



HERITAGE AT THE HEART

HERITAGE COUNCIL STRATEGY 2018-2022

Presentation to
Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

14th November 2018

INTRODUCTION

First of all, my thanks to the Chairman and Members for the invitation to make this presentation on the Heritage Council Strategy 2018-2022. Dr Marie Bourke, Heritage Council Member since 2016 and member of the Council's Strategy Group which developed the strategy document joins me today, as does Dr Helene O'Keefe the Heritage Council's Head of Education and Communication.

The timing of this presentation on the Council's new strategy is very appropriate. It comes almost exactly 12 months after the Chairman of the Heritage Council, Michael Parsons, appeared before the Joint Committee prior to his confirmation as Chairman. On that occasion the Chairman outlined his vision for the future of the organisation as seen through his own community-based experiences, particularly in County Laois as a founder and ongoing member of the local historical society and Laois Heritage Forum, and particularly his commitment to education at a national level as an active member of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)

It is pertinent to note therefore that the Council's Strategy 2018-2022 carries the moniker

- *Heritage at the Heart.*

The Chairman of Council in his opening remarks in the strategy emphasises the Heritage Council's Strategic vision as being

- *To see heritage at the heart of Irish Society and decision making and that Ireland will be internationally recognised as a centre of excellence in heritage management, conservation and community engagement.*

It is important that the Committee is aware that in working to secure its vision the Chairman also acknowledges the role of the many partners with which the Council works, partners particularly but not exclusively within the heritage community. Council is but one small agency¹ within that community, so such a partnership approach is not only desirable but essential if Council is to carry out its responsibilities under the Heritage Act (1995) as amended in the Heritage Act 2018.

1. The Heritage Council currently has 14 full time staff and an annual allocation of circa €6m. Its work with local communities, local authorities and a wide range of essential heritage infrastructure in all parts of the Island of Ireland, complements that of the Department's Heritage Services (National Parks and Wildlife, National Monuments and Built and Architectural Services) which are the executive arm of government with responsibility for designation and regulation of heritage sites and the management of state property in association with the Office Of Public Works.



In that context of partnership it is very apt that the Joint Committee will also hear today from the Chairperson of the Local Authority Heritage Officer Network. The partnership between the Heritage Council and local authorities that has led to 28 Local Authorities employing heritage officers, can be considered a “jewel in the crown” of everything that the Heritage Council has achieved in 20 short years. The emphasis here is on enabling and supporting local communities through their local heritage forum and the agreement of a local heritage plan – how better indeed for the Heritage Council to deliver its public service and meet its statutory responsibilities by making a difference to people in their own places. Similarly, initiatives such as the Museum Standards Programme, the National Biodiversity Data Centre are built on policy proposals developed by the Council and have become essential parts of national heritage infrastructure, assuring quality and excellence in both our decision making and its promotion as an educational tool.

THE LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND

All of Council’s work, as derived from this new Strategy, is set within the statutory framework set by the Heritage Act which establishes the Council as a body corporate. The Council has 11 members including the Chairman.

The function of the Council under the Heritage Act (1995 as amended 2018) is

- *to propose policies and priorities for the identification, protection, preservation and enhancement of the national heritage, including monuments, archaeological objects, heritage objects, architectural heritage, flora, fauna, wildlife habitats, landscapes, seascapes, wrecks, geology, heritage gardens and parks and inland waterways.*

Members of the Committee are asked to note that the Heritage Council therefore enjoys responsibilities for both natural and cultural heritage, and in all its work seeks to integrate and acknowledge all the connections between culture and nature, or put another way, between people and place. Specific reference to aspects of its work in these areas will be made later in this short presentation. Full details are available to members in Council’s annual reports and at www.heritagecouncil.ie

As amended by the 2018 Act the Council shall in particular

- (a) *promote interest, education, knowledge and pride in, and facilitate the appreciation and enjoyment of the national heritage,*
- (b) *co-operate with, engage with, advise and support public authorities, local communities and persons in relation to the functions of the Council, and,*
- (c) *promote the coordination of all activities relating to the functions of the Council*

Members of the Committee are asked to note the specific reference at (b) above to “local communities”. This reference to local communities was one of the key and substantive amendments to the Heritage Act in 2018. No such specific reference was included in the ‘95 Act and the change reflects the fact that much of what Council has achieved since its establishment has been possible because of a specific focus on this area of Council’s work. It is a focus which *Heritage at the Heart* seeks to continue



Members of the Committee are also asked to note the specific function at (c) regarding the co-ordination of all activities relating to the functions of Council. This has allowed Council to collaborate and influence key land-use interests such as agriculture and forestry, as well as educational and other interests in promoting its functions and their relevance to other interests, Government Departments, public authorities, educational institutions and indeed individuals.

From a legislative point of view, the Heritage Council also has specific responsibilities in relation to inter alia its role as a prescribed body under the planning acts, membership of the Council of National Cultural Institutions established under the Heritage Fund Act (2001) and section 1003 of the Finance Act in respect of the donation of Heritage objects to the state.

WHY HERITAGE COUNTS

In meeting its statutory obligations and translating those into effective actions through implementation of its Strategic Plan, it is important to note why heritage matters to Irish people, that it is significant to Ireland, and requires attention, including ongoing and meaningful investment from the State.

Heritage is the foundation of our culture and the steady pulse of contemporary Ireland. It encompasses not just buildings, monuments and museum pieces, but as highlighted in our Act, it includes our distinctive landscapes, native wildlife and woodlands, literature, folklore and crafts. Passed on to us from previous generations, it defines who we are in the present and our efforts to understand our heritage, protect it and interpret it today will be our legacy for future generations.

Whether tangible or intangible, personal or collective heritage is therefore at the heart of Irish society. Its relevance is palpable at local level where it

- *drives economies* (consider its significance to the quality of our tourism and agricultural sectors),
- *stimulates innovation* (see the inspiration it offers to our artists and our craft workers and designers)
- *acts as a focal point for festivals, conferences and commemorations* (you are aware of community participation in Heritage Week, the success of the European Year of Cultural Heritage and the central place of heritage in this decade of commemorations).

Heritage is a touchstone of identity in a world of accelerating change. It fosters a sense of belonging and supports social cohesion at a local and national level. It simultaneously crosses borders and transcends differences to connect people through sharing values, history and indeed traditions.

Above all, heritage counts because it is a nation's most valuable and publicly-owned asset and needs to be protected, nurtured and enjoyed so that it continues to count in 2022 and beyond.



HERITAGE AT THE HEART – STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The Heritage Council will play its part by delivering its strategy 2018-2022 within the framework of 3 Strategic Objectives: to advance national heritage priorities, to nurture belonging and to ensure a vibrant heritage sector. I look briefly at each of these and, following the presentation, we can expand on any aspect of interest to the members

- ***To Advance National Heritage Priorities;*** National and international policy makers are becoming increasingly aware of the potential of heritage to contribute to economic growth and social cohesion, as well as to national pride and wellbeing.

During the lifetime of this plan the Heritage Council intends to augment its record of providing evidence-based policy advice for the long-term benefit of Ireland's heritage. By aligning our work with the programming of existing and emerging government initiatives, Council will champion the significance and relevance of heritage in contemporary Ireland.

- ***To Nurture Belonging;*** In a world of increasing globalisation, multi-culturalism and mobility, heritage inspires a sense of belonging to both geographic and thematic communities. Heritage lies at the root of our individual and collective identities and is also the seed from which new connections can grow. Heritage issues an invitation to celebrate shared experiences and histories, whilst above all respecting difference.

The Council sees this strategy as a blueprint for increasing inclusivity. It addresses the inextricable links between heritage, identity people and place and the absolute imperative of engaging with both the diaspora and community-based custodians of heritage. The strategy has also benefitted greatly from Council's engagement with the voices of young people who seek a sense of ownership of their cultural and natural inheritance and who rightly deserve further opportunities for participation and leadership.

- ***To Ensure a Vibrant Heritage Sector;*** The Heritage Council has always taken an innovative approach in enabling communities to care for and enjoy their local heritage. Through its grant schemes, dynamic heritage networks (such as the Heritage Officer Network, the Irish Walled Towns Network, the Museum Standards Programme Ireland network, and the recently established Irish Uplands Partnerships) and, as mentioned its commitment to partnerships with public, private and professional bodies, the Council provides impetus and support for community engagement and the development of heritage awareness and participation. In the lifetime of this plan the Council intends to develop the heritage sector by providing funding, training, and enhanced communications and networking opportunities. There a strong commitment to educational and research programmes to stimulate curiosity and promote the highest possible levels of understanding and appreciation of our national heritage.

The forth element and objective requires emphasis, namely that of ensuring effective administrative, financial and governance capacity to allow the organisation to operate effectively and develop Irish heritage.



The Chairman of Council addresses this imperative in the plan by stating

- *The Heritage Council is aware of the constraints of its current capacity and will continue to be imaginative and innovative in the way it both secures and directs its resources. Recent capital investment in the state’s heritage infrastructure is to be welcomed and offers us all encouragement. Council will work closely with all its partners to ensure ongoing and complementary investment in both people and their place.*

Having been established some 20 years ago in somewhat of a policy vacuum, and with a specific responsibility to “propose policies and priorities for the national heritage”, the Heritage Council can take further encouragement from the prominence accorded to heritage in recent government policies and initiatives such as inter alia Culture 2025, Creative Ireland, the National Landscape Strategy, the National Biodiversity Plan, The National Development Plan, Project Ireland 2040 and the Action Plan for Rural Development. The commitment to publish a new National Heritage Plan in the next 12 months will add further impetus to all our work. I will return to the recently launched public consultation on Heritage Ireland 2030 at the conclusion of this presentation.

ACHIEVING THE VISION

Critical to achieving the Heritage Council’s vision for 2018-22 is the continued support and development of the dynamic and diverse heritage sector. Spanning local government, state institutions, community groups, individuals and the private sector, the heritage sector has capabilities in areas such as landscape, biodiversity as well as in all aspects of digital, built and cultural heritage.

Heritage can play a key role in helping to resolve complex and changing socio economic issues, such as the current housing crisis in motivating the heritage led regeneration of some of Ireland’s city, town and village centres. Working with others to facilitate the reuse of existing buildings can help to alleviate aspects of the crisis while maintaining the distinctive identity and character of our historic urban centres – of every scale.

In a similar manner, new initiatives that focus on native woodlands, acknowledging the value of high nature value farming and the development of a series of Uplands Partnerships can help in alleviating the contemporary issues surrounding climate change and rural decline, as can work through Town Centre Health Checks, the Irish Walled Towns Network and consideration of a similar network for rural towns and villages. The ‘cultural’ change in attitude and approach that is required by us all to make a difference is slow. However, everyone can contribute and the Heritage Council for its part intends to offer leadership to the sector.

This Plan also acknowledges that Council will build on the success of the Council’s previous plans and programmes² and introduce new initiatives within that context.

2. The Heritage Council is best known for its initiation and support of several programmes which assist the delivery of its statutory obligations under the Heritage Act. These include its community grants programmes, grants for County Heritage Plans, the National Biodiversity Data Centre, the Irish Landmark Trust, the Irish Walled Towns Network, the Heritage Officer Network, Woodlands of Ireland, the Discovery Programme, the Wicklow Uplands Council, the Museums Standards Programme, Bere Island Conservation Project, BurrenBeo, Heritage in Schools, Heritage Week and Ireland Reaching Out. These initiatives are directly responsible for the creation of 65 high level and skilled jobs in every corner of Ireland and act as the base on which additional funding is secured from a range of EU, national and private funding sources.



To be effective the Council needs to enhance its capacity both in terms of its overall staff numbers (not increased since 1995), and the capital and revenue funding required to support the communities (geographic and themed) referred to and identified in its work.

Discussions are ongoing with the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht with a view to securing that enhanced capacity in an incremental manner over the lifetime of this Plan.

A mid-term review of the Plan and its implementation is programmed for 2020.

Members may wish to reflect on the fact that the Heritage Council has consistently sought to maintain its spend on administration at less than 20%, meaning over 80% is directly targeted at service delivery.

CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH

The Heritage Council very much welcomes the recent launch by Minister Josepha Madigan TD of the public consultation for Heritage Ireland 2030. This is a commitment to a revitalised and refreshed National Heritage Plan with an initial vision that sees

- *Ireland's Heritage is, valued, enjoyed and protected for future generations*

Government is reflecting the statutory responsibilities enjoyed by the Heritage Council in the 2018 amendment of the Heritage Act. Three themes are highlighted in *Heritage Ireland 2030* are

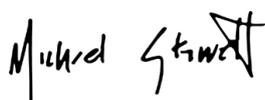
- *National Leadership and Heritage*
- *Heritage Partnerships*
- *Communities and Heritage*

These offer great scope for the Council to play its part on behalf of, and in partnership with the community-based heritage sector. They provide potential to consolidate existing important initiatives and to introduce further innovation and imagination in new initiatives.

In her foreword, Minister Madigan states that Heritage 2030 will bring together a tapestry of other relevant heritage initiatives, provide an overarching space for engagement and action over the next decade. It will integrate essential national heritage policy principles into the future strategy of the entire government and will be supported by investment under Project Ireland 2014 providing a platform for priorities to be identified and resourced through the lifetime of the Plan.

Both in terms of the public consultation and the delivery of the final plan the Heritage Council will contribute fully and constructively to this process. Council will look to ensure the most effective and efficient mechanisms and frameworks are in place and fully resourced, thus allowing all of the objectives that emerge to be met in the lifetime of the plan.

The challenges are immense. The opportunity currently presented needs to be grasped.



MICHAEL STARRETT

Chief Executive

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta

November 2018