

Meeting of the Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

Wednesday, 11th December 2019 at 1.30 pm

Conor Falvey, Assistant Secretary, Culture Division at the
Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

Opening Statement

Good afternoon, I am pleased to come before the Committee today to address your questions in regard to the Government's Plans Decade of Centenaries 2020-2023 from the perspective of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

Dr Manning as Chair of Expert Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations has given a very helpful overview of the role of the Group. I will try to add to that now by telling you how that advice and guidance from the Group to the Government on historical matters relating to the Decade of Centenaries has been invaluable in informing the State's approach to the remembrance of the significant historical events of the period.

Adoption by Government of the Initial Statement by the Group (published in 2012) effectively set the tone for the initiative from the outset. The *Statement* was widely commended for providing a supportive structure of guiding principles, which underpinned the State's approach to commemorating the significant historical events that took place between 1912 and 1916, culminating with the centenary commemorations of the 1916 Easter Rising.

The commemorative programme for the first half of the Decade of Centenaries was widely acclaimed for its inclusive, measured, and sensitive approach, which recognised the legitimacy of all traditions and valued mutual respect and historical accuracy. The programme remembered not only the seminal events that marked Ireland's journey towards independence and self-determination but also those which enhance our understanding of the wider international context during this period.

The next phase of the initiative was further underpinned by the *Second Phase Mission Statement*, published in October 2017.

The guiding principles expressed in *Initial Statement* are still significant and relevant and they are re-affirmed in the Expert Advisory Group's *Second Phase Mission Statement 2017 – 2023*. The guiding principles provide clarity and a broad template, intended to empower and support all those involved in delivering authentic, citizen-focused and appropriate commemorations, at national and community level, throughout the second half of the Decade of Centenaries.

In this Statement, the Expert Advisory Group advocated that *'the opportunity to encourage scholarship at national and local level must be used as fully as possible, with particular emphasis on archival investment and development*. This ongoing capital investment in our cultural institutions and archives will ensure that they will continue to have a central role in continuing the process of broad public engagement, creating an important, tangible legacy that endures well beyond the Decade of Centenaries for many years to come.

As Dr Manning has explained The Expert Advisory Group's most recent guidance, entitled *Decade of Centenaries Second Phase Guidance 2018-2023*, makes specific recommendations on how the significant historical centenaries in the forthcoming phase of the Decade might be meaningfully, proportionately and sensitively remembered by the State. These recommendations have been adopted by government and will inform our planning for the centenaries ahead including:

- The Struggle for Independence
- The Civil War
- The Foundation of the State
- Partition and the Foundation of Northern Ireland
- The admission of the Irish Free State into the League of Nations

The Department's budget allocation for the Decade of Centenaries programme in 2020 is €2m, an increase of €900k on 2019.

My colleagues and I in the Department are at all times conscious, in planning the Decade of Centenaries programme for the period out to 2023, that the approaching centenaries present particularly complex and sensitive challenges, coinciding with significant 50th anniversaries in Northern Ireland. The backdrop of Brexit and the ongoing issues affecting the operation of the devolved structures in Northern Ireland also present particular challenges. We are keen to continue co-operation on the island of Ireland, where appropriate and in this regard we are at all times guided by the advice from our colleagues in the

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The exploration of potential cross-border engagement will require careful, thoughtful and sensitive navigation.

The Expert Advisory Group recommends a three-tier approach comprising a small number of State-led commemorations, augmented by local authority and community-led commemorative initiatives. This approach advocates a leading role for local authorities in supporting and driving community-led commemoration, augmented with appropriate State recognition, support and participation. This measured and balanced approach has worked very effectively in a complex and sensitive local context, good examples of this approach earlier this year were seen in both Soloheadbeg (Tipperary) and Knocklong (Limerick).

The Expert Advisory Group recommended that the State should continue to support local and county commemorative exercises to widen and deepen a historical understanding of the significance of the events being commemorated among the public at large. Government has embraced this The Department plans to continue its support for local authorities in 2020 and will also have flexibility to resource additional supports where required and appropriate.

In January 2019, the Government noted the overall proposed approach to the development of the programme for the forthcoming period to 2023. This approach is grounded in the principles laid down in the Second Statement of the Expert Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations (published in October 2017) and in the most recent guidance of the Group (published in January 2019). The Expert Advisory Group has recommended a number of formal State commemorations over the remainder of the Decade of Centenaries.

- A State commemoration for all of those who lost their lives during the Struggle for Independence; in 2021, the National Day of Commemoration takes place on Sunday, 11th July. The existence of this established State ceremonial event may offer a fitting opportunity for an enhanced State commemoration.
- A State commemoration, focusing on themes of remembrance and reconciliation, to take place on a neutral date for all of those who suffered and died during the Civil War;
- The Expert Advisory Group advocates that the centenary of the foundation of the State be remembered in terms of a process rather than a single event. It began with the handing over of Dublin Castle on 16th January 1922 and ended with the formal coming into being of the Irish Free

State on 6th December 1922, in the midst of civil war. To these ends, two formal State commemorations are recommended:

- a. A State ceremonial event in Dublin Castle to mark the symbolic transfer of power to the newly emerging Irish State with the handover of Dublin Castle, and
 - b. A State commemoration on 6th December 2022 in recognition of the pioneering leaders who helped to embed the democratic tradition in the newly emerging Irish State.
- The Expert Advisory Group recommends that the centenary of the partitioning of Ireland and the foundation of Northern Ireland be remembered with a significant academic conference. It's also recommended that a conference, such as this, could examine comparative partitions in Europe, post 1918, to emphasise that Ireland's experience was not unique.
 - A State ceremonial event to mark the centenary of the admission of the Irish Free State into the League of Nations in 2023.

The Department is also engaged with relevant local authorities in relation to commemoration of the events of 1920 in Cork.

The Department is in direct contact with a number of stakeholders and partners in developing and planning these events through the Senior Officials Group and the Interdepartmental Group. The State's objective is to ensure that this period in our history is remembered with an appropriate, meaningful, proportionate and sensitive programme, which recognises the legitimacy of all traditions and values mutual respect and historical authenticity. It aims to promote a deeper understanding of the significance of these events, which remembers all of those who suffered and died, and accepts that the shared historical experience of those years gave rise to very different narratives and memories.

The role of the Decade of Centenaries Inter-Departmental Working Group is:

- To encourage and build collaborative relationships with key stakeholders in relevant Government Departments;
- To drive and support the process of developing the cross-governmental programme for the coming period; and

- To support Departments in leading, developing and delivering commemorative initiatives within the areas for which they have responsibility.

The Expert Advisory Group highlighted the fact that the Decade of Centenaries created unprecedented opportunities for people of all ages to consider and explore some of the most significant events and themes in the history of modern Ireland. The Group recommended that this positive engagement and the associated tangible, long-term benefits should continue to be supported beyond the conclusion of the Decade in 2023 and that State support should be considered for specific, significant Decade of Centenaries permanent legacy initiatives.

One such initiative is the *Beyond 2022: Ireland's Virtual Record Treasury* Initiative, which the Expert Advisory Group has endorsed as a potentially very significant and lasting Decade of Centenaries legacy, combining historical research, archival conservation, technical innovation and international collaboration. It seeks to re-imagine and recreate, through virtual reality, the Public Record Office of Ireland and its archival collections, which were destroyed on 30th June 1922 in the opening engagement of the Civil War.

The project was officially launched by the Taoiseach in Dublin Castle last Thursday (05/12/2019).

Our institutions of learning, and particularly our universities, have been a hugely important element of the Decade of Centenaries programme - delivering commemorative initiatives of great depth and academic integrity. The institutions provide an important platform for discussion and debate for both national and international audiences.

The Minister has recently remarked that “Our universities are the perfect setting to consider many questions that politicians are sometimes better steering clear of. I like to think of the Decade of Centenaries as an ‘open invitation’ – it is never about forcing people to participate but rather creating opportunities that encourage as many people as possible to explore our shared history in a respectful, supportive environment.”

The response and engagement from members of the public to the Decade of Centenaries programme has been unprecedented. Through a rich diversity of historical, cultural and creative activities, we have remembered and commemorated the centenaries of the events that led to the birth of our modern democratic State.

The objective of the State's consultative, measured and sensitive approach is to ensure that in remembering these, difficult, and often deeply personal events, we foster new understandings and mutual respect. We have remembered individual historical events as they occurred 100 years ago, considered how each impacted on the next, and reflected on the overall narrative.

This process of reflection and historical exploration has gifted us with new perspectives on our shared history. Access to new sources of information has led to a deeper and more open understanding of what happened and how those events continue to affect our world today.

In the coming years, the State faces new challenges - to remember the very difficult and sensitive events associated with Partition, Civil War, and the Foundation of the State in ways that strengthen peace and reconciliation; and that respect all traditions on the island of Ireland.

The Department's role is to shape and support a balanced, measured and sensitive approach to the programme development to best navigate this complex and challenging historical territory.

We can only achieve this by working in partnership with stakeholders, such as our institutions of learning, national cultural institutions, local authorities and creative communities. Our National Cultural Institutions have been enthusiastic and supportive partners to date and we have recently received outlines of the plans for each institution for the period ahead. Each is being considered by the Department for integration in to the wider Decades of Centenaries programme for 2020-2023.

Access to authenticated sources is essential to our understanding of the legacy and impact of the overall narrative and associated public debate. Local stories and perspectives and access to local archives can very powerfully enhance our understanding of the impact and legacy of the overall narrative.

We are also reminded of the value of keeping records and preserving the past. Our experiences and memories today are increasingly being created and preserved in digital form. The Department continues to embrace innovation and creativity to ensure that this contemporary testimony of life in modern Ireland is captured and recorded.

Appendix I

Official Groups established to underpin the Decade of Centenaries Programme

At its meeting on 10th January 2012, the Government noted that three groups were convened specifically to focus on the Decade of Centenaries and related matters.

Senior Officials Group on Commemorations

This group currently comprises the Secretaries General and other key officials of the Departments of the Taoiseach; Foreign Affairs and Trade; Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht; Defence; Education and Skills; Transport, Tourism and Sport; and the Chairman of the OPW. Officials from other relevant bodies may attend meetings as required. This Group has a role in overseeing the development and delivery of the State Centenary Programme; in co-ordinating official engagement on commemorative initiatives; and in reporting to Government appropriately in this regard.

Expert Advisory Group on Commemorations

The Expert Advisory Group on Commemorations was established by the Taoiseach in 2011 and comprises historians, cultural practitioners and record custodians. It provides guidance on historical matters relating to the Decade of Centenaries, to ensure the balance and authenticity of the commemorative programme. It has a role in ensuring that significant events are commemorated accurately, proportionately and appropriately in tone. The group is chaired by Dr. Maurice Manning, is non-partisan and is composed of independent members from around the country.

All-Party Consultation Group on Commemorations

This Group, which was originally established in 2006, is chaired by the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. This broad-based consultation reflected an inclusive approach to the commemoration of the revolutionary period and an acknowledgement of these historical events as a shared national heritage that should be remembered on a collaborative and non-partisan basis. The term of office of the Group expired on 3rd February 2016, with the dissolution of the 31st Dáil, and the Group has now been reconvened. The SDLP, DUP, Alliance Party and the UUP were invited to nominate representatives. Only the SDLP and Alliance have taken up that invitation to date. The first meeting of the reconvened Group was chaired by the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht on 4th October, 2018 and there have been 3 further meetings of the group since, the most recent on 20th November, 2019.

NB The Expert Advisory Group and the All-Party Group are consultation groups and it remains the exclusive responsibility of the Government to prepare and deliver an appropriate commemorative programme.