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Issue: Cultural Diversity Policy Review

The Community Relations Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the NIMC's Cultural Diversity Policy Review. CRC's aim is to lead and support change in Northern Ireland towards reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and promote sharing over separation. We work by promoting constructive and relevant dialogue, by actively supporting those taking real risks for relationship building, by acting as a practical bridge between groups in society and between the public, private, voluntary and community sectors and by promoting wider learning through developing better practice. Our overall aim is "to lead and support change towards a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society founded on the achievement of reconciliation, equality, co-operation, respect, mutual trust and good relations".

A Shared Future states that cultural diversity policies are 'necessary to accommodate the range of ideologies and interests of the long-resident communities in Northern Ireland and to promote inclusive policies and activities that recognise newer residents as fully integrated communities'.¹

It goes on to specify how museums will play a role in delivering A Shared Future

- ensuring that the collections are representative of the diversity which both have been and are present in the geographical area from which local visitors come and those places and domains which represent their interests, affiliations and concerns;
- ensuring that both permanent and temporary exhibitions represent and examine the interests of all the communities that the museum chiefly serves;
- devising exhibitions and supporting educational programmes/outreach work which address issues pertinent to the cultural diversity of the geographical area served.²

¹ OFMDFM, A Shared Future, p 32

² OFMDFM, A Shared Future, p 33

Similarly the Racial Equality Strategy, which complements A Shared Future, has six shared aims, which include elimination of racial inequality, equal protection, equality of service, participation, dialogue and capacity building. It states that barriers will have to be broken down which may 'involve outreach initiatives, devising new and innovative ways of engaging with people and involving them.....helping to develop the potential for greater participation and engagement while simultaneously promoting and where appropriate, providing opportunities for minority ethnic people to be fully involved in civil society'.³ The NIMC will play a central role in implementing both strategies.

We will look at the review primarily from a community and good relations point of view, and hope that our comments will assist NIMC in developing this area of their work. As already stated the purpose of NIMC is to support and advise local museums on how to celebrate, discuss and understand all cultures. The cultural diversity policy is three-fold. It has direct and indirect links with a number of client groups - their immediate staff and board, local museum staff and finally the wider public, including schools, community and voluntary etc. The Community Relations Council is already aware of the good work undertaken by the NIMC, in particular the 'Our People Our Times' exhibition, which promoted our diversity across Northern Ireland in a positive and educational way. NIMC have taken an important step in highlighting diversity and we look forward to hearing about new developments which will compliment this initiative.

The Cultural Diversity Policy

Resettlement in Ireland has been a constant trend and the growing diversity within our society and its preservation will enrich our history, culture and life experiences. The cultural diversity policy should embrace all cultures and traditions in an equal fashion, and not seek to promote any culture or tradition over another. It is important that all exhibitions and projects are placed in context of how our society and communities have changed, and in order to embrace our growing diversity the collections should concentrate on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and present day. These periods would have more relevance in today's society. NIMC is positively developing and harnessing new ways of recording and preserving new cultures and traditions in Northern Ireland.

CRC would like the policy to be incorporated into a wider Access Policy, and specific plans developed as to how this would be done within a particular time frame e.g. over the next five years.

Leadership and Networking

The Community Relations Council believes that strong partnerships ensure the effective delivery of strategies and policies. It is essential to know what the current and changing needs are of the different groups NIMC engage with. The needs of the client group are

³ OFMDFM, Racial Equality Strategy, p 33

essential for the effective delivery of this cultural diversity policy and both the NIMC and local museums would benefit from joint assistance in developing links with local communities and voluntary groups to ensure they are delivering the most appropriate programmes etc. This partnership approach would enable both local museums and the museum council to keep each other informed of new developments, both on the ground and from a national level. There are different levels of expertise within both bodies and it is essential that models of good practice are publicised at every level. Relationships between the NIMC, local museums, other organisations e.g. private and statutory and communities need to be strengthened to ensure that museums become more relevant to local communities and consequently increase awareness and participation. Examples include the recent 'A Shared Future' exhibition which exhibited integrated school's artwork in a private gallery, and the Holocaust Exhibition at Belfast City Hall. Contacts already exist with individuals and certain groups but the challenge is to build new relationships to ensure that as a society, promoting and learning about our diversity becomes a normal part of life.

America, New Zealand and Britain have a wide range of museums that examine and promote different cultures. The National Museum of New Zealand (Te Papa Tongarewa) has a permanent community gallery that is dedicated to and created by a new community every two years. The National Museums Liverpool Community Partnerships team has recently worked with the Caribbean community helping them to collect and preserve a community photographic archive. This type of work helps build trust with the local community and shows that their culture and traditions, and its preservation are important in a growing multi-cultural society. Sometimes it is not about what is collected and exhibited by these communities but more so about the process of engaging the local community to become involved in the process of researching their history. It is about self development as individuals and communities and ultimately about building strong cohesive communities. There is huge potential for growth in this area in Northern Ireland. Large numbers of local museums exist, which serve a diversity of cultures, and therefore have numerous opportunities to increase the representation of different cultures and traditions at a local level. The Community Relations Council is encouraged by the number of projects and exhibitions already undertaken, such as the Local Identities Exhibition and Fermanagh County Museum Family Heritage Day, and support the expansion of similar projects and exhibitions. Collecting with incomer communities' is a piece of work for which NIMC might provide Guidelines – or illustrative methodologies from places which have good practice in place.

A number of research projects have already been undertaken by the NIMC which provide important information about the level of participation from BME groups and what barriers exist to these groups. Sometimes there is a danger of overloading individuals and groups with consultation exercises and it is important that the Council uses the information already gathered to initiate changes that will have positive impacts on participation from local communities, especially those who feel isolated from certain institutions and irrelevant in society's history and culture. Research is a critical part of devising strategies and we would encourage NIMC to undertake further research when

it is needed to ensure that they can address new challenges and implement new procedures to counteract negative experiences of museums.

We support the need for a Cultural Diversity Network to keep different bodies informed of best practice, offer support, assistance and further guidance on access issues. This network could develop 'tool-kits' for local museum's who need information on access policies, practices, essential contacts, and projects and exhibitions that have been undertaken by different museums that could be rolled out in different areas. The Council could also develop a set of guidelines as to how to approach cultural diversity, the main issues, procedures and practices of how to deliver cultural diversity.

The NIMC has provided a number of training events for its staff and we congratulate the council for taking these initiatives. CRC wants Good Relations training to become an integral part of the organisations objectives. Good Relations training should have a 'top down' approach, with management taking responsibility for embedding good relations at the core of Council business. The Community Relations Council believes that Good Relations is a developmental process and not a prescriptive one. It should run through an organisation's entire corporate identity and become an integral part of its equality systems and should filter through to local museums, and to all of their staff.

It was mentioned that a number of training seminars were initiated and although the take up was low those who participated found it very beneficial. In order to increase the level of participation perhaps the NIMC should look at devising tailored training – everyone should undertake training in the core issues of good relations and cultural diversity, but for different staff dealing with different aspects of museum work perhaps there is an opportunity to devise specific training to match their duties and consequently make it more relevant to them.

Mainstreaming

CRC was aware of this strategy before this review, and feel that NIMC has initiated an open and transparent process for reviewing this policy. The consultation meetings in December provided an opportunity to discuss initial thoughts on the review and those who attended said the meeting was very constructive.

Challenges

Perhaps one of the most pressing challenges that museums face in Northern Ireland is trying to find new and innovative ways of engaging with local communities. There needs to be a systematic approach to promoting awareness and encouraging involvement from all of society.

There are a number of barriers that exist for BME groups but they are relevant for all communities and in today's fast moving society there are numerous pressures on individuals and families such as time constraints and finances. Unfortunately the arts, including museums are underappreciated and NIMC and local museums need to ensure that building relationships is 'core' to their cultural diversity policies. These partnerships on the ground will enable museums to collect objects that are more

relevant to local communities. This would go along way to reducing the detachment that some communities feel with regards to museums. A great deal of work has been done in developing links with local groups, working with them to produce exhibitions that are particular to them and CRC would encourage NIMC and their partners to continue with these efforts. There needs to be investment in people and time. Local museums work at grassroots level, and need to become more relevant to their local communities or else our society is at risk of missing out on this rich diversity in years to come. The NIMC, along with the museum network should engage with community leaders and show them the cultural merit of collecting items. This local work will also provide a mechanism to collect information from local communities as to why they do not feel museums represent them and provide opportunities to change and adapt museum policies and collections. The aim should be to include the largest numbers of people in arts and culture. This needs to be a long term strategy as our society and local communities keep changing, and consequently the mindset of communities has to be altered on a regular basis in order to allow new and diverse cultures to flourish in our society.

We live in a multi-cultural society, with different wants and needs. The NIMC, along with local museums, should ensure that they are fully aware of what those needs are; especially if they place restrictions on individuals and groups from using their services. Museums should look at what barriers prevent individuals and groups from fully participating and this will involve audits:

- Marketing (publications in difference languages, targeted to specific groups)
- Costs
- Opening hours (evening, weekends)
- Special Opening Nights to raise awareness
- Accessibility – public transport etc
- Guides

Outreach and Education Officers will play a huge role in this long term strategy, and will be central to building new partnerships.

Conclusion

NIMC have taken a proactive approach to promote cultural diversity, having initiated training opportunities, raised awareness among staff and other social partners, and proactively collected and exhibited our diverse society through their very successful 'Our People Our Times' exhibition and booklet.

This is an area which will require ongoing commitment from those within NIMC and its local community museums and CRC looks forward to building its relationship with NIMC and is willing to assist with this important work.

END

