



Exhibition Policy

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Policy Owner: Director of Collections

1. Introduction

This policy provides a clear summary of National Museums NI's approach to and rationale for exhibition programming. National Museums NI has a diverse range of audiences and the exhibition programme strives to cater to these many audiences while also aiming to attract new visitors.

The purpose of the Exhibition Policy is to ensure that National Museums NI fulfils its responsibilities in relation to exhibitions and displays, in line with its statutory obligations, the strategic objectives and policies of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Department for Communities (DfC). Relevant policies and strategies include National Museums NI's Corporate Strategy and annual business plans, 'Here for Good' purpose-driven brand identity, the Northern Ireland Museums Policy, and wider sectoral policy and best practice. All exhibitions will seek to deliver against the Vision, Mission and Values of National Museums NI:

Vision

Celebrate who we are: telling the stories of our past, challenging our present, shaping our future

Mission

- Develop, manage and care for our collections to benefit current and future generations
- Make our collections accessible to the widest possible audiences
- Play a leading role in the economic and social wellbeing and future of this place
- Build an organisation where people feel valued

Values

- Striving for excellence
- Being authentic
- Working together
- Showing respect
- Being courageous

The exhibition programme strives to deliver creative and engaging exhibitions, within a limited funding environment, and while demonstrating value for money and public benefit. Exhibitions provide a

platform for mobilising and sharing collections and collections knowledge in a way that is engaging for a wide range of audiences.

The exhibition programme is planned 2-5 years in advance and aligned to the strategic and annual business planning cycle. Funding is provided primarily through grant-in-aid and occasionally supported with funding from grants, sponsorship and donations.

Collaborating with and connecting to other museums and cultural organisations on a local, national and international basis is important to National Museums NI in realising our potential as a key cultural collaborator. Our exhibition programme will be flexible and responsive, taking account of different events, city, local and UK-wide initiatives and festivals, national and international events, as well as seasonal visiting patterns.

2. Aims

Exhibitions present a high profile and flexible means of providing access to collections and collections knowledge, and extending engagement with our audiences. The aims of the Exhibition Programme are:

- To increase access to and deepen engagement with the collections at our museums and other venues across a balanced audience mix
- To present the collections in new and creative ways that are relevant and appealing to a range of audiences
- To develop appreciation and understanding of our collections and collections knowledge across the three broad disciplines of Art, History and Natural Science
- To provide a platform for National Museums NI to have a voice on contemporary issues and key agendas such as the legacy of the past, health and wellbeing, decolonisation, anti-racism, and environmental change
- To provide a platform for National Museums NI to innovate and develop new interpretive techniques to connect audiences with collections
- To share collections research findings that inform and inspire our audiences, with exhibitions that are underpinned by authoritative and scholarly knowledge
- To create exhibitions that generate appeal and interest on the scale that will enhance our museums' reputations as major cultural venues
- To develop and showcase our valued partnerships with other museums, galleries and strategically-aligned organisations, sharing collections and expertise for public benefit

Priority will be given to exhibitions which enable National Museums NI to demonstrate progress and development against the key impact areas identified in the Corporate Strategy 2025-2030:

1. Identity – We will champion diverse and ever-evolving identities, creating spaces where different cultures are visible and respected.
2. Peacebuilding – We will encourage courageous conversations that support the ongoing journey from conflict to lasting peace.
3. Environment – We will mobilise our museums and collections to promote environmental action and protect our shared planet.
4. Innovation – We will be a learning platform to equip a new generation of innovators and entrepreneurs with skills, confidence and creativity.

3. Audience Development & Evaluation

Audience development and the exhibition programme are inextricably linked. The exhibition programme is informed by on-going audience research and an understanding of the current issues and challenges facing society in Northern Ireland and beyond. It is imperative that the exhibition programme is aligned with National Museums NI's Audience Framework (2022), supporting the organisation in its mission to reach and deepen connections with diverse audiences in an inclusive way. National Museums NI undertakes to:

- Use audience profiling and research to inform exhibition planning to ensure that the annual programme achieves a balance across different audience types
- Develop a range of exhibitions on subjects that will appeal to different audience segments through the four approaches of 'Involve', 'Deepen', 'Grow', and 'Invite'
- Position National Museums NI as the only Northern Ireland venue for a limited number of touring national and international exhibitions
- Ensure audience reach through promoting our exhibitions through digital platforms, press, publications and marketing campaigns
- Use evaluation methods to consult with and listen to our audiences to ensure a culture of continual improvement is adopted within the organisation
- Track audience impact both qualitatively and quantitatively through our outcomes-based measure of 'Act, Learn Enjoy'

4. Exhibition Scope and Subject Matter

National Museums NI's collections are multidisciplinary representing Art, History and Natural Science. All exhibitions will draw on or relate closely to the collections, in alignment with the key strategic priorities of the organisation.

The subject matter of individual exhibitions can vary and the main approaches include:

- Chronological
- Thematic/subject-focused
- Event/anniversary-based
- Single-work/object-focused
- Single-artist/collector/historical figure-focused

The exhibition programme also reflects the different subject specialisms, needs and aspirations of our museums and their audiences.

Appendix 1 outlines the definitions used when discussing exhibitions and the available spaces available across the sites.

5. Access, Learning & Event Programming

National Museums NI is committed to delivering public value by offering the widest and most appropriate forms of access to its collections and expertise. The exhibition programme aims to deliver this commitment. It presents additional and enhanced opportunities for increasing access to collections and collections knowledge through the development of exhibition-aligned learning and public programmes. Such alignment provides a broader and deeper level of interpretation of collections and understanding for visitors. The learning activities may include formal education programmes, workshops and informal learning activities. The public programmes include talks, tours, conferences, film shows and online activities. Each exhibition will be associated with public

programming, scaled according to available resources. All programming will be subject to consideration, approval and development as part of the organisation-wide One Programme Plan.

6. Interpretation & Design

Aligned to best practice and catering to the different learning styles of our audiences, National Museums NI will use a range of interpretative and design techniques to develop exhibitions that are informative, creative and engaging. The temporary and varied nature of exhibitions provides National Museums NI with a platform to develop its interpretive practice through use of innovative techniques and technologies. Enhanced interpretative techniques in exhibitions will be employed where appropriate depending on available funding and resource capacity.

The design and presentation of our exhibitions will be to the highest standards and within the context of improving and developing museum design.

7. Environmental Sustainability

Through its Environmental Sustainability Policy and Carbon Action Plan (2022), National Museums NI has made commitments to follow sustainable principles, best practice and guidance in its work, and reduce carbon emissions. National Museums NI will therefore prioritise methodologies that improve the environmental sustainability of exhibitions, including; virtual couriering, use of sustainable building materials, re-use/recycling of building materials, use of energy-efficient lighting. Messaging about environmental sustainability will also be incorporated into exhibitions and associated communications as appropriate.

8. Collaboration & Partnership

National Museums NI will continue to collaborate and partner with museums and other cultural organisations on a local, national and international level. National Museums NI will strive to extend its partnerships with community organisations and wider audiences, exploring opportunities for participation and co-creation. Exhibitions are a key output of such activity, benefiting our audiences by providing access to collections and interpretation, and offering unique visitor experiences.

9. Exhibition Proposals

National Museums NI does not accept proposals for exhibitions directly from external individuals or organisations. Ideas are generated in-house based on National Museums NI collections, expertise and priority agendas, or partnerships are initiated with other museums, galleries and strategically aligned organisations to develop exhibitions that fit within our overall programme.

10. Exhibition Planning Process, Responsibilities and Decision-Making

National Museums NI strives to plan its exhibition 2-5 years in advance. The exhibition planning and approval process was subject to a process mapping exercise in 2019 and is now defined as follows:

- Exhibition proposals are submitted by National Museums NI curators, working in partnership with other internal and external stakeholders as appropriate
- Exhibitions are graded into Tier 1 or Tier 2 depending on the level of complexity
- Standard exhibition proposal templates must be completed for all exhibition proposals
- The Exhibition Development Group (EDG) is the first assessment point for all exhibition proposals. The EDG will assess proposals at a high strategic level

- If approved, exhibition proposals then pass to the Feasibility Forum. The Feasibility Forum (FF) will critically assess and troubleshoot the proposals that come through to them. They will consider what the proposals mean at a practical, operational level and make recommendations back to the EDG accordingly.
- The Senior Management Team (SMT) has oversight of the exhibition programme and gives final sign-off for Tier 1 exhibition proposals, following an initial discussion at the Business Management Group (BMG). The EDG reviews and updates proposals in light of the FF recommendations before taking them to the BMG and SMT
- Operational requirements of exhibitions relating to install and de-install are considered at a quarterly Logistics Meeting
- The EDG meets quarterly and is jointly chaired by the Head of Curatorial and the Head of Audience Development
- The FF meets quarterly and is chaired by a representative from the EDG
- The SMT and BMG meet once per month and consider exhibition proposals as a standard agenda item on a quarterly basis
- Once exhibitions are approved they are assigned a Project Manager. This may be the exhibition curator, a member of the Audience Development Team or a member of the SMT
- The Project Manager will access and coordinate the resources required to deliver the exhibition including budgets, collections, curatorial expertise, loans, interpretation, design, programming, research and marketing
- The Exhibition Project Team, comprising cross-Directorate staff, is responsible for the delivery of the exhibition via regular project team meetings

10. Funding & Financial Contributions

Funding is vital to the development and delivery of the exhibition programme, and is provided through grant-in-aid, donations, grants and sponsorship.

Increasingly, National Museums NI seeks opportunities to charge for entry to major exhibitions, to recoup costs, generate income and continue to support the statutory work of the museums. National Museums NI is also proactive in applying for Museums and Galleries Exhibition Tax Relief, which helps to support delivery of the exhibition programme.

We will continue to explore opportunities to develop exhibitions on a cost-share basis to make best use of funding and resources.

11. Measuring Success

A successful exhibition programme will be measured by:

- Delivering all exhibitions and display projects on time and on budget
- Fulfilling the key objectives of each exhibition project
- Carrying out post-project evaluations on exhibition business cases
- Increasing the number of collections on public display
- Evaluating our visitors' responses to selected exhibitions using a variety of methods
- Assessing visitor numbers to the gallery, if possible, or to the museum venue
- Media coverage and reviews

12. Policy Implementation

The following National Museums NI strategies, plans and procedures, in particular, are relevant to the Exhibition Policy:

- Collections Care and Conservation Policy 2025
- Collections Information and Access Policy 2024
- Collections Development Policy 2025
- Documentation and Loans Procedural Manuals 2010
- Environmental Sustainability Policy 2022
- Ethics Policy 2026
- Human Remains Policy 2025
- Integrated Pest Management Policy 2014
- Lending and Borrowing Policy 2023
- Procurement Policy 2025
- Research Policy 2025

Upon approval, the Exhibition Policy will be implemented through the exhibition-planning framework. Training, where relevant, will be provided to support the delivery of the Exhibition Policy.

The delivery of this policy will be monitored at a strategic level by the Senior Management Team. All National Museums NI staff should strive to meet the responsibilities outlined within the Exhibition Policy.

Appendix 1: Definitions & National Museums NI Exhibition Spaces

To ensure a shared understanding amongst staff and partner organisations, National Museums NI adopts the following definitions:

- **Exhibition** – refers to an exhibition involving either works from the Museum’s own collections or from an external organisation or individual (private collections, museums, artists). These exhibitions can be hosted in the seven art galleries, Window on History, Window on Nature or the Belfast Room at the Ulster Museum; there will be occasions when the art galleries will be used to host a non-art exhibition. There is also a temporary exhibition gallery at the Ulster American Folk Park (UAFP) and limited temporary exhibition space within the Ulster Transport Museum (UTM). These exhibitions are usually free at the Ulster Museum; an entrance fee applies to both UTM and UAFP.
- **Permanent Exhibition** – applies to the ‘core exhibitions’ which provide an authoritative, scholarly, balanced presentation of a theme, event or chronological period involving primarily the Museum’s collections with some loaned items. Permanent exhibitions usually have a lifespan of 10-15 years and are present at all museum sites. They may be subject to updates to reflect new research, community engagement and collections development.
- **Temporary Exhibition** – these exhibitions complement the permanent exhibitions and present the Museums’ with an opportunity of putting more collections on public display. The exhibitions usually involve a deeper exploration of a particular theme, artist, event or chronological period. Temporary exhibitions offer greater opportunities for collaborative working with other museums and organisations. These exhibitions usually have a lifespan of 3 to 24 months.
- **Special Exhibition** – refers to a larger-scale exhibition, which may be externally sourced and involves an admission charge. Examples include *Lavery on Location* (2024) and *Ashes to Fashion* (2026). The Ulster Museum is currently the only collections-based museum venue in Northern Ireland capable of hosting such exhibitions.
- **Touring Exhibition** – refers to an exhibition that will be on view in one or more external venues
- **Display** – refers to a smaller scale presentation that can be from the Museum’s own collections and in collaboration with a partner organisation. These interventions can be located throughout the museums and public areas. Displays can be planned and delivered on much shorter timescales.
- **Gallery** – is a dedicated space for exhibitions.
- **Outdoor Museum Exhibit Building** – at the Ulster Folk Museum and Ulster American Folk Park, may be original or replica.