

## **Learning within Museums in Northern Ireland. Observations and views on the findings and recommendations.**

The Historic Monuments Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the report on *Learning in Northern Ireland* and the complementary report on *Learning and Access in Museums* and would like to thank the Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC) for inviting Council to comment. The report brings together very helpful and important recommendations for the development of education work within our museums. Jointly the two reports present compelling proof of the innovative and valuable working going on in many museums. The focus on learning and learning strategies in the recommendations will certainly be welcomed by the heritage sector as a whole.

Guidance from NIMC on the development of learning policies for museums would no doubt be very valuable to the sector and we would fully support this. We would also support the aim of directly linking a museum's learning programme to its own collection.

As it stands *Learning and Access in Museums* constitutes a reference guide for best practice and documents a range of projects that could be an inspiration for other interested groups. Schools and community relations groups could use this as a guide to develop more localised projects or those with very specific aims and objectives. It could also help alert such interested parties to resources and contacts which they may not be aware of. In this context widespread circulation of the publications would be useful.

There does need to be room for the individual museums to experiment and to try out best practice examples of work or techniques of engagement when these are highlighted through research and development. Support for smaller museums in developing their education programmes or having the financial support to develop new programmes or to use existing resources creatively are to be welcomed. We are thinking here of events such as those organised for the Downpatrick Young Archaeologists Club.

Benchmarking and methods of assessing outcomes of the various programmes of work that develop in our museums would also be valuable and Council are aware that NIMC have examined these issues. We would note that this should not mean generic programmes are all that can develop and should allow for flexibility and authorship of elements within a wider education programme that could be more experimental or not involving formal Key Stage elements. Assessment methods should also allow scope for the museums to produce education activities that meet the needs of funders in relation to various events linked to exhibitions. Many of the funders aims and objectives may be similar to those of the museum already but for experimental work, for example in non-formal learning, there needs to be scope for freedom of movement by staff. An assessment structure should be broadly welcomed in facilitating education staff and curators to consider the elements that may be successful in any particular event in relation to the overall development of work within the museum.

Involving teachers who are training is an interesting and potentially very valuable idea for crossing boundaries and helping teachers to grasp more of the potential of their local collections or historic sites for actively engaging pupils in elements related to Key Stage learning. In turn this could transform the perception of museums by young people. Museums could have accredited roles which would be integral to the delivery of the curriculum at all key stages. Associated work could be at the museums or through outreach, perhaps linked to visits to the museum.

We note that the report mentions the needs of school age children and also those in Further and Higher Education but there is relatively little reference to adult and older audiences in terms of life long learning. It might be useful to address the needs of those audiences more fully.

Links between museum education staff and curators as well as with higher education staff are also to be welcomed. The knowledge that all three groups have will contribute to the production of valuable programmes which will address the needs of a variety of audiences. There is clearly much to be gained from museums having closer links with other educational institutions and the Department of Education.

With the changes forthcoming in terms of local authorities under the Reform of Public Administration it is of great importance that the heritage sector as a whole is very clear on all aspects of the value that our collections and monuments hold for society and this needs to be communicated to local authorities as they plan for the changeover. In this context an observation in the executive summary that merits immediate and serious consideration is that 'an element that could prove critical to the future of learning services in museums is the absence of statutory remit for such work by local authorities that run museums'.

Educating people about heritage, formally and informally, is crucial to the development of museums and a learning strategy needs to be something the local authorities understand is a very critical part of the work of our museums. As the report notes aligning with the Northern Ireland Programme for Government is also critical and the museum sector has a lot to offer in terms of addressing some of the Public Sector Agreements (PSAs). Drawing on best practice guidance in developing a learning strategy will also promote understanding by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure of the importance of this strategy for the sector and support for its implementation.

Finally while welcoming all the recommendations made Council would suggest that recommendations 2, 3, 5, 6 and 31 are of particular urgency in linking successfully with schools. Education initiatives often flounder due to lack of time to plan for their implementation. Designating responsibility for development of programmes to very specific job roles is critical to success and better quality provision.