

## A Policy Framework for the Irish Museum Sector

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### **Introduction**

The Heritage Council, through its Museums and Archives Committee and in collaboration with the museum community, is currently developing a Standards and Accreditation scheme for the Irish Museum sector. This initiative, which it has been devising and refining over the past three years, has culminated in a model that can be used to assess quality assurance in our collecting institutions. The Accreditation Scheme is now in its second pilot phase, testing agreed standards in thirteen museums and galleries that represent the entire museum sector from volunteer run museums to national cultural institutions.

Allied to this, a training strategy for the sector has been devised. This strategy is being designed to address the needs of the individual, the institution and the sector.

Forward planning is required to ensure that these significant developments will be supported and adopted at central government level, at local authority level and by other key agencies with responsibility for cultural development in this country. There will be both resource issues and management issues involved in the implementation of these two policy initiatives.

To date, the Museums and Archives Committee of the Heritage Council has played a pivotal role in developing policy for the museum sector and in establishing strategies to implement this policy. This has been achieved through continuous consultation with the museum sector itself and with all the agencies with responsibility for museum development. The Heritage Council will continue to play a key strategic planning role by identifying ways of supporting the growth of the sector, and of building on the foundation established through both the Standards and Accreditation Scheme and the Training Strategy initiatives.

In terms of the administration of these proposed initiatives, it is envisaged that a museum agency will be established to do this. The establishment of such an agency has been mooted by the consultation partners at all stages of the development of the Standards and Accreditation Scheme and the Training Strategy. The National Heritage Plan (April 2002) recently published by the former Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands states under action 59 the intention to '*Examine the feasibility of establishing an independent Museum Council to provide support for museums not centrally funded by the state*'.

The relationship between the Heritage Council and the proposed museum agency can be regarded as being entirely complimentary. Put simply, it is anticipated that the Heritage Council will retain the policy function, while the museum agency will carry out the operational functions required to support and fund an accreditation scheme and a training programme for the sector.

This paper presents the policy framework, built on the parallel development of the Standards and Accreditation Scheme and the Training Strategy, which has been arrived at to facilitate the development of the museum sector in Ireland. It outlines the supporting methodology and mechanisms that have been put in place to test the scope of the policy framework. In so doing it hopes to garner the widespread support, endorsement and adoption of the framework. This will ensure the implementation of both the Standards and Accreditation Scheme and the delivery of a Training Strategy.

This framework was initially formed by two policy initiatives and informed by a number of studies<sup>1</sup> commissioned by the Heritage Council. As previously stated, from the outset the process has involved detailed consultation with the museum sector. Consultation continues to be a feature of this process.

## **Context**

Under the provisions of the Heritage Act (1995), the functions of the Heritage Council are defined as proposing policies *for the identification, protection, preservation and enhancement of the national heritage, including heritage objects...* Museums and other collection based institutions act as repositories for these heritage objects and as such, have a responsibility to preserve, conserve, document, display, interpret and communicate the collections held in trust.

The Heritage Council, through the Museums and Archives Committee, identified a need within the Irish museum sector to raise standards in museum management, collection care and services to the public, and to accredit existing standards. It also recognised that in order to realise a higher standard within our museums, a comprehensive training strategy had to be developed to facilitate the process.

Two policy proposals emerged to address the needs of the sector:

- i) the development of a standards and accreditation scheme for Irish museums
- ii) the development of a training strategy for people working in the museum sector

## **Consulting the Sector**

Extensive consultation with key partners is a hallmark of the Heritage Council's work in developing policy for the national heritage. The development of an accreditation policy has involved a high level of consultation with and participation by members of the Irish museum community.

The consultation process for the development of a Standards and Accreditation Scheme and a Training Strategy began with a Policy Day in April 1998. At this, representative

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<sup>1</sup> Canavan, T. *A Study of Museum Collections in Three Counties*, 1998  
Ryan, L. *Introduction of a Standards and Accreditation Scheme for Irish Museums*, 1999  
Farrell Grant Sparks, *Audit of Training Needs in the Museum Sector*, 1999  
Ryan, L. *A Future for Irish Museums: A Report on the Pilot Study for a National Accreditation Scheme*, 2000  
CHL Consulting Company Ltd, *A Training Strategy for the Irish Museum Sector*, 2000

members of the museum sector agreed that two working groups should be established to advance both the proposed accreditation scheme and the training strategy. The terms of reference for both groups are outlined below:

**Terms of reference for Working Group on Standards and Accreditation**

*To establish criteria for a standards and accreditation scheme; and to prepare a draft plan for presentation to government, following the presentation of an interim report to the members of the profession.*

**Terms of reference for Working Group on Training**

*To conduct an audit of existing training resources and experience; to identify the training needs within museums, at all levels and to make recommendations for the provision of training to meet the needs of museums in Ireland.*

The working groups were established in May 1998<sup>3</sup>. As part of the work programme, museum professionals in the UK, the US, New Zealand and Australia amongst others, were consulted.

A consultant was appointed by the Heritage Council to develop the briefs of the working groups and to document the process.

## **A Framework for Policy**

### **The Model for a Standards and Accreditation Scheme for Irish Museums**

The process involved in the development of the accreditation model included research into comparative international models, consultative meetings with members of the Irish museum sector and with experts from abroad and detailed contributions from the members of the working group.

The agreed model has resulted from:

- ❖ Consideration of the particular make-up of the museum constituency in Ireland.
- ❖ Consultation with representative members of the Irish museum community and associated bodies.
- ❖ Research, analysis and consultation with leading experts in museum accreditation from the UK, the US and New Zealand.
- ❖ Detailed discussions with members of the working group on the elements of the scheme.
- ❖ Four drafts of the accreditation model incorporating revisions at every stage.
- ❖ Circulation of the proposed model among the wider museum representative group.

The scheme proposed does not mirror any of the systems in operation in the countries studied but does contain elements of all of them.

### **Museum Definition.**

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<sup>3</sup> The working groups were chaired by Dr. Michael Ryan: the working group on Standards and Accreditation Scheme was convened by Pat Cooke and the working group on Training was convened by Prof. Peter Woodman.

An agreed definition of a museum is essential for the operation of an accreditation scheme for museums. The members of both working groups and the participants at the conference agreed the following definition for the purposes of this policy initiative:

***Museums are not for profit institutions that collect, safeguard, hold in trust, research, develop and interpret collections of original objects and original objects on loan, for the public benefit. They function publicly as places where people learn from and find inspiration and enjoyment through the display and research of original objects.***

*Note: The term 'museum' includes galleries, historic houses and heritage sites with collections.*

The **characteristics** of the scheme are:

- ❖ The scheme is **inclusive**, i.e., designed to facilitate the maximum amount of participation from all sectors of the museum community.
- ❖ The scheme is **voluntary**. Accreditation is an elective process but the objective would be to include the majority of institutions in the scheme.
- ❖ The scheme is **incremental**. The staged approach towards gaining accreditation is designed to maximise the level of participation in the scheme. An interim assessment stage is included to facilitate those institutions that may take longer to reach all of the standards required for accreditation.
- ❖ The scheme has an **aspirational structure**. There is an inbuilt mechanism to encourage museums to progress through all the stages to full accreditation.
- ❖ The scheme will be **flexible** with standards set to reflect the different levels of resources and staff in participating institutions.
- ❖ **On-site visits** will be a feature of the three main stages of the accreditation process - preparation for accreditation, interim assessment and accreditation.

### **Categories for assessment**

It was agreed that the categories for assessment should reflect a balance between the importance of public access and good public services while simultaneously ensuring a high level of care and protection of museum collections. Seven categories were agreed and they are as follows:

- 1 CONSTITUTION**
- 2 MUSEUM MANAGEMENT**
- 3 CARING FOR THE COLLECTION**
- 4 DOCUMENTING THE COLLECTION**
- 5 EXHIBITION**
- 6 EDUCATION**
- 7 VISITOR CARE**

## **Implementing the Standards and Accreditation Scheme**

### **The Pilot Study Phase 1 – November 1999 to August 2000**

In April 1999 the Heritage Council's report entitled *The Introduction of a Standards and Accreditation Scheme for Irish Museums*, included the model discussed above. In this report, two main short-term recommendations were proposed. These were:

- ❖ The setting up of a pilot study, administered and funded by the Heritage Council, to establish and agree standards and to test the accreditation model
- ❖ The organisation of an orientation programme, funded by the Heritage Council, to launch the pilot scheme and to provide a thorough introduction to the participating institutions to the Standards and Accreditation Scheme

In May 1999 the Heritage Council approved funding for the pilot study a consultant, to co-ordinate and document all aspects of the process.

Fourteen museums, which met the museum definition, were invited to participate in the pilot study. Nine replied positively and six were selected to represent a cross section of the museum sector.

The six institutions selected were:

The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin  
Knock Folk Museum, Co. Mayo  
Waterford Treasures, Waterford City  
The National Transport Museum, Howth, Co. Dublin  
Donegal County Museum, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal  
Abbeyleix Heritage Centre, Co. Laois

The participating institutions represented a significant geographical spread with a mixture of small, medium and large collections, diverse governing structures and a range of resources.

A major challenge for the pilot group was to reach agreement on minimum standards among a diverse group of institutions. The six museums in the study were deliberately chosen to represent the various strands within the museum sector and therefore a consensus had to be reached that would accommodate standards in a range of museums extending from a national cultural institution to a voluntary run museum. It is important to note, however, that though these minimum standards were agreed the understanding existed that the degree to which they would be developed thereafter, would be appropriate to the scale and nature of the individual institutions. For instance, one would expect that a national cultural institution with its own education department would provide a more developed educational programme to the visitor than a small independent museum with a full-time staff of two.

### **The Assessment Process**

A panel of four independent assessors, drawn from the museums and archives sector was put in place to assess the accreditation plans produced by the six participating institutions.<sup>2</sup> Their brief also included an evaluation of the results and process of the

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<sup>2</sup> The Panel included the following members:

study itself. They worked in teams of two and visited and assessed three museums each.

The assessors played a significant role in the pilot study. Their expert evaluation of the process and results of the study acted as a critical quality control on the project, and points raised in their reports brought several key concerns into focus.

### **Pilot Study Phase II – September 2001 Ongoing**

In early 2001 the pilot scheme was expanded to include 13 institutions. Seven new museums were selected based again on both their institutional and geographical diversity.

The seven institutions are as follows:

The Butler Gallery, Kilkenny  
The Chester Beatty Library, Dublin  
The Hunt Museum, Limerick  
The National Print Museum, Dublin  
Monaghan County Museum, Monaghan  
Muckross House, Killarney, Co. Kerry  
Musaem Corcha Dhuibhne, Ballyferriter, Co. Kerry

This second phase of the pilot scheme will ascertain a number of important facts. These can be summarised as follows:

- ❖ The practical application of the accreditation plan – timeframe and work schedule
- ❖ The reality of implementing agreed standards across thirteen diverse institutions
- ❖ The resources required to achieve interim accreditation – staff time and institutional/external resources
- ❖ The cost to the Heritage Council of the participants reaching interim accreditation
- ❖ The establishment of an accreditation training programme
- ❖ The cost of implementing an accreditation training programme

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TRAINING STRATEGY FOR THE IRISH MUSEUM SECTOR**

### **Background**

Museum professionals from other countries have commented on the link between the introduction of an accreditation scheme and the provision of training in the proposed Irish scheme. They observed that this combination is both innovative and significant. Given the nature of the Irish museum sector, it is imperative that the introduction of a national accreditation scheme is supported by a targeted training programme. The two elements are interdependent. If the training element were absent the scheme would not work.

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Brian Lacey, Chief Executive, The Discovery Programme  
Aidan Walsh, Director, Northern Ireland Museums Council  
Emmeline Leary, Museums Officer, *Re:source*  
Virginia Teehan, Director, Heritage Office, University College Cork

The lack, to date, of a dedicated training course or courses for those working in the museum sector has also been noted by international colleagues. This gap makes the provision of training to support the accreditation process all the more essential.

Of equal importance is the need to address the continuing professional development training needs of the sector. Early on the Heritage Council 's Working Group on Training saw that a two-stranded approach was needed to address both the needs of the accreditation scheme and the professional development of the sector. Both ultimately would provide very necessary confidence building measures, an increase in standards and a higher degree of professionalism.

It was agreed that a strategy was needed to develop a practical training programme that could be implemented with the support of the museum community.

### **Current developments**

In April 2001 the Heritage Council hosted a policy day to which representatives of the museum sector, who had been involved in the consultation process, were invited. A number of proposals were agreed and the following recommendations were made:

i that a working group on training should be re-established to implement the agreed recommendations of the Training Strategy

ii that the establishment of a Museums Agency should be prioritised

In August 2001 a co-ordinator was appointed to advance the implementation of a Training Strategy and a working group was convened.

Since then the Training Strategy has been progressed to implementation stage. The key objectives of this period were – the development of the courses proposed in the CHL report and investigation of other course options; the consideration of the accreditation and validation options; recommendations on an administrative structure; outline of an implementation plan and an estimate of costs.

All of these objectives were met and the following recommendations were proposed:

- To develop and deliver:
  - A Foundation Course in Museum Practice
  - A Diploma in Museum and Cultural Management
  - A Programme of Short Courses
  - A Database of Providers
  
- To seek partnership with an academic institution to develop, accredit and deliver the Diploma
  
- To establish a Museum Agency to administer the training strategy and programme

It is important to note that each of the elements of the training programme outlined above have been thoroughly researched and developed, to the point where the next logical step is to begin making them available to the museum sector. This next step is however, contingent to a great extent, on the establishment of a museum agency.

## **The Establishment of a Museum Agency**

The Heritage Council is currently managing the development of both the Training Strategy and the Standards and Accreditation Scheme. However, once both initiatives are ready for implementation this will no longer be feasible. It has been recognised by all partners that the establishment of a national museum agency will at this point become a necessity.

It is envisaged that the proposed agency will have a broad strategic remit, managing not only the proposed Standards and Accreditation Scheme and the Training Strategy, but also a comprehensive development strategy for the sector. A grant fund administered by the agency, will provide an important source of additional income for approved initiatives within the sector.

The agency, it is proposed, may be established and run under the aegis of the Heritage Council, somewhat along the lines of the relationship the Heritage Council enjoys with the Discovery Programme and the Irish Landmark Trust.

In the *National Heritage Plan*, published by the former Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands (April 2002) the establishment of a study to ascertain the feasibility of a Museum Council was mooted under action 59. It is the Heritage Council's intention to proceed with this study as soon as possible.

## **Recommendations**

A number of strategic recommendations can be made as a result of the construction of the policy framework.

- 1** That the policy framework comprising the Standards and Accreditation Scheme and the Training Strategy should be implemented on a national basis once the Pilot Study Phase 11 has been completed and evaluated.
- 2** That endorsement for the Standards and Accreditation Scheme and the Training Strategy, and the adoption of the aims and objectives of both initiatives, should be secured from the Department of the Environment and Local Government. Other relevant government departments including The Department of Finance and the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism will also be consulted
- 3** That all local authorities endorse the Standards and Accreditation Scheme and adopt the aims and objectives of the scheme, with a view to supporting implementation in the collecting institutions within their constituencies. Furthermore, that they commit to and provide support for the implementation of a training programme for the museum community within their constituencies.
- 4** That a Museum Agency is established to administer the implementation of a Standards and Accreditation Scheme and a Training Strategy.



- 5** That funding is committed for the implementation of the Standards and Accreditation Scheme and the Training Strategy by the relevant government departments.