

**CONFIRMED MINUTES
MEETING OF BOARD**

**Tuesday 16 December 2025
Training Room, Cultra Manor**

Members Present:

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

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)
Michelle Ashmore, Secretariat

1. Induction

1.1 Apologies

The Chair formally welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies were received from:

Ryan Cornett

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 11 November 2025.

1.4 Matters Arising from Previous Meeting

The CEO advised that all actions from November 2025 meeting were complete.

Members noted the update.

2. Chair & Chief Executive Business

2.1 Chair & Members Business

The Chair advised that the Reawakening the Ulster Folk Museum project is progressing through the approval process with a view to meeting the 31st December 2025 NLHF deadline.

The Chair highlighted the current budget challenges faced which the CEO would update further in her report. He also mentioned the continuing challenges we face in relation to delivery of capital projects.

The Chair also advised that there is good information provided in the Q2 Business Plan Report.

The Chair reminded members that a Board Effectiveness workshop will take place after the Board meeting on 27th January 2026.

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** – The Outline Business Case is near the end of the approval process. It has completed the DfC approval process is now being considered by DoF. We are hopeful that this will be completed to ensure that the NLHF deadline of 31st December is achieved. Following approval, the next step will be to appoint a new integrated consultancy team. We are pushing CPD for this to progress as early in January as possible.
- **Ulster American Folk Park** – The initial tender process for the integrated consultancy team, issued through the CPD Framework, was unsuccessful. We are preparing to reissue the tender through the Crown Commercial Services framework early in January. This has required an extension to the original deadline for submission of the OBC which is now due the end of June 2026.

We have bid to DfC for additional funding for 2026/27 to deliver a specific programme for US-NI 250 and the 50th anniversary of the Folk Park.

- **Ulster Museum** – The Welcome Project is progressing well and changes have begun to be implemented in the atrium.
- **Museum Accreditation** – Following assessment earlier this year we have been awarded Full Accreditation for all four of our museums. Administered by Arts Council England on behalf of the UK Accreditation Partnership, Accreditation is the benchmark for well-run museums and galleries. The Accreditation cycle means that museums are normally assessed every five years, but due to severe delays caused by

the Covid-19 pandemic our last assessments were in 2015. As an organisation we have been on a significant journey of transformation and modernisation since 2015, becoming stronger, more resilient and courageous. We can now evidence the difference we are making in society and are committed to amplifying the impact of our museums and collections – in 2015 we had 13 areas for development and this time around we only have 3. So, while we have maintained full accreditation it also demonstrates significant improvement of how our museums are led, managed and operated.

- **JobStart** – We have been successful in our application to the DfC JobStart Scheme for 8 funded opportunities in roles across our sites and at headquarters.
- **Cultra Manor** – the CEO updated the Board on ongoing discussions regarding the future operation of Cultra Manor.
- **Loans** – Members approved the proposed loan approval authority for the CEO increases to £150,000 in alignment with the updated delegated authority in the recently approved Scheme of Delegation.

3. Performance Review

3.1 Business Plan Review

The CEO presented the Q2 review. She highlighted the key emerging KPI trend which shows visitor footfall behind target at paid sites. This is due to ongoing challenges with external factors such as weather, road closures at key events and impact of cost of living on disposable income.

While this trend is consistent with the sector across UK and Ireland, it is impacting on self-generated income and a £300k shortfall is currently being forecast. The CEO advised that from the outset the budget set carried a high level of risk, however the position continues to be monitored and actions are being identified to try and contain this as much as possible. A bid has also been made to the Department for an in year allocation.

The CEO advised that another successful Ulster Museum Late took place in Q2 as well as the Staff Conference, attended by approximately 300 colleagues with over 80% satisfaction recorded.

Members noted the update especially the budgetary challenges.

3.2 Financial Review

The Head of Finance & Governance (HFG) updated Members on the Q2 management accounts and forecast, focusing on the main income and expenditure variances, commenting specifically on the following:

- An ambitious annual target was set for self-generated income, however based on current average income per visitor data, it was unlikely that those targets would be achieved by year end, with the potential for an overall income deficit of c£0.5m;
- There will be a reduction of the enabling funds for the UAFP Journey Ahead project in this financial year, but that the deadline for spending those funds was March 2027, so the remaining unspent budget of £0.6m can be carried forward into the 26/27 financial year;
- Payroll spend was being managed tightly, that it is tracking on budget for the year to date, and is expected to come in on target by year end;
- An in year internal budget reprofiling exercise is ongoing to allow for easements to be declared and budget pressures to be addressed across business units.

The HFG advised that the overall financial position is being closely monitored and managed tightly, however given the income projections there is potential for a net overall budget pressure of £0.3m. He advised that a bid of £0.3m has been submitted to the DfC December monitoring round. If unsuccessful, management will move to restrict in certain areas to avert any over-commitments and ensure a year end deficit does not materialise. He added further that management would be seeking to limit any knock on impact to business plan delivery and general visitor experience.

The HFG also updated on the current capital position, noting that two key construction projects were at risk (UM Store and UFM Reawakening enabling works), resulting in a capital budget easement of £0.6m. The HFG advised that discussions are currently ongoing with DfC Capital Team about tailing those key priority projects into the next financial year so that they can continue to completion.

Members noted the update.

3.3 Q2 HR&OD Report

The COO highlighted the following from the tabled report:

- Following the staff conference, we conducted an evaluation of the event with 82% of staff indicating their overall satisfaction;
- Our annual staff engagement '*Pulse Survey*' completion rate was up 13% from the previous year;
- Another round of Executive Team Briefing sessions took place across all of our sites in November. These updates covered a range of business issues and provided an opportunity for colleagues to ask questions; and,
- Another round of the FLM programme will be held in Q4 as well as another TDI group.

Members noted the report.

4. Strategy

4.1 Spotlight on Corporate Strategy – Identity

The Director of Collections (DC) presented an update on our key impact area of Identity, as it relates to Identity and Language as a policy direction.

The presentation explained the policy context around Identity and Language and provided an update on:

- Languages of Ulster – our signature programme
- Looking Ahead - key challenges and issues
- Opportunities for future development
- Our commitment to embracing identity and language positively and proactively

Members endorsed the presentation, commending the DC for thought leadership in this area and enduring the proposed manifesto for the organisation. The Chair thanked the DC for the presentation and Members approved the direction of travel as outlined in the presentation.

5. Governance

5.1 Verbal update from ARAC

The Chair of ARAC highlighted the following key points from the meeting held on 17 November 2025:

- Therese Rafferty attended her first meeting as an ARAC member and also passed on his thanks to Keith Charlton who stepped down as a member;
- Satisfactory IA reports have been completed for Customer Booking and Membership Arrangements Review and Health & Safety Arrangements Review;
- The Head of Collections Services provided an update on Collections Hazards Management and the progress made on the two recent Priority 1 internal audit actions;
- Final Annual Report & Accounts 2024-25 and Final Report To Those Charged With Governance (RTTCWG) have now been certified by the Comptroller & Auditor General of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and laid in the Assembly;
- Members raised their ongoing concern with CPD delivery and the problems they continue to present across the board in terms of revenue maintenance projects and capital investment projects; and,
- Corporate Risk Register was approved.

Board members noted the update.

The Chair of the Board passed his thanks onto members who attend ARAC for their work over the past year.

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

None noted

7. Date of Next Meeting

The Chair thanked Members and attendees, drew their attention to the date of the next meeting on 27th January – and closed the meeting at 11.59am.

Signed:



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Date:

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27/1/26

Copies: DfC, Board Members, File, Website