



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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

10 February 2011

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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**COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

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**Review of the Value and Impact of Museums in Northern  
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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

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

**Witnesses:**

Mr Alastair Hughes     )  
Mr David Polley        )     Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure  
Mr Patrick Neeson     )

**The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):**

I invite Alastair Hughes, head of museums and libraries in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) to introduce his team and make an opening statement, after which we will ask questions. Alastair, David and Patrick, you are welcome, and thank you for coming.

**Mr Alastair Hughes (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):**

Thank you for your invitation to brief the Committee. I am head of museums and libraries branch. David Polley, from my branch, is one of the team working on the museums policy. Patrick Neeson is the departmental economist and is head of the economics branch.

We have already submitted a written briefing on the value and impact of museums in Northern Ireland, which covers, at the Committee's request, an update on the current research into the social and economic value of museums and an examination of the relationship between the value of museums and the museums policy. The Department is very aware of the important and valuable contribution that museums make in Northern Ireland economically, socially and culturally. Even at a basic level, the sector employs hundreds of people, provides major tourist attractions and is a vital support to formal and informal education.

I will put into context the background of what DCAL does in the sector. There are 42 accredited museums in Northern Ireland. DCAL has a limited and quite specific role in the sector. It provides funding and undertakes policy and advocacy for the sector in central government. Funding is primarily statutory rather than discretionary. DCAL is the main funder of the work of National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI), and the Committee will hear from our colleagues soon. The Committee will be aware that NMNI runs four museums, which are at Cultra, Omagh, Armagh and Stranmillis. The Department also supports the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium and W5. Obviously, those sites have a particular value in supporting the science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects that are taught in schools.

In addition to the four NMNI museums, there are 38 other museums in Northern Ireland, including council-run local museums, National Trust properties, independent museums and regimental museums. Although DCAL provides some direct financial support for other smaller organisations such as the Somme Heritage Centre and the Centre for Migration Studies, the main interface with the wider sector is through the Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC). DCAL provides funding to the NIMC, which provides support services in local museums and grants to registered museums.

In our written submission, we sketched out the value and impact that the museums sector has in Northern Ireland. Without prioritising, I will outline those briefly. First, museums are vital for tourism. They are a key driver of the Northern Ireland economy; 10% of all visitors to Northern Ireland visit a museum, and 28% of museum visitors are from out of state. Northern Ireland museums welcome in excess of 1.5 million visitors each year; and nearly 1,000 people work across the sector. Those are impressive figures. NMNI runs four of the top 10 visitor attractions in Northern Ireland.

Secondly, the sector makes a contribution to education and lifelong learning. Museums enhance delivery of the curriculum by providing inspirational learning experiences. Last year, for example, NMNI alone had over 100,000 people in educational programmes. Thirdly, museums are part of the overall process of helping position Northern Ireland as a forward-looking and progressive place to which people will want to visit and live and as a place for investment with a rich past and a positive future. One businessman is claimed to have said that his company came because of the incentives and stayed because of the people.

Fourthly, museums promote and enable creativity. Their artefacts, collections and programmes help develop new creative content, services and experiences. Of course, prosperous economies are characterised by a strong creative sector, and, across the globe, creative industries are recognised for their potential for high growth and wealth creation. Last, but not least, good museums make an important contribution to a shared and better future for all, based on equality, diversity, interdependence and mutual respect. Our museums reflect and promote understanding of the history, culture and people here. They can be catalysts for bringing communities together to explore the complexities of history and culture. Museums make an impact on a number of priority areas for government.

We will now review briefly how we have taken forward work to spread awareness of the impact of our museums: first, it is through planned work to create a research and evidence base; secondly, it is through our work on the museums policy, and, thirdly, it is through high-level departmental targets, particularly public service agreements, which are given the highest level of Executive priority. My colleague Patrick will provide an update on current research into the social and economic value of museums.

**Mr Patrick Neeson (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):**

The Department's role is to gather evidence on some of the impacts that have just been talked about. The research falls into two main types: first, the gathering and analysis of statistical evidence on the number of people who visit museums and their characteristics; and, secondly, the gathering of research evidence from our own sources and others on the impact of museums.

DCAL has commissioned a series of modules in the continuous household survey and the young persons behaviour and attitudes survey on museums in Northern Ireland. That information is collected and published as a series of research bulletins. The data collected focuses on the types of people who attend museums. Some follow-up questions are asked about satisfaction with visits and what would make a person more likely to visit a museum.

As the Committee is aware, a report, which was known as VALCAL, was commissioned by the Department in 2007 on the social and economic value of libraries, museums, and so on. That report was useful in bringing together much of the research evidence at the time, and it highlighted some of the possible impacts. The Department is aware of other research carried out elsewhere. For example, the libraries, museums and archives sector across the UK is conducting research into the economic impact of the three sectors. The museums sector in Northern Ireland is represented by the NIMC. That research aims to answer three key questions: first, what economic evidence should be collected; secondly, how should economic data be collected; and thirdly; how should the data be used to prove the economic impact of any organisation?

The Department has also engaged with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) on the research that it has undertaken. The DCMS is taking forward research known as the culture and sport evidence (CASE) programme, which looks at the drivers, impact and values of engagement in culture, arts and sports. The programme incorporates a significant degree of research activity. One output from CASE is a database that brings together all of the available research in the field from around the world. That provides a wealth of evidence that the Department can draw on to help informed decision making.

One brief point that the Committee should note is that we should be cautious of some of the

economic benefits that are often quoted in studies, and I am talking not only about research in this sector. For several reasons, studies that attempt to estimate the economic benefit to a region from a particular sector or from particular investment can sometimes overstate the true scale of that benefit.

DCAL is taking forward its own economic and social research programme. It began by carrying out a review to identify gaps in available data to assess areas where further analysis or research could be carried out. On museums, the review found that there were gaps in relation to the economy, health and education but that data was available on social inclusion. The Department plans to carry out work to look at the impact that structured education programmes provided by culture and sport providers have on those who take part, while the research on museums will look at gender differences and engagement with the sector.

To measure the wider economic benefit, the programme will explore a number of different approaches to attempting to capture the value of participation. Those include the continued valuation approaches that the researcher mentioned earlier, and another approach known as subjective well-being analysis. It will also look at the impact of factors such as household income in participation. I am happy to provide the Committee with more detail on that. I will now hand over to David Polley, who will outline how that work has impacted on the development of policy.

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

I will take the Committee through how the value and impact of museums is being incorporated into the museums policy. At one level, the policy works as an advocacy document to set out the value of the museums sector, but the real point of the policy is to increase the impact and value of our museums to society here. For instance, the draft policy states that we must ensure that museums are recognised as valuable contributors to tourism and economic development. Specifically, in the section on developing audiences, there is more exploration of the economic value of museums to tourism. A priority area, education and learning, seeks to strengthen the reputation and capacity of our museums to support the formal and informal education sectors.

The Minister plans to present the final version of the policy to the Committee next week, and

that will take into account the responses to the consultation process, the discussion with the Committee of two weeks ago and the initial work of this review. I cannot steal the Minister's thunder, but one issue to emerge was that the final document should contain a more explicit description of the value that the museums sector provides.

I will now address a specific issue. In November, the Assembly's Research and Library Service briefing note suggested that a more systematic and continuous evaluation of the impact of the museums sector should be carried out. More comprehensive and robust statistical information will always be useful in demonstrating the value achieved from public expenditure. There is a particular issue about demonstrating the value of the local museums sector, due to a lack of robust data, and the NIMC might have raised that with the Committee. That area of museums policy proposes a target, which is to gather up-to-date intelligence on the sector in support of policy implementation and strategy development, with the intention of including gathering data from the entire museums sector to help to demonstrate the impact and value. That information can inform the museums policy work as we move forward into the operational phase and as more detailed strategic work is taken on. It will also allow government to measure the impact of the interventions that have been made.

The final area to highlight is how the Department's public service agreements help to emphasise the value of museums at the highest level in government in Northern Ireland. There are currently three public service agreements that are relevant to museums. The first is to increase the total number of national museums visitors, the second is to increase the proportion of national museums collections that are accessible via the Internet and the third is on the number of organised educational visits to national museums. The PSA target on visitor numbers demonstrates, in part, the economic value of national museums, which provide four of Northern Ireland's top 10 visitor attractions. The target on providing educational visits demonstrates the social value of museums in supporting the formal education sector.

As the Committee might know, we are currently coming up with new targets for the next Budget phase. Those are under development, and we are not sure yet whether the Executive will use detailed PSAs as they have done before. DCAL is considering two possible targets for the museums sector. The first might be around increasing the number of out-of-state visitors to

museums. That would be in addition to a more general attendance target, and attention would be focused on the economic benefits of the museums sector to the cultural tourism product. That will require co-ordination with the tourism bodies, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and Tourism Ireland. A second target might be to have a certain number of organised learning visits and experiences at our museums. Again, that would reinforce the goal in the draft museums policy that every child in Northern Ireland should have the opportunity to visit a museum as part of a curriculum-based activity. I hand back to Alastair to conclude.

**Mr Hughes:**

I hope that the Committee finds our presentation and written submission useful in taking forward its review on the impact and value of museums. We look forward to seeing the final report and to going through it in detail. One main area in which we can take forward any recommended work is during the follow-up to the museums policy.

**Mr O'Loan:**

Thank you for your written presentation, which was very good, and for your oral submission just now. Overall, I am impressed by your handle on the issue, and there is a significant degree of common mind on these things. I am particularly interested in the economic significance of museums, and it is on that issue that I will question you. You state that 10% of visitors here go to a museum and that 28% of museums visitors are out-of-state visitors. As you said, those are very impressive figures, and they show the importance of the museums sector to the economy.

You talked about the relationship with tourism, and I will ask about that. When we start thinking about economics and tourism, we think of the potential role of other Departments, including DETI, and other bodies related to tourism such as the NITB and Tourism Ireland. Should we be thinking about any other Departments, and how good is the joined-up approach between DCAL and other relevant Departments and bodies?

**Mr Hughes:**

My feeling is that NMNI has developed strong links with many of those other organisations and is constantly looking towards ventures, partnerships and arrangements with them. In a sense, we seek to share some of their expertise in this area. At departmental level, there are good



connections with other Departments; so, in a sense, this is about a teamwork approach to relationship building and not purely a relationship with a Department or an arm's-length body.

**Mr O'Loan:**

You have the strategic lead, particularly on resource issues, Executive budgets and so on. It is you and your fellow Departments that will make the running on those matters.

**Mr Hughes:**

Absolutely; and we work closely and have good links with other Departments. I am glad to see the NITB's submission to the Committee. There is always more that can be done, and we want to refine those links. There are partnership arrangements and agreements underway with NMNI on funding. I have no doubt that we will have to look at other better working methodologies.

**Mr O'Loan:**

Significant museum ventures that were hoped to happen over the next four-year period have not received the capital allocation to allow them to go ahead. The Ulster American Folk Park is one, and there is at least one other significant one. Does that cause you concern?

**Mr Hughes:**

DCAL's capital budget across the arm's-length bodies is a cause for concern. We would like to do more. Personally, I do not have any control over the allocations; that is decided at ministerial and senior management team level, but we would like more investment in libraries, museums, arts and sport.

**Mr O'Loan:**

There is an important point around a critical mass of museums, and, given the construction of NMNI and the local museums associated with the NIMC, there is thinking around that. To me, it is very important that we see them as a totality and that local people, particularly visitors, get a feeling that there is a rich museum environment. I tie that in with the arts sector so that outside visitors know that there is a rich cultural environment here. Is that high in the Department's thinking?

**Mr Hughes:**

I would be surprised if it were not. That is going wider than my remit of the museums and libraries branch.

**Mr Neeson:**

If a tourist were asked why they came to Northern Ireland, they might not be able to answer that question. More than likely, the reason would be to visit family and friends. Do they come here because we have the Ulster Museum or other museums, because we have an opera house or because of other arts sectors? It is hard to say; but, when they come here, those will be part of the attraction. It is clear that museums, and a strong museums and arts sector, add to the attraction of why tourists come to Northern Ireland, why they come back and why they suggest to other people that they come here.

**Mr O'Loan:**

I was more than a little disappointed by the first response to my question, because we are talking about and looking for a joined-up approach across Departments and public bodies. I find it surprising that a prompt is required to say that there needs to be joined-up thinking and a connection between the arts sector and the major facilities associated with it and the museums sector.

**The Chairperson:**

If you do not mind my saying, there seem to be more answers in your questions than there are from the Department today.

**Mr O'Loan:**

The other point is somewhat related. When we talk about encouraging business to come to Northern Ireland through foreign direct investment and so on, we often think about the things that attract people here. When discussing the business environment, we talk about corporation tax and such issues.

I happen to think that quality of life and the international image of what life is like here is an equally significant factor. This discussion is very much related to that. Is that in the thinking of

DCAL and related Departments?

**Mr Polley:**

Yes. That is covered in our submission. Stephen McGowan, who is working in the creative industries, has talked to the Committee before. When it comes to new industries and more creative industries, people with those skills will go to where they want to live and create value where they want to live. Therefore, cities that are good at attracting high-value-added creative industries are the sorts of liveable environments in which such people want to live. The culture and arts sector is extremely important in attracting people such as that.

**Mr Hughes:**

I will quote the DCAL mission as to what we are about.

“to deliver economic growth and to enhance the quality of life in Northern Ireland by unlocking the full potential of the Culture, Arts and leisure sectors”.

That is what we are aiming for. That is part of our contribution to the economy in Northern Ireland.

**Mr O’Loan:**

I am thinking about executives of big firms in the United States and elsewhere who are thinking of coming here for perhaps a five-year placement, and whose staff would bring their children here and put them into schools. These issues are very much in their minds. For example, they may ask themselves whether this a place in which they would want to spend a significant part of their lifetime? It is very important that we think in those terms.

**Mr Neeson:**

May I respond, Mr O’Loan, by saying that that is recognised in the Department. It is one of the esoteric reasons that corporate executives want to come here. Often, they will invest their company in an area in which they want to live, where they think that there would be a good quality of life for them and their children and where there are good cultural and other activities for them to enjoy.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Thank you very much for your presentation.

Correct me if I am wrong, Alastair, but you said in your presentation that you want to see more investment in our library service. That is good news, because, at this moment, there is a consultation document on getting rid of a number of our libraries, to which this Committee is opposed. If you are saying that there is more investment; that is very welcome.

I want to get back to the museums sector and to good practice outside Northern Ireland. You referred in your presentation to developments across the water and the measurement of the value of museums. Are there any areas of good practice elsewhere in these islands that we could make use of? Do you have any international examples of good practice in that area?

**Mr Neeson:**

I referred to two types of analysis that the Department is taking forward in its research programme, as the researcher referred to earlier. One is continued valuation or the willingness-to-pay approach, which is an internationally-accepted method that is used worldwide. Another approach that we are thinking about using is subjective well-being analysis, which is something that the DCMS has used. It is a fairly innovative approach. One way of looking at it is as a happiness index approach. Essentially, individuals are surveyed on how they feel about the quality of their life at present, and, in the same survey at the same time, they are asked how they participate and engage in things such as the arts, sports, leisure, museums and so on. We try to connect how well they feel about their individual state of mind at that time and how much they are engaging. The DCMS has used that fairly innovative approach and it is one that Treasury has touched on and taken note of. The DCMS has said that, in its dealings with Treasury to seek more funding, that it is something that Treasury has listened to. Those are two approaches that we are looking at.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Will you give us a wee bit more information about the ALMA projects?

**Mr Polley:**

Dr Hull talked about those. ALMA-UK is the Archives, Libraries and Museums Alliance. It used to be called the MLA-UK Joint Forum, and includes the museums, libraries and archives in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England. It has identified this as a key issue.

Interestingly, it is not just a case of working out a methodology to demonstrate the value of a particular institution. In effect, it is trying to develop a series of tools that any institution can use, but based around the questions; who does the body need to convince of its value, who are its stakeholders, and how can they be convinced? We do broad sectoral interventions at high-level or Northern Ireland level. However, this is for actual, particular local institutions, because their stakeholders are completely different; they will be local, both councils and funders. The first stage is nearing completion. I do not know what the NIMC told you about it last week. I am aware that we have talked to you about it, as has Dr Hull.

**Mr McCarthy:**

OK. That is grand; thank you.

**Mr Humphrey:**

Thank you all for your presentation. If I heard correctly, Alastair said there were 42 accredited museums in Northern Ireland. I will ask you just a couple of questions on that. First, how many of those 42 have no entry fee? Secondly, who accredits them?

**Mr Hughes:**

I do not have the answer to your first question to hand, but I am happy to supply it to the Committee. Secondly, accreditation is done through the NIMC.

**Mr Polley:**

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council is the ultimate accrediting authority.

**Mr Hughes:**

Yes; I am sorry. The NIMC is the body that assists in that process in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Humphrey:**

Would it ensure that the context of what you were saying, the interpretation of a shared and better future and so on, is accurate and balanced?

**Mr Polley:**

One has to go through a number of steps to get accreditation, and one linked step is the Museums Association's code of ethics, which covers such issues. For instance, if a community or group is being represented in a museum then there needs to be consultation with that community to ensure that things are even and balanced. Such things are covered in that process, and this is something that is being taken forward in the context of the museums policy as well.

**Mr Humphrey:**

Are you confident that it works?

**Mr Polley:**

I know people in Northern Ireland have raised issues with it. That is why it is a live issue in the museums policy.

**The Chairperson:**

Are there any plans on the part of the Department to update the PWC report of 2007, which assessed the social and economic value of libraries, museums, arts and sport? Secondly, why was a full economic impact study not carried out following that report?

**Mr P Neeson:**

I will answer in a slightly different way by referring again to the economic and social research programme that the Department is taking forward. This is a new step for the Department as it has not previously had such a specific programme. It is starting in April 2011, and among the things it will look at are how economic impact is measured, and what those impacts are; so that is one way I would answer that question.

**Mr Hughes:**

In relation to stage 2, we spoke with those involved at the time. The research was terminated at

the end of phase 1 because it was concluded that available data would not support a robust model. The project steering group concluded that there was insufficient Northern Ireland data to construct a model that quantified the value of impact resulting from the Department's investment in arts, libraries, museums and sport. It concluded that any model created would be reliant on a prohibitive number of assumptions, and that in itself would lead to it not being robust.

**Mr Polley:**

Essentially, one would be spending money on something which would have so many assumptions in it that it would not convince anyone that we needed to convince, so it would not be good value for money.

**The Chairperson:**

With that, I thank the officials who have come along today. Thank you for your evidence, which Hansard personnel have captured on our behalf.