



Presentation to the Joint Committee for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
12 December 2018

Thank you to the Chairman and members of the Joint Committee for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht for the invitation to this meeting.

In my capacity as Chair of the Irish Museums Association, it is a pleasure and a privilege to address the committee on behalf of the sector. I am accompanied by Gina O'Kelly, the IMA's director of operations.

Many present will be familiar with the work of the Irish Museums Association, but allow me to briefly introduce the context in which we make this presentation.

An all-island organisation, the IMA is dedicated to the development of the museum sector. We provide a platform for museum professionals on both sides of the border to work together; with the aim of gathering and sharing expertise, promoting standards of excellence, encouraging collaborative practice, identifying areas of concern and opportunities for the museum community, and advocating the valuable contribution of museums to our society.

Most importantly, we provide a collective voice for the museum sector through our twelve-member board of directors and 300-plus members. These represent the wide breadth of museums, ranging from small community-led, voluntary organisations to national cultural institutions.

We additionally work in partnership with many collection-based organisations - many but not exclusively from the cultural heritage sector - to provide a programme that advises on, encourages and supports long-term, sustainable care and interpretation of our cultural heritage in line with the Heritage Council's Museums Standards Programme for Ireland and the Northern Ireland Museums Council Accreditation Scheme UK. We provide continued professional development and networking opportunities, advocate for museums on a national and international level, and carry out valuable research.

Whilst the IMA is there to support museums we are not about maintaining the status quo. We're also there to challenge and lead conversations about how museums need to change to be more relevant and engage more people. Building stronger networks should be part of this forward momentum of change. It's about a building a stronger, more coherent and sustainable sector.

Constructive partnerships are at the heart of museum organisations' practice. By pooling resources through the sharing of skills and expertise, museums have been able to deliver strategic value and provide enriched programmes and visitors experiences.

This was never more evidenced than during this decade of commemorations, where there continues to be great pride and buy-in at a grassroots level. Regional and rural museums have had a key leadership role in this. Not only are they critically interpreting their histories through their collections and providing further contextual understanding of the events surrounding this decade, but they are also enabling access to expertise, research, and education. They are enhancing opportunities for public engagement and highlighting aspects within museum practice often overlooked by the public.

Cross-border collaborations in museums have proven to have major impact in celebrating diversity and exploring our shared histories, providing safe spaces to discuss and explore contested narratives.

The IMA's recent Bridge over Brexit research with Ulster University highlighted the value of an extended and diverse museum network. It facilitates diverse conversations and supports and assesses existing relationships and initiatives within the museum sector. It explores the potential implications and lines of communication to prepare for the changes ahead; and advocates the role of the museum and the broader cultural sector in fostering relationships between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland through the expertise of museums whose leadership and world-leading research across a range of core themes will be vital to the Brexit discussion.

It is in this context that we wish to take this opportunity to highlight the landscape in which many of our members from regional and rural museums work in.

There are approximately 178 museums in Ireland, of which 141 would have a regional or rural remit. Many of these work in isolation and without the supports available to those in urban environments. With the loss of the museum officer role within the Heritage Council, volunteer and community-led museums increasingly look towards the IMA for guidance. Cognoscente of the limited capacity under which we function, we do this with the goal of the museum sector working together as a whole. Facilitating links between our national and regional cultural institutions and grass-root museums is key to how we work, particularly where it comes to supporting the increasingly divergent roles that the contemporary museum is expected to play within our society

In 2016, we published the survey of museums in Ireland carried out in collaboration with University College Dublin. The first iteration of this kind in over a decade, findings highlighted that major strides had been taken to improve the services provided by our museums to the communities they serve, particularly in the areas of education and access.

However, it also highlighted the opportunity for enhanced support of community and independent museums, including a review of funding initiatives and the development of a national strategy concerning the specific needs of regional and rural museums. This would recognise the key role they play in developing a local sense of identity and community, promoting social cohesion and inclusivity, their contribution to well-being, life-long learning and their contribution to rural development and tourism.

Museums are safe spaces to explore and discuss what really matters and where we are going. At their best, museums are a place to celebrate diversity and explore our shared history (including contested history). The value of an extended and diverse museum network is that helps facilitate diverse and important conversations across the island as a whole.

I would like to finish by commending the importance given to our cultural heritage in recent government and agency strategies and plans, including Heritage 2030, Culture 2025, Creative Ireland, and Project Ireland 2040, and thank the committee for inviting us to be here today. The Irish Museums Association looks forward to working with government to continue to enable a fluid dialogue around museum practice in the coming years.