

LEGACY
CONSERVATION

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

Strategic Review of Museums Service

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LEGACY CONSERVATION

November 2022

1 Table of Contents

2	Introduction	4
2.1	Methodology.....	4
2.1.1	Project Objectives	4
2.1.2	Project Scope	4
2.1.3	Project approach.....	5
2.1.4	Project Management Team Structure	5
2.1.5	Review Group.....	5
2.1.6	Role descriptions.....	5
2.2	Benchmarking	6
2.2.1	Review of Staffing Resource	6
2.3	Engagement and Stakeholder Consultation	6
3	Review of the current provision.....	7
3.1	Background	7
3.1.1	Local Council Reorganisation	7
3.1.2	The Covid Pandemic.....	7
3.1.3	Communication.....	9
3.2	Organisational Health	10
3.2.1	Establishing principles.....	11
3.2.2	Statement of Purpose	11
3.2.3	Overall Remit	12
3.2.4	Policy context for Museums in Northern Ireland	13
3.2.5	Future aspirations for Down County Museum and Newry and Mourne Museum as part of an integrated Museums and Heritage Service.....	14
3.2.6	Planning.....	15
3.2.7	Staffing structure	15
3.2.8	Background information on reorganisation of Council Functions.....	17
3.2.9	Benchmarking across the sector	18
3.2.10	Comparison of collection-based posts in museums	18
3.2.11	Posts not included in the new Structure.....	19
3.2.12	Managing Risk and Emergency Plans.....	21
3.3	Managing Collections.....	21
3.3.1	Documentation	22
3.3.2	Collections Development	23
3.3.3	Collection Care and Conservation.....	23
3.4	Users and their experiences.....	24
3.4.1	Access.....	24
3.4.2	Understanding and Developing Audiences.....	25

3.4.3	Visitor Figures for Down County and Newry and Mourne Museum	25
3.4.4	NISRA Visitor Attraction Survey	26
3.4.5	Audience Profile	26
3.4.6	Website and Social Media.....	27
4	Income Generation	28
4.1	Venue hire.....	29
4.2	Cafe / Tearoom	29
4.3	Shop	30
4.4	Educational Activities.....	30
4.5	Special events	30
4.6	Other Charges	31
5	Consultation Meetings.....	31
5.1	Friends of Down County Museum	31
5.2	Downpatrick and County Down Railway.....	32
6	Recommendations	34
6.1	Governance.....	34
6.2	Staffing	35
6.3	Collections.....	36
6.4	Users	37
6.5	Stakeholder Groups	38
7	Appendix A.....	40

2 Introduction

This review was commissioned by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and takes a wide view of the operation and provision offered by Down County Museum and Newry and Mourne Museum.

Both are accredited museums operated by the Council within the area. They were located within different Council areas and have been brought together in the NMDDC following the Review of Public Administration in 2015. Until recently they have operated largely independently and this review will look at overall service provision, identifying areas of concern and making recommendations for future development.

2.1 Methodology

The following objectives were established for the review:

2.1.1 Project Objectives

1. Review of current museums provision across the district and identify any areas where improvement is required.
2. Benchmarking of museums provision with other regional museums run by Local Authorities.
3. Consider level of current staff resource provisions for the museum services across the district.
4. Set out a detailed forward plan for the museum services across the district for the next 12-months.

2.1.2 Project Scope

The review will cover the following areas

- Service Provision
- Collections Care
- Access
- Visitor numbers
- Modernisation
- Exhibitions – variety and rotation
- Resource requirements
- Opening hours
- Education and Outreach
- Events
- Charging

Focus on:

1. Modernising the service
2. Responding to the challenge in post-pandemic context
3. Widening community engagement

Target groups:

- Care homes
- Schools
- Interest groups

4. Widening participation and social inclusion

Target groups:

- Families
- 16-24 year olds
- School children

- Community groups
- General visitors

2.1.3 Project approach

2.1.3.1 Mapping Current Provision

The project looked at various aspects of the museum activities. This was by necessity a high-level overview within each area but with a focus on areas for development and improvement.

The Museum Accreditation Scheme overseen by Arts Council England and operated by the Northern Ireland Museums Council, sets out nationally agreed standards of good practice for museums. It forms a useful outline through which to map current provision. There are three areas which will be reviewed:

Organisational Health

- governance and management,
- planning and resources,
- managing risk.

Managing Collections

- holding and developing collections,
- collections information,
- collections care and conservation.

Users and their Experiences

- public access,
- understanding, and developing audiences,
- user engagement.

2.1.4 Project Management Team Structure

Siobhan Stevenson carried out the review on behalf of Newry, Mourne and Down District Council (NMDDC).

2.1.5 Review Group

Andy Patterson, Asst. Director,
 Noreen Cunningham, Curator,
 Ken Abraham Asst. Curator,
 Declan Carroll Educ. & Outreach Officer, and
 Education & Outreach Officer DCM (when confirmed in post)

2.1.6 Role description

Siobhan Stevenson – external consultant and Director of Legacy Conservation – will conduct the review, carry out consultation and develop and present finding and recommendations to the Review Group.

2.2 Benchmarking

The benchmarking involved interviews with comparator museums in NI and elsewhere to gain an understanding of scale and performance of the museum service and to identify areas of good practice.

Identified comparators are:

- North Down Museum
- Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum
- Tower Museum

2.2.1 Review of Staffing Resource

This will involve detailed consideration of current job descriptions and roles and draw on the information in the benchmarking exercise and information for elsewhere across the UK and Ireland.

2.3 Engagement and Stakeholder Consultation

The following stakeholders were identified for engagement:

Friends of Down County Museum
Lecale and Downe Local History Group
Killyleagh Family History Society
Down u3a
Old Newry Society
Schools
Donors
Community Groups
Care Homes
Tertiary level education providers
NI Museums Council
Irish Museums Association
Downpatrick Railway Museum
Ulster Architectural Heritage Society
Local business owners, e.g. (Downpatrick Town Committee)
Chamber of Commerce

3 Review of the current provision

3.1 Background

3.1.1 Local Council Reorganisation

This Review is conducted against a backdrop of the changes which took place in relation to the creation of Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and the closer relationship that has been developing between the two local authority museums (Down County Museums and Newry and Mourne Museum) in the Council area since 2015.

The restructuring of local government, came into effect in early April 2015. This saw 11 new councils replacing the previous 26 city, district and borough councils.

The Museums and Galleries (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 sets out how local district councils may provide museums and galleries, stating that:

“a district council, either alone or together with another district council or any other person, may provide and maintain museums and galleries”.

Nine of the “new” councils deliver museum services. For the new Newry, Mourne and Down district Council this brought two formerly separate local authority museums under the same Council structure, effectively changing the Council’s role from running a museum venue to delivering museum services. However, unlike some other local authority areas, there had not previously been any formal partnership arrangements in place between the museums. The developing agenda for museums in Northern Ireland was also strengthened by the wider powers and responsibilities granted to councils under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

The opportunity for greater collaboration between the two museums is seen within the current business plans which are modelled on the same format and emphasise greater partnership e.g.

Down County Museum Forward Plan *“the Museum will continue to develop new links with the communities of the District and work in partnership with Newry and Mourne Museum”*.

At the same time, pay disparity across the new Council areas has been an ongoing area of reform for local authorities across Northern Ireland. The recent staff review conducted by the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council was carried out with a view to ensuring fair pay, transparency and equality for like job roles within the Council.

The current staff changes are seen as an opportunity to bring together the two museums under a shared structure and with a common purpose. The staffing structure sees dedicated staff focused within each museum; however, it is anticipated that there will be a mutually beneficial collaboration on areas such as capacity building, shared learning and support.

3.1.2 The Covid Pandemic

The pandemic forced museums to close their doors to the public in March 2020. There were variations across the museum sector in Northern Ireland on how the pandemic impacted on

individual institutions. The Museum, Crisis and Covid-19 Project at the Ulster University mapped the response to the pandemic, focusing on how museums contribute to community resilience and wellbeing in a time of crisis. The findings from this project are available online at [Outputs - Museums, Crisis and Covid19 \(ulster.ac.uk\)](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/museum-crisis-covid-19)

For Local Authority museums, this additional challenge in addition to the challenges posed by organisation of amalgamated Council and of reviewing staffing levels and staff terms and conditions to provide parity across the Council structures.

At **Down County Museum**, apart from the Heritage Manager, the museum staff were put on furlough. Redeployment opportunities were offered to staff, however, only a small number of staff were redeployed towards the end of the period of closure. Apart from a brief period of reopening in October 2020, this arrangement continued until the end of the Covid restrictions.

The completion of the Ballykinlar History Hut was a significant project that was brought to fruition during the period of Covid restrictions. It was a '*Shared History and Culture*' programme, a project supported by the European Union's PEACE IV Programme. The opening of the hut and programmes surrounding this initiative have been a successful aspect of the post-covid programming.

The resumption of activities in the rest of the museum post-covid has, however, presented huge challenges for Down County Museum as momentum for other projects was lost and had to be regained. The problems have been significantly compounded with the loss of staff through retirement, redeployment and resignation. This has resulted in a discontinuity in staffing provision with a huge loss of skills and experience, especially within collections knowledge, which underpins museum provision. Limited opening hours were also put in place due to staff shortages and this has slowed momentum in rebuilding audiences.

At **Newry and Mourne Museum**, staff were not automatically furloughed and collections staff were able to work from home. This was supported by online access to the Modes collection database. Once buildings were reopened for staff, collections work was able to progress behind the scenes and there were advantages to being able to focus on collections care and management priorities.

Engagement with the Museum's audiences was through online lectures on a variety of subjects and increased social media posts. A column in the local newspaper was also a popular addition to keeping in touch with audiences. Consequently, Newry and Mourne Museum was well placed to reconnect with audiences and to move forward with temporary exhibition programming and in person activities when it was possible to do so.

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Within the wider museum sector, the pandemic whilst bringing many challenges has also provided some opportunities. The Museums Crisis Covid 19 Project confirms that accessible online content, produced in coordination with existing exhibitions and museum values, has brought museums into contact with new audiences. There has also been building of confidence in digital skills amongst museum staff and digital museum content has become integrated into each part of museum practice. There is increasing recognition that high-quality digital content can reach audiences that have not access to in-person museum services. The rapid development of online exhibitions, the hosting of webinars and online lecture series, and an increase in communication through social media all made museum content more accessible.

It is important that museums learn to value their online audiences as much as in person visits. A lasting change from the pandemic is a recognition that the museums impact cannot be measured in in-person visits alone. Understanding museum digital audiences requires an ability to measure and

understand digital audiences and so museums need to have access to and understand digital analytics.

While there is an ongoing concern that digital material cannot replace the 'real' museum experience, it is evident that digital content and engagement inspires in person visits. The challenge for the NMDDC is how to balance and continue to nurture the online museum experience with the traditional offer delivered by its museums. This will require a dedicated focus and may require additional support.

It is hoped that new funding opportunities will be available to support this type of activity, however, it is important that the museums forward plans acknowledge this change in focus and incorporate these aspirations into key actions. [See Recommendation 14)]

3.1.3 Communication

Many of the specialist and stakeholder groups have used the museum over a long period of time for activities such as meetings, public lectures and functions. While this is acknowledged to be by mutual agreement it has, never the less, become embedded as standard practice particularly within Down County Museum.

The abrupt way in which these arrangements have been terminated has been a source of distress to groups that are operated on a voluntary basis and who feel that they have been long term relationship with the museum.

While there are sound business reasons for reviewing the benefits of long-established arrangements, it is clear that there was an expectation on the part of the groups that these arrangements would continue or that, as a minimum, they would have adequate notice of the intention to review the arrangements before a decision was reached. The rationale for evening activities should be clearly articulated with specific criteria attached to use outside normal opening hours. This should not be seen to preferentially advantage particular groups. [See recommendation 16)]

The lack of notice that the arrangements were under review and the way in which the groups were notified of changes is a **significant failure of communication between Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and some of their key stakeholders.**

The failure of informal mechanisms of communication and the abrupt changes to custom and practice means that special attention is required to rebuild trust. Formalising the arrangements is therefore required by both parties so that there is clarity around the basis on which partnerships operate and the expectations that each partner has within the relationship. The process of formalising arrangements will require time and may bind both parties into undertakings that may be better left flexible, however, it is an important step to rebuilding effective relationships. [See recommendation 15)]

Care should be taken that the overall objective of partnership does not become lost in the process. First setting out a clear and agreed purpose as the basis of an effective relationship and ensuring it is aligned to the aims and objectives of both organisations will bring clarity to the process. It will also ensure that there is mutual benefit to the partnership.

Useful training exists on building partnership and it may be useful to consider this as a set in the process.

3.2 Organisational Health

Newry Mourne and Down District Council operate two museums Down County Museum and Newry and Mourne Museum.

Newry Mourne and Down is the third largest local authority in Northern Ireland, and is one of nine Councils with a museum remit. It has a substantial coastline with many areas of natural beauty including the Mournes, Strangford and Lecale, and Ring of Gullion. In terms of demographic, the population is younger than the UK average with more under 19's and fewer over 65's.

The museums sit under Tourism, Culture and Events within the Council structure and are managed by the Head of Culture, Arts, Heritage and Events. This forms part of the Enterprise, Regeneration and Tourism Directorate which is one of five Departments within the Council.

The Directorate is responsible for a range of activities in these areas which support the local economy and encourage investment, including responsibility for protection of the natural and build environment. There is a natural fit for museums within both the tourism agenda and within the heritage remit. The positioning of museums within this context offers opportunities for integrating the museums service with other Council functions and supports the agenda for Culture, Arts, Heritage and Events and the wider aim of attracting inward investment.

There are also firm links to other Council Directorates, in particular the Active and Healthy Communities section with museums contributing to the wellbeing agenda.

There is an Annual Tourism, Culture and Events Service Plan with clearly articulated aims for the museum service. At present these include:

- Draft new Museum Forward Plans & undertake review of Museum policies,
- Deliver museums engagement programme with community and visitors through annual programme of events, activities and exhibitions,
- Continue investment in Museum Facilities, and
- Increase accessibility to collections via new website and social media platforms.

Implementation of the recommendations arising from this Review is an anticipated future objective.

Prioritising the reorganisation of the structure is also clearly within the plan and it is this process which has impacted on the current museums where it has resulted in the recruitment of a number of new permanent staff.

The Council is committed to the future of the two museums and to meeting professional standards through attaining Museum Accreditation.

This commitment should be regarded as a positive when considered against the backdrop of cuts in spending in local authority museums elsewhere. This is estimated to be 27% across England, Scotland and Wales (Museums Association, Local Authority Funding Report 2021). There is no comparative figure for Northern Ireland, however the pressure on local authorities to deliver statutory services continues to put pressure on council budgets.

There are also clear mechanisms of accountability and an appropriate scheme of delegation to enable Council Officers to discharge functions under the overall direction and resource of Council.

The incorporation of Museums in the Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy, whilst it affirms the strength and importance of the two museums through strong statements, does not provide a route-map to the development of provision. However, as the document itself states *“it is not an end point: it is a new beginning and a foundation upon which the Council’s investment and support of annual programmes and activities can be based.”*

The challenge is for the museum service to clearly demonstrate that investment in the museum service can deliver across a wide variety of the Council’s objectives. Clarity around the museum service objectives and clear “lines of sight” between the Council Strategic Plans and delivery by the museum service will ensure that the impact of museums is clearly acknowledged and valued. [See recommendation 2)]

Senior staff within the museums service should have a strong focus on demonstrating the value of the museums. This objective should also be shared by the Friends of Down County Museum who, as a friend’s organisation, also have the objective “to further the interests of Down [County] Museum”.

A question for the Friends of Down County Museum is whether under the revised Council remit there is an argument for the group to act as an advocate for the wider museum service.

3.2.1 Establishing principles

In the course of the dialogue with stakeholder and special interest groups, there has been a significant emphasis placed on the development principles with the museums. In order to address some of the concerns, it is useful to reflect on the background to the museum’s development.

A commitment to establish **Down County Museum** as a regional county museum was agreed by Down District Council in 1980 after significant local activity to develop the concept and in part in response to the calls for a regional museum service to be established in Northern Ireland (Regional Museums in Northern Ireland – Malcolm Report 1978). The gaol site was purchased and redeveloped firstly bringing the Governor’s Residence into use as an exhibition space with facilities for staff and collections storage. The gaol cell block was subsequently restored and interpreted. A new extension, opened in 2015 provides extensive space for larger collections and includes an exhibition space, storage, staff accommodation and public facilities with a new tearoom. The development of the museum was a significant achievement of the former Down District Council.

Newry and Mourne Museum was established in 1986 at Newry Arts Centre where it occupied a small area. It moved to the current site at Bagenal’s Castle in 2007. The castle site had been rediscovered after being lost through adaptation and incorporation within McCann’s Bakery. Through the sympathetic restoration of the building to house the museum, the site provides for a much larger exhibition space, public spaces and incorporation of the tourist information service. It tells the story of the Newry and Mourne area from prehistoric times to the present day.

3.2.2 Statement of Purpose

Down County Museum

The museum’s statement of purpose is ‘to enhance appreciation of the history, culture and environment of County Down’. Its purpose is ‘to collect, conserve, interpret, and display those objects which best serve to illustrate the history, culture, and environment of County Down, and to research

related subjects. This involves study, promotion, and active practice in relation to human history, the natural environment, the arts and crafts, past and present.'

Newry and Mourne Museum

As a Newry, Mourne and Down District Council service, Newry and Mourne Museum is committed to providing a high-quality, dynamic and inclusive learning and recreational resource. As the area's collective memory bank, the museum will collect, preserve and interpret the diverse material and cultural heritage of Newry and Mourne in order to cultivate and promote pride, understanding and enjoyment of local cultures and traditions to the present day.

3.2.3 Overall Remit

The remit of the two museums are similar and underline the museum's role in relation to their collections through collecting, conservation and preservation, and interpretation for public benefit.

- In addition, Down County Museum's remit emphasises active practice and research as a core area.
- Newry and Mourne Museum's remit places stronger emphasis on cultures, traditions and public focus.

It should be noted that the collecting areas of the museums are different with a potential overlap in collecting.

- Down County Museum has a county-wide remit which intersects with the area of Newry and Mourne. It also extends beyond the current district council area into those of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon, Lisburn and Castlereagh and Ards and North Down.
- Newry and Mourne has a narrower collecting area that includes the south of County Armagh. Only a few towns considered to be in the hinterland of Newry but outside the District Council Boundary are considered pertinent to the collecting policy.

Both museums are housed within historic buildings and have provided an incentive for the restoration of an important local site of historic merit and the interpretation of stories around that historic site. This provides for a lot of commonality in the way the buildings are maintained and used.

The founding aspiration of Down County Museum to be a regional museum has never been fully realised, in part due to the conflicting collecting areas of other local museums. In addition to the development of Newry and Mourne Museum in 1986, North Down Museum was established in 1984 and Lisburn Museum, founded in 1979, was greatly enhanced and expanded in 1994 with the development of the Irish Linen Centre.

This aspiration has been a long held ideal of local stakeholder groups and may be a contributing factor to the unease felt in the recent changes as it has perhaps not specifically been acknowledged as part of the Council's plans. Looking at the current policy context for museums in Northern Ireland is useful in examining the relationship of both museums development within the wider Northern Ireland context.

3.2.4 Policy context for Museums in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland Museums Policy which is the policy framework for national and local museums was launched in 2011 by the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure to cover a period of ten years.

The vision of the policy is for a coordinated and sustainable museum sector that develops, preserves and interprets its collections to the highest possible standards; delivers quality services that inspire, educate and engage local, national and international visitors and users; harnesses its strengths and diversity to support economic, social and cultural development in Northern Ireland and a shared and better future. A revision of the policy is overdue and it is a future commitment to revise and update the policy in line with government objectives.

The Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC) has recently published its new Strategy “Museums at the Heart”. It sets out a vision for “dynamic, inclusive and sustainable museums at the heart of our culture and communities” and identifies five goals for the museum sector in Northern Ireland. These form a useful framework through which museum can deliver for the whole of society. The five goals are:

- Museums are connected to their communities and cultivate a shared sense of place
- Museums enrich people’s lives and create opportunities for enjoyment, learning and fulfilment
- Museums drive transformation to make us more sustainable, inclusive and innovative
- Museums contribute to economic and social recovery
- Museums develop, protect and promote their collections and collections knowledge for the benefit of their audiences

The Museum Accreditation Scheme is the UK-wide sector standard for museums. Local authority museums are considered under a single category within the standard and there is no hierarchy of local and regional local authority museums. All of the museums run by Northern Ireland’s councils meet this standard. It is managed centrally by Arts Council England (since it absorbed the functions of the Museums Libraries and Archives Council in 2011) and administered locally by NIMC

In 2012 the Northern Ireland Museums Council produced a report on “The Future of Northern Ireland Local Museum Services”. This was in response to the Programme for Government 2011-15 which stated that the Northern Ireland Executive will establish the new 11 council model for local government by 2015. The report aimed to inform the local government reform process and set out a compelling and revised vision for the role the new council would play in the protection, preservation and use of cultural heritage through museum and their associated services. It commented that

“While immediately challenging, the reform of local government also offers a host of opportunities for the sector. It opens up the prospect of the strategic development of the infrastructure to ensure that quality museum services are delivered more uniformly across Northern Ireland, as well as consolidating the role of museums in education and learning, tourism and economic regeneration, health and well-being, identity and community relations at a local level.”

Within the report it was recommended that:

1. The Museum Accreditation Scheme and the Northern Ireland Museums Policy are used to inform the establishment and operation of museum services across the new councils.
2. Each new council delivers a museum and heritage service.
3. Specific and planned provision is made within the structures of the new Councils to ensure that the governance, strategic planning and accountability of their museum services achieve the requisite high standard.
4. Specific provision is made within the agendas of the transition committees to examine the associated policies and plans for museum services by way of ensuring continuity of service and the maintenance of standards in museums.
5. Each new Council adopt a forward plan for its museum service which correlates to the structure and goals of the Northern Ireland Museums Policy.
6. As part of the process of amalgamating museum services councils take note of the skills and expertise of extant staff and move to ensure that there are sufficiently knowledgeable and experienced staff in place to cover all of the needs and demands placed upon the new museum services.
7. Particular attention is given to the matters concerning the transfer of title of museum collections, the definition of museum collection development policies for the new council areas, the documentation of collections (in preparation for transfer and thereafter), together with the protection and storage of museum collections.
8. The transition process gives specific consideration to the focus and objectives of future museum services, the process by which museum services will report to council, and their position within the departmental structures of the new councils.
9. The potential of future museum services to contribute to broader heritage related agendas, both within councils and through external partnerships, is carefully considered and that the necessary resources are allocated to assure that museum services fully contribute to agreed cultural, social and economic priorities.

The proposals to develop regional museum services within each of the 11 Council districts is core to the current vision for museum provision in Northern Ireland. It has the advantages of defining a coherent museum service which identifies with the enhanced responsibilities and accountability structures of the now fully-formed 11 local authorities. This vision supersedes earlier attempts at a county museum structure but shares the same objectives of a “coordinated and sustainable museum sector”.

There is a view that it is essential to the future of museums in Northern Ireland that the opportunity to both rationalise and strengthen the provision of museums and to integrate this with a widened range of Council functions (that include heritage, tourism and regeneration) is grasped.

3.2.5 Future aspirations for Down County Museum and Newry and Mourne Museum as part of an integrated Museums and Heritage Service.

The aspiration for Down County Museum to be a county museum was conceived as part of the consideration of development of museums in the early 1980s – this was a point closer in time period to the second world war than to the present day and so it is not surprising that much has changed in the intervening years. Among a range of cultural and social changes have been an increase in international travel, a dramatic increase in information and communication technology and a changing approach to recreational activity.

Within the museum sector there has been a substantial development of local museums both within local authorities and as part of the independent sector. Setting aside the recent impact of the pandemic, visits to museums have increased dramatically. Local museum visitor figures have more than doubled since 2000 (Mapping Trends in Northern Ireland Local Museums, NIMC 2016).

In order to acknowledge and build upon the successful development of both Down County and Newry and Mourne Museums the Council, should identify the goal of creating a regional service across the Newry Mourne and Down District Area as a successor to the vision for a regional county museums structure. [See recommendation 1]]

3.2.6 Planning

Each museum has a forward plan which is currently modelled on the NIMC Museums Policy.

These include headings of

- Collections Care Management and Use
- Developing Audiences
- Education and Learning
- Infrastructure and Resources

3.2.7 Staffing structure

The recent staffing review has been undertaken against a backdrop of rationalisation across all of the Council functions. The review examined the structure immediately preceding the review process. Job descriptions were revised to bring them in line with a common structure and with key functions.

The lack of consultation on the review has been one of the areas of contention for stakeholder groups, combined with a perception that the review is about reducing staff posts and cost saving.

It is perhaps not surprising that the Council restricted its consultation on the staffing to the staff affected by the review and their Unions given the sensitivities on grading and the uncertainty that the process creates for staff. The staffing arrangements are delegated areas of Council authority and as such consultation with bodies outside of Council processes would have been irregular and counter to arrangements for management and reporting.

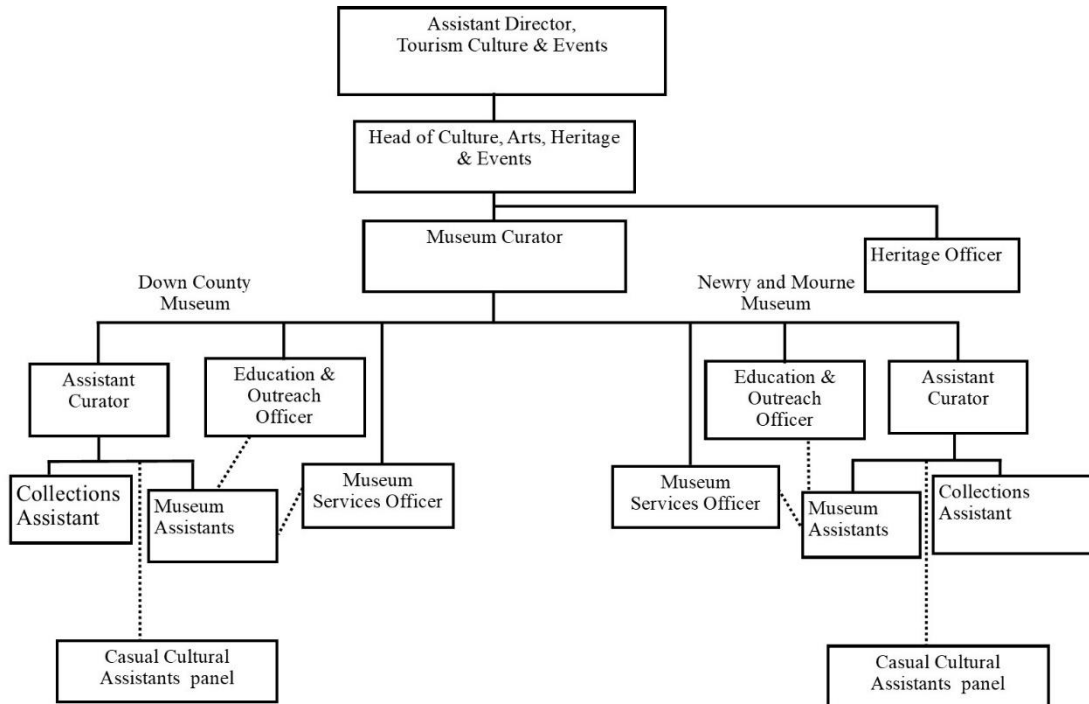
In exploring the changes to the staffing structure there is no sense that the recent staffing review was primarily about reducing the number or overall cost of the staffing. There is also no evidence that there was a process of downgrading the status of Down County Museum. The conclusions and subsequent outcomes of the review are consistent with this.

The review resulted in:

- Four newly created or remodelled posts

- Sixteen posts which were pinned at a higher salary scale point
- Four posts which were redeveloped at grades on a lower salary scale point
 - Staff were not in post at the time of redevelopment.

Staff numbers immediately before and after the review remain the same at 18.7 FTE.



3.2.7.1 Current job titles and grading.

Job Titles	Scale
Museums' Curator	PO4
Heritage Officer	PO2
Assistant Curator (Collections Officer)	PO1
Education and Outreach Officer	PO1
Collections Assistant (Assistant Collections Officer)	Scale 6
Museum Services Officer (Museum Officer)	Scale 5
Museum Assistant	Scale 4

The resulting structure includes core curatorial team comprising an Assistant Curator with responsibility for fulfilling museum accreditation, exhibitions and collections and line management responsibility for the Collections Assistant and Museum Assistants at each of the museums; and a

Collections Assistant with responsibility for collections management and care responsibility in particular documentation of collections.

The roles of the Museum Assistants have been re modelled and this has resulted in standardisation of hours. The contracted cover is between 9 and 5 and so evening work is not a standard part of the duties. This change provides for a greater certainty for staff and for cover during museum opening hours. It is in line with good practice and is similar across other museums. The roles have been extended to include duties which will assist the curatorial team with tasks to include exhibitions, research, collections management and care.

There are 4 full-time and 2 part-time Museum Assistants in Down County Museum and 2 full-time and 2 part-time Museum Assistants in Newry and Mourne Museum, as well as an extensive Casual Cultural Assistant panel that may be drawn upon if required.

In addition, each museum has an Education and Outreach Officer to deliver the learning and access programmes and two Museum Services Officers whose roles involve administrative support for museum operations including ensuring facilities are maintained, finances, bookings, shop and communication with museum users.

In line with the recent recruitment there is an induction programme in place. Given the discontinuity in staffing at Down County Museum this will be critical to rebuilding capacity and knowledge. This should continue beyond the initial appointment and be extended to all staff. Provision should also be made for staff engagement across the sites and should be a key component of business continuity measures. [See recommendation 6) and 8)]

3.2.8 Background information on reorganisation of Council Functions

The recent restructuring within Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has been undertaken to rationalise services across the Council structure.

Buildings owned and operated by the Council are maintained and developed as part of the Buildings and Estates which sits within the Corporate Services Directorate. Maintenance functions and responsibility for services including electrical, joinery, painting and plumbing services are centralised within the Council. This ensures that a range of skilled technicians can carry out necessary work and that Council has responsibility compliance ensuring that health and safety standards and provision is made. This includes electrical safety, fire safety, and water quality.

3.2.8.1 Heritage Manager Role

The previous Curator of Down County Museum was promoted to Heritage Manager in April 2018. This offered the then Curator a regrading of the post and wider responsibility for heritage across the Council. The Heritage Manger took on responsibility for Newry and Mourne Museum as well as Down County Museum but also had wider responsibility for heritage within the area. It is assumed that this was within the Newry Mourne and Down District Council area. Heritage activities included involvement in archaeology, built heritage and shared history projects. The Curator notified the Friends of Down County Museum of this change in a letter on 23rd March 2018. At the time he anticipated that there would be a new curator at Down County Museum in “due course”. This did not happen and while there was not a clear commitment to this from Council, the confusion over this seems to have contributed to the current discontent with the recent staffing review.

The Heritage Manager Post no longer exists and the post holder has retired. It has been replaced by role of Curator again with responsibility for the two museums. The Curator is based at both Down County and Newry and Mourne Museum splitting her time between her two sites. A Heritage Officer post has been created across the service to take on the wider responsibility of developing and promoting heritage across the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area. This will be based at Downpatrick.

The creation of this dedicated Heritage Officer role will provide a focus for both Down County and Newry and Mourne Museums to integrate with wider heritage activity in the district. The opportunity for enhanced and joined up promotion and awareness raising for the built heritage assets within Newry and Downpatrick was emphasised by other stakeholders. The creation of this post is a significant step to realising this potential.

As part of the museum service structure, it has a strong museum focus linking them as two historic buildings. The post is temporarily line managed by the Assistant Director, however, will naturally sit under the role of a revised Museum and Heritage Services Manager, as it will underline a joined-up approach to promotion of collections and heritage.

3.2.9 Benchmarking across the sector

Benchmarking of jobs was carried out through comparison with jobs advertised within the last few months plus reference to several specific museums who shared current information on staffing and key posts.

Museums Consulted in Northern Ireland included North Down Museum, Lisburn Museum and Irish Linen Centre, and Derry City and Strabane District Council, which runs the Tower Museum.

Comparison was also carried out with some key posts within Bristol Museums, Hereford Museum Service and Norfolk Museum Service and advertised post across the UK and RoI.

It is worth mentioning that within the conversations there were several museums or museum services who indicated that a staffing review was likely to take place and that cost savings were anticipated to be a significant factor in the reviews.

There is no standardisation of job titles in the museum sector for staff across local authority and independent museums. Some job roles with the same title have widely differing job descriptions and responsibilities. This makes it difficult to undertake direct comparisons, however, there are some general trends that are outline below.

3.2.10 Comparison of collection-based posts in museums

Title	Comments	Indicative grades	Salary (to £.5K)
Museum Manager or similar	Wide range of pay ranges but all with staffing and budgetary responsibility. Higher paid roles are within the larger museum services where responsibility extends to several museum sites. Some London-based roles extend beyond this range.	PO1 – PO5	33.0 – 45.5

Senior Curator	Generally characterised by experience. – Higher-paid roles are within the larger museum services and come with staffing /budgetary responsibilities.	BG 12, PO5, Curatorial Grade D	36.5 – 45.5
Archivist and Collections Researcher / Development roles	Variety of collection specialist posts – often project based. Some with project management responsibilities.	PO2 and unspecified	34.0-38.0
Curator	Various pay ranges, however, advertised post were mostly around £25K.	BG 10, Scale 5/6, Curatorial Grade E	22.5 - 33.5
Collections Officer	Collections-based roles often focusing on collection management or exhibitions.	Scale 6 and unspecified	24.0 – 29.0
Education Officer	Wide range of roles, some with staffing responsibility.	Scale 6 and SO1 to – PO2	25.5 – 36.0
Assistant Curator / Collection Assistant	Mostly without staffing or budgetary responsibility.	Scale 5/6	22.5 – 27.5
Museum Assistant	Visitor facing – without staffing responsibility.	Scale 4 – 6 and not specified	19.0 – 22.0

Relating the museum-based job titles within NMDDC to those throughout the sector it is considered that the post titles and responsibilities do not closely match with comparators within the sector with the duties often aligning to more senior job titles. In particular the post of Assistant Curator does not normally carry with it line management or responsibility for fund raising. The current Curator post at NMDDC more closely resembles both in seniority and in range of responsibilities the post of Museum Manager.

This disparity of roles is also reflected in the concerns raised by the Friends of Down County Museum who are concerned about the ability of the Curator to dedicate sufficient time to collections-based activities within the museum. It is therefore recommended that the Council consider the Job titles relating to better reflect the key purpose of the posts and afford greater comparability across the museum sector. This will provide clarity in the role to external organisations. [See recommendation 5)]

The grading of staff posts as assessed against the range of duties are considered to be in line with posts in similar local and regional museums and with advertised post across the UK, RoI, and local comparators.

3.2.11 Posts not included in the new Structure

Photographer post

The post of photographer formerly in existence at Down County Museum has not been included in the new structure. The loss of the photographer / technician post has been one of the points raised by the Friends of Down County Museum and other local heritage groups. They perceive the inclusion of a full-time photographer post as contributing to the museum as a centre of excellence.

There were two aspects to the work of this post

- Photographic services such as artefact photography, developing and printing, graphics / labels display and copying of photographic collections.
- Technical duties included installation of exhibitions, maintenance of interactives and lighting and general services maintenance.

During the staffing review the need for this post was considered within the wider changes to the Council structure and changes in technology and job roles within museum practice. As a museum building, the facilities services are now the responsibility of the Buildings and Estates team. This places the museum in line with other Council facilities and ensures that health and safety considerations are consistent with wider Council processes.

The development of digital technologies for photography have made reproduction on both graphics and images of collections easier and a less technical discipline. It is now easier to produce case labels and this work can be carried out by curatorial staff who author them. Digital photography makes it easier for images to be checked for quality during the process of capturing images and reproduction. There is no processing required and electronic images can be readily supplied to external design companies.

Digital collections have now come to the fore so that collections can be made available in an online format. Increasingly this requires emphasis on collections information and management systems so that there is clear linking of images with associated data, usually within the structure of a database system. In addressing the curation and accessibility of the photographic archive there are a range of new skills that are required.

Comparisons were made with other museums. No photographers are employed within the staff structure of other local museums contacted within Northern Ireland. National Museum NI retains the services of a single photographer. A reduction from 3 photographers in 2010. Contact was also made with regional museums services within local authorities in England. Of the three contacted, two did not have a photographer, one large museum service with multiple collection sites, had a photographer on staff. The post holder was about to retire and while no decision had been made on whether the post should be retained, the respondent indicated that this is likely to be considered in the light of a future staffing review with an emphasis on cost cutting.

The decision not to retain specialist photographic staff, is in line with the trends elsewhere. New staff positions in areas such as collection management and digital media have become more common. The Collection Assistant post has been created with many of these functions in mind. They will have responsibility for “supporting the assistant curator in all aspects of collections management” this is to include documentation, digitisation and care of collections including photographic collections.

Should support for photographic collections be regarded as a future development, I would not recommend recreating a photographer post. Given the range of archival collections within both Down County and Newry and Mourne there may, however, be a rationale for considering the development of a post with special responsibility for developing digital engagement through work on the paper and photographic archival collections. It is recommended that consideration is given to seeking external funding for a temporary project-based post to support the cataloguing, improved storage and digitisation of collections with a particular focus on virtual collections access. [See recommendation 11)]

3.2.12 Managing Risk and Emergency Plans

Risk management is an increased areas of focus across the public sector and the Council has appropriate Corporate and Directorate Risk Registers and a Contingency Plan. For museum accreditation the Museums Service must show that it is cognisant of these risks as part of its own business continuity and general risk management processes. There are however two important areas of risk that relate to the safety of both collections and people and these need to be clear addressed.

Museums must have:

- A risk assessment of security arrangements
- A clear, workable emergency plan

The security risk assessment should be revised every 5 years. The emergency plan must be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that it is current and workable and there should be evidence of regular testing of the emergency procedures.

In both museums the documentation relating to these areas was produced some time ago and does not seem to indicate that the details are actively updated and reviewed in line with good practice. They do however, contain a good basis of useful and workable information.

It is recommended that the Emergency Planning is reviewed at both museums sites as a matter of urgency and that the information is based on an active risk assessment of major risks.

Measures to mitigate risk and to implement successful emergency procedures should be included in the plan.

A regular process of training should be included for staff across the museum service with a regular testing regime taking place at each museum site.

Given the large turnover of staff at Down County Museum it is further recommended that priority is given to ensuring that the emergency procedures at the museum are in line with current arrangements and that training is provided at the earliest opportunity for new staff members as part of the induction process. [See recommendation 4)]

3.3 Managing Collections

This report is not intended to be a detailed look at either the collections policies and plans or the implementation of those plans, however, a broad-based review has been carried out to identify general recommendations and to highlight particular areas of focus.

Both Down County Museum and Newry and Mourne Museum have had an appropriate range of policies in place, however, they are significantly out of date and need to be reviewed. Both museums produced the current range of collection policies in 2016/17, however, due the pandemic the usual cycle of renewal.

Down County Museum policies are due for review after 5 years and the review date indicated in December 2021. Newry and Mourne Museum Policies are due for review after 3 years and the review date indicated in March 2020.

It is recommended that these Policies are reviewed and that the Policies should be produced at a museum service level with the individual museums referenced in specific sections where relevant. It is further recommended that the policy documents are revised and approved on a regular cycle. It is suggested that this should be every 3 years. Current good practice and updated codes, standards and legislation should be referred to in creation of the policies.

There have been plans in place within most of the policy areas. The delivery of these have been impacted by the pandemic. These should also be redrafted. Other areas of activity are highlighted through the forward plans. There is strong evidence that there are procedures in place for management of the collections including documentation and collections care and conservation but this needs to be reflected in revised and updated plans which are linked to the forward plan. [See recommendation 9)]

3.3.1 Documentation

Both museums have had documentation databases onto which they have been recording object details and both museums are aiming to complete documentation of the collections to SPECTRUM standards. This is the recognised standard which is specified in the Museum Accreditation documentation. Museums are required to deliver progress against any backlogs. There is good awareness of the areas of documentation backlog and there are renewed plans in place to tackle outstanding areas of documentation.

Newry and Mourne Museum

The documentation system in use at Newry and Mourne museum is MODES and has been upgraded to MODES Complete which is a flexible multi user interface which allows remote access to the database. The system allows for the addition of images and can be accessed at different levels so that museum users can access the system to view archival collection items without the need for them to be handled.

Newry and Mourne have made substantial progress on documentation of their artefacts and archival collections with growing access to digital images available by accessing the system. Further development and digitisation of collections in particular the Reside Collections and making these available through collections online are targets for future development.

Down County Museum

There is a back-log relating to objects which have been entered into the museum but not been documented fully and accessioned into the collections. This includes some historic backlog material as well as collections donated before the pandemic and more recently. Priorities for documentation are WWII material, Downe medical collection and Ballykinlar excavation material. There is also a requirement to update some existing records as they require fuller information to meet with SPECTRUM standards.

The collections have been documented on the ADLIB system and this is no longer being developed and supported as a system. It is planned to migrate the current data that is on ADLIB to MODES which is the documentation platform used by Newry and Mourne Museum.

The integration of databases into one platform which is network based is an important step. It has advantages in developing expertise across staff using the system and will widen access to the collection database to a more extensive range of collection-based staff.

The MODES database has an integrated facility for holding digital photographic images and other files within the database. This has been exploited at Newry and Mourne Museum to ensure that collection images can be made available through online access.

It is understood that there will be a future target will be to prepare the include the photographic collections within the digital archive. At present there is a mix of state of readiness for transfer to MODES with metadata existing for a portion of photographic images and some requiring rationalisation before they can be uploaded. Only a small number of images are available for making available through collections online. There is a good awareness of priorities for documentation. These should be included in future plans and quantified targets which can be monitored included in revised plans. [See recommendation 11]]

3.3.2 Collections Development

Both museums have a collecting policy and plan with established priorities for collecting. Down County Museum has a wide remit in throughout County Down. Newry and Mourne Museum has a tighter geographical remit reflecting the Newry, its hinterland and the Mournes.

The Collections Development Policies and plans will need to be reviewed and this should be done in the light of creation of a Newry Mourne and Down Museum and Heritage Service to reflect and represent the whole of the Newry Mourne and Down District Council. [See recommendation 9]]

3.3.3 Collection Care and Conservation

There are plans in place for conservation and collections care at both museums. Development of appropriate plans is a requirement of Museum Accreditation.

Collections Care involves the safe display, storage and transport of collections in the museum environment and is often characterised by interventions with the building, building service and storage furniture and the procedures to monitor and control the museum environment. The Collections Care and Conservation Plan should reflect the range of risks that the collection is exposed to and should enable prioritisation of interventions to improve the long-term preservation of the collections.

It is clear that some priorities are recognised and being dealt with in both museums and this needs to be reflected in a revised and costed plan which is clearly prioritised for the significant risks that the collection is exposed to. A risk-based methodology should be adopted to make the plan holistic and to set key priorities.

Newry and Mourne

A particular area of concern is the storage of collections and the capacity to store collections on site. The current storage facilities are undersized for the collections and this is difficult for object storage, location tracking and research use for the collections. Rehousing of collections is necessary and will often expand the area required for storage. A Storage Plan was undertaken in March 2022 with proposals for redevelopment of existing areas within the museum to accommodate improved storage and organisation of collections within the areas. This report has not been yet been implemented although partial improvements have been made. There is still considerable pressure on space from storage of collections and the overall recommendations of this report should be considered with a view to making targeted improvements and increasing the overall footprint for collections storage. [See recommendation 10]]

A condition assessment has been carried out for collections in the past to prioritise the conservation requirements of the collections. This is useful to indicate key priorities and to target external conservation of collection items which integrated with collections use and exhibition.

Down County Museum

Collections Storage priorities were addressed through major capital development and there is now an appropriate footprint for collections storage including storage of large items of agricultural material.

A major area of concern is the environmental control within the gallery spaces in particular the Governor's Residence which houses the Pre-history and Victorian Galleries. This is particularly important as there are a large number of items on loan from other national and local museums. The functioning of the air conditioning (HVAC) system has been of concern for some considerable time and is outlined as an action in the current forward plan. There has recently been a report produced to determine the operational effectiveness of the system. It recommended urgent replacement of the current HVAC system with one that is correctly specified and able to integrate fully with the museums building management system.

It is essential that this is pursued within the Council as a major capital project but one which is fundamental to the continued safety of collections that belong to the museum and are available to the museum on loan. [See recommendation 10]]

There are a number of priorities for collections care which become evident in other areas of the museum. The discontinuity of staffing and the impact of the pandemic has disrupted some of the routine collections care procedures. As the staffing compliment is returned to normal levels it is critical that collection care is built into induction training and is part of the routine procedures being undertaken. Rotation of sensitive collections on display should be undertaken with the permanent galleries as part of a planned refreshment. There are a large number of loan items on display, this is particularly the case in the prehistory displays. A refreshment of the permanent galleries should include a review of loan collections with a view to maximising the proportion of the museums own collections that are accessible and on display. [See recommendation 12]]

Several of the display areas a subject to water ingress through doors and leaks in roof lights. Other areas are not as well controlled as desirable. It is important that these are included in a fully risk assessed and prioritised in a Collections Care and Conservation Plan.

3.4 Users and their experiences

3.4.1 Access

Both Down County Museum and Newry and Mourne Museum are now open from 10am to 4.30pm Tuesday to Saturday and offer a vibrant programme of permanent and temporary displays. This facilitates a good level of public access to collections. Monday closure allows for development work, maintenance and cleaning, however, this does not apply on Bank Holidays when the museum remains open to facilitate visits during leave periods. Sunday opening is not considered as cost effective, however, weekend opening is appealing to tourists and so it is suggested that this should be kept under review in future. Opening at other times can be considered for special groups and for school visits. These opening hours are considered to be in line with many museums.

Both museums have a policy statement on access but these are due for review. For Down County Museum this takes the form of a Policy document and Newry and Mourne Museum have an Access Statement with a commitment to physical access.

Neither has an Access Plan but relevant objectives are included within the forward plans for both museums. It is recommended that a coordinated policy statement for both museums is developed to outline the commitment to accessibility of the collections, which incorporates a commitment to access for all audiences.

A Museum Accreditation requirement is that plans for improvement of access should be in place. In order to focus on access, it is recommended that access is included within any audience development or engagement plans. An Access and Inclusion audit has been completed for both museums and this focuses on supporting physical access to the museums. These recommendations along with actions for developing intellectual and sensory access should be including in the plan.

3.4.2 Understanding and Developing Audiences

The audience numbers for both Down County Museum and Newry and Mourne Museum are provided in a table below for year up to the pandemic. Visitor figures are not always accurate indicators or audience engagement as they are affected by a range of factors. They may also not be consistently collected. Both museums have broadly similar figures with Newry and Mourne having slightly higher figures until 2017. It is likely that the uplift in numbers after that date is due to the opening of the extension reflecting a boost in visitor numbers and perhaps an increased footfall associated with the new tearoom. Across Northern Ireland local museums as a whole have consistently reported increased visitor figures with many individual museums reporting a year-on-year increase in numbers. This has not consistently been the case across Down County and Newry and Mourne Museums and the visitor numbers for both museums could be greater. North Down Museum report visitor figures in the order of 74,000 while Lisburn Museum reported visitor figures in excess of 153,000. Care should be taken when directly comparing figures as visitors through the door will include those attending for reasons other than the museums exhibitions and activities. Such visits include visits to the café and use of facilities such as toilets.

The Tower Museum charges for entry and so cannot be directly compared. They report visitor figures immediately pre pandemic of 27,000.

All museums report a fall in in visitors since the pandemic and estimate this to be between 20 and 30% reduction. The residents survey in Newry Mourne and Down District Council shows a decrease in engagement from 18% to a post pandemic figure of 16%.

3.4.3 Visitor Figures for Down County and Newry and Mourne Museum

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
DCM	34,299	30,603	31,331	32,715	22,879 Building partially closed for new extension	30,618	45,656	50,027	45,400
NMM	35,591	34,719	34,251	34,889	34,762	33,177	35,820	26,924 Building closed for 4 months for Revamp	29,595

3.4.4 NISRA Visitor Attraction Survey

Visitor Numbers for Museums & Art Galleries 2013- 2019 (Pre-pandemic)

Attraction	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Armagh County Museum	9,452	10,001	11,147	10,247	10,780	11,876	10,266
Carrickfergus Museum	20,113	25,268	16,924	17,022	20,451	23,038	21,233
Centre for Contemporary Art Derry ~Londonderry	-	-	4,445	5,800	-	7,070	-
Down County Museum	35,000	40,000	40,000	40,000	40,000	45,000	45,000
Enniskillen Castle Museums	34,595	26,525	-	-	64,748	65,097	85,722
Larne Museum & Arts Centre	3,725	3,619	3,824	4,927	7,460	6,312	7,847
Mid-Antrim Museum	24,729	34,972	26,111	28,904	28,942	28,000	-
Newry & Mourne Museum	34,251	34,889	34,762	33,177	35,820	26,924	29,595
North Down Museum	80,034	78,264	74,139	76,561	75,944	72,445	73,664
Northern Ireland War Memorial	12,656	9,380	10,008	9,777	10,645	9,150	10,036
R-Space Gallery	-	-	-	1,271	1,890	1,464	1,600
The Gallery Whitehead	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Royal Irish Fusiliers Museum	-	-	11,236	-	12,193	12,136	12,463
Tower Museum	31,171	21,722	22,749	22,488	25,153	20,986	27,461
Ulster American Folk Park	134,924	130,434	122,947	132,570	127,365	117,076	112,916
Ulster Folk Museum	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ulster Museum	416,028	465,512	464,762	460,028	533,153	584,723	522,388
Ulster Transport Museum	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Whitehead Railway Museum	7,395	6,396	6,264	5,860	10,602	15,483	12,295

3.4.5 Audience Profile

Audiences NI (ANI) were commissioned by the Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC) to complete a Visitor Profiling Project in six museums across Northern Ireland in 2016. Both Down

County Museum and Newry and Mourne Museum were selected and there is a report with combined findings across the six museums, as well as individual reports for each museum. While this project was some time ago, it presents a range of useful findings. The methodology was developed to enable future visitor profiling and benchmarking among museum. It would be useful to include information on visitor profiling as part of assessing impact of museums.

The profiling showed that while a significant portion of visitors were from within the Council area both museums attracted visitors from other Council areas and from outside Northern Ireland. Both museums were rated highly by visitors with friendly staff being commended for their welcome and knowledge.

Barriers to visiting included lack of time and not knowing what event and exhibitions are on were significant numbers also commented on the lack of parking at Down County Museum and the location of the building at Newry and Mourne Museum. This reinforces comments made elsewhere in this report.

Most people enjoyed their visits and responses were unanimously positive with Newry and Mourne (73%) and Down County (77%) rating the experience as excellent and a majority of visitor (69) and (81) saying they would visit again.

Consultation with user groups produced similarly positive comments with one user commenting that the Museum (Newry and Mourne) is “a little gem” and represents the positive aspect of Council provision which is not so clearly evident elsewhere. The ability of both museums to represent a safe space for all communities to explore identity and culture was also widely acknowledged as a positive contribution with Down County Museum being cited as an exemplar in this area.

There have been initiatives such as the recent one in Newry and Mourne Museum that resulted in the recent exhibition “Caring for the Community: The Development of Medicine in Newry and Mourne”. This built on collaboration with the health-care sector and took steps towards co-curation with the community. This practice of engaging with community groups outside the museums usual catchment of visitors is important for building audiences and making the museum service relevant and empowering. [See recommendation 13]

A significant barrier to school use of museum is the transport cost and that this has risen significantly due to the current energy crisis. It is estimated that costs for bus transport have doubled since pre pandemic. This will be a major disincentive to schools in person engagement with the museums. The recent Schools programme which was an initiative to assist with the costs of transport was extremely useful in ensuring that schools were reengaged with the museum schools’ programme. It would be positive if this could be facilitated in the coming year.

3.4.6 Website and Social Media

The new website has been one of the recent initiatives to provide coherent content on both Down County and Newry and Mourne Museum. It replaces the earlier websites that are no longer supported. The webhosting contract expiring at Down County Museum in February 2020 and for Newry and Mourne Museum (bagenalscastle.com) in July 2021. Both websites were therefore operating at risk and migration to a new web platform was undertaken as a matter of urgency. The consequences of such a rapid migration are that many aspects of the transfer are still being updated.

The website information on Newry Mourne and Down museums is quite confusing and not as easy to find as a visitor would like.

Currently there is some general information on the Newry Mourne and Down District Council website but the official website is the NMD Museums website which is hosted as part of the Visit Mourne Mountains. This can be quite confusing as it is not clear that this is the official website until it is clicked through from the search engine.

The opening hours for Down County Museum are listed differently on various non-Council websites. Since this has been reported efforts have been made to correct information.

The What's On section of the Council website is perhaps the main portal for events and activities supported by Council. The tab takes you to the Visit Mourne Mountains website, however, only if you are eagle eyed will you see the NMD Museums tab at the top of the page to get information on museum activities.

The new NMD Museum website is an attempt to provide coherent and up to date information and achieving a secure platform for web information is to be welcomed. While some information was a little out of date further training has now enabled staff to update information and all of the museums exhibitions are now included.

The museum has also new social media channels on facebook, twitter and Instagram. The transition to the new channels has been a difficult one with loss of followers for both museums.

It is clear that there is a strong intention to promote the museum through a variety of platforms, and to rebuild the audiences for the website and social media. This will take time and a concerted effort to regain followers and develop a good range of content.

The branding of the new website and social media platforms is not as strong as it could be and efforts should be made to incorporate traditional branding of each of the museums within the new NMD Museums platforms. It may be worth considering an identity for the museums service that is engaging and underlines the refreshed vision for museums and heritage in the Council.

The website is a source of information and should be a shop window on the Down County and Newry and Mourne Museum. It is a way to promote key initiatives, recruit participants and inform people what is going on. It should also act to advocate for the impacts that the museum service has on tourism and on the local life of residents.

Museums websites should also act as a resource encouraging people to browse the collections, enjoy online exhibitions and learn about some of the stories that make up the history and culture of Newry, Mourne and Down. [See recommendation 14)]

4 Income Generation

Both Down County Museum and Newry and Mourne Museum are free to enter. Of the comparator museums most were also free to enter. The Tower Museum (Derry City and Strabane District Council) does incur a charge of £4 to visitors. Free entry removes a significant barrier to accessing the museum and it is therefore important that the museums remain free for general visitors.

Both museums do have limited chargeable activities on offer. These include:

- Venue hire

- Café / tearoom at Down County Museum
- Shop at Down County
- Educational Activities
- Special events
- Other charges

4.1 Venue hire

There are fees attached to room booking and these are based on an hourly rate during museum opening hours. There is a room booking procedure and terms and conditions of hire are in place. The fees for room hire are tiered with reductions for charitable use. They are modest and attractive for use by external bodies.

There is a booking system in place and clear instructions to hirers. Room hire brings in a modest return (around £1000 per year in Newry and Mourne Museum). The fees have been integrated across the two museums to bring consistency of approach.

The room hire charges do not have a rate for evening activities and so any evening opening outside of museum activities would need to be discussed directly with the museum in question.

The staffing review has resulted in standardisation of hours across the Museum Assistants posts. The contracted cover is between 9 and 5 and so evening work is not a standard part of the duties. This change provides for a greater certainty in terms of working hours for staff and ensures adequate cover during museum opening hours.

The staff are engaged on contracts that cover the museum opening hours. Evening opening can be facilitated by provision of staff necessary to remain compliant with health and safety arrangements. For both venues this involves two staff who are trained in fire safety being available on site.

These arrangements are similar for other museums contacted as part of the benchmarking exercise. A minimum of 2 and up to 4 staff are required in the museums contacted and charges for evening activities incorporate charges for the necessary number of staff.

Other museums reported that evening hire only allowed them to break even. For a number of museums, the use for evening activities was not therefore actively promoted. The pandemic had changed evening use of the museum for a number of those contacted and this had prompted a change in perspective. In general, it was considered that the benefits of evening activities needed to be strongly supporting the overall strategic priorities of the museum or be of clear commercial benefit. [See recommendation 16)]

4.2 Cafe / Tearoom

The presence of a café / tearoom at a museum site enhances the public offer, makes it feel more of a destination and encourages visitors to stay for longer in the museum.

The presence of a tea room is generally run on a franchise basis. This is the arrangement under which Down County Museum tearoom was offered prior to the pandemic. It was run by a social enterprise, offering training and opportunities as well as providing a good level of customer service. A share of the turnover is generally made in payment to the host museum. At Down County Museum there was a small payment for use of equipment and they were charged for utilities. In general museums report benefits in terms of visitor numbers and visitor satisfaction. At North Down

Museum the café is particularly successful bringing people into the museum and providing an attractive facility for visitors. It has the benefit that activities can continue in the evening at the café, as it has a separate entrance and can be isolated from the museum with independent security systems. This enables evening functions and weddings to catered for at the museum under the control of the café staff.

At Down County Museum the previous holder of the tearoom franchise was is no longer able to continue to run the tearoom. This is both on commercial grounds and in terms of the impact of the pandemic. The closure of the tearoom was raised as an issue for stakeholders and there was general confusion over the reason for this, with many citing the temporarily reduced opening hours as being responsible. While there has been a period of closure this in itself is not the reason for the café no longer being open, however, it does appear to be an important issue for museum users.

The financial viability of the offer is a concern when seeking a new franchise holder for the tearoom. It may be that Down County Museum can incentivise the franchise for a new holder at least in the first instance in order to attract a provider. Regular opening of the museum and the efforts to increase audiences will also help to make the opportunity more appealing. It is anticipated that efforts will be made to readvertise the franchise opportunity within the next six months.

The ability for visitors to have some refreshments while in the museum is an issue for Newry and Mourne Museum, however, beyond vending machines there is limited scope for a café at present.

4.3 Shop

Down County Museums has vibrant shop which is well located in the access way to the museum. It stocks a good range of stock and provides for a point of contact at the beginning of the visit to the museum. There is a reported good interest and sales from the shop which contribute to the income.

Newry and Mourne Museum has a Tourist Information in the foyer area. The foyer is a large space which is currently underused. There are proposals to re-organise and expand the staff accommodation in this space as part of the storage plan, however, there may still be space for a small retail space should that be desirable.

4.4 Educational Activities

Educational visits and tours are charged for at a very modest rate. These are set to encourage participation and use of the museum but to provide for additional costs incurred.

The charges are not considered prohibitive and it is perhaps worth considering a wider range of more regularly offered tours which might enhance a visit and could attract a slightly higher fee. Integration of booking of tours and other add-ons as part of visit may be marketed through the new website and this could be considered as a way of providing additional value to visits. A more experiential approach may also be appealing to a broader range of particularly young adult audiences.

4.5 Special events

The artisan market and other special events are occasionally held at the museum premises. This primarily provides an opportunity to develop different audiences but may potentially generate income. It is understood that various chargeable events have been run in the past. At present the focus is on core activities and those which closely fit with the museum remit. After a period of

consolidation for staff and for returning audiences, it may be worth investigating future opportunities for events of a more commercial nature.

Successful, events that are designed to generate income require careful consideration and cost planning but may also need some initial investment of resources in order to become successful. Regular activities can offer greater return as audience awareness can be built on over time. It is useful to consider a range of activities that may bring in different audiences as part of a plan to build audience engagement. Food evenings, murder mystery events and film screenings have proved successful at other museum venues and while these are perhaps less directly related to the museums educational remit may offer opportunities that would change the perception of the museum.

4.6 Other Charges

A range of other charges are applied to copyright, reproduction and photography. The charges facilitate use of the collections but ensure that costs are not incurred by the museum. There is an appropriate split between educational and commercial use. It is recommended that these charges are reviewed and standardised across the museum service.

5 Consultation Meetings

Consultation was carried out with a variety of

Key Stakeholders
Special Interest Groups
Wider community groups

The comments and issues raised as part of the consultation are used to inform this report. There were a wide range of particular issues, opportunities and suggestions raised through contact with the consultees. The findings will be communicated to staff through more detailed discussion and reporting.

There are two groups who have raised very specific issues and these are outlined below.

5.1 Friends of Down County Museum

The Friends of Down County Museum was established in 1989 and has been a keen supporter of Down County Museum throughout its 33-year existence. It is a registered charity which is independent from but associated with Down County Museum. The long-term commitment to the museum and voluntary contributions of time and expertise has been an important factor in the development of the museum. Donations to the collections and support for programmes of work and outreach have been valuable contributions to the work of the museum.

The purposes of the Charity are:

- To support and promote the work of the Museum
- The Society shall be independent of, but associated with Down County Museum

- Members will work close association with the Curator and staff of the Museum, to develop the Museum, support the collection, participate in associated activities and act as ambassadors within the community for the Museum.
- Funds raised are solely for the benefit of the museum.

In their role as ambassadors within the community, the Friends have been vocal in their disquiet over the recent staffing review and structural changes. A number of Freedom of Information requests were submitted to NMDCC by the Friends relating primarily to the review process and decision making. The Friends remained dissatisfied with the responses received.

Meeting with the Committee members of the Friends of Down County Museum was held on 6th October 2022

There was a brief agenda which focused on:

- 1) Review of current position to include:
 - Community engagement
 - Staffing structure
 - Resourcing
 - Opening hours
 - Service provision
- 2) Aspirations for Future Development of the Museums Service
- 3) Friends of Down County Museum – future work and partnership

The friends prepared a document summarising their views under each of the headings. This is included as Appendix A

The group see themselves as a key aspect of wider community engagement and were exceptionally critical of the Council and its failure to engage with them and other key stakeholders prior to implementation of the staffing review.

They have an expectation that the Council will work with them and are open to the re- building of trust. Many of the points raised by the Friends of Down county Museum are included in the report and centre on staffing, “downgrading” of Down County Museum and availability of the museum for evening meetings.

Clearly there are benefits to re-establishing a good working relationship between the Friends and the new Museums and Heritage Service. [See recommendation 15)]

5.2 Downpatrick and County Down Railway

Down Patrick and County Down Railway are an independent charitable organisation which was set up in 1985 with the aim of restoring a portion of the former Belfast and County Down Railway as a working railway museum, incorporating the various aspects of Northern Ireland’s railway heritage.

The Railway has been very successful in developing both the railway as a restored working railway and has also been able with the support of external grant funding to open a museum in the station building and a Carriage Gallery which displays engines and carriages.

There is a long-established relationship with the former Down District Council. This has been formalised through a Partnership Agreement. The Railway receives funding from the Council and is bound by a service level agreement renewed on a regular – currently annual basis. The Council owns parts of the physical infrastructure on the site including the station building and the workshop. Leasing arrangements for the land are complex but the Council sub leases the land to DCDR on a 900-year lease.

There are several areas of concern around the current arrangements and these have been the subject of a formal complaint to NMDDC. These predominantly centre on:

- the Councils decision to revise the Partnership Agreement,
- Planned preventive maintenance work which has not been completed by Council
- Service level agreement terms and funding arrangements
- Ongoing development regarding the Ballydugan extension to the railway and vesting of land
- Carparking and access

Communication with the group has been poor and some of the issues appear to be as result of confusion due to changing staffing and management arrangements within Council.

The Downpatrick and County Down Railway and its museum is a unique heritage attraction within Downpatrick. It is an accredited museum and has a lot to offer in terms of tourism in the area.

In common with many independent museums DCDR has seen major challenges due to the pandemic. The need to maintain and cover core running cost while at the same time having the main income stream from events and train journeys cut off has placed huge strains on a volunteer run organisation. This has been compounded by recent arrangements with Council. The impact of not having preventive maintenance work completed has meant cancellation of event days and has restricted use of the site. This limits the income stream for the museum.

It is clear that Downpatrick and County Down Railway are a key tourist offer within NMDDC and have the potential to enhance the heritage offer within the area both as an attraction and as a link with Inch Abbey and potentially other attractions.

The development of a coherent offering for tourists in Downpatrick is particularly important for attracting people to the area as there needs to be an intention to visit Downpatrick as it is not on a through route. Enhancing collaboration with DCDR through a Museums and Heritage Service that has a wide remit for encouraging and developing the heritage offer beyond the museums could unlock some of this potential. [See recommendation 3]]

6 Recommendations

6.1 Governance

- 1) It is recommended that the Council frame future development of both Down County Museum and Newry and Mourne Museum within the overall context of the development of an integrated Museum and Heritage Service for the Newry Mourne and Down District Council while preserving the unique identity and track record of the two museums.**

This will involve the following practical steps:

- a. Articulating the key drivers and purpose of this change as a route to a coherent and integrated delivery of museum services within the Newry Mourne and Down District.
 - b. Drafting of a new set of integrated policies for the museums service with a coherent and combined set of overarching principles, as well as development of a specific set of parameters for each museum site.
 - c. Reviewing and refreshing the remit and collecting policy of the museums with a view to coherence and coverage for the Council area.
 - d. Developing the collections information systems to deliver an integrated resource for the enjoyment, study and management of the collections.
 - e. Investigating the range of services that should be extended throughout the Council area. This may include support and resources for heritage and collection-based work throughout the Newry Mourne and Down area.
- 2) It is recommended that an overall strategic framework is considered for the museums and heritage service which identifies key impacts that the Council wishes to see for the museum service.**
 - a. This will involve defining impacts that the current service delivers, particularly in support of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy 2022—2027 and the Vision that *“In 2027, Newry, Mourne and Down has a rich cultural life that is celebrated and protected for future generations. Our culture, arts and heritage creates economic impact in our urban centres and brings benefits to all our rural communities across the district”*.
 - b. Developing a clear line of sight between Council investment in Museum Services and the impacts this has for local communities, tourism and development will provide increased visibility for the Council’s support for the Museum and Heritage Service and an evidence base for the positive role museums play across the Council’s priorities.

- c. Widening development and support to other museum and heritage organisations within the NMDDC area will help to establish a more joined up and coherent offering for visitors and residents which directly support the aims of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy as well as unlocking economic potential for the area.
- 3) **It is recommended that the relationship of NMDDC with Downpatrick and County Down Railway (DCDR) and its Railway Museum is considered within the context of an integrated Museum and Heritage Service. Incorporating a wider vision for development of the museum offer within the Council area and working collaboratively with DCDR as an independent museum, ensures that museum provision is delivered in a more joined up way for both residents and visitors.**
- a. The Council should seek a resolution to developing a new partnership agreement through mutual discussion and agreement. The continued success of the DCDR as an accredited museum and attraction should be a key objective.
 - b. The review of the SLA should take into account the overall strategic framework for the museums and heritage service and support the DCDR in recovering from the impact of the pandemic and re-engaging audiences.
 - c. A close working relationship should be established through which expertise can be shared and areas of mutual benefit can be pursued. This includes promoting the museum as an integral part of the cultural and tourist offer in the Downpatrick area.
- 4) **It is recommended that the Emergency Planning is reviewed at both museums sites as a matter of urgency and that the information is based on an active risk assessment of major risks.**
- a. Measures to mitigate risk and to implement successful emergency procedures should be included in the plan.
 - b. A regular process of training should be included for staff across the museum service with a regular testing regime taking place at each museum site.

6.2 Staffing

- 5) **It is recommended that the Council consider the Job titles relating to the revised structure to provide a clarity in the role and recognition of the key purpose of the posts greater comparability across the museum sector.**
- a. Specifically, it is suggested that the current curator role is retitled Museum Services Manager and that the two Assistant Curators become Curators. This will reinforce the curator positions as having the detailed insight and responsibility for the collections within the individual museum collections and development policies. It may also be desirable to retitle the Collections Assistants to Collections Officers.
- 6) **It is recommended that there is a specific focus on development of staff across the short term. This should include confidence building, training and focus on integrating the teams and working practices across the two museums.**

- a. This will involve a coherent induction and training programme for staff. The inclusion of collections-based work for Museum Assistants is to be welcomed and should include opportunities for learning and development in the areas of collections management, care and audience engagement.
- b. In particular it will be important to provide both formal and informal opportunities for staff to engage with each other across the two museums and at all levels within the organisation.
- c. The Friends of Down County Museum are keen to support the induction of staff and this longer-term perspective may be helpful in developing an understanding of the history and significance of Down County Museum. Similar inductions should also be undertaken for Newry and Mourne Museum and both should be available to all collections staff.

7) It is recommended that the exhibition schedule is considered in the light of new staffing at Down County Museum and that in the forthcoming year temporary exhibitions are reduced or temporarily suspended.

- a. This will provide for a period where new collections staff can focus on core collections management activity and develop a greater depth of knowledge on the collections.
- b. This will also enable a renewal and refreshment of permanent exhibitions at Down County Museum to be prioritised.

8) It is recommended that as part of a business continuity planning that a programme should be established to ensure that provision is made for staff departure and that there are appropriate record keeping and systems in place to support transfer of responsibilities.

- a. This should include developing familiarity with practice and procedures across the two museums to build resilience into the staffing structure.

6.3 Collections

9) It is recommended that the range of collection policies are reviewed and that they should be produced at a museum service level with the individual museums referenced in specific sections where relevant.

- a. Policy documents should be revised and approved on a regular cycle. It is suggested that this should be every 3 years. Current good practice and updated codes, standards and legislation should be referred to in creation of the policies.

10) It is recommended that the Council supports the museums in addressing key collection care priorities.

- a. Both the replacement of the HVAC system in the Governor's residence at Down County Museum and the lack of storage capacity at Newry and Mourne Museum are key infrastructure improvements that should be considered through Council procedures. This will require allocation of capital budget.

11) It is recommended that consideration is given to seeking external funding for a temporary project-based post to support the cataloguing, improved storage and digitisation of collections with a particular focus on virtual collections access.

- a. This post should be across the museums service; however, priority should be given to increasing digitisation and online access to the photographic collections at Down County Museum.

12) It is recommended that permanent exhibitions should be reviewed with a focus on rotation of sensitive material and increasing the number of collections that are on display. This should include a review of loaned material particularly at Down County Museum.

- a. At Down County Museum, this will enable a response to conditions in the gallery as well as reducing the impact on light sensitive collections.

6.4 Users

13) It is recommended that the museum takes a renewed look at audience engagement. It is particularly important to examine the way in which the museum interacts with audiences in the light of the pandemic and with digital technologies and museum-based activities outside of the museum.

- a. Widening and diversifying engagement is key to developing audiences. Special focus should be on attracting under-represented groups.
- b. Participatory practice should be embedded within audience engagement and should be directly linked to the temporary exhibition programme.
- c. Consideration should be given to taking the museum out of traditional spaces and into other venues. The increased engagement should be incorporated into reported visitor figures and should be included as part of the museums impact.
- d. The museum service should build on collaboration with the community (which is beyond the work with special interest groups) and develop the practice of co curation in developing temporary exhibitions as a way of empowering communities and encouraging ownership of the museum service.

14) It is recommended that development of the website is prioritised as a way to connect with audiences particularly those who are underrepresented within the museum visitor profile.

This will involve:

- a. Ensuring that core information is up to date and relevant,
- b. Resources such as publications and collections online are populated and enhanced over time as a window on the collections,
- c. Promoting the activities of the museum and their contribution to local life, wellbeing and learning,
- d. Creating a gateway to encourage people to engage with and use the museum service and attract people to visit and support the museums,
- e. Developing the new website as an integrated resource for accessing services, collections and opportunities located at the two museums and as part of a museum outreach and education service.

6.5 Stakeholder Groups

15) It is recommended that there is a renewed relationship established with the Friends of Down County Museum. The Friends organisation while independent from the Museum, has a singular place to support and develop the museum and this should be recognised.

- a. The Council should formally acknowledge the role of the Friends group in strengthening Down County Museum.
- b. Increased communication through full participation of museum staff including the Curator on the Board of the group and reinforce this as the key mechanism by which the Friends group has a mechanism to influence and support the staff of the museum.
- c. Key to this refreshed relationship will be developing a mutual trust that is based on respect as colleagues working toward a shared aim. Building that trust may require some acknowledgement by both the Council and the Friends that there are issues to be worked thorough and that there has been hurt and distress caused by recent decisions and events.
- d. In developing this renewed relationship, the Council should endeavour to secure support for the aspiration for a regional Museums and Heritage Service across the Newry Mourne and Down District Council Area as a successor to the vision for a regional county museums structure.

16) It is recommended that the Council clarify the current arrangements for evening activities in the museum as part of forward programming.

- a. This should encompass occasional use for wider public events and activities run collaboratively with the Friends or special interest groups can be developed in partnership.

- b. Use of Council venues other than the museum for evening meetings should be encouraged.
- c. A set of guiding principles to inform decision making around evening activity should be set out. This should include public benefit, audience building and accessibility as key criteria. This should be framed within the drive to extend and diversify audiences and to widen participation from underrepresented sections of the community.

17) It is recommended that the Council develop a Communication Plan as part of the work on audience engagement that identifies target audiences and establishes a clear mechanism for communication. This would include segmenting audiences to include:

- a. Key stakeholder groups such as the Friends of Down County Museum, Downpatrick Railway Museum
- b. Special Interest Groups such as Killyleagh Family History Society, Lecale and Downe Local History Group, Old Newry Society
- c. User groups such as schools and care homes
- d. Partners in the business community

THE FRIENDS OF DOWN COUNTY MUSEUM SUBMISSION DOCUMENT TO THE STRATEGIC REVIEW OF MUSEUM SERVICES WITHIN NEWRY, MOURNE AND DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

Representatives from the Friends of Down County Museum welcomed the opportunity to meet with the independent reviewer, Dr Siobhan Stevenson, on Thursday 6 October 2022. The meeting allowed the Friends of Down County Museum, as a leading stakeholder, to put on record their serious concerns about the way in which the restructuring of Down County Museum was implemented and to outline a number of suggestions that would restore the Museum to the levels of excellence reached in the past.

Historically, the Friends of Down County Museum has acted as a means of supporting the one-time Director of the Museum (Dr Brian Turner) and, later, the full-time Curator (Mike King). Community participation was a key function while fundraising activities assisted all kinds of projects, especially the purchase of items for the collection, which is extensive and exceeds those of most local authority museums. The Friends want to be constructive, are keen to volunteer, desire to raise the profile of the Museum which, in truth has been diminishing under the watch of the Council for some time despite local concerns, and aim to have positive relationships with the newly appointed, if reduced, team in our County Museum.

It was with surprise and consternation that the Friends of Down County Museum discerned the Council's plans for museum services in Down County Museum towards the end of 2021, which not only confirmed the downsizing trend, but also revealed a fundamental change to the leadership and curatorship of the Museum, as well as the care of its nationally important collection. There had been no consultation with stakeholders, and elected councillors were completely in the dark about what seemed to be the introduction of the changes to the organisation of the Museum by stealth, under the cover of the Covid-19 pandemic. Once the Friends became aware of the plans – almost by accident – serious concerns were raised and there was uproar in many quarters across the district. A letter of concern was signed by as many as 100 prominent people, mainly in the council area but also further afield; people with a strong connection to the museum as visitors, political representatives, writers, guides, historians, archaeologists or artists. A public meeting was held in February 2022, attracting significant community and political interest, but it was disappointing that invited senior council officers did not attend to explain the purpose of the restructuring of museum services and to answer public concerns. Similar offers to engage with council staff in a less public forum were also ignored.

The terms of reference for this strategic review indicate a meaningful engagement and, it is hoped, an acknowledgement that things to this point have not been handled well. The preparation of a detailed forward plan is one that needs to be informed, influenced by stakeholders and predicated on an understanding that not all museums are the same but rather are defined by their differing sites, the extent of their buildings and infrastructure, and the size and importance of their collections. While a 'district-wide review of provision' may have been

conducted outside of the public gaze, the *distinctiveness* of both Down County Museum and Newry and Mourne Museum needs to be celebrated. Museums and museum services cannot simply be homogenised just because they fall under common guardianship. The bench-marking of museums is suggestive of an assumption of ‘like with like’ and this reductionist view implies the application of political or business modelling, with little consideration of the heritage, curation or civic functions associated with museums.

The major areas of concern for the Friends of Down County Museum are set out below.

Lack of Stakeholder Engagement

Underpinning all of these points is the very clear grievance that the original review of museum services was carried out in a secretive manner that made stakeholder input impossible. This indicates an approach to governance that is seen as problematic at best. The senior management of Newry, Mourne and Down Council implemented the restructuring using their powers of delegation, and elected councillors were not cognisant of the scale of the changes and the implications for future provision in Downpatrick. It is expected in local democracy that elected representatives are made fully aware of policy decisions and have been given the opportunity to interrogate proposals that have clear ramifications for the public interest. The fact that a number of councillors have questioned what has been done indicates that they felt blindsided and rendered unnecessary, despite their popular mandate.

The new council arrangements envisaged under RPA have been in place for some time, and the Friends of Down County Museum observed the dilution of services and staffing with some concern during a period of drift that predated the review. Moreover, it soon became evident that informed research into the review of museum services was lacking, with the consequence that the vision dictating the restructuring was unsound. Stakeholders had been ignored and, despite concerns being mooted over several years, the most recent operation of the Museum has caused significant levels of grievance. For example, the Friends were unable to meet as a group, for any kind of activity, in the Museum building in the evenings, bringing decades of consultation and cooperation to an abrupt end. When attempts were made to engage with senior council officials, these requests were rejected.

Service Provision: staffing

Even before the most recent review, the restructuring of museum services had resulted in an actual reduction in posts at Down County Museum despite senior managers’ assertions to the contrary. The Curator post is now shared with Newry and Mourne Museum and is based there, even though it is a smaller museum with a smaller collection. The Friends of Down County Museum recognise the obvious ability of the appointed part-time curator and would welcome this expertise on site on a full-time basis. Much-needed decisions on infrastructure and maintenance have already been made, but combining these administrative functions with curatorial responsibilities across two museums thirty miles apart can only lead to frustration and the physical impossibility to fulfil the role. Like all organisations, museums require a figurehead who provides an identity and ethos as well as an accountable presence and an affiliation that is understood and valued by stakeholders and the wider community.

Of significant concern to the Friends of Down County Museum is the fact that the position of Technician/Photographer has been deleted despite the Museum having one of the most important photographic archives in Ireland. The technical duties associated with a museum's extensive collection cannot be phased out, but rather will have to be done by outsourcing, which is an expensive alternative to having expertise at hand, not to mention the strong affinity that an on-site technician has with both the collection and the identity/brand of the museum. It has been inferred that the care of original historic photographs and their digitisation will be carried out externally. But who will take new photographs – to recognised museum standards - of objects, buildings and events to add to the archive and preserve institutional memory? The cost-effectiveness of outsourcing is questionable and the impersonal nature of occasional input into the life and work of the museum is suggestive of a lack of spontaneity and a dilution of identity. And who will be responsible for maintaining the archive? If all technical work for exhibitions (such as monitoring and replacing lighting, painting panels, producing labels etc.) is outsourced, what will happen to the specially-designed studio space and all the equipment (much of it paid for by the Friends) that has already been created? The inclusion of these skills in a full-time museum post has always contributed to Down County Museum being recognised as a centre of excellence. The lack of such technical and photographic expertise on-site will produce an obvious deficit, and this will only become clear once what has been lost is fully appreciated and understood.

The quality of recent appointments is welcomed. However, the Museum Assistants are expected to assist with curatorial work in addition to cleaning, security and visitor care. Professional curatorial posts have been downgraded but newly-appointed staff have more responsibilities, and these can distract from the core business of the curatorial team. The nature of the Down County Museum site demands that two people are required to be based in specific buildings for purposes of cleaning, security and visitor care, with a third person patrolling the site and supplying relief for breaks and lunch. The opportunity to engage in much-needed curatorial work is necessarily reduced because quality resources are being spread too thinly. The Friends of Down County Museum appreciate that there have been many changes in the workplace, much due to new technology, so that some jobs, such as typists, have become obsolete. While we applaud the greater feeling of ownership that a wider role may give front of house staff, we feel there is a serious lack of technical support. There is now an opportunity for a new, dedicated post to concentrate on the building maintenance, contracts, cleaning and security, which, for example, a Technical Officer, supported by a cleaner could provide.

Every museum is faced by the challenges and opportunities afforded by their sites. Viewing different museums against a common benchmark is a cause for concern, especially when, at the time of its inception, Down County Museum was considered to represent best-in-class standards. A one-size-fits-all approach to museums that differ greatly in terms of function, site, outreach and collections is unhelpful.

Current Resource Provision: access to the museum and collection

Something that adds visibly to the recent state of crisis surrounding Down County Museum is the fact that it was open only three days per week, from Wednesday to Friday. The optics of a lack of events in the Museum on St Patrick's Day (the biggest day of the year, usually with 2000-3000 visitors) and the fact that it was closed throughout Easter weekend in

2022 were not good and led many to consider that the Council was allowing Down County Museum to wither on the vine at a time when people were desperate to return to a sense of normality as society emerges from the pandemic. People working on weekdays have been excluded for some months, depriving the museum of footfall and conveying an impression of malaise. We are very happy to see that Saturday opening has recently returned, but the Museum is open to the public for fewer hours and the part-time nature of its opening can only be addressed by renewing staffing structures and ensuring that the museum resumes its community function as a cultural and historical space that is open for all and which produces a climate of learning, research and outreach.

Information about opening hours and access to the site needs to be made public. Weekend and public holiday openings are viewed as essential and the creation of opportunities for evening lectures, music, drama and workshops is considered a valuable part of a museum's communitarian function. Recent press advertising has celebrated the extension to opening hours, but these increased opening times fall well short of what they had been.

The Friends of Down County Museum recognise that in the digital age, the website and social media presence for Down County Museum is of critical importance in terms of outreach and creating opportunities for people of all ages to embrace the museum, its collection and facilities. The website has been replaced by a joint one with Newry and Mourne Museum and while this affirms a district-wide approach to museum services it also diminishes the identity of both museums, especially when it is unlikely that locals and tourists will plan to visit both museums in a single day. We understand that the old website was no longer supported but the current provision contains reduced levels of information. For example, the galleries of photographs of objects in the collection have disappeared as well as the convict database and access to publications and articles provided by the Friends. The virtual museum service has been reduced, with the result that Down County Museum has a smaller digital imprint, which contradicts the vision shared by senior managers with the Friends when the restructuring plan was discovered.

If the planned enhanced website is still in an early stage of development, it would be helpful to state this on the home page in order to ensure that browsers return to the site rather than assume that the Museum is diminished. We do appreciate that the revised opening times are now made clear on the website.

Of particular concern to the Friends of Down County Museum is the fact that redundancies, resignations, retirements and redeployments have led to a lack of business continuity and a loss of institutional memory, with the resultant deficit in identity. While the history of the Museum from its creation to the restoration of each of the buildings is well documented, there should be opportunities for the transmission of all the background information so that the enterprise of the founders of the Museum – and those who have carried the torch ever since – is not lost.

The Future

Down County Museum was established in response to government-sponsored reports advocating a rational system of county museums in Northern Ireland, one of which was located in the historical and ecclesiastical town of Downpatrick. Down County Museum should be

viewed as a unique museum and not benchmarked against other county or specialist museums and centres. Indeed, every museum needs to be viewed in its own specific context and, as such, our museum deserves to reflect the nature of the site, its ongoing needs and the size of the collection with due regard to the fact that members of the community entrusted valued items to its care.

As a stakeholder and preserver of local heritage and memory, the Friends of Down County Museum desire to be involved, included and valued so that they can provide support for the curatorial team and those who add value to the experience of visitors. There is no doubt that the Museum has been allowed to lose parts of its identity. The café was a hub for locals to meet, engage in conversation and enjoy a safe and shared space. Along with the large function room, these facilities were available for community groups and those invested in history and heritage. Moreover, Down County Museum's library and research-led history is in danger of being lost and the restoration of a vibrant academic reputation needs to be a central part of the strategic review. The Director of Enterprise, Regeneration and Tourism has recognised that Down County Museum requires a bigger budget than Newry and Mourne Museum and that this will not be cut. We trust that this review will uphold this principle, for no other reason than the relative sizes and scope of the two museums.

Fundamentally, the Friends of Down County Museum welcomed the opportunity to make its views known as part of the strategic review. It is hoped that council officers will acknowledge that the original process was flawed, take note of the main issues and suggest remedies so that confidence in the services provided by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council can be restored. It is also hoped that by listening to the views of stakeholders, council staff will agree that full disclosure to our elected representatives is a necessary part of its duties and function. This clearly did not happen in the case of the museum restructuring, as demonstrated by a series of FOI questions submitted by the Friends. While executive functioning is necessary in order to effectuate change, circumventing elected representatives and stakeholders is unhealthy and undermines the principles of local democracy and engagement.

The whole process of restructuring resulted in resignations, retirement, redeployment and redundancy on an unprecedented scale. At the same time, the lack of communication from senior managers to stakeholders has resulted in the latter feeling ostracised and undervalued as they witness the reduction in outreach and engagement. As a stakeholder group, the Friends of Down County Museum does not exist to create obstacles or to undermine the objectives of the Museum. In order to improve the service, bridge-building must begin and compromises reached. Council and stakeholders must have the good of the museum as the only objective. The Friends of Down County Museum look forward to a return of the development of harmonious and transparent relations with Newry Mourne and Down District Council, with all committed to the restoration of a very successful County Museum in Downpatrick.

4th November 2022

Anne Curran, Kenneth Dawson, Patrick Moore and Lesley Simpson, on behalf of the Friends of Down County Museum