

**CONFIRMED MINUTES
MEETING OF BOARD**

**Tuesday 17 December 2024
Training Room, Cultra Manor**

Members Present:

Gordon Milligan – Chair
Keith Charlton
Ryan Cornett
Charlotte Jess
William McMullan
Sally Montgomery
Peter Osborne
Therese Rafferty
Fiona Ryan
Mark Walker
Robert Whan
Shane Quinn

National Museums NI Attendance:

Kathryn Thomson, Chief Executive (CEO)
Colin Catney, Chief Operating Officer (COO)
William Blair, Director of Collections (DC)
Aaron Ward, Director of Public Engagement (DPE)
Hannah Crowdy, Head of Curatorial (HC) – Item 4.2
Michelle Ashmore, Secretariat

1. Induction

1.1 Apologies

The Chair formally welcomed everyone to the meeting.

There were no apologies.

1.2 Conflicts of Interest

The Chair ascertained there were no conflicts of interest in relation to the business as set out on the agenda.

1.3 Approval of Minutes from Last Meeting

Members approved the Minutes of the Board Meeting held on 5 November 2024.

1.4 Matters Arising from Previous Meeting

The Chief Executive (CEO) advised that a tour of Heron Road/TIMS will be arranged for Board Members in the New Year and that the presentation on the Future of Natural Sciences is on the meeting agenda.

The CEO also advised that the two outstanding actions from January 2024 would be scheduled when relevant.

Members noted the updates.

2. Chair & Chief Executive Business

2.1 Chair & Members Business

The Chair referenced that members have received a copy of the final Independent Financial Review report. This will be discussed further under section 4 of today's Board meeting agenda.

The Chair highlighted that the Minister for Communities visited the Ulster Folk Museum on 14 November 2024 for a consultation on the draft Corporate Strategy 2025-2030. We also provided an update on the Reawakening Project and discussed next steps. He also experienced the Languages of Ulster Trails and visited the Ferguson Black Tractor at the Ulster Transport Museum.

The Chair advised that the Head of Internal Audit was producing an action plan report summarising the discussion from the Board Effectiveness Review which took place in October 2024. This will be brought to the next Board meeting.

The Chair advised the Commercial Task & Finish Group meetings were still ongoing and a feedback report would be brought to the next Board meeting. He also thanked members who are involved in the group for their time.

The Chair advised that Mark Walker as new Chair of ARAC will be providing a verbal update from the December 2024 meeting.

2.2 Chair Executive Report

The CEO provided a verbal update from the Chief Executive report with the below highlights:

- **Reawakening the Ulster Folk Museum** – it has been agreed with NLHF to defer their decision 6 months to allow the OBC to proceed through the Departmental approval processes. In addition, following approval by the Board in September 2024 the final phases of works for the removal of invasive species is near completion.
- **Ulster American Folk Park** – the next step for this project is to procure the ICT and develop the OBC. The MSW Growth Deal have advised that the OBC is to be submitted by March 2026. We are currently in discussions with DfC and FODC as to how we will secure the funding support to deliver this.

- **Corporate Strategy 2025-2030** – the public consultation process will launch in early January 2025. Internal consultation workshops are being run over the next number of weeks.
- **Budget 2024-25** – the independent financial review by Deloitte is complete and a final report is expected imminently.

In October Monitoring we received an additional in year allocation of £1.53m which covers the forecast deficit for the year.

The CEO also passed on her thanks to the Head of Finance & Governance and his team for their great achievement regarding this settlement.

- **Disposal of the Mary Joseph** – following previous Board approval to disseminate a ‘Declaration to Deconstruct’ via the National Historic Ships website, this has now been live for the required six months. As no credible alternative to deconstruction has emerged we will be bringing the second-stage proposal for disposal by ethical deconstruction to the Board in January 2025.
- **Repatriation of Ancestral Human Remains to Hawaii** – in April 2022, National Museums NI returned two ancestral human remains (iwi kūpuna) and five sacred cultural objects (mea kapu) to native Hawaiians with the support of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA). The original repatriation request we received also included an additional three iwi kūpuna but unfortunately they could not be located at the time. We committed to continue searching for the missing iwi kūpuna and, through the ongoing review of National Museums NI’s collection of human remains, we were pleased to locate them in November 2024. We immediately notified our colleagues in Hawaii and they confirmed their wish to progress with a formal repatriation in early 2025. A repatriation proposal will therefore be brought to the Board for approval in January 2025.

Members noted the update and requested a summary of the communication plan regarding the consultation process for the Corporate Strategy 2025-2030.

3. Performance Review

3.1 Business Plan Review

The CEO spoke to the Q2 review. She highlighted that we are largely on track against all KPI targets. Overall visitor numbers are on target primarily due to exceptionally strong performance at Ulster Museum with Lavery, Caravaggios and Bout Ye.

Members noted the update.

3.2 Financial Review

The Head of Finance & Governance took Members through the funding position and the management accounts, confirming that the £1.53m grant in aid shortfall projected within the 2024/25 draft business plan has now been confirmed by the Department.

The Head of Finance & Governance advised Members that the paid entry sites were tracking behind expectations in terms of footfall and admission income with an adverse variance of c£55k forecast by year end, but noted that the overall self-generated income picture was positive, with retail and venue hire income on track to yield a £200k favourable variance at year end.

The Head of Finance & Governance advised that some payroll pressures were emerging in Visitor Experience, due to higher than expected demand on our key events programming, particularly at the Ulster Museum, and having to arrange cover for sickness (short and long term), as well as maternity. He outlined the measures that were being taken to minimise the impact between now and year end, and that the pressures have been quantified and flagged with the Department as part of January monitoring.

The Head of Finance & Governance also provided a capital spend update, confirming the in year bids that have been successfully funded. Colleagues had met with DfC officials on 13th December for an in depth review of projects, and confirmed that all capital projects were on track for delivery by 31st March, with no expected tails into 2025/26.

The Board raised their concern regarding the risk to the Estates as a result of a significant lack of capital funding and revenue maintainence.

Members noted the update.

3.3 Q2 HR&OD Report

The COO highlighted the following from the tabled report:

- Progression of Management Development programme; and,
- Absence rate has slowly started to decline and is currently 4.25%.

Members noted the report.

4. Strategy

4.1 Independent Financial Review – Final Report

The CEO spoke to the Independent Financial Review Report, confirming that the Executive Team are very encouraged by the outcome of the report. It clearly articulates the challenges the organisation has faced and outlines the positive outcomes in the response to managing these. It demonstrates the value for money of investment in National Museums NI, including benchmarking with comparable organisations. The recommendations continue to be discussed with the Department as part of the budget setting process for 2025-26.

4.2 Rebuilding Natural Sciences

The Head of Curatorial presented the plans to rebuild Natural Sciences capacity and function at National Museums NI.

Members noted the erosion of resources in this area over recent years, the clear case for rebuilding capacity and thanked Hannah Crowdy for the presentation.

4.3 Commercial Working Group

The Chair, Keith Charlton confirmed that the working group would have its final meeting after the Board Meeting and that a final report would be presented at the January Meeting.

5. Governance

5.1 Verbal update from ARAC

The Chair of ARAC highlighted the following key points from the meeting held on 10 December 2024:

- Two Internal Audit reports presented with satisfactory outcomes;
- Health & Safety and Data Protection Policies were approved;
- Visitor Regulations were reviewed in detail and are recommended to Board for approval.

5.3 Visitor Regulations for Approval

The CEO advised The Bye Laws were last updated in 2008. With a significant amount of legislative and societal changes since that time, they have recently been updated to ensure they remain relevant and applicable.

The individual Bye Laws for each of the four museums were reviewed at the ARAC meeting on 10 November 2024 and are recommended to the Board for approval.

Members approved the updated Bye Laws.

5.3 Loans, Acquisitions, Disposals

The Board approved the Loans for Approval as presented.

5.5 FOIs

The Board noted the FOI report.

6. Any Other Business

The Chair advised members that the Ulster Scientists Trust Awards Ceremony is taking place at the Ulster Museum on 3 January 2025 to which they have all been invited and encouraged them to attend these opportunities where possible.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The Chair thanked Members and attendees, drew their attention to the date of the next meeting on 28th January – and closed the meeting at 12.20pm.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Kelly', written over a horizontal dotted line.

Date:

28 January 2025

Copies:

DfC, Board Members, File, Website