

## **National Museum of Ireland**

Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2018 at 1:30pm

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### **Opening Statement to Joint Oireachtas Committee by Director, National Museum of Ireland on the topic of the development of the network of regional and local museums and related matters**

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#### **Background**

The National Museum of Ireland (NMI) is Ireland's largest national cultural institution with four public sites – three in Dublin (Natural History Museum, Museum of Archaeology, Museum of Decorative Arts and History) and one in Castlebar, Co Mayo (Museum of Country Life). NMI additionally manages a 20,000m squared Collections Resource Centre in Swords, which houses our collection ensuring it is available for research and scholarship.

NMI collects, conserves and interprets the largest holdings of portable heritage in Ireland – over 4 million artefacts/specimens. Welcoming over 1 million visitors per annum, visitor numbers have doubled since 2004 and continue to grow, despite a significant reduction of 40% in budget between 2004 and 2016. A €1.42 million increase in budget allocation over 2017 and 2018 has initiated the process of readdressing this prolonged period of deficit. We welcome the continued focus of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and Minister Madigan, T.D. to increase funding in arts, culture and heritage sector.

Under the National Monuments Act 1930 to 2014, the National Museum of Ireland is the State's repository for archaeological objects, and cares for them on behalf of the State. There are currently 168 staff employed across all of our sites. NMI has a national remit to work with the 12 Local Authority Museums that are designated as places of deposit for archaeological objects of local importance. This is supported through an assigned designated local museum liaison, our Head Keeper of the Irish Antiquities Division, Maeve Sikora.

## **Collaboration with local and regional museums**

The National Museum of Ireland has a rich and dynamic relationship with the network of regional and local museums, upon which we are eager to build.

This is an opportune time to present to the Joint Oireachtas Committee, as our recently published Master Vision reinforces NMI's commitment to local and regional museums stating as an objective: "The proactive development of regional partnerships to deliver a truly national service". Collaboration is a core value of the NMI and is supported at a strategic level by the NMI Board. Collaborations with local and regional museums through collections loans, exhibitions, education and outreach programmes are a priority and crucial to achieving our ambition of a truly national service. The key areas underpinning these collaborations are outlined below:

### **Legislative role:**

- Under the National Cultural Institutions Act 1997, the Director of the National Museum of Ireland can designate a museum as a place of deposit for archaeological objects of local importance. All archaeological objects found that have no known owner are State property and finders are obliged to report their discoveries to the National Museum or to a Designated Museum.
- The National Cultural Institutions Act 1997 additionally outlines the manner in which the NMI facilitates collection loans and enables the Director of the NMI to place an object in the care of a Designated Museum.

### **Collections and Operations:**

- Facilitation of loan requests to local and regional museums from the national collection – both permanent and temporary (See Appendix 1).
- Provision of advice, support and collaboration on issues of conservation, security, collection management and care, exhibition and interpretation both individually and through regular network meetings (See Appendix 2).

### **Programme – Events and Outreach:**

- Facilitation of talks, lectures and research by staff of NMI in response to requests from local and regional museums.

## **Benefits and Importance of the relationship**

The network of local and regional museums and the NMI's collaboration with same is critically important to the delivery of the vision of the NMI. Over the years, staff in the NMI have been heavily involved in the setting up of Local Authority Museums. It is through these relationships at both an institutional and individual level that the NMI can ensure the national collection reaches a wider audience, that local and regional communities are informed of the statutory role of the NMI in relation to archaeological finds, that NMI is enabled to connect more with a wider audience enabling their participation and feedback on our programme and that we grow awareness of the richness and importance of Ireland's cultural heritage. The establishment of the Museums Standards Programme for Ireland (MSPI), which is managed by our colleagues in the Heritage Council is a crucially important step in enabling best practice standards across museums in Ireland. While advocating for these standards across the sector and the resources required to support them, the NMI is also itself in the process of MSPI accreditation.

Crucially, our relationship also brings invaluable professional support to NMI and the Local Authority Museums Network (LAMN), for example the recent Tullydonnell Hoard find involved rapid and close collaboration between the NMI team and Donegal County Museum and is an excellent example of the importance of these trusted and professional relationships.

Some examples of activity over the last 12 months include:

- Cloosmore medieval ring brooch, temporary loan to Músaem Chorca Dhuibhne, 2018.
- Temporary loan of objects related to policing in Ireland to Monaghan County Museum 2017/2018.
- 13 Viking objects from recent excavations at Beamish & Crawford site, Cork Public Museum 2018.
- Collection of High Crosses on loan to St Mary's Medieval Mile Museum, Kilkenny.
- Delivery of local archive and heritage projects through the iCAN project a partnership between NMI and Galway County Council supported by Creative Ireland [www.ouririshheritage.org](http://www.ouririshheritage.org)
- Temporary loan of the de Burgo-O'Malley Chalice to St Patrick's Church in Newport for their Centenary Celebrations in September 2018.

## **Challenges and key learnings**

There are some key challenges and learnings which we are collectively working to address that are broadly covered under the following themes.

### **Timelines:**

The NMI is significantly under resourced across its curatorial and conservation departments. For example, in comparison to the National Museum of Northern Ireland which has a collection half our size and visitor numbers of 820k annually, the NMI has only half the number of staff of its counterpart in Northern Ireland. We currently require a minimum notice period of 12 months for loans. This is to allow us to fulfil the significant amount of practice (selection, condition checking, conservation, recording, mount making/design) and paperwork that is required for a collection loan. However, we understand that this timescale can present a problem for local museums who may not have clarity on budgets and planning until the year of a proposed exhibition.

### **Resource:**

The safeguarding of the objects in the care of the National Museum of Ireland is the key responsibility of collections staff. Low staffing levels particularly within our conservation and curatorial departments can create a bottleneck. However, the availability of budget to facilitate a collection loan from conservation costs to security costs is difficult and can present problems for both the local museum requesting the loan and the NMI.

### **Types of Artefacts Requested:**

There is a public expectation that the significant objects of the national collection will be on permanent display in the National Museum of Ireland. Some examples include the Tara Brooch, the Ardagh Chalice and the Broighter Hoard, our collection of Bronze Age gold, our exceptional and internationally renowned bog bodies which are preserved as a result of the unique properties of our boglands.

Considering the visitor numbers and the level of expectation for displays at the National Museum, it is generally the policy that objects that are on permanent exhibition are seldom placed on an outward loan. In these cases NMI works with local museums and special interest groups to provide a talk, lecture or event on the object in local area. For example, as part of the 150 year anniversary of the Ardagh Chalice, our former Director Ragnall O' Floinn delivered a lecture in Ardagh to mark the occasion. Some notable exceptions include a short term loan of the Derrynaflan Hoard to Tipperary County Museum.

**Opportunities and enablers:**

In discussion with our colleagues in the local and regional museums we have identified the following areas as potential opportunities and enablers of greater collaboration in our network.

Increased communication, regularly between the NMI and the LAMN particularly at the level of Director and the management team. This would enable joint strategic planning and partnership at an early stage ensuring it is factored into annual business plans and budgets.

Investigation and delivery of joint initiatives including co-curated exhibitions, education and event programmes as well as early consultation on potential traveling exhibitions that directly link in with both national and local community interests and concerns.

Investigation of opportunities to increase the mobility grant or similar ensuring a greater resource availability to enable the costly process of collection loans would have a significant impact.

**Conclusion:**

As illustrated in the attached appendices there exists a strong, collaborative relationship and significant activity between the NMI and the network of local and regional museums. An increase in staff and budgets across institutions would certainly enable greater and more strategic activity. The strength of these relationships however is driven primarily by the commitment and dedication of the staff involved and continued open and regular communication.