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Analysis of Museums Policy Consultation Responses

1 Introduction

This Briefing Paper provides a brief analysis of the responses received by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) as part of the consultation exercise on a draft museums policy, *Museums Policy for Northern Ireland*¹, released for consultation between 24 July and 30 September 2010. The analysis presented here is not comprehensive, and focuses specifically on any areas of concordance between the topics highlighted in the consultation responses, and concerns or recommendations expressed by the Committee for Culture Arts and Leisure inquiry into museums, held in 2008².

In general, many of the respondents welcome the creation of a draft policy and agree with the overall intentions of the work. Some of the concerns expressed by consultation respondents include the lack of specific roles and responsibilities assigned in implementing the policy, the absence of a specific action plan and framework for implementation, uncertainty over monitoring and evaluating the policy, and the need for

¹ Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. 24.7.10. 'Museums policy for Northern Ireland: Consultation document'; the responses were requested on 13.10.10 and delivered to the CAL Committee on 21.1.11.

² Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. 2008. Report on the inquiry into the development of a museums policy for Northern Ireland: http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/culture/2007mandate/reports/report07_08_09r.htm Accessed 3.11.10.

specific commitments from DCAL on resourcing. The greatest area of concern would seem to be the section of the policy which focuses on cultural rights.

2 Recommendations made by the CAL Committee

A previous Northern Ireland Assembly Briefing Note compared the CAL Committee recommendations with the draft museums policy and found a number of areas of discordance³. In particular, the following areas of difference were highlighted:

- Responsibilities and role of National Museums Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Museums Council not specified
- No clear links specified with other government departments
- Review of Public Administration not referred to in the draft policy
- Emphasis on cultural rights and the use of international agreements to ensure that 'museum collections and exhibitions reflect local identities'
- Specific periods and themes not addressed
- Free access to museums not addressed
- Differences between the DCAL policy and similar documents in the UK and Ireland, particularly regarding coverage of the role of key bodies in the sector, local authorities and government departments, ongoing educational or development programmes, a clear action plan with responsibilities specified, and case studies to highlight areas of good practice.

3 Views expressed by consultation respondents

26 full responses were received by DCAL, including local government, museums bodies, individual museums and heritage bodies, funders, religious groups, trade unions, education bodies, individuals, and others. The majority of respondents welcome the creation of a museums policy, and have engaged positively with the consultation exercise. Some commend the department on the broad intentions behind the exercise, and with many aspects of the vision expressed in the draft policy. It is described, for example, as a 'significant step forward' and a 'solid foundation'. The view was expressed by one response, from a significant funding body, that the lack of strategic leadership on museums to date had created a 'policy vacuum'.

(a) Cultural rights

The section of the policy on 'Cultural Rights' would appear to be a contentious one for many of the consultation respondents. Of those which express an opinion on this section, most have reservations about its inclusion, wording or tone. While there is

³ NI Assembly Research and Library Service Briefing Note. 10.11.10. 'Comparison of the DCAL draft museums policy and CAL Committee recommendations'. NIAR 543-10.

some agreement with the broad intentions of reflecting and representing diverse identities, a number of bodies and individual institutions have expressed reservations about including this section within the policy, and about the implications of applying the various legislative and other instruments cited in Appendices 1 and 2. These concerns can be summarised as follows:

- The issue of respecting the cultural heritage of communities, and reflecting their diverse views, is described in some responses as an underpinning principle of all museum work, and **should not be identified as a stand-alone theme**. Some commented that if the subject is to be identified at all, it would sit more appropriately within ‘Section 3: Values, Standards and Legislation’.
- The **Museums Association Code of Ethics** is cited by a large number of the respondents as already providing the necessary principles that museums must follow to ensure they represent the complex views of the communities they serve.
- Some respondents express concern that the applicability of cultural rights is, as yet, **a relatively uninvestigated area of rights policy**, so applying international instruments specifically to museums without further consideration may be problematic. In particular, it is noted that the legal implications and obligations of such instruments are currently not understood clearly.
- The policy **does not define what is meant by cultural rights** in this context, which causes concern for some consultation respondents. Some state that they would need **more detailed guidance** on how to interpret and implement the various instruments cited.
- There are concerns too about the **adjudication and enforcement** of cultural rights in the wider legislative landscape, with a degree of uncertainty about how the instruments relating to cultural rights would work in practice.
- A number of respondents cite the importance of **museums being independent**, and the advantages of an ‘arms-length’ policy where museums are free to work with the communities which they represent without interference from government. One respondent cites the CAL Committee report which, in Recommendation 5, states that ‘the policy recognises the requirement by museums to be able to tell the stories of their communities in an independent manner’⁴.
- **Additional legislation of relevance to cultural rights** is cited by a number of respondents, including the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, the Treasure Act 1996, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Disability Discrimination Order (2006).
- One of the key museums bodies has stated that it will be important to clarify the power and position of the museums policy, and also to be clear that it cannot **supersede the existing museums legislation**.⁵

⁴ Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. 2008. Report on the inquiry into the development of a museums policy for Northern Ireland: http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/culture/2007mandate/reports/report07_08_09r.htm Accessed 3.11.10.

⁵ Museums and Galleries Order (Northern Ireland) 1998.

(b) Roles and responsibilities not stated

A second area of concern among many respondents to the consultation was the lack of defined roles and responsibilities in taking the policy forward. A significant heritage charity states that the policy ‘will require strong leadership, a collaborative approach and the setting of consistent standards’. Some of the museums which responded state that National Museums Northern Ireland ‘plays a vital role’ and will be important in turning the aspirations expressed by the policy into reality. More specifically, respondents have expressed concern that roles and responsibilities should be assigned directly to the Northern Ireland Museums Council for some of the goals set out in ‘Section 6: Education and Learning’, and ‘Section 8: Infrastructure, Investment and Resources’. Indeed, the CAL Committee report stated that:

4. We recommend that a strategic body is in place, whether the Northern Ireland Museums Council or a successor body, which co-ordinates the development of museums on geographical and thematic lines, to ensure Northern Ireland has a comprehensive provision of museums.

11. We recommend that the Northern Ireland Museums Council continues in its present form until the museums policy is implemented, and we urge the Minister to note the strong support within the museum sector for the continuation of the Northern Ireland Museums Council in its current form or as a successor body.

24. We recommend that the development of the museums policy is taken forward by a panel of key stakeholders, including among others, the Northern Ireland Museums Council, National Museums Northern Ireland, and a range of departments.

25. We recommend that the museums policy itself is drawn up by the Northern Ireland Museums Council, drawing on the expertise of its board members, and by the National Museums Northern Ireland.

(c) Monitoring and evaluation unclear

Some respondents have commented on the importance of the policy containing greater reference to monitoring and evaluation. A number of the responses remark on the need to establish a common baseline of information on the economic and social impact of museums which can be used across the sector to monitor the performance of the policy throughout its lifetime. One of the local councils which responded stated that:

There needs to be an overview of the current situation and resources to put the scale of achieving the goals into perspective. Consideration should also be given to how the success of the policy will be measured (in relation to the current baseline), how the required actions will be resourced and how the policy will achieve value for money.

(d) No action plan defined

The final section of the policy, 'Section 10: Turning words into action', receives some attention from respondents, with many stating that this needs to be substantially more detailed in order to be effective. Suggestions are made that a detailed action plan could include a commitment to integrate the policy goals into the corporate plans for DCAL, National Museums Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Museums Council, and that the mechanisms through which progress will be reported to the Assembly should be stated.

(e) Partnership working could be emphasised

Partnership is a theme which emerges strongly from the consultation responses, and is described by many as something which should feature more strongly within the museum policy. Museums working in partnership with a range of different bodies is emphasised as a factor which could (i) alleviate funding difficulties (ii) discover and promote good practice (iii) share expertise, and (iv) share exhibition materials and artefacts for display. In particular, partnership is described as being important between the museums themselves and the following:

- Key museum bodies, including National Museums Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Museums Council and the Museums Association
- The library and archives sector, particularly Libraries NI
- Arts Council Northern Ireland
- Heritage Lottery Fund
- Local government
- Northern Ireland Tourist Board
- Government departments, particularly with regard to museums working to promote good relations and create a shared understanding of heritage
- Those responsible for developing educational curricula
- The voluntary sector
- Heritage bodies in other jurisdictions, such as the Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network, and the Irish Museums Association

Some of these links feature in the recommendations made by the CAL Committee in its report on museums. In particular, the following recommendations are relevant in this regard:

3. We recommend that the policy sets out how the national, local council and independent museums can best work in partnership to maximise the potential of all museums, and to create a cohesive museums sector.

6. *We recommend that the Department develops a museums policy which raises the profile of museums within government and firmly places museums in a broad, cross-departmental context.*

7. *We recommend that the museums policy addresses how the links between museums and education can be strengthened and taken forward at a departmental level. DCAL should establish formal links with DE and DEL to do so.*

8. *We recommend that the museums policy addresses how the links between museums and tourism can be strengthened and taken forward at a departmental level. DCAL should establish formal links with DETI to do so.*

9. *We recommend that the museums policy addresses how museums can contribute to the Shared Future agenda. We recommend that the Department consults with OFMDFM on this issue.*

24. *We recommend that the development of the museums policy is taken forward by a panel of key stakeholders, including among others, the Northern Ireland Museums Council, National Museums Northern Ireland, and a range of departments.*

26. *We recommend that the policy process includes consultation with all stakeholders in the museums sector, as well as the Arts Council and Sport NI, and those in other fields such as education, tourism and community regeneration, who have an interest in the policy.*

(f) Widening the focus of museum education work

A number of respondents make a distinction between education and informal learning, and feel that the policy should make it clear that museums have a role in both regards. Some practical suggestions are made about educational initiatives applied by museums sectors elsewhere, including the *Learning Outside the Classroom* programme in England. Furthermore, areas where the wording of the education aspects of the policy could be broadened and improved are highlighted. For example, a distinction is suggested between education, where teaching is conducted more formally, and learning, where knowledge is self-directed with the aid of resources and information provided by the museum. It is implied that this distinction could be recognised more explicitly in the policy, and the role of museums in each defined separately.

(g) Ownership by communities could be emphasised

A number of respondents commented on the importance of fostering a sense of ownership of museums by their local communities, and expressed concern that the policy does not set out how this could be achieved.

(h) Intangible heritage not defined

Some of the respondents referred to the importance of intangible heritage being addressed and presented by museums, and the importance of such disciplines as oral history, intergenerational dialogue and reminiscence in creating a record of the recent past.

(i) Concern for resources, financing and storage

Resources and financing are issues which concern a number of the respondents, particularly in the current economic climate. They express doubt that the goals outlined in 'Section 6: Education and Learning', 'Section 7: Collections Development, Care, Management and Use', and 'Section 8: Infrastructure, Investment and Resources' can be delivered without additional funding. Some respondents suggest partnership working to alleviate funding pressures, particularly with regard to areas such as (a) marketing (b) sharing specialist conservation and presentation expertise, and (c) storage facilities. Indeed, particular concern was expressed by some respondents about the issue of museum collections and storage. These concerns can be summarised as follows:

- Museum storage is under severe pressure, and greater resources and partnership working are required to alleviate the problem
- Other jurisdictions have focused on the building of a 'national collection', but the Northern Ireland policy does not appear to set out such a strategy
- There are potential conflicts over the concerns of commercial gain and the welfare of collections
- A commonly-agreed disposals policy is not in place in Northern Ireland.

(j) Full EQIA not carried out

Concern was expressed by one respondent that a full Equality Impact Assessment does not appear to have been carried out.

(k) RPA not addressed

Two of the respondents noted with some concern that the Review of Public Administration is not addressed in the museum policy. One of these responses states the following:

The question of how the RPA will affect the museum sector in Northern Ireland is not addressed. This omission is disappointing as this issue was identified as being of importance in the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure's report into the development of a museums policy for Northern Ireland. Although the full implementation of the RPA programme has apparently been postponed until 2015, that the draft Museum Policy is described in the Ministerial Statement as being intended to cover a ten-year period indicates that this vital issue should have been addressed. With reference to the implementation of the RPA, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure's report recommended that the questions of the Northern Ireland Museums Council's functions, including accreditation, as well as the appropriate level of museums provision across the post-RPA council areas, should be addressed in the draft Museum Policy. The failure to address these questions significantly reduces the value of the draft Museum Policy.

(l) Examples of good practice provided

The consultation responses collectively highlight a large number of examples of good practice, some of which could be used to illustrate the final museum policy. Such examples include, but are not restricted to:

- *Ireland in Conflict* exhibition at the Ulster Museum
- National Museums Liverpool Community Partnerships team, working with the Caribbean community to collect and preserve a photographic archive
- Causeway Museum Service, examining the legacy of Plantation
- *Valuing Heritage by Valuing Memories* project
- Learning Outside the Classroom programme in England

(m) Accreditation supported

Enthusiastic support was expressed by many of the consultation responses for 'Section 3: Values, Standards and Legislation'. In particular, one of Northern Ireland's higher education providers 'welcomes the recognition given' to the Museum Accreditation Scheme. Furthermore, a key museum body states that this scheme,

...provides a strong foundation for museums, gives confidence to the public in knowing its heritage is appropriately managed, preserved and used, and gives an essential basis for investment in the sector by government and other funders.

(n) Free access not addressed

Finally, the CAL Committee's report referred to the issue of free access to museums. Recommendation 17 states that,

We recommend that the museums policy addresses the issue of access to museums and whether there is a case for extending free access to more museums in Northern Ireland.

A number of the respondents comment on the importance of tackling accessibility issues in museums, and one in particular notes that the issue of whether to extend free access or otherwise is not addressed in the policy. Concern is also expressed about the implications for audience development of the closure of some national museums on a Monday.