

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM TURASÓIREACHT, CULTÚR, EALAÍONA, SPÓRT AGUS NA MEÁIN

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TOURISM, CULTURE, ARTS, SPORT AND MEDIA

Dé Céadaoin, 29 Meán Fómhair 2021

Wednesday, 29 September 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Brendan Griffin,	Malcolm Byrne,
Ímelda Munster,	Micheál Carrigy,
Johnny Mythen,	Fintan Warfield.
Christopher O'Sullivan.	

Teachta / Deputy Alan Dillon sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Vice Chairman: There is one item of committee business to be addressed before I call our witness to present. Can I take it that the draft minutes of the committee meetings held in private and public session on Wednesday, 22 September are formally agreed and there are no matters arising? Is that agreed? Agreed.

Impact of Covid-19 on National Cultural Institutions: Discussion

Vice Chairman: This meeting has been convened for a discussion with the National Museum of Ireland, NMI, and the Irish Museums Association, IMA, on the impact of Covid-19 on cultural institutions. I formally welcome the following witnesses who will all join the meeting remotely via Microsoft Teams: Ms Lynn Scarff, director, and Ms Catherine Heaney, chair of the NMI, Ms Gina O’Kelly, director, and Dr. Audrey Whitty, chair of the IMA. They are all very welcome.

The format of the meeting is such that I will invite our witnesses to make their opening statements, which will be followed by questions from members of the committee. As the witnesses are probably aware, the committee may publish the opening statements on its website following the meeting. Before I invite them to deliver their opening statements, which are limited to five minutes, I would like to advise them of the following in relation to parliamentary privilege.

Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative they comply with any such direction.

As our witnesses today are attending remotely outside the Leinster House campus, please note there are some limitations to parliamentary privilege and, as such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness physically present here does. Witnesses participating in the committee session from a jurisdiction outside the State are advised they should also be mindful of domestic laws and how they may apply to the evidence they give.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House, or an official or entity, either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I again remind members of the constitutional requirement that members may be physically present within the confines of the place which Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House, or the Convention Centre Dublin. To participate in public meetings, I will not permit a member to attend where they are not adhering to the constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to attend from outside the precincts will be asked to leave the meeting.

In addition, when physically present in the committee room for the meeting, all members in attendance are asked to exercise personal responsibility in protecting themselves and others from the risk of contracting Covid-19. They are strongly advised to practise good hand hygiene and leave at least one vacancy between them and others attending. They should also maintain

an appropriate level of social distancing during and after meetings. Masks, preferably of good medical grade, should be worn at all times during the meeting except when speaking. I ask for the full co-operation of members on this matter.

I also ask members to please identify themselves when contributing for the benefit of Debates Office staff preparing the Official Report. They should mute their microphones when not contributing to reduce background noise and feedback. I ask that they use the button to raise their hands when they wish to contribute. I remind all those joining today's meeting to ensure mobile phones are on silent or are switched off.

Furthermore, I am obliged to be absent from the meeting for a time. I nominate Senator Carrigy to chair the meeting in my absence. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I call Ms Heaney to make her statement.

Ms Catherine Heaney: Is pribhléid mhór dom a bheith anseo os bhur gcomhair inniu. I thank the committee for the opportunity to present today on behalf of the NMI. We appreciate the fact that this committee identified the recovery of cultural institutions, and the cultural sector in general, as part of the work programme it published in June. Together with the director of the NMI, Lynn Scarff, I hope that during this exchange we can provide the committee with some considerations that may usefully be 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 with the committee that will follow this afternoon.

As most members of the committee will be aware, the NMI is among a number of cultural institutions including, for example, the National Archives of Ireland, the National Library of Ireland, the National Gallery of Ireland and others. The NMI has four public sites, three of which are located in Dublin. Many members will be familiar with the Natural History Museum, which is on the Merrion Street side of Leinster House, in addition to the Museum of Archaeology, which is on Kildare Street. I hope members all regularly take the chance to visit these sites. We also have a site at Collins Barracks, where our decorative arts and history galleries are located, and we have the Museum of Country Life in Castlebar, County Mayo. In addition to our museum sites, we also manage the collections resource centre based in Swords, which is where we house the majority of our collections that are not on public display. In fact, we have had exchanges previously with this committee. The Chairman of this committee has visited Swords. We have a number of issues with the lease of that premises, which we may address in future correspondence with members.

To return to the issue of the pandemic, like many of public bodies we closed our doors on 12 March last year. It has been a stop-start situation since. We have made every effort, while we have been open, to ensure the safety of our visitors through instituting pre-booking visits and one-way systems as well as some physical alternations to support public health measures. Many of the measures and changes we have instituted to support the public during the pandemic have been enabled with the support of the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, and her Department. We are very appreciative of that.

Of course, the work of the NMI 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 taught us many 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 our lives. For so long, the key performance indicator for the sector has been visitor numbers. This notion, in our view, has been completely turned on its head. As we move out of the pandemic, there is an opportunity to consider the wider and deeper role of cultural institutions and culture more generally. Museums as collectors, curators, spaces of well-being, places of discussion about our future and instruments of community cohesion are all ripe for new consideration.

In the early days of the pandemic, the NMI decided to work harder to meet our public sector and human rights duties by considering those communities most adversely impacted by the pandemic. As it happens, many of those communities are on our doorstep. These include families who had poor access to online learning, children who did not have the home supports to progress with learning and education and those families and individuals living in accommodation without gardens and outdoor spaces to escape, especially during the early days of lockdown when we were all confined. As international tourism remains low, the National Museum will continue to focus on disadvantaged communities and support recovery from learning loss and loss of opportunity. However, 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 well-being of communities. As many committee members are aware, 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, including engagement with this committee, in our dialogue on an inclusive museum will be very important in establishing new, common and acceptable key performance indicators 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 to the Minister and Department for ensuring that our budgetary allocations remained intact. However, we have seen a loss in retail income for which we will have to adjust. As many committee members know, as they come from different parts of the country, it is the many cultural and heritage sites, big and small, dotted around the country and which rely heavily on visitor numbers for their survival that are suffering and will face a much more difficult road to recovery. For that reason, while getting people through the door can no longer be the key performance 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. I know this committee has undertaken a report on the recovery of tourism and has acknowledged culture in that. The committee will also be aware that the EU's blueprint to support the tourism sector, published in the early days of the first wave of Covid, highlighted the importance of cultural tourism in building more sustainable long-term tourism economies. Not only must we look at the immediate recovery road for the cultural sector, we must also look at the long-term road of recovery and how that fits in to the tourism strategies the committee is considering.

For the cultural sector, including the national cultural institutions, enhanced capabilities with more fit-for-purpose buildings and viable online offerings help to support the cultural offering as we try to rebuild. Ensuring that the investment anticipated for the sector under the national development plan does not fall away could not be more important as we move out of

the pandemic. 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. There is a digital capacity gap in the cultural sector that will need to be bridged. Skills and staff will be required to do that work.

Considerations about the development of an enhanced night-time economy in Ireland, which is also an item for consideration under this committee, 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, in particular. Using cultural spaces to support artists and host events, and using them as a safe and enjoyable place to simply hang out, are all ripe for consideration. When we travel again, we can experience places such as the cultural quarter in Vienna or cities such as Washington and New York. There is an opportunity in those places for people to come in, hang out, use the cafe and WiFi. That is normal for cultural institutions. We must build our capacity to make these places nice places to come and simply hang out.

The committee will be well aware of the recommendations of the arts and culture recovery task force, some of which I have mentioned today. It provides strong recommendations for the more immediate recovery of our sector. However, long-term strategic considerations 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 future storms, which it will inevitably face. 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 the committee on some of these longer-term issues, not least with regard to our enabling legislation, which is now quite old, even by the standards of a national museum. We would love a dialogue on that, as we would love a dialogue on our ambitions as an inclusive museum.

Dr. Audrey Whitty: I will give the committee a background to the Irish Museums Association, IMA, initially and I will thereafter make our submission. The IMA is the main network for museums in Ireland and uniquely works on an all-island basis. We provide connectivity and a collective voice for the museum sector through our 350 members, who represent the breadth of museums from community-led and voluntary organisations to national cultural institutions. Enabled by funding from the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and the Heritage Council, we extend a support programme for the museum community structured under three pillars: advocacy, professional development, and research and dissemination. Our aim is not only to ensure the safeguarding of our cultural heritage, but also to continually look towards the future of museums as centres for discussion, learning, research, industry, creativity and enjoyment.

With approximately 250 museums across Ireland, attracting in excess of 8 million visitors per year and directly employing more than 1,500 staff and 1,000 long-term volunteers, they are integral to the creative economy and are important stakeholders within the Irish cultural sector and related industries. Through their collections, museums support new research, open conversations, and help heal. They are integral to place-making and our national identity, one that will be impacted by the collective experience of the pandemic.

Museums are also defined by their role in education and community building. They provide our society with programmes that provide lifelong learning, promote well-being, advocate inclusion and diversity, foster social cohesion, protect our most vulnerable, and play an important role in reconciliation on the island of Ireland. They are one of the main reasons visitors come to Ireland, bolstering the tourism and hospitality sectors, and are intrinsic to our civic infrastruc-

ture, supporting urban and local regeneration and revitalising our towns and city centres.

Museums influence and inform public conversation. Discussions that gathered momentum in the public forum throughout the pandemic have been encouraged and led by museums. Those included discussions about historical inequalities, power dynamics, political divisiveness, IDE and ethical values, and sustainability. We also saw during the pandemic how the public turned to museums for enjoyment and to feel connected. Museums, at the same time, proved to be dynamic, flexible and forward-thinking. Without doubt, they have a pivotal role to play in social and economic recovery and resilience of the nation. However, it is apparent that support of their activities is in need of re-energising.

The main challenges for the sector include a strategic framework. Approximately 68% of museums within the Republic of Ireland are classified as independent, with 32% of museums falling under a range of different Departments and public bodies. As a result, leadership and direction for the sector resides with numerous stakeholders. We would welcome the establishment of a body to establish a clear and considered national strategy for museum development and ensure fluid dialogue between Departments and agencies to secure the centrality of the museum sector in national frameworks, thus supporting the sector in realising its full potential.

The IMA sees the second challenge as relating to funding structures. Museum structures have moved at a faster pace than current funding frameworks. Most Irish museums holding collections of national, regional and local importance operate as non-profit, independent organisations without the funding supports extended to related sectors. While recognising that many receive specific project funding via schemes operated by the Heritage Council, the Arts Council and the cultural unit of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media, short timelines, retroactive payments and capacity concerns sometimes present cash flow and resourcing issues when availing of project grant funding. Core multiannual funding would not only be key in ensuring the long-term survival and enhancement of their development and planning but would also benefit local social and economic infrastructures and the regeneration of our town centres.

The third challenge we see is the building of capacity. Investment in staff is core to equipping future leadership that is representative of our communities and audiences, that empowers co-ownership and that ensures values of diversity and inclusion are embedded within our museums. Capacity building and training are primary areas of focus to encourage new leadership and to ensure these values of diversity and inclusion are embedded within our museums. Knowledge exchange, co-mentoring across sectors on how to rethink business models and strategies and investment in upskilling all allow practitioners to meaningfully connect with audiences and build sustainable, collaborative relationships with community leaders.

The fourth challenge is that of empowering museums. By definition, museums are centres of research. Despite this, available data on the museum sector in Ireland are severely lacking. Current information on visitor numbers, how the sector is structured, museums' collections, employment, funding and programming is not consistently reported and centrally gathered. This presents a barrier to museums in making the case for supports, in benchmarking their activity and in evidencing their value. We strongly recommend this be addressed as a first step in assessing the needs and impact of museums.

Vice Chairman: I thank our witnesses for their opening statements. We will now proceed to the questions and answers session with members. I will call on committee members on the basis of the agreed rota, which has been circulated. Members have five minutes each.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank both Dr. Whitty and Ms Heaney for their presentations. I have three questions. I am conscious that Dr. Whitty said that 68% of museums in Ireland are independent and community or volunteer-led. Ms Heaney talked about some of our national cultural institutions, which have somewhat of a State cushion. Will the witnesses outline some of the financial challenges those independent and community and voluntary museums face? What measures are now necessary to ensure they can get back on their feet?

Ms Heaney mentioned the opportunities for late-night opening, which is very important, and the night-time economy. What do we need to do to ensure that our cultural institutions can open later at night? There is some evidence that it happens, but we need to do more.

During the pandemic, we saw the amazing digital offerings of some of our museums and galleries. Some of what came out was incredible. How can we further enhance that? I am particularly thinking of the educational context and linking in with schools. Some very imaginative programming has been funded. The National Gallery of Ireland did some incredible stuff during the period, for example. Even now, as it gets back up and running, the Yeats exhibition it has put on is excellent.

Those are my three questions. One relates to the financial challenges facing the independent sector, the second is about how to get more late-night opening and the third is about how to further enhance the digital offering so that it can link in with the education system further.

Dr. Audrey Whitty: With regard to the fundraising issue for independent museums or, more to the point, the financial instability arising from the pandemic, we believe there is great potential to establish a dedicated collaborative task force to look at that particular issue under the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future. This task force could be expanded across Departments to support museums and relevant agencies and bodies under whose remit museums fall. That would look at the long-term sustainability of the independent museum sector, as the Senator outlined. We also believe there is a need for a national strategy for museum development, which would again encompass the independent museum sector. This would aim to ensure more fluid dialogue between Departments and agencies to keep it within the national framework. We see those two proposals as possible ways to alleviate the strain on the independent museum sector.

With regard to the night-time economy, there is great potential to look at this issue under the auspices of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media as Ms Heaney, chair of the National Museum of Ireland, has outlined. I am referring to the use of the cultural space within the night-time economy. Museums in particular are well positioned to be central to those particular spaces. I will stop now and allow the National Museum of Ireland representatives to come in.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Before Dr. Whitty's colleagues come in, did her organisation quantify the scale of the losses to the independent and voluntary museum sector over the Covid period? Some of the national cultural institutions had a cushion.

Dr. Audrey Whitty: I will let Ms O'Kelly, our director of operations, come in on that point.

Ms Gina O'Kelly: We are currently carrying out an extensive survey in the museums sector. The preliminary report arising from this is due to be published within the next fortnight. The Network of European Museum Organisations has quantified these losses across Europe. We have not been able to do that in Ireland. That brings us back again to the issue of research

on the sector and providing capacity for that research. Many museums that closed suffered great losses of income and revenue. I refer not only to entry fees to museums, but to the tertiary economy of coffee shops and retail environments. That has had very significant impacts. Many museums also rely on hiring out their commercial spaces for events and there has obviously been a great impact on that activity. One of the core issues we have faced has been that of staff capacity within many of these museums.

It should be noted that, when we are talking about the independent museum sector, we are not just talking about community and volunteer-led institutions. There are regional museums or museums that hold collections of national importance that are also classified as independent. As noted, 32% or 34% of museums are funded directly through Government agencies, but the rest fall outside of that funding. Their capacity to avail of some of the grants is also an issue because they do not have the staff or resources to apply. Retroactive payment is also an issue because the museums may sometimes not have the cash flow to pay out sums of money. We saw this in their attempts at digitisation last year. Some museums just did not have the capacity to avail of some of the supports that were extended to them.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I am out of time but I will ask Ms Heaney or any other witness to say a line or two on how to get more of our museums and galleries open late at night or on the digital offering.

Ms Catherine Heaney: I will just pop in on the late-night opening. The conversation on late-night opening has really just begun. As with everything, it is crucial to bring everyone that should be in the conversation into it at an early point. The museum sector is very open to being part of that dialogue on how to shape the night-time economy. The special offering of museums and galleries is that they often bridge the early evening period. The sector may not be for the crowd who want to stay out until 2 a.m. or 3 a.m. but for people who go out as a family. There are people who do not do late nights or whatever, so an early evening offering could probably play a unique part. We see that a bit with Culture Night etc.

The “how” is probably the deeper question because everything is resource-driven. All our galleries and museums have very valuable and important collections that need the utmost surveillance, care and attention. It would be an addition to our existing resource requirements but there is much potential payback so beginning that conversation now would be very advantageous. Ms Scarff might speak to the digital piece.

Ms Lynn Scarff: With digital, we will continue to be hybrid in the museum with regard to the availability of online and on-site material. I can give the committee an insight into one of the great advantages of digital. We had a broadcast from our natural history team on Earth Day that attracted 27,000 pupils from all over the country at primary school level. That is the kind of reach we would not ordinarily be able to have in the museum over an hour and 40 minutes. If we think about how to build a sensible programme that looks at a digital offering, and if we supplement it with on-site material, it would really allow us to be more national all the time with our programming. We are looking at building resources around the digitalisation of the collection, and, unfortunately, this is not just about capital but about having the people to do that work and getting the collection online so people can access it.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank the witnesses for their attendance and submissions. As has been stated, museums are an important and integral part of society in any country. We are extremely lucky to possess a rich and vibrant array of art, literature, history and music. My county of Wexford has some of the best museums in the country, like Johnstown Castle, En-

niscorthy Castle, the National 1798 Rebellion Centre and the Fr. Murphy Centre at Boolavogue.

Would museums benefit from using their space for the likes of small performances by local or even well-known artists? I refer to historical play enactments, literature and poetry readings or small ensemble performances, for example. What drawbacks or obstacles exist in upskilling employees and volunteers? Do museums need specialist equipment, for example, and is there a national plan for raising funds? Does the sector need extra funding from the Department and how much funding is required?

Ms Catherine Heaney: I thank the Deputy for those observations. He highlights one of the points we make in our submission, which is the need for greater collaboration across the sector. It takes in the use of bases like museums in the main, and particularly national cultural institutions, as the public spaces that they are. All these public spaces are recognised under the national development plan. If that all follows through, there is a tremendous opportunity for collaboration and bringing different strands of culture together under one roof. We are ambitious about bringing in new audiences and diversifying.

It is one of the plinths in the cultural strategy from the Department to increase collaboration across the sector. We are very mindful of that and now is a good time to start thinking about how that can be done. Much of the cultural sector, and particularly cultural institutions, has innovated and brought in artists-in-residence, programmes and the likes over the course of the pandemic. This is not just a pandemic measure but something we must make constant. There is clearly a funding attachment under that but if we can look at being more diverse in the sourcing of statutory funding from different Departments and having less strict lines around what should do what, we could make a more dynamic cultural space. I thank the Deputy again for his observations.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I asked about potential drawbacks or obstacles to upskilling employees and volunteers.

Dr. Audrey Whitty: Trying to achieve a sustained programme of training would be the main obstacle if we were to look to enhance the skills of staff across the museum sector in Ireland. We have spoken about a physical hybrid model, taking in virtual and physical learning, exhibitions and research programmes. We could look at collections management and conservation for the collections. The Irish Museums Association has implemented the Interpreting Museums programme, which could be expanded and delivered at a much higher level in terms of necessary funding.

On the question of upskilling, we could look at certain areas, particularly European models such as the UK digitisation fund and the Canada Council for the Arts. There is also the area of upskilling actual digital skills as well.

Ms Lynn Scarff: There is a great opportunity in the point raised by the Deputy around training and it concerns increasing the diversity of the workforce within museums and reaching out to local communities. Our chair spoke about the inclusive museum and there is definitely opportunity in training programmes and reaching communities that may be under-represented within our workforce. Working with volunteers and young graduates in that respect would be really important for our workforce in future so we can be more representative of our communities.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: There was mention of key performance indicators that reflect

quality of engagement rather than the quantity of visitors only. What are examples of what should be included in those indicators?

Ms Gina O’Kelly: Will the Deputy just repeat the question?

Deputy Johnny Mythen: There was mention of the development of key performance indicators that reflect the quality of engagement rather than the quantity of visitors only. What examples might be included in those indicators?

Ms Gina O’Kelly: The use of digitisation has come to a head over the past two years as people turn to that aspect of museum engagement. We really must provide a wider and more significant base of understanding of online engagements. This again brings us back to a better understanding of how we are engaging with audiences.

We have been working with a number of consultants over the past year, looking at how museums might evaluate this type of engagement in a better way. This is a costly process and to date we have spent approximately 30% of our budget in exploring this matter. Such supports are necessary. It is a case of more funding being required but it is not necessarily constrained to it. It is also about being clever in how we apply this funding so it can create a baseline for museums to engage in a better way.

Ms Lynn Scarff: I can also speak to the key performance indicators. We have been focused for so long on quantitative evaluation so the type of key performance indicators we are now looking at are much more qualitative in their basis. By their nature, these are more difficult to record. There has been some quite significant research done in a number of countries around health and well-being and its connection to depth of engagement in culture and how communities reach that culture. There are opportunities in how we evaluate our programmes and look, in particular, at methods of informal and non-formal learning and where our cultural institutions fit in that ecosystem. There may be young people who might find the formal learning structures of their school not necessarily as inspirational as a visit to their local museum. There is a question of thinking about those cultural institutions and our cultural ecosystem as somewhere we can measure the different elements. We are not just thinking about the number of primary schools coming in but rather follow-up studies on a long-term basis taking in the impact of a visit or workshop on a primary school group, for example, through the pupils’ education. As Ms O’Kelly rightly points out, that kind of work takes resources because it is a little more long-term in nature but it allows us to start measuring our impact in a much more holistic way. A focus on funding that kind of research to develop key performance indicators that speak to that depth of engagement is where we need to be.

Chairman: I thank Senator Moynihan and the contributors for their responses. I call Senator Warfield.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I thank Ms Heaney, Dr. White and Ms Scarff for their very interesting contributions to this discussion. I am particularly drawn to Ms Heaney’s comment that museums are ripe for new consideration as collectors, curators, spaces of well-being, places of discussion about our future and instruments of community cohesion and education. Does she think that is the kind of thing that should be considered in the context of the legislative reviews she suggested later in her contribution? The legislation that surrounds the national cultural institutions is different in ways and she might speak to the museum legislation. Is there scope for a review of it?

The elements she spoke about with respect to artists and places of culture place the museums in a very good position in terms of budgetary allocations as very active cultural places. I was in Collins Barracks for the Mother Summer Block Party. That is a good example of how our national cultural institutions can engage in the night-time economy. I commend the witnesses for adopting that approach early. Have they made the Department aware of the staffing issues that would come with the recommendations of the nightlife report? How do the NMI's staffing numbers compare with similar museums across Europe or in Scotland or Wales?

I wish to touch on a matter Ms Scarff and I have spoken about previously. Ms Heaney mentioned the Black Lives Matter protests in her contribution. Will she update me on the NMI's strategy to deal with objects that have an colonial past? I spoke to the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, on this matter in the Seanad. I called on him to step up to the plate to provide resources and funding that may be necessary for the museum's work. Is there a need for Government policy in this area? I will leave it at that as there are only two and half minutes remaining in this time slot.

Ms Catherine Heaney: I thank the Senator for those questions. I will deal with the question on the legislation first. The legislation is probably around the same age as the Senator. Often it is useful to revisit our legislation every decade or so because it informs exactly what we do. The most recent legislation that founded the museum places a heavy emphasis on collections and our collections policy. That is what we do. It is our bread and butter in many ways. There is very little emphasis on and very few references to the public. One such provision is that the legislation requires us to make available objects for sale to the public. There is no real depth within our legislation in that respect. In many ways, our strategies and the strategies of many of the cultural institutions, as the Senator will be aware, are far more visionary and inclusive than the legislation requires us to be. When the board of the museum in its fullest numbers stepped down at the start of July we wrote to the Minister on a number of topics, one of which was the legislation. There is an outstanding invitation from this committee for us to write to it and that is one of the areas we hope to address in our correspondence. As Dr. White said, we need this kind of national vision and quite often that is set out in the legislation.

The Senator asked about making museums more accessible other than being part of the culture and fabric of our lives. While we had the Mother Summer Block Party at Collins Barracks, depending on the spaces, there are limitations. Obviously, there is a car park that limits our capacity to stretch between our Kildare Street building and the National Library. I raised that with the Ceann Comhairle previously when we gave permission for the Ceramics Room to be used for the Seanad a few years ago. As we come out of the pandemic it is almost wrong to go back to what was normal. This is an opportunity to recognise how people changed their lives, how we have changed and how we have socialised. So much has changed. This is the opportunity not to go back to the things that were not as nice prior to the pandemic and to celebrate the things that were nice. It is a good time to almost draw a line in the sand and to reconsider what is important to us and what is important that culture can support in ensuring we can have the things we liked about the lockdown such as being able to walk around our cities without too much interference. I bike around Dublin and I was biking around the city on Monday and I hated it. We have to use this time to see what can we do differently. I will pass over to Ms Scarff to deal with some of the remaining points the Senator raised in his questions.

Ms Lynn Scarff: I thank Senator Warfield for his questions. As Ms Heaney said, during the past two weeks we have had the Mother Summer Block Party. We have had Alison Lowry in doing a piece of work and some filming on music in Clarke Square on Sunday. The time is

ripe for our cultural institutions to be used as spaces of the public realm where arts and culture are going on continuously.

I will address the Senator's last question on decolonisation and repatriation. Our board ratified a statement on the NMI's policy on that issue at our last meeting of our full board last June. I would be happy to send that on to the Senator in full for him to read through it. He raised the issue of what resources we need. There is still a great deal of research to be done on the objects in our collections from a provenance perspective, particularly our ethnographic collection, and we are very much committed to that. The key element for us is communication and dissemination of that collection in order that other communities around the world are aware of what we hold and why we hold it. It is part of a larger decolonisation question and process for our museum, on which we are working with a number of our peers.

On the Senator's question about a national policy, it is important there is one. Both Dr. White and Ms O'Kelly from the Irish Museums Association have brought this up and there is a discussion at a national level on that. The Heritage Council would potentially, because of its role in the museum standards programme of Ireland, be a good home to drive that forward. Generally, there is a strong consensus on examining that. I imagine we will see something emerging in the coming months. That overall message we want to get across to the committee today is that the pandemic has shown there is a commitment to collaboration across the museum sector in Ireland - across our national cultural institutions, local museums, independent museums and historical sites. Thinking of ways that can be built on and policies that nurture that is where we need to go. As Ms Heaney said, we are moving very much forward and taking new steps, building on what we have learned and the opportunities that were created.

Chairman: I thank Ms Scarff for that response. I call Senator Carrigy.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I welcome all the witnesses. I thank them for the work they do in maintaining and looking after our rich heritage. Covid has given us more of an appreciation of what is around us in our culture, history and surroundings. We have had more time to look at that. There is a bright future for our museum sector, etc. Evening and night-time events were mentioned and I noticed in my county of Longford over the past couple of years that libraries have been used for such events, book launches, etc. We should consider opening our museums to such events. It would allow more people in and more people might get an appreciation of museums and what we have in them.

Since we have opened, where are visitor numbers at? The witnesses mentioned international tourism and we had a discussion yesterday in which I spoke on connectivity. We are still down on many routes that were there pre-Covid so, regarding tourism numbers for 2022, they are predicting Dublin Airport will be down 35%. The international numbers will not come in. Do the witnesses have a breakdown of visitor numbers from within the country and international pre Covid?

I agree multi-annual funding is needed so one can prepare and organise for years in advance. What is funding looking like for 2022 for the national cultural institutions? Have agreements been made on their funding going forward? Are all our museums Wi-Fi friendly? I mentioned people coming in and everyone has their phone. It is important to have that accessibility and capability in all museums. In my county, we have done that with all our libraries, which are now hotspots.

I will finish on an issue closer to home. This is for Ms Whitty from the IMA. We are proba-

bly the only county in the country, though I may be incorrect on this, that does not have a county museum. Yet we pay a five-figure sum to store our artefacts outside the county. That is a failing on us as a county but is there any link between museums around the country? Is there any help Ms Whitty could steer me towards with regard to pushing that on and getting it put in place?

Ms Lynn Scarff: I will take the initial question on visitor numbers. What we have seen has been an interesting story within the national cultural institutions and the four museum sites. When we reopened we had to put in a number of health and safety measures to ensure our visitors had a safe visit to the museum. In general terms, that meant, depending on the museum building or site, our capacity was limited to 50% to 60% of what it normally would be. These were all pre-booked visits. People pre-booked free tickets for a particular time. At most peak times when one would expect people to be out and about, particularly at the weekends and over July and August when we are open, we operate at the top of that 60% capacity. That was the case for our museum of archaeology, our museum of country life and our museum of decorative arts and history in Collins Barracks.

In the figures for, say, the museum of decorative arts and history, what was interesting was that the number of visitors coming from local communities was quite high. In the case of that museum, it was 34%, and 10% were from within walking distance. That speaks to the engagement of local audiences with their NCIs and to the work we can do around engaging our communities

On the tourism question, which is an important element, the greatest drop for us was in our museum of archaeology in Kildare Street, which would normally have 70% of its visitors as international tourists. That experienced the greatest drop from its normal August figures. It began to grow with local and domestic visits but people seem to be returning more to the museum sites in their local community. There is a need for us to rethink those visitor offerings that may in the past have been seen more as international offerings and think about how they are welcoming to a local and domestic audience. That is particularly for some of the independent museums, visitor centres and sites linked to the IMA or the Association of Visitor Experiences and Attractions, AVEA, which rely very much on ticketing income. A business model needs to be developed that can scale up as international tourists return but that is sustainable in responding to local communities.

The Senator mentioned our budget for 2022. We have submitted our budget estimates and are hopeful we will be able to match the resources against our strategic plan and what we wish to do in the national museum. Senator Warfield asked about staffing numbers in the museum and I did not answer that question but, to give an indication, the National Museum of Scotland, which has a slightly smaller collection than ours and has a number of sites, has a staff of 480, while the National Museum of Ireland has a staff of 181 across 4 public sites and one collections resource. The disparity is evident. It is not all about funding and resources. There are sensible ways we can collaborate and examine using our resources wisely and there are opportunities to do that, but it shows in stark numbers the difference that exists.

Dr. Audrey Whitty: I will come in on the 2022 funding figures on behalf of the IMA. We looked in our submission paper at multi-annual funding for the NCIs and cultural institutions under category A6, but also for categories A1 to A3, which relate to meeting a specific cultural need and supporting the high-level goal of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media in relation to enhancing access to the arts, culture and film sectors. We see the annual grant payments structure hopefully becoming more similar to the Arts Council, whereby organisations draw down up front with a declaration of assurance, rather than retribution or ret-

roactive payments. That would help enormously in budgeting for 2022, as would a core funding package for independent, professionally run local museums to look at support areas such as collections management, insurance rates, security and facilities. That would bring in the Wi-Fi IT infrastructural component as a matter of urgency, which is a major barrier and impediment to the hybrid model of museum roll-out across the country.

On the Senator's comment regarding Longford, there are 12 local authority museum network museums across the Republic of Ireland. For those museums in particular, we see great potential in the arts and culture recovery task force Life Worth Living report of November 2020. There was an emphasis on the importance of working with the local authority cultural teams to deliver the recommendations of that report. We see Longford and all other counties as being front and centre in that.

Ms Gina O'Kelly: On visitor numbers in the wider sector, the drop in international and national tourism last year severely impacted the museum sector, particularly those in the Dublin and Belfast areas. Those in areas where national tourism was happening and people were stay-cationing were not affected as much. There were historic lows of 7% to 10% of previous years in summer 2020. That has recuperated this year with growing public confidence in taking part in activities again and a reopening of society. We advocate for the resourcing of an awareness campaign for museums, such as shared branding and a user-friendly online platform for access to museum contents. There are international examples of this, such as a museum in Finland. We also advocate for audience research to gain insight into who and how audiences engage with our cultural venues, based on visitor profiling reports such as those carried out by the Northern Ireland Museums Council. We are looking at the expansion of existing programmes such as Culture Ireland. As part of the creative industries, museums would very much benefit from an expansion of these types of programmes to include the museums.

To go back to a previous point about events happening and a more holistic approach to the museum offering, museums very much fall within the creative industries and a huge part of their programming is engaging and supporting artists such as storytellers, writers and visual artists in terms of all their offerings, whether it be online or on-site.

Ms Catherine Heaney: On that last point on storage, I mentioned in our submission that the National Museum of Ireland's main collection is in the collections research centre in Swords. That houses almost 4 million items. One of the challenges we have is that is a leased building and the lease will end at the end of this decade. This places huge challenges that need to be addressed relatively soon in regard to where those collections will go. Moving collections is no easy feat. Many of the collections in the resource centre are delicate in nature.

Longford and other counties and other institutions face similar challenges around storage. Often we see the answer to the problem as just finding a building or a place but it is much bigger than that. It is about finding somewhere that is safe and accessible and which can be used in different ways by different communities. Everybody connects with their local heritage. We all go into the museum and try to find things from our townland or home county.

We need to have a debate to answer the question and the challenge that face us, and not just the National Museum of Ireland in terms of its storage. Storing items is difficult as some of them are big. We have had a conversation ourselves over the summer about the ending of peat harvesting and turf cutting and all the artefacts that go with that. It is not easy to store a turf cutter, so we have to find different solutions. That is why I flag the issue.

It is an important challenge that faces so many in the culture and heritage sector. It would be wonderful to find a solution that was more than just finding an immediate solution to a problem, one that will offer opportunities to communities, tourism and research.

Vice Chairman: I thank the witnesses for a very engaging conversation on our museums. To pick up on Dr. Whitty's point on the local network museums, I come from a rural constituency, Mayo. Certainly our local authorities have done fantastic work in networking both our domestic and international tourism offerings. It is hugely important that we work collaboratively on that. I refer to getting an understanding of how that collaboration works with the local authorities and how it is included in draft development plans going forward in order that it becomes a strategic pillar of what is happening locally. Dr. Whitty referenced that 68% of museums are independent and 32% are either governed by a Department or a public body. That implies that there are huge issues or challenges around funding for independent organisations and how we address the shortfall and the deficits. There would be challenges around insurance, resources, electricity and so forth, especially after the past 18 months where they probably had to continue to pay the bills but had a huge drop off in revenue.

I thank Ms Scarff for her input into the National Museum of Ireland - Country Life in Castlebar, which got funding of €350,000 recently for enhancement and an extension of the entrance. It is coming up to its 20th anniversary and we are hugely proud of what we have in Mayo. It is one of four institutions nationwide, and the only one outside Dublin. Thankfully, Mayo has something to show and it certainly has been used for a multitude of events. Mayo day was held two years ago and there was fantastic advertising globally of what we have in the only museum outside Dublin. Well done on that. If there is anything we can do locally, please get in contact.

In regard to collaboration, research, training and development, are there discussions around technological universities, which are being established all across the country, and around our universities? Ms O'Kelly touched on an awareness campaign and how we can work collaboratively with primary and secondary schools to ensure people are educated on our history and culture and the significance of what we have within our own regions. I would be interested to hear the witnesses thoughts on that and how we can improve the educational element around it.

On the commitment to the establishment of a national or public strategy to govern both our independent museums, how would that be developed? How would it be funded and how can we, as Oireachtas committee members, support that initiative?

Dr. Audrey Whitty: I will take the question on education first. We have it in our submission paper. It is very close to the heart of the Irish Museums Association. In terms of the expansion of current education in the sector, we would look to arts portals and schemes, in particular to include much museum activity and development of a dedicated platform that links the wider sector of educators, such as history and sciences, into museums, and at enabling and promoting participation, co-creation and engagement in all our museums across the island. A national example of this would be the current Department of Education and Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media's Art in Education portal and the Creative Ireland Creative Communities. If they could be expanded on and given increased funding, that would be hugely significant. Investment in the roll-out of online learning in the classroom by museums through establishing formal links with the Department of Education, particularly its junior cycle for teachers, JCT, co-ordinators for post-primary, particularly at junior certificate level. A very good example of that would be the Arts in Education charter.

What we would look to would be a major evaluation of museum online learning and en-

agement in terms of the hybrid model going forward. We have already done that through the Irish Museums Association teacher survey, which was museum engagement during and post Covid-19. We would welcome funding to expand on that particular area of evaluation, to assess the resources, such as capacity and access to both programming and collections to better address the needs of all our audiences.

In terms of the national strategy, our director of operations Ms O’Kelly can come in here as well, but we would see that as a major deficit in Ireland at the moment, that is, that we do not have a national strategy for museums unlike many of our European Union counterparts. That would be extremely welcome and could possibly fall under the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to implement it. Northern Ireland has the Northern Ireland Museums Council but we do not have an equivalent body here in the Republic of Ireland, so it is something that is needed in terms of a national strategy. We would be very keen on that moving forward, if that was possible.

Vice Chairman: Does anyone else want to jump in there?

Ms Lynn Scarff: To support that point on the national strategy, at the moment we have a situation where the national cultural institutions are under the remit of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. However, the local museums within local authorities are under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. While many opportunities come with that, it presents a need for structures that allow collaborative work, particularly around policy and strategy which is something we are perhaps missing at the moment. The points of intersection between culture and heritage can sometimes be lost. It is the duty of all of us to emphasis how intricately they are linked. Our chair mentioned how everybody who comes to the National Museum of Ireland can find something from their own town and their own place, and how important that is in terms of our identity. Looking at that policy and strategy structure and how it sits in a cross-departmental element would be important.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I have a further question which is related. We are coming out of a very successful decade of commemorations but are coming into perhaps that most difficult period of Irish history. We have already seen the controversy around events in Armagh. We are moving into that period of the Irish Civil War and the foundation of the State which is a more sensitive area. What role do the witnesses see the museums as playing in how we mark and commemorate those events of 100 years ago?

Ms Lynn Scarff: We are playing a central role in that and our Department just released its upcoming programme. There are a number of exhibitions on the programmes of the National Museum of Ireland and the cultural institutions and colleagues within the local and independent museums are playing a part in that. The role that cultural institutions play around the centenaries is very important. By our nature and the way that we programme and work, we are good places for approaching difficult, sometimes contested histories. We provide that space. Our collections allow us to take a more nuanced approach to that, and we can take the space and time to give people the points of reflection that they need. I would see our cultural institutions as playing probably one of the lead roles in that.

On the programmes that are coming up, for example, from the National Museum of Ireland’s perspective, we have studio and State which opens at the end of this month around the signing of the treaty. That is a collaboration with the Hugh Lane gallery where we are taking the portraits of Lavery and elements from our collection to explore that particular moment in time. We have an artist in residence who is funded by the centenaries programme. Anthony

Haughey will be with the National Museum of Ireland for two years exploring this topic with communities both North and South of the Border. We will have a number of programmes coming out of that. That kind of depth and breadth of programming is what is needed when talking about these kinds of centenaries. People need that space and time to explore that topic in a very rich way.

Ms Gina O’Kelly: I would echo what Ms Scarff mentioned in regard to museums playing an integral role in the interpretation and the re-examination of the decade of centenaries. Most of our museums have been extending very strong programmes in terms of their connectivity and interpreting this period of our history. It also ties in very much with the aims, goals and the remit of the IMA in regard to being an all-island organisation, where we would encourage our museums consistently to engage with each other in a cross-Border manner. There are a number of projects coming up over the next number of years which, throughout the decade of centenaries, has evidenced how these museums have started working more collaboratively around the decade of centenaries, and have expanded that into joint exhibitions, sharing loans and engaging in a much deeper way.

We are also one of the partners on a research programme with the University of Ulster, which is looking at EU funding, in particular PEACE funding, and at cross-Border activity within museums, which again ties in to the way we would see the examination of the decade of centenaries really contributing towards the future of museums and towards peace and reconciliation.

Ms Catherine Heaney: Senator Byrne raised a very important issue. The cultural institutions, including the National Museum of Ireland and the National Library of Ireland and others, store the records, and sometimes the records speak for themselves and people can have their views on those records but it is a very important reference point. The fact that we are now open means people can come and view our exhibitions. We have updated our galleries to reflect some of the key moments, particularly towards the closing of the decade of centenaries. We are working with the national museum in Northern Ireland, with some sharing of collections. That was a development during the decade of centenaries that has brought us closer together. If people get the chance, now that we can move about more freely, they should visit the museum in Belfast which has an incredible exhibition on partition and on conflict, which was a celebration of the Good Friday Agreement. How they did it, in terms of consultation and recognition of the cultural differences, is really a credit to it. Sometimes museums, because they work to what is in the collections, can be very good places to represent different views and different histories. While museums have a role in commemoration they must also use interpretations to look at and learn from history and plan for the future.

Dr. Whitty may have something to say because the Michael Collins’s slippers are clearly one of the parts of the national collection that are nearly more important to people than any of the key events that happened in 1922 and leading up to the establishment of the Free State. There has been more public interest in the slippers than there has been in some of the other key events. It is a really important piece, and it is important it was raised today.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: It might be useful for Members of the Oireachtas to visit that exhibition in Belfast. It could certainly be helpful. My colleagues in west Cork might have more of an interest in the Collins slippers.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: We have a fantastic museum in Clonakilty called Michael Collins House. We would love to put those slippers on show there, even if it was only for

a couple of weeks in the summer. I am sorry for interjecting there, Vice Chairman, but I had to put in a request for that.

Vice Chairman: Senator Carrigy wants to come back in.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I would like to comment on a couple of points Ms Heaney made about learning from our history and planning for our future. They were very apt words. Over the summer months, I did a day trip to Dublin with my kids. We visited Dublin Zoo and Collins Barracks and I thought it was very interesting, not just for them but for me. We, as parents, people in the education system and the Oireachtas have a responsibility to inform our youth of our history, especially the period of the War of Independence and the Civil War. This is not taught enough in schools. School tours needs to be promoted more. Students should go into our museums and learn our history. Perhaps it should be a yearly event that the school would visit its local museum, the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin or wherever. That is something that needs to be pushed more and perhaps the Department of Education should be advocating that.

Ms Heaney mentioned meeting during the summer. She knows I am a strong advocate of the whole mid-Shannon wilderness park project for the boglands and the midlands and the interpretation of that and telling that story. Naturally enough, I am biased. I am from Longford and I hope that happens in my county and that we will see the benefits of it.

Does Ms Heaney, as chairman of the National Museum of Ireland, she see any opportunities for the museum to expand in the future? She highlighted an issue with storage whereby the lease is running out. Now is the time to have the conversation in order to have that sorted out years in advance. Does Ms Heaney see opportunities to grow the museum and expand it throughout the country? The Vice Chairman mentioned the National Museum of Ireland - Country Life in Castlebar.

Ms Catherine Heaney: I will start and bring Ms Scarff in because she will have some points to make on that. When the Senator's party colleague was Minister with responsibility for this Department, one of her mantras was getting the collection out of Dublin. She was passionate about that and, in many ways, that is why the National Museum of Ireland signed up to museum accreditation programme, which Ms Scarff mentioned. It is operated by the Heritage Council but it is part of creating common standards across all museums, so that where conditions are optimal for loaning out items, whether it is Michael Collins's slippers going to Cork or whatever, there is a set of standards throughout the museum sector that ensure collections are cared for when that happens.

Sometimes it is not about building new buildings but it is about using spaces better. On this topic of the inclusive museum, what does it look like? Is it bricks and mortar or is it something else? Is it objects in schools, libraries or other public spaces? There is something important there that we must think about. This relates to Senator's Carrigy's point about bringing kids into the museum. When I put my name forward to serve on the board of the museum, one of my motivations was to change the queue that was going to Blanchardstown shopping centre on a Sunday and to have it going to the museum instead. There is opportunity there about how we display our collections and about the whole digital agenda and how we digitise and make our collections available. You can have digital content alongside one or two artefacts. People like to touch and feel items, even if they are reproductions. This relates to our vision for the sector, as Dr. Whitty said, and to having this national strategy and vision. There is opportunity there. We just have to look a bit harder and work together more.

Ms Lynn Scarff: Ms Heaney has covered the key points. For our sector, it is really about mobility of collections rather than more buildings and about resources to enable the required conservation, the loan requirements and the security needs for the national collection to get out to museums around the country. It would be my ambition that no primary school child in Ireland would be more than 20 minutes' drive from his or her national collection. Doing that through our network of local museums and independent museums requires the resources for the conservation of items, security, transport and so on and putting things in place, such as a mobility of collections grant. There is one in place but it is just not sufficient for the demand put on it. It is about looking at this idea of a national strategy and policy and then properly building a resource and implementation plan around that. It is also about looking across the museum sector and thinking about where we are going overall and how we start to move the collection so that people can access it more.

Dr. Audrey Whitty: On that point, we in the IMA would look at advocating an extension of the State insurance scheme to museums in receipt of public funding to enable that mobility of collections. It would provide relief for smaller museums for whom that represents a major percentage of annual running costs. There are very good international examples across a number of EU countries such as Denmark, Italy and Sweden. It would be worth using the ICOM report, entitled State Indemnity Schemes, as a template for Ireland. ICOM is the International Council of Museums under UNESCO.

Vice Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I extend our thanks to our witnesses for what has been a very informative exchange. That concludes our business for today. I thank everyone who contributed today.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.55 p.m. until 11.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 13 October 2021.