

Challenges facing the museum sector and cultural institutions as a result of COVID-19.

Opening statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sports and Media by Dr Audrey Whitty, Chair - Irish Museums Association (IMA), 29 September 2021.

Background

The Irish Museums Association (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 wide breadth of museums from community-led and voluntary organisations to national cultural institutions.

Enabled by funding from the Department TCAGS&M and the Heritage Council, we extend a support programme for the museum community structured under three main pillars: advocacy, professional development, and research & 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.

Museums in Ireland

With approximately 250 museums across Ireland, attracting in excess of 8,000,000 visitors per year and directly employing over 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 placemaking 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 life-long 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 reason visitors come to Ireland, bolstering the tourism and hospitality sectors, and are intrinsic to our civic infrastructure, 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: historical inequalities, power dynamics, political divisiveness, IDE and ethical values, sustainability.

We also saw during the pandemic how the public turned to museums for enjoyment and to feel connected. How museums, at the same time, proved to be dynamic, flexible, 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 reenergising.

Main challenges for the sector:

- **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 potential.

- **Funding structures.**

Museum structures, today, have moved at a faster pace than current funding frameworks. Currently, 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, Arts Council and the Cultural Unit of the Dept TCAGS&M, short timelines, retroactive payments and capacity concerns present cashflow and resourcing issues when availing of project grant funding. Core, multi-annual funding would not only be key in ensuring the long-term survival and enhancement of their development and planning, but also benefit local social and economic infrastructures and regeneration of town centres.

- **Capacity-building**

Investment in staff is core to equipping future leadership that is representative of our communities and audiences, empowers co-ownership, and 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 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 up-skilling, allows practitioners to meaningfully connect with audiences and build sustainable, collaborative relationships with community leaders.

- **Empowering museums**

By definition, museums are centres of research. Yet available data on the museum sector itself is severely lacking. Current information on visitor numbers, how the sector is structured, their 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, in evidencing their value. We strongly recommend this be addressed as a first step in assessing the needs and impact of museums.