

Consultation on a Museums Policy for Northern Ireland

Section 1: Draft Policy Vision

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with our draft vision?

Agree

5. Please provide us with any comments you may have on our draft vision.

Draft vision: "Accessible heritage: inspiring discovery, enhancing wellbeing and connecting communities"

The Museums Association (MA) is a dynamic membership organisation that campaigns for socially engaged museums and a representative workforce. We are the only organisation for all museums in the four nations of the UK. Our network includes over 11,000 individual members working in all types of roles, from directors to trainees, and we represent more than 1,500 institutional members ranging from small volunteer run local museums to large national institutions. We work ethically and sustainably and collaborate with partners where we have common aims and values.

We agree with the components of the draft vision but believe it needs developed further.

The vision needs to mention collections as they are what make museums unique. Museums must care for, manage and use collections in order to inspire discovery, enhance wellbeing and connect communities.

Learning is core to what museums do and needs to be recognised in the vision.

An emphasis on inclusion in the vision would support anti-discrimination work in museums.

The vision does not recognise the financial picture and the urgent need for sustained investment in museums to allow them to deliver the vision.

We would suggest the vision should be amended to: "Inclusive, participatory and resilient museums that use collections to connect communities, inspire discovery, promote active learning and engagement and enhance wellbeing."

We understand that there may be a desire for the vision to be short and concise but if it is too short then it will lack power and ambition.

Section 2: People and Communities

6. Aim 1: Supporting positive health and wellbeing through engagement and participation.

This aim might be met by museums organising exhibitions, events, and programmes which promote connection and opportunities for active participation.

Strongly agree

7. Aim 2: Inspiring creativity and supporting opportunities for life-long learning.

This aim might be met by museums through the presentation of their collections, resources, and activities that foster curiosity, creativity, and encourage learning at all stages of life.

Strongly agree

8. Aim 3: Supporting access to trusted information and resources.

Museums might do this by providing collections, research, and interpretation that supports public understanding and learning.

Strongly agree

9. Aim 4: Working innovatively to drive participation and engagement.

Museums might achieve this by understanding the interests of their audience and applying creative approaches and fresh methods of engagement to reach greater numbers of people, digitally and through in-person visits.

Strongly agree

10. Please provide us with any comments you have on the proposed aims for People and Communities.

We agree with the aims and many museums in Northern Ireland are already delivering against them.

Adequate resource should be provided to Northern Ireland Museums Council so that it can support all museums to achieve these aims and can collect the data to evidence it.

We have suggestions with regards to the ways in which museums might achieve the aims:

Aim 1 –

We are pleased that active participation in museums is recognised as a way to enhance health and wellbeing. Participation in the work of the museum promotes wellbeing and self-confidence and broadens the knowledge and horizons of participants, the museum and the wider public.

Museums might also support positive health and wellbeing by:

Partnerships: museums should work in partnership with communities and health and wellbeing organisations to support the wellbeing of a diverse range of people. Partnerships can bring fresh perspectives and insight to all areas of museum work and should be based on the principles of equity.

Addressing inequality: museums should recognise health inequalities and strive to overcome them by working with specialist health organisations and a wide range of people and communities.

Wellbeing for all: It is important that the wellbeing of the workforce is recognised alongside the wellbeing of audiences and communities. Museums support the wellbeing of everyone who works in and with them including staff, freelancers and volunteers.

Minimising harm: museums should recognise that they are not necessarily regarded as safe places for everyone, particularly those who have been systemically excluded, and should take measures to minimise harm in collecting and research practices, displays, programming and interpretation. The MA's [decolonisation guidance](#) and the Global Voices Local Choices' [decolonisation in Northern Ireland guidance](#) can support museums in this journey.

Aim 2 – Museums should not just present collections, resources, and activities but create opportunities for active participation in them.

Museums should share information about collections widely and should collaborate with both museums and non-museum groups, such as universities and community groups, to add to this information.

The MA's [Power to the People](#) is a framework designed to help museums understand and improve their participatory practice and community engagement. It provides benchmarks of best practice, to showcase excellence in this field and to support museums to develop strong and sustainable connections to their communities.

Aim 3 –

It is important for museums to support access to trusted information and resources particularly at a time when misinformation and disinformation is increasing.

The Code of Ethics says that museums and those who work in and with them should:

“Support audiences to embrace and understand the complexity of information and knowledge by presenting multiple perspectives that have been evidenced and researched.”

Museums should encourage public participation in decision making and build knowledge through the exchange of ideas, valuing it as they would institutional knowledge.

Aim 4 –

It is important to note that museums might reach new audiences by meeting them in person, outside of the museum building.

MA research in 2023 found that a majority of museums in Northern Ireland are undertaking at least one type of social impact work, with 70% or more of respondents are engaged in work related to health and wellbeing, placemaking and acting as a space for engagement, reflection and debate.

Quantitative data such as visitor and participant numbers are important but it can be difficult to measure the social impact of museums and the transformational impact they can have.

One respondent to our research shared: “The qualitative and quantitative problem that we struggle with is that we have targets to make that are not the nice fluffy stuff... being inspired by looking at an art painting, or maybe some connection with a family - it’s very hard to measure that.”

Therefore, when evaluating if museums have achieved the aims, it will be necessary for NIMC to support museums to measure their impact and engagement.

The MA’s Measuring Socially Engaged Practice toolkit also supports museums with creative ways to measure social impact.

Section 3: Places

11. Aim 5: Providing safe, accessible and inclusive spaces for everyone.

This aim might be met through the design and management of public and exhibition spaces, the respect for all staff and visitors as well as by the range, variety and quality of the museum’s exhibitions, events and activities.

Strongly agree

12. Aim 6: Preserving local histories including collections, traditional skills and crafts, and stories for people and communities.

Museums might do this by putting the story of people and communities at the centre of their storytelling and having collections with interpretation that brings heritage to life and focuses on themes particularly relevant to its audience.

Strongly agree

13. Aim 7: Celebrating and representing cultural diversity through collections, programming and storytelling.

Museums might do this by curating representative exhibitions and programmes which reflect and celebrate the diverse identities, histories and experiences of everyone in our society.

Strongly agree

14. Aim 8: Contributing to the public awareness of Northern Ireland's environmental challenges through sustainable operations, local actions and provision of information and resources.

Museums might demonstrate this by operating sustainably and reducing environmental impact; through exhibitions, resources and activities providing factual information on environmental and biodiversity issues or perhaps by reference to local experience of impacts.

Strongly agree

15. Please provide us with any comments you have on the proposed aims for Places.

We support these aims. However, to achieve these aims, targeted investment will be required and should be distributed through NIMC.

Aim 5 –

We agree with this aim. The [Code of Ethics for Museums](#) says that museums should be inclusive spaces, where everyone is valued and treated equitably and with respect. It says that museums and those who work in and with them should find ways to support everyone to participate in museums, recognising the barriers to access experienced by some individuals and communities. Work with communities to overcome the challenges of poverty and exclusion and to achieve equality of outcomes.

Museums have an important role to play in promoting diversity and equity by fostering understanding and good relations between people of different identities and beliefs. They should embrace an approach that is anti-discriminatory, anti-racist and anti-ableist which includes training the workforce and creating internal policies and action plans on these issues.

Aim 6 –

We agree with this aim and believe museums have an important role to play in safeguarding tangible and intangible heritage.

Aim 7 – We agree with this aim and believe that museums should co-curate exhibitions and programmes with communities. There is an opportunity for museums to provide opportunities for people to share and celebrate their cultural heritage in the museum space.

A great example of this is National Museums NI which partnered with the African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland (ACSONI) and Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC) to deliver [Global Voices Local Choices](#), an [Esmée Fairbairn Communities and Collections Fund](#) project which addressed colonial legacies through bringing diverse cultures and perspectives into local and national museums across Northern Ireland. National Museums NI made available its world cultures collection to initiate conversations on decolonisation, inclusion and diversity. The voices of those directly connected to colonialism were amplified and their cultural perspectives and stories included, making displays richer. [Guidance on Supporting Decolonisation in Northern Ireland](#) was produced by the project partners.

Aim 8 –

Museums are working to increase the public awareness of Northern Ireland's environmental challenges using their collections and programmes, working with communities and partners to champion change in their local area, and embedding climate action through committing to targets for reducing energy, waste and carbon emissions. For example, National Museums NI has undertaken a baseline carbon footprint assessment to develop an action plan for carbon reduction and North Down Museum has used its exhibitions to engage the local community with the issue of climate change and inspire them to take action. Museums need dedicated funding to ensure that their buildings and collections are sustainable and so they can continue to support communities to be more sustainable and take action for climate justice.

Section 4: Partnerships

16. Aim 9: Demonstrating the value of the museum sector in meeting government outcomes.

Museums might support this by contributing evidence of their cultural, educational, social, and economic impact to research initiatives, by identifying authentic opportunities to contribute on issues identified as policy priorities, for example through the Programme for Government.

Strongly agree

17. Aim 10: Investing to support a vibrant and connected accredited museum sector.

This might be achieved by accredited museums maintaining their professional standards, by the building of relationships and partnerships within and beyond the heritage sector, by valuing and supporting the professional development of museum staff and encouraging non-accredited bodies to pursue the industry standard.

Strongly agree

18. Aim 11: Working with others to preserve, grow and celebrate local heritage, arts and culture.

This might happen through collaborations with individuals, communities and organisations to protect, promote and share heritage, arts and culture.

Strongly agree

19. Aim 12: Working innovatively with others to support positive outcomes for people and communities.

This might include collaborations across sectors and disciplines to deliver projects and partnerships that address community needs and deliver social, cultural and economic benefits.

Strongly agree

20. Please provide us with any comments you have on the proposed aims for Partnerships.

NIMC should be provided with additional funding to distribute to the sector to support partnership development. Limited staff capacity and the cost of supporting collaborative activity are barriers to museums forming and maintaining partnerships so it is vital that this work is funded.

Strong partnerships can help museums to understand the issues their communities are facing, support collaborative community participation, and bring them into contact with new networks of people that can then become new audiences, volunteers and staff.

Partnerships should bring communities together and be based on the principle of equity. The MA Working Equitably Toolkit supports museums with equitable working and the Code of Ethics for Museums asks museums and those who work in and with them to: “Build equitable relationships with communities and audiences based on respect and mutual benefit. Seek a diverse range of people and stakeholders to bring a wide variety of perspectives and insight to all areas of museum work.”

Aim 9 – We agree with this aim and believe there is a role for sector support organisations to deliver this but also for government officials to raise internally how museums can contribute to policies when they are being developed. Cross departmental working within government is essential to achieve this.

Aim 10 – Public investment in museums is the key to creating a vibrant sector. We agree that connection and networking can support museums to learn from each other. However, capacity could be a barrier to achieving this.

Aim 11 – We agree with this aim but would value examples of what it looks like in practice. It takes time to build strong partnerships and we know that museums in

Northern Ireland are already overstretched so support will be required to achieve this aim.

Aim 12 – We agree with this aim and believe that museums should work with a diverse range of partners and think beyond traditional partners and audiences. However, similar to the last aim, museums will require support and investment to be able to achieve this and it will take time to build strong, equitable and sustainable partnerships.

Section 5: Museum Policy Actions

21. Accreditation remains the best assurance of quality standards and NI Museums Council should continue to apply the UK Accreditation Standard.

Strongly agree

22. Subject to the availability of funding, NI Museums Council should encourage greater numbers of museums to pursue accreditation.

Neither agree nor disagree

23. Subject to the availability of funding, NI Museums Council should deliver further small grant schemes for accredited museums, to support programmes, acquisitions, essential minor works or the purchase of equipment.

Strongly agree

24. Subject to the availability of funding, the Department and NI Museums Council should pilot a small grant programme to support proposals to maintain and develop the connections between museums, schools and young people.

Agree

25. Subject to the availability of funding, the Department should work with the NI Museums Council to develop a programme to support museums in the care of objects or collections that are considered to be of particular significance and which merit, or require, particular, specialist care or management to ensure their continued preservation and accessibility to museums users, with decisions on eligibility informed by expert advice.

Agree

26. Please provide us with any comments you have on the proposed Museum Policy Actions.

We agree that Accreditation remains the best assurance of quality standards. It demonstrates that museums are professionally run, sustainable and trustworthy. It also means that there are consistent standards across museums in the UK. While

Accreditation is currently being reviewed, it is expected that changes will seek to improve the scheme.

It is vital that adequate resource is provided from the Department of Communities to support NIMC to meet these actions. National Museums NI and local museums will also require government investment and support to retain the Accreditation standard and make improvements.

The delivery of small grants to museums is an important role for NIMC. NIMC is the most appropriate body to distribute this funding to the sector and has strong relationships with museums across Northern Ireland. Funding to support programmes, acquisitions, essential minor works and the purchase of equipment is much needed and would be welcomed.

We support the idea of to develop a small grant programme to support proposals to maintain and develop the connections between museums, schools and young people. The grant scheme should be designed in collaboration with NIMC, schools and young people to ensure it supports joint priorities and outcomes. Joint working between the Department for Communities and Department of Education would also support this.

We support the idea of the Department working with the NI Museums Council to develop a programme to support museums in the care of objects or collections that are considered to be of particular significance. We are unclear if this is intended to be a similar scheme to the Recognition Scheme in Scotland and the Designation Scheme in England.

Section 6: Heritage, Culture and Creativity (HCC) Programme-level Actions

27. An assessment should be made of the capital needs of HCC sectors and a strategy to address them developed.

Agree

28. A programme of research should be implemented to explore the social and economic value of the museums sectors and the contribution of the work of the museums sector to the priorities established in the Programme for Government and other Government policy and programmes.

Strongly agree

29. An assessment of skills requirements across museums should be undertaken, in the context of a wider HCC review and a strategy to address need developed.

Agree

30. Work should be undertaken across the HCC sectors to develop new networks with a view to catalysing new potential and building innovative new projects and partnerships.

Strongly agree

31. Work should be undertaken to support the HCC sectors adapt to the current funding environment by exploring the means to maximise revenue streams beyond public funding and by applying existing, available, funding options.

Agree

32. Please provide us with any comments you have on the proposed HCC Programme-level Actions.

We agree with the approach of using evidence to assess capital needs. We know that capital funding for urgent repairs and maintenance is needed and that museums need dedicated funding to ensure that their buildings and collections are environmentally sustainable.

There is a pressing need to improve the data for the museum sector in Northern Ireland. We would also advocate for a joined-up approach to data collection across the UK to achieve comparable data.

We would welcome a sector wide skills audit to help identify gaps in areas such as digital capability, conservation and leadership. A sector specific skills strategy would support workforce development and succession planning, creating a more sustainable and resilient sector.

Networks are a useful way to provide a way from museum professionals to learn from each other but are often run on a volunteer basis by people with full time jobs and with no financial resources. Funding should be provided to NIMC so that these networks are invested in and run effectively.

Museums require support to explore additional revenue streams such as commercial development and philanthropy. Museum directors and leaders also require the capacity to think strategically about financial resilience as much of their time is taken up with the day to day running of a museum.