

**CONFIRMED MINUTES
MEETING OF BOARD**

**Tuesday 24 March 2026
Training Room, Cultra Manor**

Members Present:

Gordon Milligan – Chair
Keith Charlton
Charlotte Jess
William McMullan
Sally Montgomery
Shane Quinn
Therese Rafferty
Mark Walker

National Museums NI Attendance:

Kathryn Thomson, Chief Executive (CEO)
Colin Catney, Chief Operating Officer (COO)
Aaron Ward, Director of Public Engagement (DPE)
James Lewsley, Head of Finance and Governance (HFG)
Michelle Ashmore, Secretariat

1. Induction

1.1 Apologies

The Chair formally welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies were received from:

William Blair
Ryan Cornett
Peter Osborne
Robert Whan

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 27 January 2026.

1.4 Matters Arising from Previous Meeting

The Chief Executive (CEO) advised that action from the last meeting have been completed and was included on today's meeting agenda.

2. Chair & Chief Executive Business
2.1 Chair & Trustee Business

The Chair advised that his recent visit to Washington DC with the Chief Executive (CEO) was a great opportunity to advocate for National Museums NI and that the CEO would update further later in the meeting.

The Chair presented the feedback from the Board Effectiveness session which took place in January 2026. He further advised that the presentation would be circulated to members for fuller consideration and then an action plan agreed at the next meeting.

The Chair advised there was ongoing conversations taking place regarding the difficult budget situation we and other ALBs are facing going into the new financial year.

The Chair passed on his thanks to members who attended the launch of Ashes to Fashion in the Ulster Museum at the end of February, which is receiving incredible feedback. He also encouraged members to attend organisational events when they could, as this was a good opportunity to network.

Finally, the Chair advised that he would like to arrange one to one meetings in April regarding Board members appraisals.

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 procurement to reappoint the ICT is underway and it is anticipated that the contract will be awarded by the end of April.
- **The Journey Ahead – Ulster American Folk Park** - Work to develop the OBC is progressing well. In addition liaison is ongoing with CPD to ensure that the procurement for the ICT will commence in April when the new Crown Commercial Services framework is in place.

The CEO also advised that DfCs Economists visited the museum to get a better understanding of the project for the review and approval process.

- **Ulster Museum** – The Ashes to Fashion exhibition opened successfully at the end of February attracting significant PR coverage.
- **What's On** - Following feedback from the Board, an appendix has been added to the CEO report detailing upcoming exhibitions and events at each of the museums where Trustees may wish to engage.
- **St Patrick's Events in Washington DC** – The Chair and CEO travelled to Washington DC to take part in the annual St Patricks Day programme. Last year demonstrated how important a platform this is to profile the significance and impact of our work; to highlight our development priorities; and, to advocate opportunities for others to get involved with our work and/or support our museums.

As part of the programme, the CEO had been invited to take part in a panel discussion at The Washington Forum on Northern Ireland - a collaboration between the American University, Georgetown University and Ulster University. Every year this forum brings together a wide audience to consider the state of the peace process in Northern Ireland and reflect on the opportunities and challenges ahead. Our work on identity and peace-building is particularly relevant to this debate and the CEO welcomed the opportunity to showcase what we have been doing in the wider discussion.

- **Relevant Engagements** – The Director of Collections, attended an international conference in Richmond, Virginia, as a guest of Tourism Ireland to promote peace tourism. He was also invited to take part international roundtable in Sarajevo on memory and social cohesion in Europe. This event was organised by the International Sites of Conscience, the Catalan Institute for Peace, and the War Childhood Museum, Sarajevo.

Members noted the report.

3. Performance Review

3.1 Business Plan Review

The CEO presented the Q3 review. In particular, highlighting the difficulty in meeting some of our KPI for this financial year, including targets for self-generated income.

Sally Montgomery asked if the Business Plan Review could include year to date key indicators from previous year.

Members noted the update.

3.2 Financial Review

The Head of Finance & Governance (HFG) updated Trustees on Q3 management accounts and year end forecast, focusing on the main income and expenditure variances, and commenting specifically on the following:

- The bid of £300k into the January monitoring exercise (as advised in the Q2 update) had been successful, and was being directed toward spend activity that would ease pressure on future years budgets;
- Further to the Q2 update regarding an expected adverse variance on self-generated income, our estimate has been revised downwards to £0.3m based on current average income per visitor;
- Payroll is projected to be £221k under budget due to delays in filling vacancies, mainly security staff;
- Operating costs would be overspent by £0.5m as a result of certain projects and activities being brought forward to ease pressure on 2026/27 requirements;
- Easements in programming budgets were unlocked from business units totalling c200k and reflecting the lower than expected SGI reported above;

- There would 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, therefore the remaining unspent budget of £0.6m can be carried forward into the 2026/27 financial year;
- Q4 has been a highly active period in terms of capital project delivery, and that it is hoped that most projects will come in or around budget.

Members noted the update.

3.3 HR&OD Report

The Chief Operating Officer (COO) presented the Q3 report. He reflected on a lot of work which has taken place on the OD front including SMT and Executive teams 'stop and focus' away days. He also highlighted how important volunteering is for the organisation as it increases every year.

Sally Montgomery asked if year-end report could include details of what staff training has taken place.

Keith Charlton asked if it would be possible for the Ulster Museum General Manager to join a future meeting to advise members on staff engagement initiatives at the museum.

Members noted the report.

4. Performance Review

4.1 Final Draft Business Plan 2026-27

The CEO advised the Business Plan 2026-27 represents Year 2 delivery of the Corporate Strategy 2025–30. The format of the business plan follows the same template approved last year with a few refinements.

The draft budget for 2026-27 is included, however we have not yet been notified of our allocation by DfC. To support this proposed budget a detailed analysis was submitted to DfC, a copy of which was included in the Board papers.

The CEO advised that the Head of Operations would join the May Board meeting to present on revenue maintenance which he also presented at March ARAC meeting.

Members approved the final Draft Business Plan 2026-27 subject to budget being confirmed.

4.2 Reawakening Programme Governance Proposals

The COO presented an outline of the Executive teams proposed approach to programme governance and management for Reawakening at UFM. Specifically, to seek input from Trustees on the role of the Board in oversight of the major for capital investment projects.

Discussion took place on the overall structure and terms of reference for the proposed Board oversight and involvement in the governance of the Reawakening Programme and more broadly in the capital investment across National Museums NI over the coming years. The Chair advised that the proposed structure was approved by members with terms of reference and members nominated to join an oversight Committee to be discussed at May Board meeting.

4.3 Organisational Development & Communications

Over the past number of years, significant strategic and development work has taken place across the organisation to clarify the future direction for individual museums. At the same time, the organisation has adopted a new Corporate Strategy 2025-2030.

The Director of Public Engagement (DPE) presented an outline of the National Museums NI Field and the role it will play in strengthening organisational clarity and alignment as we deliver our strategic ambitions.

The Field Guide will be shared widely with staff across National Museums NI as a practical reference document. It will be used to support internal communications, team discussions and planning activity as we move into the next phase of delivering the Corporate Strategy.

Members noted the update.

5. Governance

5.1 Board Reserve Fund Bid – Cover to Proceed

The CEO advised we are seeking approval for the Board Reserves capital fund to be used to provide cover for works to proceed on the final phase the Ulster Museum Collections Store project. A high priority bid has been submitted to DfC to compete these works as part of our 2026-27 allocation. Cover to proceed is requested in lieu of receiving confirmation of our capital allocation. It is anticipated that any costs incurred would be reimbursed when capital funding for the 2026-27 year is confirmed by the Department.

Members approved the Board Reserve Fund Bid – Cover to Proceed.

5.2 Verbal update from ARAC

The Chair of ARAC provided a verbal update of the Committee meeting held on 9 March 2026 and highlighted the following:

- Satisfactory IA reports has been completed for Budgeting and Management Reporting and Programme Planning, Delivery and Evaluation;
- Internal Audit updated members on the performance against the IA Plan 2025/26 which was overall satisfactory. The Chair of ARAC passed on his thanks to members of staff who were involved the audits;
- EY have been reappointed for a further 3 years with new IA plan being developed for approval at June ARAC meeting;
- Governance update was provided by HFG;
- External Audit took members through External Audit Strategy 2025/26;

- The Head of Operations gave a presentation on Revenue Maintenance with recommendation for this to also be added to the next Board agenda;
- Health & Safety Performance and Safeguarding updates were provided;
- Safeguarding and ICT Security policies were reviewed and approved; and,
- The Bi-Annual Assurance Statement, Annual Assurance Statement and Risk Management Framework were recommended to the Board for approval.

5.3 Risk Management Framework

The HFG advised that the Risk Management Framework is unchanged from the previous annual update in 2025 and following consideration by ARAC is recommended to the Board for approval.

Members approved the Risk Management Framework

5.4 Loans, Acquisitions, Disposals

Loans were approved as presented.

5.5 Bi-Annual Assurance Statement

The CEO advised that the Bi-Annual Assurance Statement has been recommended by ARAC for approval.

Members approved the Bi-Annual Assurance Statement.

5.6 Annual Statement

The CEO advised that the Annual Assurance Statement has been recommended by ARAC for approval.

Members approved the Annual Assurance Statement.

5.7 Ethics Policy

In October 2027, following extensive consultation with members and sector bodies, the new Museums Association Code of Ethics was approved.

Our own Ethics Policy has been updated to reflect the new Code of Ethics, and has been restructured around the three guiding principles for ethical practice – 1. Equitable and Inclusive, 2. Transparent and Accountable, 3. Responsible and Sustainable. The Ethics Policy applies to all employees, volunteers and Trustees at National Museums NI.

Members approved the Ethics Policy.

6. FOIs

The Board noted the FOI report.

6. Any Other Business

The CEO advised that the current CEO of NITA is out sick and expressions of interest had been sought from members for a secondment to cover the role. The Head of Experience and Enterprise expressed an interest and has been appointed to act in covering the role for 3 months.

The CEO also advised members that alongside our counterparts in Dublin, we have been working on a funding application for the Shared Island initiative with meetings having taken place in Dublin and Belfast. The funding application will be submitted next week.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The Chair thanked Members and attendees, drew their attention to the date of the next meeting – 12 May 2026 – and closed the meeting at 12.56pm.

Signed:



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Date:

12 May 2026

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Copies: DfC, Trustees, File, Website