



Department for

Communities

www.communities-ni.gov.uk

Museums Policy NI: Consultation



© Crown Copyright 2026

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0

except where otherwise stated. To view this licence visit:

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright-holders concerned.

Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Culture Policy Branch
Level 7
Department for Communities (DfC)
Causeway Exchange
1-7 Bedford Street
Belfast
BT2 7EG

or email: hccconsultation@communities-ni.gov.uk

This publication is also available to download from our website at www.communities-ni.gov.uk

OVERVIEW

The Department for Communities (DfC) is the Executive department with responsibility for policy on the museums sector in Northern Ireland.

The current policy - “Northern Ireland Museums Policy” – was published in 2011 and this consultation is part of the process to establish a new policy to replace it.

The focus of this consultation is on the draft vision statement, the 12 policy aims that are proposed as the basis of a new policy for Government support of Northern Ireland’s museum sector, and on a number of emerging issues where action might be taken.

The vision and aims have been prepared following engagement with people across the museums sector and research on modern, good practice, nationally and internationally.

Your views are important to us and will help inform the new policy. A questionnaire on the draft vision and the policy aims is available at the link below and we would welcome your response by 22 June 2026.

If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, we would ask that only one person from each organisation submits a response. A paper-based questionnaire is available on request from HCCpublicconsultation@communities-ni.gov.uk.

For this consultation, we may publish all responses except for those where the respondent indicates that they do not wish for their responses to be published. All responses from organisations and individuals responding in a professional capacity may be published. We will remove any personal data, including email addresses and telephone numbers, from these responses; but apart from this, we may publish them in full. For more information about what we do with personal data please see our [consultation privacy notice](#).

Your response, and all other responses to this consultation, may also be disclosed on request in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR); however, all disclosures will be in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (UK) 2016/679.

If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential it would be helpful if you could explain to us why you regard the information you have provided as confidential, so that this may be considered if the Department should receive a request for the information under the FOIA or EIR.

In order to facilitate the survey, Citizen Space, which is not operated by the Department, is used as a data processor. Details of Citizen Space’s privacy policy can be found online at [Citizen Space Privacy Policy](#).

MUSEUMS POLICY NI: CONSULTATION

MINISTERIAL FOREWORD



Our museums are places that hold many remarkable and unexpected objects and collections that help tell the story of our people, our places and our heritage.

They are heritage spaces that offer room for tranquil study and contemplation; but they are also full of life, delivering a huge array of events, courses and opportunities to hear the stories of generations past, and to tell our own.

Without the knowledge, professionalism and curiosity of our museum professionals, the risk is that important and interesting connections to our past could be missed, misinterpreted or lost altogether.

This consultation marks an important step in the development of a new policy on how the Executive supports our museums sector and the people who work in it.

And it is your chance to give your views on how our heritage should be not only protected and preserved; but brought into the light and brought to life, to be shared and enjoyed.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this consultation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Gordon Lyons'.

GORDON LYONS MLA

Minister for Communities

27/04/2026

MUSEUMS POLICY NI: CONSULTATION

Introduction and Context

1. The Department for Communities (DfC) is the Executive department with responsibility for policy for the museums sector in Northern Ireland. The Department also provides financial support for museums through a number of channels.
2. This consultation is an important part of the process to inform the direction of a new policy to update and replace “Northern Ireland Museums Policy” which was introduced in 2011.
3. The focus of this consultation is on the draft vision for the policy, the 12 aims that are proposed as the basis of a new policy, and on a number of emerging issues where action might be taken. It is intended that the new policy should have a lifespan of ten years, with a mid-life review.
4. The vision and the aims have been prepared following engagement with people across the museums sector and through research on modern, good practice, nationally and internationally.
5. This document offers information on the context for the development of the new policy, the nature of support currently provided for museums and an outline of areas where a new ten-year policy might particularly focus.

The Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme

6. The work to develop a new policy for museums forms part of the Heritage, Culture and Creativity (HCC) Programme. HCC was established by the Minister for Communities in July 2024. It will see the development of new policies for the arts, historic environment, public libraries and museums and will give each of the policy areas the status they merit and provide each of the communities of interest with their own focus. More information about HCC can be found at [Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme](#).

Guiding Principles for Policy Development

7. The HCC Programme is built on a shared set of guiding principles for the policies to be developed under it. They are that Heritage, Culture & Creativity Programme policies will:
 - be **valued** by all
 - be **inclusive**, recognising and respecting the diversity of our society
 - bring **equitable** access to opportunities and experience
 - **enhance** the lives of people and communities
 - be **sustainable** in terms of economic and environmental challenges

The purpose of a new Museums Policy

8. Every policy should be subject to periodic review and re-assessment, to ensure that it remains relevant and capable of achieving the intended outcomes. Changes in role, focus and professional practice, in technology and in visitor expectations since “Northern Ireland Museums Policy” was published in 2011 mean that a review now is merited.
9. The new policy will aim to support the high standards and sustainability of the museums sector over the next decade and to encourage the role museums, and the people who work in them, can play in addressing their core functions and in contributing to community needs and to Executive priorities and policy.
10. As such the policy will provide the basis for the investment of public funding to the sector and serve as a guide for the strategic planning of National Museums Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Museums Council and for individual museums and galleries.

Current areas of support

11. The Department’s support for the museum sector is primarily delivered through two bodies, National Museums NI and the NI Museums Council.
12. National Museums NI is Northern Ireland’s flagship heritage institution. It was formed under legislation made in 1998 and comprises the Ulster Museum, Ulster Folk Museum, Ulster Transport Museum and Ulster American Folk Park. It has national and increasingly international standing and recognition for its work.
13. It is an arm’s-length body of the Department, which provides around 80% of its annual funding. It is a respected and successful institution, a significant employer with a multi-disciplinary workforce and is responsible for collections amounting to 1.4 million objects, along with a significant portfolio of property, including many historic and landmark listed buildings. It also plays an important leadership role in supporting the wider museum and culture sector in Northern Ireland.
14. The Department’s resource funding to National Museums NI over the last five financial years is provided in the chart adjacent. The opening grant for 2025/26 was £20 million.

Year	Opening budget	Closing
	£’000	£’000
2024/25	16,119	18,137
2023/24	13,820	17,465
2022/23	13,349	16,311
2021/22	12,245	14,614
2020/21	11,459	13,029

15. While in the current public spending environment this represents a positive outcome, there is an established and growing need for modernisation and renewal across many of the museums collections and exhibitions, necessary to keep pace with its responsibilities, current standards and visitor expectations.
16. National Museums NI also faces significant capital funding requirements, particularly in relation to its estate and collection care. The recent announcement in respect of its £50m Reawakening Project at the Ulster Folk Museum is recognition of the Museum's need for investment and of the economic and social value that the redevelopment is expected to generate.
17. However, its maintenance requirements, and their growing costs, is leading to a deterioration of its estate; stalling improvements in accessibility; and impacting its plans to modernise its facilities and visitor experiences. Investment decisions in respect of National Museums NI are considered through a well-established business case process.
18. Further information on National Museums NI can be found by following this link: [National Museums Northern Ireland](#).
19. The NI Museums Council is an arm's-length-body of the Department and is the development body for the museum sector in Northern Ireland. It provides leadership, advice, and training and development opportunities to local museums and museum professionals. It promotes best practice in collections care and visitor experience and delivers networking events.
20. NI Museums Council is central to ensuring that local museums across Northern Ireland operate to the highest standards and remain sustainable. It achieves this through its role as the Northern Ireland Administrator of the UK Museum Accreditation Scheme, working in partnership with Arts Council England.
21. Subject to the availability of funding, NI Museums Council delivers grant programmes to support the work of accredited museums in areas like programme and exhibition development, collections care, and through small capital works and purchases. In 2025/26, the Department provided NI Museums Council with £110,000 in capital funding, the first since a £25,000 investment in 2022/23. Utilising that funding, NI Museums Council successfully delivered two small-grant programmes for accredited museums.
22. NI Museums Council also provides essential opportunities for museum staff and volunteers to develop skills and knowledge through training and networking. This is increasingly important in a sector where limited resources restrict career development. By investing in people, NI Museums Council helps strengthen the foundations of the museum sector and supports long term resilience.

23. More information on the work of the NI Museums Council, can be found here: [Northern Ireland Museums Council](#).
24. The broader museums sector comprises a number of institutions funded and managed by our local councils, along with a range of independent museums. The Department supports their work, and particularly their progress through the Accreditation Scheme, by its sponsorship of the NI Museums Council. There are 40 accredited museums across Northern Ireland.

The Role, Contribution and Value of Museums

25. The fascination, appreciation and importance of heritage is shared across the world. It is the focus of a number of international organisations; the subject of a range of international agreements and conventions; and the quarry for myriad academic studies.
26. The global interest is reflected just as strongly nationally and locally. It is not driven solely by curiosity about the past, but by a recognition of the influence, insight and creativity that an understanding and appreciation of our natural, cultural and built heritage can bring to contemporary life.
27. That recognition is one of the reasons museums have such an important place as crucial heritage institutions and in cultural life - a YouGov survey in 2024 for Art Fund found that 89% of UK adults thought museums are important to UK culture, with 47% saying they are very important and only 7% that they are not important.¹
28. In the UK, the Museums Association set out the characteristics of museums as being to “...enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.”
29. In 2022, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) produced the following definition, which has been adopted by the Irish Museums Association:

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”

¹ https://ygo-assets-websites-editorial-emea.yougov.net/documents/ArtFundNMDC_Museums_240426.pdf

30. These statements of characteristics provide a basis for understanding the foundational purpose of museums, but they do not tell the whole story of their impact and contribution, or of their social or economic value.
31. Beyond their conservation, interpretation and exhibition roles and their stewardship of huge numbers of artefacts and archives – for example, National Museums NI is custodian to 1.4 million objects across four museums – our museums, and their expert, cross-disciplinary staff, play an important role across a spectrum of activity.
32. Among other things, museums are important visitor attractions appealing to local people and tourists alike.
- Figures for 2024 published by the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions show the Ulster Museum as the third most visited venue in Northern Ireland, with more than 530,000 visitors, and all of the four National Museums NI sites in the top ten;²
 - The NI Continuous Household Survey 2024/25 found that 42% of adults within Northern Ireland had visited a museum or science centre within the previous year. This compared with a UK figure of 48% found in the 2024 YouGov survey for Art Fund.³
 - Although the 2022 Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey observed a 15-year low of 53% in young people visiting a museum or science centre.⁴
33. Organisations in the museum sector are significant employers, encourage volunteering and are important education facilities and research institutions. For individuals, a growing body of evidence supports the positive contribution to mental health and wellbeing of visiting museums and participation in activities.
34. At a practical level, their work ensures that heritage objects remain accessible and highlights the ongoing need for traditional craft skills. With their particular focus on the preservation, restoration and ongoing maintenance of historic buildings at the Ulster Folk Museum and Ulster American Folk Park, National Museums NI provides opportunities for skilled heritage contractors in thatching and other traditional construction techniques. These skills support wider application in construction and restoration in the wider built heritage sector.

² <https://www.alva.org.uk/details.cfm?p=423>

³ <https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/experience-of-culture-arts-and-heritage-by-adults-in-northern-ireland-202425.html>

⁴ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/young-persons-behaviour-and-attitude-survey-2022>

35. Museums, and the people who work in them, play a crucial role in our understanding of our cultural heritage. Without the knowledge, professionalism and curiosity of our museum professionals, the risk is that important and interesting connections to our past could be missed, misinterpreted or lost altogether. For example, their professional expertise is looked to in the safeguarding of the customs, traditions, crafts and skills that constitute our living heritage - this role is becoming more significant following the UK Government's ratification of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, with NI Museums Council serving as the Northern Ireland community hub in that initiative.

Opportunities and Challenges: Policy Priorities and Potential Direction

36. To support the development of the new policy, the Department has undertaken a programme of stakeholder engagement, visits to institutions and research on approaches and priorities in other jurisdictions. That engagement and research has led to the development of the propositions which are the subject of this consultation process and to the development of the draft vision and policy aims.
37. It is acknowledged that funding for the sector is an important issue and, while the development of the new policy is intended to support the rationale for additional, targeted financial support for the sector, the new policy will not in itself be an immediate guarantee of that.
38. As a result of its engagement and research to date, it is not expected that the new policy will result in the need for any change in the governance or role of National Museums NI.
39. In terms of the broader museums sector, it remains the case that accreditation is regarded as the most effective means to ensure all museums are, in the words of Arts Council England, "sustainable, focussed and trusted, inspiring the confidence of the public and funding and governing bodies".
40. As such we propose that the UK Accreditation Standard should continue to apply in Northern Ireland and that the NI Museums Council should continue in its accreditation role.
41. Subject to the availability of funding, the Department will also consider supporting NI Museums Council to extend the level of its engagement and encouragement of museums, and particularly those seeking to pursue or retain accreditation.
42. For small organisations, the availability of financial support in the development of new programmes, activities, events and exhibitions, or for essential minor works or the purchase of equipment, can make a significant contribution to the services an accredited museum can provide.

43. Informed by the evidence of the impact of funding programmes introduced in 2025/26, the Department will seek to support further such investment, subject to the availability of funding. Accreditation would be a gateway for entry to such funding.
44. Throughout the engagement process, many stakeholders reflected on the impact of rising costs on their visitor numbers and on their capacity, for example, to undertake visits to schools and other groups in the community.
45. A key role for museums lies in outreach and in its connections with schools and young people. For children to miss out on the chance to visit a museum or have a museum visit them at school is a very real loss, not just in terms of the missed curriculum opportunity but in missing the chance to build connections to museums and heritage more widely.
46. On that basis, and subject to the availability of funding, the Department proposes to work with NI Museums Council to explore the potential to pilot a small grant programme to support proposals to maintain and develop the connections between museums and young people.
47. Engagement across the sectors covered by the first phase of the Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme (that is arts, museums, public libraries and the historic environment) has generated a number of common themes and issues which may be considered for action on a programme-wide basis. These include:
 - a. A desire to address the capital needs of the sectors, in terms of routine maintenance, investment to address access, environmental and health and safety requirements and a coherent approach to strategic capital development;
 - b. Growing evidence of the social and economic value of the sectors and their intrinsic importance to individuals, communities and society more generally; the contribution and value of the work of the museums sector to, for example, the priorities established in the Programme for Government might also be included as part of a wider research initiative under the aegis of the Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme;
 - c. The benefits that might be brought through a programme of skills development to include provision in terms of organisational governance, management, investment and fund-raising; in digital potential and skills; supporting professional development and so on, to strengthen the skills base of the sector and support its sustainability;
 - d. The potential to develop networks, within and across sectors, with a view to catalysing new potential and innovative projects and partnerships;
 - e. Recognising that public funding is likely to continue to be constrained, the potential to maximise existing funding sources should be explored along with approaches to generating new income streams and funding options.

48. Other than to the National Museums Northern Ireland, the Department does not provide core funding⁵ to accredited museums. Responsibility for the viability and sustainability of these institutions rests with their respective governing authorities.
49. However, there have been a number of ad hoc arrangements where the Department has provided some support directly to accredited museums to meet particular, last resort, needs. While the Department has the authority to provide such support, it does not constitute a funding programme.
50. Many significant items and archives are under the custodianship of our public cultural institutions – for example the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, National Museums NI, Libraries NI, Armagh Observatory and Planetarium or the Historic Environment Record of Northern Ireland. However, the Department recognises that stewardship of important locally, and nationally, significant heritage is not confined to those institutions.
51. It is certainly also the case that our local accredited museums hold many remarkable objects and collections that tell the story of our people, places and heritage. It is also true that the nature of such items and collections can sometimes require a level of management or essential care that can be beyond the day-to-day capacity or the budget of smaller institutions.
52. Subject to the availability of funding, the Department proposes to work with the NI Museums Council to develop a programme to support museums in the care of objects or collections that are considered to be of particular significance and which merit, or require, particular, specialist care or management, in order to ensure their continued preservation and accessibility to museum users. While the terms of such a programme are not predetermined, it is anticipated that decisions on eligibility would be informed by expert advice.
53. This programme would replace the current ad hoc funding arrangements for some institutions, with the intention to introduce new arrangements from 1 April 2027.

The Draft Vision for the New Museum Policy

54. In the consultation questionnaire you are also invited to offer your views on the draft vision for the policy, which is intended to describe succinctly what the policy is aiming to achieve. Having taken into account some points for inclusion suggested in the course of engagement, we propose the following vision:

“Accessible heritage: inspiring discovery, enhancing wellbeing and connecting communities”

5 By core funding we mean long term funding to support running and operational costs

The Draft Policy Aims

55. In developing the draft policy aims, the Department has taken account of:
- Legislative duties as set out in the Museums and Galleries (NI) Order 1998. The Order itself can be found at: [Museums and Galleries \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1998](#)
 - Government policy priorities, including the Programme for Government
 - Stakeholder engagement
 - Literature review and best practice from the UK, Ireland, and internationally
56. At the heart of each of the policies developed under the Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme are three common focusses: People & Communities, Places, and Partnerships; and three shared drivers: to strengthen, to connect and to innovate. When brought together these form a matrix which is the basis for the presentation of the policy aims.
57. The matrix below sets out 12 draft aims proposed for the museum policy. The new policy will rest on these aims, and you are invited in the following pages to offer your views on them.

	HCC Policy Goals	People and Communities	Places	Partnerships
Museums:	Strengthen: Building resilience growing capacity and ensuring the sustainability of the sector.	1. Supporting positive health and wellbeing through engagement and participation. 2. Inspiring creativity and supporting opportunities for life-long learning.	5. Providing safe, accessible and inclusive spaces for everyone. 6. Preserving local histories including collections, traditional skills and crafts, and stories for people and communities.	9. Demonstrating the value of the museum sector in meeting government outcomes. 10. Investing to support a vibrant and connected accredited museums sector.
	Connect: Realising the full potential of creative connections, intersections and partnerships.	3. Supporting access to trusted information and resources.	7. Celebrating and representing cultural diversity through collections, programming and storytelling.	11. Working with others to preserve, grow and celebrate local heritage, arts and culture.
	Innovate: Fueling innovation and propelling growth, impact and reach.	4. Working innovatively to drive participation and engagement.	8. Contributing to the public awareness of Northern Ireland's environmental challenges through sustainable operations, local actions and provision of information and resources.	12. Working innovatively with others to support positive outcomes for people and communities.

Conclusion

58. We greatly appreciate you taking the time to share your views on the draft vision, policy aims, and other matters relating to the museum sector in Northern Ireland.

