

Board of the National Museum of Ireland

Minutes of Meeting of the Board

on Thursday 25th February 2021 via video-conference

Present: Ms Catherine Heaney (Chair) Ms Denise Moroney
Ms Helen Shenton Mr Declan Nelson
Professor Ingrid Hook Professor Mary O'Dowd
Professor Kathleen James-Chakraborty Dr Andrew Power
Dr Linda King Mr John Bowen
Mr Paolo Viscardi Ms Mary Crotty
Dr Susan Rogers Mr Ambrose Loughlin
Dr Barra O'Donnabhain

Apologies: Ms Judith McCarthy

In attendance: Ms Lynn Scarff (Director, NMI)
Ms Jade Dillon (Secretary to the Board,
NMI)

1.0 Opening of meeting, apologies if any, adoption of agenda

The Chair opened the meeting and apologies were conveyed for Ms McCarthy. It was noted that Ms Shenton and Mr Loughlin would be joining the meeting at a later time due to prior commitments. It was noted by the Chair that she was conscious that online meetings can be difficult and demanding to participate in and that it would be her preference to keep the proceedings as tight as possible today.

i) Congratulations to the Director

On behalf of the Board, the Chair conveyed heartfelt congratulations to the Director on her recent wedding and wished her a lifetime of love and happiness.

ii) Director's appraisal

The Chair proposed the inclusion of a closed session on the meeting agenda for the Director's appraisal. The change to the agenda was proposed by Mr Viscardi and seconded by Dr Power.

2.0 Minutes of previous meeting - 19th November 2020, and matters arising, if any

The minutes were approved by the Board with exception to minor amendment. The minutes were proposed by Mr Bowen and seconded by Dr Rogers.

3.0 Executive report

The Committee noted the executive report and the report was taken as read. The Chair invited the Director to provide an overview to the Board.

i) Website homepage

The Director informed the Board that the NMI team had developed a new home page that will be more proactively orientated towards online engagement. The Director stressed the importance of the NMI homepage as the only virtual gateway to the museum and that navigation needs to be more straightforward to ensure that online events and resources are accessible within a few clicks.

The Director pointed out that the NMI has numerous high quality online videos, tours and other content but that this content was lost due to indirect pathways/dead-ends/insufficient exposure on the homepage. The Director informed the Board that updates will be provided to the Strategy & Engagement Committee.

ii) Public consultations

The Director notified the Board that the NMI are working towards two public consultations pieces; the first as a final stage of the NMI's community engagement strategy and second as an integral step in the development of the NMI's *20th Century History of Ireland Galleries*.

iii) Kildare street strategic assessment report

The Director informed the Board that the Minister of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media has approved funding for external consultants to assist in the production of the Strategic Assessment Report. The Director explained that this work, along with other capital works for Kildare Street have been delayed due to the Level 5 restrictions.

iv) Research grants and proposals

The Director informed the Board that the Collections & Learning division are currently working on a number of research grant submissions, including a digital humanities grant.

The Director told the Board that she is of the opinion that research is an important area that needs to be supported and built on at the NMI and emphasised that it is a key area of focus for the Board's General Public Advisory Committee (GPAC). The Director highlighted that, unlike other cultural institutions around the world, one of the main challenges is that cultural institutions in Ireland are not considered as research bodies by public funding bodies and are therefore exempt from making lead partner applications for research funding and securing the associated overheads. The Director pointed out that access to research funding could be utilised for supporting research services and opportunities within the NMI.

Some discussions followed on the noted funding opportunities and the Board agreed that the NMI's research profile needs to be improved upon.

v) NMI's Digital Strategy

The Director reported that the NMI's Digital Strategy Working Group will have its first meeting at the end of February to discuss the key areas of focus for the Strategy, and to agree on work packages for each area.

vi) InForm Catalogue

The Director informed the Board that the *InForm* exhibition catalogue, produced by Dr Edith Andrees and a number of NMI staff, was published on 18th February 2021 ahead of the launch of the exhibition which has been delayed due to level 5 restrictions.

vii) Minceir.ie Online Traveller Portal

The Director informed the Board that a generous grant has been received for the Minceir.ie Online Travellers Portal project. This programme, initiated by Ms Rosa Meehan, curator of Irish Folklife Division, will see the creation of an online portal of objects, archives, photography, recordings and other collections held in the National Cultural Institutions and Irish Folklore Commission, UCD illustrative of or pertaining to Traveller culture and history. The Director explained that the funding will also be used to fund the position of the project coordinator for a two-year contract at the NMI it is planned that this position will be recruited from interested members of the Traveller community.

3.1 Discussion

The Chair thanked the Director for her overview of the executive report and welcomed feedback from the members of the Board.

i) Online gateway to the NMI essential

The Board discussed the effects of the closure on the NMI and there was agreement that a review of the

website's homepage to make events and programming more accessible is an important step in the NMI's engagement during closure. There was agreement that it is likely that visits to the NMI will initially be slow after re-opening, due to understandable crowd anxiety and the detrimental effects that the pandemic has had on the tourist economy.

ii) Outside museum walls

In relation to making the NMI welcoming to people of all communities and backgrounds with varying interests, Dr King proposed that it is vital for museums to engage with communities outside the museum walls in order to effectively reach audiences that may not otherwise visit museums. The Director agreed and informed the Board that a focus on enabling local communities including schools to use the Museum space will be a priority.

4.0 Special Discussion Topic: Project Engage: Workforce Plan

The Board noted the presentation document and it was agreed that the document would be taken as read and that an overview of the plan would be provided by the Director. The Chair welcomed the Director to commence her presentation and requested that the Director also explain the genesis of the plan for the benefit of new board members.

i) Project Engage

The Director provided an overview of the stages of Project Engage up to this point in the process. The Director explained to Dr Rogers and Dr O'Donnabhain that the workforce planning was due to commence in mid-2020 but this was postponed due to the pandemic. The Director reported that Ms Catherine Smith McKiernan, HR Consultant was brought on board in September 2020 to develop the plan.

ii) Importance of evaluation and staff consultation

The Director stressed the importance of staff consultation and evaluation throughout the process and explained that the Project Engage Steering Group consists of staff who are members of the Union, and non-managerial staff. A number of individual, group and departmental conversations have taken place over the last few months in particular to ensure that all queries and concerns are acknowledged and talked through.

The Director informed the Board that the Workforce plan presentation (circulated to the Board) was presented to the Steering Group in January who approved the plan for departmental circulation.

4.1 Feedback

i) Endorsement

The Board wholeheartedly congratulated the Director on her work on Project Engage and on the delivery of the Plan itself. The Board fully endorsed the Plan and described the Plan as a milestone for the NMI. It was noted that the Plan provides great opportunities for career advancement and that it is encouraging to hear that NMI management are willing to be flexible in this regard.

ii) Early planning a priority

The Chair thanked the Director for her presentation and highlighted the importance of early planning for both the NMI and the Board, and how the two bodies communicate in terms of board expectations and the needs of the organisation. The Chair highlighted that the Plan will need to be considered for Board transition with regards to preserving and promoting the organisation's long-term strategies.

iii) Project Engage onsite

Dr. Power queried whether the Director had concerns on whether there may be a different reaction to the Plan when the NMI re-opens and informal discussions on the Plan take place between staff. The Director thanked Dr. Power for his valid question and explained that informal small group meetings are ongoing and that there is a huge amount of time and effort going into proactively engaging with individuals and responding their queries.

iv) NMI's Master Vision Statement

Prof O'Dowd advised that the NMI's Master Vision Statement be reviewed prior to the cessation of the Board on 5th July 2021 to acknowledge the improvements that have been made over the last five years.

It was agreed that the NMI's Master Vision Statement would be reviewed by the Board prior to this date.

v) Research focus and graduate programme

The Board briefly discussed the importance of the development of a research focus at the NMI. It was agreed that although the Collections Resource Centre is currently the NMI's research centre, this area is resource deficient. The Director put forward that this Plan will look at how to approach overheads to build capacity.

Prof O'Dowd referred to the current graduate programme at the National Library of Ireland and proposed that it would be a step in the right direction for the NMI to follow suit. The Director agreed.

vi) Deputation

The Board queried the reasoning behind the establishment of a deputation model at the NMI. The Director explained that the deputation model has already been implemented at management level and it ensures that updates at meetings are passed on to those who cannot attend a meeting. The Director explained that each manager elects a deputy from their team who will attend the meeting in their place to take notes and update on their department. The Director explained that this allows team members to 'act up', ensures a level of transparency and can also ensure that any gaps in the skills or knowledge of the manager can be complemented and or filled by the deputy.

The Director informed the Board that she is in discussions with the Department on the potential role of a deputy Director. The Director explained that this would be executed internally.

vii) Final letter to the Minister

The Chair thanked the Board for their feedback and noted that the Plan will be a useful tool to articulate the NMI's values and visions for the future in the current Board's final letter to the Minister.

Mr Loughlin joined the meeting.

5.0 Succession Planning

5.1 Future Board

i) Business Plan for 2021

The Business Plan for 2021 was taken as read and was formally adopted by the Board with exception to minor amendments.

With reference to the Business Plan for 2021, the Board briefly discussed the importance of public consultation, particularly in relation to community engagement and the *20th Century History of Ireland Galleries*. In relation to the *20th Century History of Ireland Galleries*, Prof O'Dowd advised that the NMI should consult with experts prior to the release of a public consultation. Ms McCarthy requested clarity on the public consultation for community engagement.

It was agreed that consulting with external experts should be a key priority for the NMI.

It was agreed that the *20th Century History of Ireland* plan would be circulated for the next GPAC meeting.

ii) Corporate governance training

The Chair thanked those who attended the corporate governance training in January. The Chair informed the Board that the Secretary will soon be circulating a feedback survey on the training.

iii) Risk

Mr Loughlin informed the Board that he has been liaising with the Chair of the Board on the risks to the NMI, if Board continuity is not maintained. Mr Loughlin informed the Board that there is no statutory body called the National Museum of Ireland and that it is the Board that is the body corporate. Mr Loughlin explained that a quorum of six would ensure that decisions could be made at Board meetings, however it is essential that a full Board is prioritised and is in operation to ensure that the NMI can fulfil its fiduciary functions, as per the National Cultural Institutions Act 1997.

The Chair informed the Board that she, the Director and the Secretary have been liaising with the Department on this and have submitted correspondence in relation to the risks. It was noted that it appears that a number of state bodies are currently without board and that it is estimated that there may be delays in the appointment process for the NMI.

It was agreed by the Board that it would be prudent, as agents of the National Museum of Ireland, to exercise duty of care and restate the importance of Board continuity in the context of the National Cultural Institutions Act, to the Minister. It was agreed that this would be included in the letter to the Minister along with the finalised Board recruitment handbook.

iv) The position of the Chair of the Board

In relation to the Chair of the Board's position, the Chair informed the Board that she would consider staying on as Chair of the Board for a maximum of two years. The Chair's announcement received the unanimous and full support of the Board.

v) Board recruitment handbook

The Board noted the Board recruitment handbook and the handbook was formally adopted with exception to minor additions.

It was agreed that potential candidates should be made aware of the cost implications of travel.

It was agreed that research expertise in relation to the NMI's collection should be more explicitly stated in the handbook.

It was proposed that a line should be included on whether the views expressed on a candidates public-facing profiles are in keeping with the ethos and values that are important to the NMI.

It was agreed that it would be sensible to take a staggered approach to the advertising of the position of the Chair of the Board to ensure a smoother transition and handover and that this would be brought to the attention of the Minister for her consideration.

It was agreed that the skills and functions of the Chair of the Board should be put forward to the Minister as an appended document of the Board recruitment handbook and that the role of the Chair of the Board could be advertised upon the formation of a full Board.

It was proposed that biographies of the NMI's external subcommittee members should be uploaded to the website.

vi) RDS and RIA nominations

Prof O'Dowd informed the Board that a meeting has been convened at the RIA for next week to identify those who may be interested in being put forward as RIA nominees to the Minister. The Secretary clarified

that names are to be forwarded to the Secretary in the first instance and that it is the Secretary's duty to forward the names of nominees to the Department for the Minister's consideration.

5.2 Special discussion topic for April and budget meeting

The Chair gave an overview of the proposed special discussion items for the next board meeting and informed the Board that she and the chairs of the subcommittees will be convening a meeting before each board meeting.

It was agreed that the final board meeting would be scheduled and would be dedicated to the discussion of the budget for 2022.

i) April board meeting

The Chair proposed that it would be valuable to the run-up to the cessation of the board to allocate the April Board meeting's special discussion topic discussion item to GPAC related priorities, **The Board agreed with the Chair's suggestion.**

ii) Independent museum model

Discussions followed on the NMI's reputation as the national institution for the collections of Ireland and how communications need to be improved to ensure that the NMI stays relevant and at the forefront in the minds of the public.

The Board briefly discussed emerging campaigns to establish museums and galleries that reflect specific communities in societies, including a standalone Women's Museum. It was emphasised that the Museum needs to consider how better to engage and work with underrepresented groups and communities to ensure their experience and narrative is included prominently in our National Museum.

iii) Topics of prioritising for the new board

The Chair referred to the Strategic Plan 2019-2022 and highlighted that the main areas of focus for this plan was to increase capacity and implement improvements within the NMI. The Chair emphasised that the role of the next Board, in forming the next strategic plan for the NMI, will partially focus on building an engagement piece that will encompass areas such as improving the NMI's research profile and relations with international bodies.

The Chair stressed to the Board that these topics need to be acknowledged as they will shape the agendas for the new board and emphasised that unless the topic is part of the handover process, it may not be prioritised by the future board.

On the subject of prioritising collections care, Ms Shenton informed the Board that on a governmental level, she has been advocating for a suitable storage solution for the collections of the NMI and has highlighted the risks associated with less than adequate storage spaces.

6.0 Committee updates

It was agreed that the Board would take the subcommittee reports as read and that the chairs of each subcommittee would provide an overview of key updates only.

6.1 General Public Advisory Committee

The Board noted the GPAC report and accompanying documents. Prof. James-Chakraborty gave a brief overview of the key updates from GPAC:

- GPAC welcomed two new external members onto the Committee in February 2021:

- **Prof Wayne Modest** is Head of the Research Center of Material Culture, a research institute within the Tropenmuseum (Amsterdam), Museum Volkenkunde (Leiden), the Afrika Museum (Berg en Dal) and the Wereldmuseum (Rotterdam) that focuses predominantly on research of ethnographical collections in the Netherlands. Prof Modest is also Professor of Material Culture and Critical Heritage Studies (by special appointment) in the faculty of humanities at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam (VU).
 - **Dr Richard McElligott** is a professional Historian from Kerry who holds a PhD in Modern Irish History from UCD. He is a permanent Lecturer in Modern Irish History at Dundalk Institute of Technology. In 2017, he was appointed as an expert curator for RTE's National Treasures project where he helped select objects for an exhibition on the social history of Ireland since 1917 (held at NMI - Country Life, Mayo).
- It was agreed by GPAC that the approval of policies for MSPI accreditation would be prioritised by GPAC prior to 5th July.
 - It was proposed that the digitisation of the collection to ensure public access (particularly during closure) should also be prioritised first and foremost by the Committee prior to the cessation of the Board.
 - Prof. James-Chakraborty informed the Board that an amendment was made to the recently approved Irish Antiquities Division Acquisitions Strategy to include a law pursuant to the European Union, Council Regulation on the introduction and import of cultural goods, 17 April 2019 (2019/880). **The Board formally adopted the amendment.**

6.2 Strategy & Engagement Committee

The Board noted the Strategy & Engagement report. Dr King informed the Board that the Strategy & Engagement Committee welcomed a new external member onto the committee in January 2021:

- **Derek Flynn** has worked on a range of museum-related projects in Canada, China, Japan and Berlin. He is currently the design director with MOMA, New York and works with all strategic areas within the organisation.
- Mr Shane Sterio, the NMI's Retail Manager, gave the committee a presentation on the NMI's Online Shop. The Online Shop was launched on 25th January.
- Succession Planning: Dr King stressed the importance of audience and community engagement for the NMI, particularly during the pandemic. Dr King acknowledged that the NMI has carried out a number of audience engagement initiatives during the course of the pandemic and proposed that priority should be given to the further development of public engagement strategies and initiatives.
- The Brand and Identity guidelines tender is currently being drawn up, while the Digital Strategy is in development, however the brief has expanded to include online collections, therefore increasing the timelines. Dr King informed the Board that this is a large-scale project with many moving parts and that additional time is required for the Strategy.

6.3 Capital & Estates Committee

The Board noted the Capital & Estate Committee report and accompanying documents. Mr Bowen gave a brief overview of the key updates from the Committee:

- The Committee discussed the Operational and Governance Agreement documents received from the Department.
- It was agreed that the Director and Ms Aoife Hurley, Head of Operations would consider the document further in terms of how the financial sign-off is flowed through the Board. Mr Bowen informed the Board that it was agreed that the Committee would liaise with the Audit & Risk Committee in relation to the financial side of the proposed agreement.
- Mr Bowen stressed that mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that the collaboration between the OPW and the NMI is governed fairly and clearly.
- The Ceramics Room was returned to the NMI on 16th December 2020.

6.4 Audit & Risk Committee

The Board noted the Audit & Risk report and accompanying documents. Mr Loughlin gave the Board a brief overview of the key updates:

- Review of the 2020 financial reports.
- Mr Loughlin stressed that there has been a significant reduction in own resource income and retail income and that these losses will remain a cause of concern well into 2021.
- Mr Loughlin informed the Board that the Committee approved the NMI's Procurement Plan, subject to some minor amendments and requested that the Board formally adopt the Plan with exception to minor amendments if any.
- The Board noted the final draft of the Management Response Letter (copy attached) which had some suggestions to management for improvements on finance issues from the C&AG (that are in hand) and formally adopted the letter for noting by the Board.
- The external audit of the 2020 financial statements will commence early in March/April and has been contracted out by the Comptroller & Auditor General (C&AG) to DHKN Limited Galway Financial Services.
- Two additional risks have been added to the Register, 1) the risks associated with Board transition and 2) Brexit implications in relation to import/export licenses.
- The Committee discussed the recent public discourse in relation to the decision by ESB to not re-open No. 29 Georgian Museum. The Director gave an overview of the arrangements with ESB in relation to loans from the collection up until their return to NMI in 2017. It was emphasised that NMI has no operational or governance role in relation to Number 29.
- Budget 2021: Mr Loughlin reported that there has been no major diversions from the budget 2020.

The Board formally approved the following documents: Procurement Plan, Management Response Letter, Financial Pack, Budget 2021, Covid Risk Register and Budget Cash Out-Turn.

With reference to the Risk Register, the Board briefly discussed the vast improvement in risk monitoring at the NMI but agreed that the NMI has more steps to take in this area. Ms Shenton put forward that the Risk Register could be a useful tool for decision making and for encouraging innovation and research on collections. The Director thanked Ms Shenton for her input and agreed to send Ms Shenton the NMI's Risk Policy.

7.0 A.O.B and items for noting

i) NMI's policy benchmarking

In relation to acquisitions policies, the Chair put forward whether stakeholder involvement should be considered in the drafting of the NMI's policies and strategies, and proposed that external expertise may be a valuable future-proofing measure for the NMI. Prof Chakraborty agreed and stressed that the MSPI accreditation should be considered the first step in this process.

ii) Formalities note

The Chair noted that it is important that board-related information is sufficiently documented, including information in email format. The Chair emphasised that the main point of contact to the Executive is the Secretary to the Board and requested Board members please continue to copy the Secretary to the Board on any email correspondence that is board-related.

iii) Oversight agreement

Due to the misplacement of the oversight agreement in a separate agenda item on Decision Time, it was agreed that the Oversight Agreement for 2021 would be reviewed and approved via email correspondence.



Post-meeting note: the Oversight Agreement for 2021 was formally approved by the Board and was forwarded to the Department on 11th March 2021.

8.0. Date of next meeting

29th April 2021.

End of meeting.

APPROVED