

**Northern Ireland Museums Council**

**Guidance on setting up a museum**

**Introduction**

From time to time people come to the Northern Ireland Museums Council seeking advice on how to initiate the process of setting up a museum. Some groups and individuals come with the barest outline of an idea, others approach us with quite advanced proposals. While each is inevitably unique, there are some essential things which we think need to be worked through in order to ensure that the proposed museum gets off to a good start, that improvident investment and effort are avoided, and that those embarking on the establishment of a museum have an idea of the breadth and scale of the associated requirements, responsibilities and commitments.

This document provides an outline of the factors that need to be considered; it poses some salient questions and provides links to other sources of information and good practice. However, it cannot cover everything and we would suggest that you come and talk to us at an early stage. Our contact details are available through the web site [www.nimc.co.uk](http://www.nimc.co.uk)

**What is a museum?**

The answer to this fundamental question is the Museums Association’s agreed a definition which states that:

*Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.*

As you will gather from this, the salient features of a museum are look after its collection, its engagement with the public and the commitment to undertake these responsibilities in perpetuity for public benefit.

This definition includes art galleries with collections of works of art, as well as museums with historical collections of objects. But it should be noted that the following categories of organisations will not normally be deemed eligible under the recognised museum sector standard – the Accreditation Scheme (see below):

* Science centres and planetaria, natural and archaeological sites, historical and industrial buildings and sites, and heritage centres, not having associated permanent collections
* Institutions displaying live specimens (e.g. zoos, aquaria, botanical gardens)
* Educational loan services
* Venues for temporary exhibitions with no permanent collections
* Records centres (e.g. environmental, archaeological sites or monuments)
* Libraries and archives (including sound, film or photographic archives)
* Institutions whose collections are accessible only via the internet
* Charitable or non-charitable companies limited by shares who distribute dividends.

**What is your motivation to start a museum?**

Organisations and individuals have all sorts of reasons for wanting to start a museum.

For instance, if your motivation is to

* Preserve a building
* Find a new use for a building
* Provide a community focus or meeting place
* Change the image or the perceptions of your organisation
* Preserve an aspect of our natural or material heritage
* Benefit a particular individual
* Benefit a particular community

then, while starting a museum may be the way forward, it is more likely that there are other ways of achieving what it is you want to do: creating interpretive trails, oral history recording projects, a visitor centre, publications, websites, digital archives, a virtual museum, temporary exhibitions, traditional craft activities, for example.

If, on the other hand, your motivation is to

* Save an existing collection
* Acquire and preserve a collection for the benefit of the public
* Make a private collection publically accessible

then it is likely that this could be done effectively through a museum.

**Yet another museum?**

Before establishing a new museum you should consider if there is an existing museum which does what you aspire to, or could assist in saving, acquiring, preserving or presenting a collection. There may be good reasons why an existing museum cannot do what you want to achieve, but these should be tested (through talking to local groups, museum staff, libraries, and heritage organisations, for instance) as it is not worth reinventing the wheel or duplicating effort when resources are not plentiful.

NIMC has a good knowledge and understanding of the museums in Northern Ireland (and further afield) and what collections they hold, and we would be happy to share this with you.

**So you want to start a museum?**

Aims

Before anything else, you should be very sure what the aims of your proposed museum are. NIMC has found that museums’ aims tend to be cultural, social or economic, or more likely, a combination of all three.

At this point in your thinking it is worth distinguishing between the ‘need’ you have identified for your museum and what the ‘demand’ for it by others might be.

Inputs

As a next step you should undertake a pragmatic assessment of what resources you have at your disposal, both now and in the medium and long terms, what resources you don’t have, and what resources you will need to bring your proposal to fruition and to sustain it. You might consider resources across four areas;

* People – who is involved, are they paid professionals and/or volunteers, what is their capacity, skills, expertise and level of commitment?
* Premises - do you already have a building to operate from, is it owned or leased?
* Money – are you able to finance the museum yourself, or will you need to raise money, and how much?
* Time – how much time are you and others prepared to give to the project now and in the future?

Measures of success

From the outset you should establish what would constitute as ‘success’ for your museum. In other words, what impact will your museum have? Measures of success tend to be seen in terms of ‘outputs’, which tend to be quantitative (such as visitor numbers) and ‘outcomes’ that are often more qualitative and take time to manifest (such as levels of awareness, knowledge and/or participation). Obviously such measures or targets will change as you move from the idea or concept stage, to the establishment phase, through to the operation of your museum after it is open.

Delivery

At the initial stages significant thought, planning and input must be given to four particular aspects, which will provide the firm foundation for the operation of the museums. These are

* Organisational structure, Governance and Management – who will ‘own’ the museum and its collection, how will it be run, who will operate it, how will it be financed?
* Collections - how will the collections be housed, cared for, managed and developed?
* Facilities – where will the museum be sited, will it comply with the prevailing standards, what capital works might need to be done?
* Visitors and Users – what the needs and expectations of your potential users, how will you present and interpret your collections, how will you develop your audiences?

**Governance and Management**

As indicated earlier, this is about the operation and control of your museum and is an essential aspect in achieving your aims and making the museum a success. You will be required to establish your museum as a legal entity in some form, particularly if you intend seeking financial support from public sources.

Whilst dependent upon your intentions and your aims, it is likely that you would operate a museum within the ‘not-for-profit’ sector or charitable sector, either as a trust or company limited by guarantee. NIMC can provide guidance on these, but in due course you will need to get legal opinion.

You may wish to consult the following documents when thinking about museum governance

<http://www.nimc.co.uk/what-we-do/guidance-and-information/> where you will find our guidance on Governance and Management for Museums

<http://www.aim-museums.co.uk/downloads/1bf3188a-dd7d-11e1-bdfc-001999b209eb.pdf> is an Association of Independent Museums’ Focus Paper on governing independent museums

<http://www.aim-museums.co.uk/downloads/a4a1c5f9-dd8d-11e2-b572-001999b209eb.pdf> is a most valuable ’10 Golden Rules for Good Governance, also produced by the Association of Independent Museums

**Accreditation**

The Accreditation Scheme sets nationally agreed standards for museums in the UK and aids museums in their commitment to managing collections effectively for the enjoyment and benefit of users.

A questionnaire can be completed to assess if an organisation is eligible to apply for accreditation in the first instance and enable the applying organisation make informed decisions about how it wishes to develop. Guidance on this questionnaire and on the Accreditation Scheme generally is available from the Northern Ireland Museums Council.

Museum seeking recognition under the scheme must meet certain requirements regarding the governance of their organisation. These include having;

* A clear statement of purpose
* Acceptable constitution for the governing body
* Appropriate management arrangements
* Effective forward planning
* Secure occupancy of all premises containing collections
* Demonstration of financial basis
* Appropriate workforce, in numbers and experience, for the museum’s
* responsibilities and plans
* Access to professional advice and input to policy development and
* decision making
* Clear, workable emergency plan
* Organisational approach to environmental sustainability

Considering these aspects at an early stage in the development of your museum will stand you in good stead for the future. In a similar manner, the standard sets out what is expected, as a minimum, when it comes to your collection.

**Collections**

In short you will need to ensure that your governing body has;

* Satisfactory arrangements regarding the ownership of the collection
* An approved policy for developing collections. This is also known as an acquisition and disposal policy that must include – a statement of purpose, an overview of current collections, themes and priorities for future collecting, themes and priorities for rationalisation and disposal, and information about the legal and ethical framework for acquisition and disposal of items
* A Documentation policy, which guides how the museum will document is collection
* A Care and conservation policy, to guide its approach to collections, care and conservation.

And that these are supplements with associated plans and procedures.

Again, NIMC can advise you on the best to approach collections care and management, and there is useful guidance to be found through the Collections Trust, see <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/index.php>

**Museum Building**

Inevitably, if you are caring for a collection you will need to house it somewhere and to fulfil the role of a museum, have a means of making the collection accessible to the public. While there are various ways of obtaining the space your require – borrowing, renting or buying – you will gather from the overview of the museum standard that a stress is placed upon retaining secure occupancy for the medium to long term.

Amongst the myriad things you will need to consider is that your building is fit for purpose so far as it meets your aims concerning your collection, and complies with the necessary requirements for the people who will work in your museum and those who will visit it. Thus when considering your museum building you may ask – does it have adequate display space and storage for the collection? Do you need support spaces such as a workshop or offices for your staff and/or volunteers? Is it secure? Will it meet the health and safety requirements for visitors and workers? Does it offer an appropriate level of accessible facilities, such as toilets, café, meeting rooms, for visitors?

The Accreditation Standard states that, “Accredited museums are welcoming and accessible. They exhibit collections and have a planned approach to identifying and providing a good-quality service for a broad range of users.”

**Visitor Services**

In the establishment phase of your museum you will have assessed the needs and demands of visitors and that these will have been incorporated into a forward plan by your governing body. Such a plan will also set out how you will maintain the interest and involvement of visitors, and experience suggests that successful museums develop good-quality, stimulating services for users and potential users on a continual basis.

In line with the Standard you will need to consider how you will,

* understand who its users and non-users are
* evaluate and analyse information to assess users’ needs
* devise plans to broaden your range of users
* develop a culture of customer care with arrangements in place to make sure all users are treated with courtesy and care
* and take account of users’ needs, guided by a policy statement setting out a commitment to give everyone access to collections and associated information

As part of your planning process you might have regard for

* providing adequate and accessible facilities to meet the needs of the expected number and
* range of users or provide information about nearby facilities
* having appropriate signs and directions inside and outside the building
* communicating effectively with users and potential users through a range of accessible marketing and promotional activities
* exhibiting the collections using a variety of interpretative methods
* providing access to the collections and associated information for research purposes and other forms of engagement
* and providing effective and stimulating learning and discovery experiences focused on the collections

NIMC provides numerous case studies of how local museums have done these things and you can read these at <http://www.nimc.co.uk/what-we-do/>

**Sustainability**

As you will gather from the definition of a museum, they are not short-term institutions and there is an expectation that all museums can best care for our heritage by operating ‘in perpetuity’. This should be to the forefront of your thinking when deliberating and planning a museum and thus you will have to plan to ensure that you not only have the necessary inputs – People, Premises, Money and Time – to get your museum off the ground, but also that you have the necessary resources to make it flourish.

You might wish to plan for your museum in terms of

* Social sustainability – How will you meet peoples changing needs and expectations? How will you develop your visitor and user base? See <http://www.hlf.org.uk/HowToApply/goodpractice/Documents/Thinking_about_audience_development.pdf>

<http://www.museum-id.com/idea-detail.asp?id=353>

* Environmental sustainability – How might you reduce any adverse environmental impacts in building and running your museum? What could you do to reduce your carbon footprint and that of your visitors? See <http://www.hlf.org.uk/HowToApply/goodpractice/Documents/Reducing_Environmental_Impacts.pdf>
* Economic sustainability – How will you generate the money needed to establish, run and develop your museum? See <http://www.nimc.co.uk/fs/doc/Funding%20for%20Museums.pdf>

[http://www.aim-museums.co.uk/downloads/ee7f04d4-dd7c-11e1-bdfc 001999b209eb.pdf](http://www.aim-museums.co.uk/downloads/ee7f04d4-dd7c-11e1-bdfc%20001999b209eb.pdf)

Again, NIMC provides guidance, advice and training in these areas and we would welcome your enquiries.

**Other related material**

If, after reading this paper, you still feel setting up a museum is the way forward you can get advice from a number of organisations and museums. You may also wish to talk to other local museums.

**Northern Ireland Museums Council**

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NIMC supports local museums across Northern Ireland in maintaining and improving their standards of collections care and public services. We can give you detailed advice and guidance on setting up a museum and put you in contact with other local museums directly.

For more information on **Museums Accreditation** see: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/accreditation-scheme/>

For more information on the principles of running a museum view the Museum Association’s **Code of Ethics for Museums** <http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=15717>

General information on museums and the sector is provided by the **Museums Association** <http://www.museumsassociation.org/home>

For practical advice on collections visit the **Collections Link** website <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/>

**Big Questions, Big Answers** is a publication from Museums Galleries Scotland that is “intended to guide and advise anybody who is thinking about getting involved with a heritage project.” <http://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/publications/publication/19/big-questions-big-answers>

Association of Independent Museums

<http://www.aim-museums.co.uk/downloads/2267bc78-dd79-11e1-bdfc-001999b209eb.pdf>

On the Heritage Lottery Fund website you can find a series of ‘good practice guidance’ documents which will inform you thinking see <http://www.hlf.org.uk/HowToApply/goodpractice/Pages/Goodpracticeguidance.aspx#.Uq7wKjpFCpo>

**Non-Museum projects**

If you have considered this paper and decide that running a museum is not for you, however you would like to create an alternative heritage project then some useful sources of information can be found at:

Heritage Lottery Fund website: <http://www.hlf.org.uk/Pages/Home.aspx>

For information about caring for historic buildings and monuments visit the Northern Ireland Environment Agency website: <http://www.doeni.gov.uk/niea/built-home.htm> or the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society <http://www.uahs.org.uk/>

For information concerning archival records, particularly local and family history, you may wish to contact the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland <http://www.proni.gov.uk/>

For information about caring for collections visit the ICON – Institute for Conservation website <http://www.icon.org.uk/>

For information about setting up reminiscence activities visit the Reminiscence Network of Northern Ireland website <http://www.rnni.org/>

For information on collections of Northern Irish tourist trails, museum collections, photographs, exhibitions, oral testimonies and other information from local museums and community groups visit the Northern Ireland Community Archive website <http://niarchive.org/>

For information on setting up oral history projects <http://www.bl.uk/oralhistory>

There are other websites which provide guidance on creating interpretive trails, research and publications, websites, digital archives, setting up temporary exhibitions in various sites, retaining traditional craft skills, and it is suggested that you search for these through your search engine.

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