

4. Museums Policy for Northern Ireland

Consultation Questionnaire

Your details
Name: Professor Gabriel Cooney
Job title or role: Chair, Historic Monuments Council
Address: Statutory Advisory Councils Secretariat 4th Floor Clarence Court 10 - 18 Adelaide Street Belfast BT2 8GB
Telephone: 028 9025 0472
Email: secretariat-hillst@doeni.gov.uk
Are you responding as an individual? No
Please give the name of the organisation, a brief account of its membership and how the views of your colleagues were gathered. The Historic Monuments Council has a statutory role in the care, curation and presentation of archaeological objects and more broadly the material remains of the past under The Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (Northern Ireland Order)1995.
DCAL may publish a summary of the responses to this consultation document. Normally, the name and address (or part of the address) of the author are published along with the response. If you do not wish to be identified as the author of your response, or if there is any information in your response that you do not wish to be disclosed, please indicate here. <i>Please see information relating to Freedom of Information at the bottom of this form.</i>
General Questions:
Do you agree with the draft Museum Policy's overall themes? The policy is to be broadly welcomed and should help with a structured development

for the museum sector. However there are significant issues that the draft policy does not address.

If no, what should be included?

As mentioned in the introduction the draft Museums Policy has been developed in response to the issues raised by the Inquiry of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly into the development of a museum policy for Northern Ireland

(www.niassembly.gov.uk/culture/2007mandate/reports/report07_08_09r.htm),

In this context it is surprising that there is no direct reference in the current document to any of the 28 recommendations of the Committee's report, on which it had taken written and oral evidence.

For example the Committee's report recommended that the draft museum policy should be prepared by the Northern Ireland Museums Council, drawing upon the expertise of its board members, and the National Museums Northern Ireland. It would have been useful to know if this recommendation had been followed through.

As a consultation document issued by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure a formal statement in the policy itself of the Department's key role and commitment to leading the development of our national and local museums would have been very useful. This should have been clearly stated in Section 4, Delivering the Vision. That commitment is central to realizing the strategic priorities set out in the draft policy, particularly in the context of the challenges posed by decreases in public spending.

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.

Does the draft Museum Policy cover the issues you would expect? (please delete as appropriate)

The Historic Monuments Council endorses the vision for Northern Ireland's museums set out in Section 2 of the draft museum policy.

However, Council would have to express concern that some of the wording used elsewhere in the report appears to be directly in contradiction to that vision.

Examples include:

Section 5.1*the right of every person to engage with the cultural heritage of their choice...* As it is phrased this seems to be at odds with the parameters set out in Section 2.3 defining an effective museum policy

Section 9.2 the concept of exhibitions being *responsive to the cultural rights of people and communities...* Again this runs against the tenor of the Section 2 and indeed to the second sentence in 9.2 which recognizes that Northern Ireland is becoming a more diverse and multi-cultural society.

Paragraph 7.1 includes the comment that museum collections can *reaffirm truths...*

This view is problematic and stands apart from the transformative and challenging impact of collections that informs the rest of the wording of this section. The inclusion of such phrases in a museums policy may create future problems for curators, who as the draft museums policy rightly recognises in Section 2 have the duty and responsibility of engaging with diverse audiences in a multi-cultural society.

Regarding Section 3 Council is of the view that it is important that there is a clear distinction between legal requirements, which museums are required by law to follow, and government policies, such as CSI which do not carry the same weight.

Paragraph 3.3 states that:

"Museums easily embrace the principles of ensuring equality of opportunity and developing good relations, beyond any legislative requirement to do so."

This is a statement that seems to be at best somewhat complacent and perhaps likely to create a hostage to fortune. Would someone who had a disability for example, such as a visual impairment, necessarily endorse this view? Or indeed someone for whom English was not a first language and had felt that visits to some museums in Northern Ireland left something to be desired in terms of accessibility. it might be better to state that:

"Museums in Northern Ireland "seek" (or indeed "strive"?) to embrace the principles of ensuring equality of opportunity and developing good relations, beyond any legislative requirement to do so. "

In the introduction there is the concluding comment that:

The proposals suggested would not result in adverse implications to section 75

groups and altering the proposals would not result in better community relations or equality of opportunity.

A somewhat more equivocal statement might be more appropriate, such as a phrasing along the lines of that:

“On balance it seems an equality impact assessment is not required at this stage but the policy will be reviewed periodically to determine whether an equality impact assessment might be required at some point in the future.”

Questions relating to the five strategic priorities:

1. Developing Audiences

Do you agree with the identified issues and goals for this section? (please delete as appropriate)

Council would be in broad agreement with the identified goals

As noted above Council would suggest that the wording of 5.1 is problematic and contrary to the overall vision of the draft policy.

In 5.3 Council would have a concern about the use of the phrase ‘products and services’. This runs counter to the view of what the social role of museums as articulated elsewhere in the document.

If no, what should be included?

What actions would you suggest in order to achieve the goals?

Council would suggest that efforts to develop sectoral knowledge about cultural tourism support structures need to be developed, particularly for the smaller museums. Across the board this would enable them to link to other government departments who may become more aware of their work. NIEA work relating to Historic Buildings and Historic Monuments perhaps comes into this arena. Joined up thinking on how to profile the overall offering that museums in Northern Ireland have to both home and international audiences may be needed, particularly in the face of decreases in public expenditure.

2. Education and Learning

Do you agree with the identified issues and goals for this section?

The statements in Section 5.3 of the areas that museums are active in are laudable but given Council's concern about the paucity of specialized, professional curatorial and conservation staff (see comment on Section 7 below) across museums in Northern Ireland questions have to be raised about the capability of museums to either invest in the skills and capacity of their staff and to have a deep knowledge of their collections.

In terms of the goals realization of EL1 requires the commitment of a number of government departments and agencies.

The questions raised above and below (regarding Section 7) raise serious questions about whether EL6, which Council would strongly support, can be realized.

If no, what should be included?

Council would recommend that there should be a clear statement of Departmental intent to support putting the goals into action, particularly

EL6 - developing museums' capacity for high quality research

EL7 – consolidating and strengthening CPD of staff across the museum sector.

3. Collections Development, Care, Management and Use

Do you agree with the identified issues and goals for this section? (please delete as appropriate)

Council strongly supports the overall thrust of this section. Collections Development, Care, Management and Use has to be at the heart of a museums policy for Northern Ireland.

The goals CD 1-4 are to be welcomed but have to be set against the reality of the current state of collections development, care and management. Key issues are addressed below

If no, what should be included?

In order to achieve the goals a greater investment needs to be made in the number of professional curatorial staff employed in Northern Ireland. For example, a concern of the Historic Monuments Council is the current lack of curators with archaeological expertise employed in the museums sector. Five years ago the National Museums Northern Ireland employed three archaeological curators – now, regrettably for an institution which has statutory responsibilities relating to archaeology (i.e. the Treasure Act 1996), national status and important archaeological collections, it employs no archaeological curators. The lack of curatorial staff across the sector raises issues about the capacity of museums in Northern Ireland to realise the full potential of their collections as envisaged in the draft museums policy.

Whilst recognising that it is just one of many collections issues of concern to the museums sector, the Historic Monuments Council is also concerned with the problem of the long-term curation of archives generated by archaeological excavations. With one or two notable exceptions in the local authority museum sector, it has proved difficult to transfer archives to museums in Northern Ireland – this is largely a problem of capacity. Given this failing, it is difficult to agree with the Minister's assessment that we are 'now coming towards a place where we have a cultural infrastructure fit for the 21st century'. The development of a Collections Resource Centre which, amongst other functions, would be a suitable repository for the large number of archaeological excavation archives that have been generated in recent years should be considered a key action to achieving goals CD1, CD3 and CD4.

A broader issue that has been brought to the attention of the Historic Monuments Council is the fragmented and dispersed nature of the storage of the reserve collections, constituting the vast bulk of the overall collection, of National Museums of Northern Ireland. In many cases this material is also stored in conditions that are inadequate. This state of affairs is in direct contravention of both the overview and goals set out in Section 7 of the draft policy

What actions would you suggest in order to achieve the goals?

The establishment of a NMNI Collections Resource Centre would provide a central hub of curatorial and conservation expertise that other museums as well as educational, cultural and heritage organisations, could buy into. It would also address the issue of the fragmented, inadequate storage of NMNI collections This would provide a cost-effective mechanism by which the 'cohesive, joined up' approach to meeting museum responsibilities (Section 7.3) could be achieved. The only organisation in Northern Ireland with the expertise to successfully staff and run a Collections Resource Centre is the National Museums Northern Ireland.

4. Infrastructure, Investment and Resources

Do you agree with the identified issues and goals for this section? (please delete as appropriate)

Council is in agreement with the overall direction indicated here.

In relation to the goals (IIR2) Council was surprised that the Museum Accreditation Scheme, while appropriate to include here was not highlighted as a goal in Sections 6 and 7.

Council welcomes the reference to the use of digital technologies in goal 7 (IIR 7). The potential of digital technologies to underpin the collection, care and presentation of museum collections needs to be highlighted much more strongly as an aspect of museum policy in Northern Ireland.

5. Cultural Rights

Do you agree with the identified issues and goals for this section? (please delete as appropriate)

The Historic Monuments Council welcome and endorse this section and the broadly inclusive wording of most of Sections 9.1 – 9.4.

However, as noted above there are references to cultural rights in the other sections of the draft museums policy which are both at odds with the vision set out in Section 2 and Section 3 (Values, Standards and Legislation) and indeed would appear to directly contradict the tone and most of the content of Section 9.

While Council welcomes the recognition of Cultural rights, the sensitivity of this issue needs to be recognized much more clearly than currently in the draft policy and should be addressed in the final policy.

Any Other Comments

Please use this space to provide any other comments on the policy.

The Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and the Treasure Act 1996 should be added to Appendix 2.

It is important that there is clarification that the requirements listed in Appendix 2 are illustrative but not exhaustive. Other international treaties and domestic statutory instruments not referred to in Appendix 2, but which carry as much weight include for example:

International

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

Domestic

Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998

Sex Discrimination (NI) Order 1976

Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006