

Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
Government Plans for Commemorative Events 2020-2023

Wednesday 11 December 2019

Opening Statement.

I would like begin by thanking the members of the committee for the invitation to attend this meeting today.

As we head into the final years of the Decade of Centenaries, and are facing the challenge of commemorating events from a very turbulent and sensitive part of our history, I would like to share today some of our experiences in Tipperary and talk briefly about a model of collaboration which was successful for us in 2019.

We have, like our colleagues across the country been involved in marking centenaries since 2012, through the various cultural services in the county such as the Heritage and Arts Offices and Library and Museums Services. We also took part in the Ireland 2016 programme which nationally generated an unprecedented groundswell of creative engagement and participation on the theme of commemoration in what was a hugely successful 2 year programme. The legacy of this programme was an engaged public who had been activated and were interested in exploring their own history and marking the centenaries of events that happened in their localities.

The challenges facing both them and us were of course the fact that the period of commemoration we were moving into was both turbulent and divisive. Unlike the 1916 events which had happened outside of the county, we were now moving into a period of time where due to the War of Independence and the Civil War a significant amount of activity took place within Tipperary. Events such as the Soloheadbeg Ambush, which is generally seen as the first action of the War of Independence in January 1919 and which resulted in the loss of 2 lives .There is a significant challenge in commemorating events like this, not least because the historical narrative and legacy for those involved and their descendents is so completely different.

This was never going to be an easy event. In June 2018 I was approached by a group of locals who had formed a committee to mark the centenary in Solohead parish. They had come together to consider an incident that had happened in their locality and the tone that they were setting was respectful and inclusive and one of remembrance. Over the next few months I provided whatever support I could and facilitated support from the Commemorations Unit in the Department of Culture Heritage and the Gaeltacht. A number of activities took place around the centenary including a project with local schools. A formal

commemoration took place on January 20th at which relatives of the people that carried out the ambush, the relatives of the County council employees there on the day and the relatives of those that lost their lives were in attendance. An information panel was unveiled at the site of a monument at Solohead Cross and a publication detailing the events of the day and all that had been present was released and made available to those in attendance. To tie in with this the County Museum and Local Historical Society hosted a conference the day before the event.

Great credit is due to the organising committee for taking on this event and for at all times adhering to the principles of respectful and inclusive commemoration. They brought together all elements of the community and any challenges that arose they worked through them together. The history books record these events in great detail but we must also remember that the narratives have also been handed down through generations and are powerful and emotive and the input of the local communities themselves on the ground are essential to navigating the path to inclusivity and sensitivity in these matters.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Commemorations Unit of the Department, who through the Local Authority again provided support and advice for this event. We were delighted to recently be awarded the Chambers Ireland Local Authority Excellence Award in the Commemorations Category and were delighted to have the Chairman of the Solohead Committee with us on the night to receive this award as it recognises the importance of that partnership between Local Authorities and Local communities in relation to commemorations.

This 'partnership model' was also central to our submission to the public call by the Expert Advisory Committee on Commemorations in 2018, as we feel in Tipperary that this is what works best for us for engaging the public in the commemorations process. The Committee we worked with in Solohead certainly had huge capacity but we would hope to grow this in other groups around the county and encourage them to adopt the methods and approach used by this group. Resources are of course essential to this, we have run a number of grant schemes since 2015 which provides supports to groups in this area and this is something we would hope to continue to 2023 and again we acknowledge the support of the Commemorations Unit of the Department of Culture Heritage and the Gaeltacht in helping us do this on an annual basis. As we now approach 2020 we are again reaching out to communities and organisations within the county with a view to working with them and supporting them in remembering the events of a hundred years ago.