

# National Museum of Ireland

Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> September, 2021 at 12:30pm

## Opening Statement to Joint Oireachtas Committee by Chair of The National Museum of Ireland, Catherine Heaney on the topic of challenges facing the museum sector and cultural institutions as a result of COVID-19

Thank you for the opportunity to present before the Committee today on behalf of the National Museum of Ireland.

We appreciate the fact that this Committee identified the recovery of the cultural sector, and the role of the National Cultural Institutions play in that recovery, in your work programme, published in June.

Together with the Director of the National Museum of Ireland, Lynn Scarff, I hope that, during this exchange, we can provide you with some considerations that may be usefully applied – in a policy context – as we start to emerge from the effects of the pandemic. I will deal with some top-line points in this statement, and we are happy to discuss our more detailed submission in the exchange that will follow.

The National Museum is Ireland's largest national cultural institution with four public sites – three in Dublin (Natural History Museum, NMI Archaeology, NMI - Decorative Arts and History) and one in Castlebar, Co Mayo (NMI - Country Life). In addition, the Museum manages the Collections Resource Centre in Swords which acts as the main repository for the national collection.

As with most doors across the country, those of the Museum closed on 12<sup>th</sup> March last year. It's been a stop-start situation since, and we have made every effort, while open, to ensure the safety of our visitors through instituting pre-visit booking systems; one-way systems across our sites; as well as some physical alternations to support public health measures. Many of these changes have been enabled though capital support made available by the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media, Catherine Martin and her Department.

But, of course, the work of the Museum is not just about welcoming visitors through our doors: during the pandemic, we have continued to collect, conserve and educate, including through an enhanced online offering.

The experience of the pandemic has thought us new things, as well as presenting new challenges.

At its broadest level, the pandemic has caused many to question the role of culture and heritage in all of our lives. For so long, the key performance indicator for the sector has been visitor numbers. This notion has been completely thrown on its head.

As we move out of the pandemic, there is an opportunity to consider the wider and deeper role of the cultural institutions and the culture sector more generally. Museums as collectors; as curators; as spaces of wellbeing, as places of discussion about our future, and as instruments of community cohesion and education are all ripe for new consideration.

In the early days of the pandemic, the National Museum of Ireland decided to work harder to meet our Public Sector and Human Rights Duty, by considering those communities most adversely impacted by the pandemic. Many of these communities are literally on our doorstep: the families who had poor access to online learning; the children who did not have the home support to progress with learning; and those living in accommodation without the garden and outdoor space to escape lockdown.

As international tourism remains low, we will continue to focus on disadvantaged communities and support recovery from learning loss and loss of opportunity.

But as we move out of the pandemic, we want to bring more rigour and discussion to the concept of the inclusive museum. We know that cultural institutions play a critical role in creative place-making and are important elements of our overall cultural ecosystem, and in turn the health and wellbeing of communities. The Black Lives Matter movement, which became an active voice in the pandemic, has highlighted that museums across the globe have a distance to travel.

Political engagement in our dialogue on an inclusive museum will be very important in establishing new, common and acceptable KPIs that go far beyond visitor numbers. This is a policy and a resource issue for all of us.

Of course, the National Cultural Institutions in Ireland were cushioned – from an income perspective – during the pandemic given our high-dependency on Exchequer funding. We are grateful that our budgetary allocations remained intact. However, we have seen a loss in retail income which we have had to adjust for.

But it is the many cultural and heritage sites, big and small dotted around the country and which rely heavily on visitor fees, that are suffering and will face a much more difficult road to recovery.

For this reason, while getting people through the door can no longer be the key measurement for cultural institutions, the sector needs a return of strong visitor numbers to survive. Income diversification and incentives to collaborate across the cultural sector are opportunities that need to be created and supported.

The role of cultural tourism in post-pandemic Ireland must not be neglected in our bid to reopen fully. The EU's blueprint to support the tourism sector, published at the height of the first wave of COVID, highlighted the importance of cultural tourism in building more sustainable tourism economies.

For the cultural sector, including the National Cultural Institutions, enhanced capabilities with more fit-for-purpose buildings and viable online offerings help to support a stand-out cultural offering. Ensuring that the investment, anticipated for the sector under the National Development Plan, does not fall away could not be more important.

And while the Museum worked very hard to reach audiences online during the pandemic, we know that building a high-quality online offering to complement physical programming will – in post pandemic life – be just as important in driving interest and outreach in our collections and work. There is a digital capacity gap in the cultural sector that will need to be bridged.

Considerations about the development of an enhanced night-time economy in Ireland should not just tag culture in a long list of potential component parts. It should situate culture as a key plank in helping to bring audiences into our towns and cities after working hours. Using cultural spaces to support artists, using cultural spaces to host events, using cultural spaces to be a safe and enjoyable place to simply hang out are among the endless possibilities that are ripe for consideration.

The Committee will be well aware of the recommendations of the Arts and Culture Taskforce, some of which I have mentioned today. It provides strong recommendations for the more immediate recovery of our sector.

However, long-term strategic consideration of the role of culture in our society, and how that is supported by Cultural Institutions, is also required if we are to ensure the sector weathers inevitable storms with greater resilience.

Over the coming weeks, as the board of the National Museum regroups, following a number of reappointments and new appointments, we will be writing to you on some of these long-term issues, not least with regard to our enabling legislation and our long-term ambitions as an inclusive museum.

Thank you.

