75 million people, which is quite different from England and very different from London, as I remarked at an earlier session. In scale and size, we are also different from Scotland and even Wales. Does that lead to a different approach to how you fund here?

Mr Mullan:

No, it does not. Our approach is that we will fund the heritage that matters to people. Therefore, it will differ in Scotland, Wales and different parts of England. What matters to people in Northern Ireland will be the applications that come to us and how they are prepared to look at that. Our mechanisms give us the freedom to flex towards particular local needs and interests. For example, many of my colleagues in England are gearing up for the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War. We are working on a small project with the Community Relations Council to look at how to deal with the various anniversaries that we have in Northern Ireland. The hope is that, out of that, a set of principles will be developed that will enable us to fund projects that are fundable as such, and we will be having a conference on 21 March to that end.

Mr O’Loan:

Do you put in funding primarily on the capital side, or what do you actually do here?

Mr Mullan:

It is very broad. It can be capital. We have invested about £140 million in Northern Ireland over the past 16 years. However, it is not all capital. The Diamond war memorial project that I

referred to was simply to give people the time and resources to do research into a particular project. It really depends on what is needed and whether the project that has been suggested can meet our criteria. I do not know the exact figures, but the capital overall has probably been more than 50% or 60%, but there is still a substantial sum that does not relate to capital. We are investing in the building up of museum skills through a £1 million bursary that National Museums Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Museums Council have been drawing down on. We are funding a number of apprenticeships through that.

Mr Maeer:

Even in a capital project, you have to do activity as well.

Mr Mullan:

That is a very good point.

Mr Maeer:

Even if it is a capital project, it has activities going with it, which is different from when we started.

Mr Mullan:

Any project that meets our criteria has to answer a conservation need, a learning need and a participation need. The participation bit is creating broader audiences and drawing them in to the project that has been funded.

Mr O'Loan:

Finally, how do you read the quality of relationships with the various partners involved with you in Northern Ireland?

Mr Mullan:

It is great that we have institutions such as the Northern Ireland Museums Council and that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) is working with them. I think that there should be a closer relationship between National Museums and the Northern Ireland Museums Council. It is good to see that, for example, the training skills project that I mentioned is a joint project.

However, there needs to be a strategic view and a vision for museums in Northern Ireland that goes beyond existing museums policy. It needs to ask, “What are the stories that we want to tell?” and then to tell those stories in a mixture of national and regional museums. There is a lot more joined-up working that can be done, and there is certainly a willingness among them all to do that.

Mr O’Loan:

I suggest that the Department should have a significant role in that strategic lead.

Mr Mullan:

We view the museums policy that was developed as being quite limited. It could have provided a much more overarching vision.

Mr O’Loan:

Is that the one that is currently out for consultation and about to be finalised?

Mr Mullan:

That is right. That is what we have fed back.

Mr K Robinson:

Thank you, Chairperson, for confirming that Carrickmore was never at the centre of European affairs. Thank you very much, gentlemen, for coming along this morning, particularly Gareth for making the effort of coming from London. Lest you think that we know nothing about museums here: I am disappointed that my colleague beside me missed the opportunity to mention the boy from Killyleagh, who you would know as Sir Hans Sloane. The British Museum was started with his first collection. So, we have a long-standing interest in museums in this part of the country.

I note from the briefing that you reckon that every £1 million that you invest can lead to an increase in tourism revenue of about £4.2 million. That is quite a significant figure. Most people go from £1 invested to about £1.50, but you are going from £1 to £4. If that is the sort of return that you think you can generate, particularly in areas that need regeneration, I have a suggestion for you. In Belfast, we have one of the oldest warships afloat, HMS Caroline, survivor of the

Battle of Britain. I believe that she is the second oldest commissioned warship in the world and the oldest floating commissioned warship in the Royal Navy — I believe that HMS Victory is grounded at Portsmouth at the moment. We tend to think in terms of buildings and the sort of projects that Paul has outlined. Is there an opportunity to think outside the box and to look at maritime and aviation projects as well?

Mr Mullan:

We funded the Canberra being brought across and developed at the Ulster Aviation Society's museum complex. Whatever the future holds for HMS Caroline, I have no doubt that HLF money will be involved at some stage, whether at Portsmouth or Belfast.

Mr K Robinson:

Of course, you could save the transport costs, could you not?

Mr Mullan:

It is totally up to somebody taking the responsibility and putting together a project. That has yet to emerge.

Mr K Robinson:

Do you stand over the return on investment of £1 to £4?

Mr Maeer:

We put those together with maritime, industrial and transport heritage. That is a big part of our funding. Probably 15% of what we have done in money terms since we were set up has gone into that type of heritage. We have funded lots of those sorts of projects in the past.

In asking about the £1 to £4, are you asking how we do that?

Mr K Robinson:

I am asking whether you stand over that sort of return. It seems to be a very positive return.

Mr Maeer:

It is. That figure comes from our research. When I started at HLF, I set up a research strategy around the programmes that we fund. We need feedback on where our money has gone and the difference that it has made. It is very business-focussed research in that regard. We started that in 2004-05. There are lots of different aspects to it, but one is some economic impact studies. We did those for five or six years running, and we put in a new sample each year. Something different about the way in which we have gone about doing research is that we use a random sample. Therefore, if we get good results, we can be very confident about them.

We have built up about 90 projects for which we have done economic impact assessments. We are not necessarily looking at the £30,000 grants; the completed projects that we look at start from £250,000 to £500,000 and above that. There are standard ways of doing such research, and it is widely accepted. We look at the funding we put into those projects and at the additional money that is brought into a local area as a result of that capital injection — money that has resulted in an attraction that was not there before or an attraction being in a much better condition. Expecting that to continue for some years, we take a 10-year time horizon. That is where the figure of £1 to £4 comes from.

Mr K Robinson:

I am sure that Paul was in the room when we discussed some of the further questions that arose out of previous presentations, but I am not sure whether Gareth was. You are probably aware that the Committee is not thinking in silos; we are trying to think beyond our brief for culture, arts and leisure into the potential for generating money through tourism and other aspects. Critical mass was mentioned earlier. We have looked at the arts, and we have invested quite a bit into arts per se. You are investing in the heritage side of things. Do you have any suggestions for how we might look perhaps more energetically at bringing together those two aspects to create that critical mass here in Northern Ireland?

Mr Mullan:

That can be done in a number of ways. It is about everybody in Northern Ireland, Ireland and the UK having a better understanding of what those places are and valuing them. It is about encouraging and, as National Museums does, giving many good reasons for people to visit and to

come back. It is about creating programmes that are refreshed and captivating. It will take an awful lot of work, but it is certainly about not seeing our museums as dry and dusty places.

Wearing another hat, I am one of the trustees of the old museum building in Belfast, which was, in effect, the first museum in Northern Ireland. By the late nineteenth century, it was so boring that nobody went into it. However, the Ulster Museum, which is so fresh and dynamic, came out of that. Its visitor numbers are phenomenal — over 660,000 in the first year. It is about investment, but it is also about making things interesting for people.

The Chairperson:

I thank Paul Mullan and Gareth Maeer for coming along today. Gareth, you mentioned a booklet. We will obviously want a copy of that.

Mr Maeer:

I have two copies here, which I will leave.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for your presentation. Good luck with your onward travels.