



Department for Communities: Heritage, Culture and Creativity, a strategic approach to protect, support and celebrate our culture, heritage and the arts.

Mr Lyons (Minister for Communities): I wish to advise Members of the approach I propose to take to deliver important work across the culture, arts and heritage aspects of my portfolio.

In Northern Ireland we are truly fortunate to have around us a landscape that is filled with important markers of how this place has been shaped by its people, their beliefs and customs, their traditions and technologies, their conflicts and their partnerships.

Few would disagree with a suggestion that we have a particular awareness of, and a real connection to, our rich cultural heritage and traditions. Those influences are important factors in the development of our connection to literature, music, painting and dance, for example, and of the traditional crafts of our smiths and weavers and so many others.

The evidence is all around us that our heritage doesn't just belong in our past. It plays an important role in our present and offers great prospects for the future.

In recent years we have seen the contribution that people and organisations working across heritage and the arts have made in terms of quality of life here. On an everyday basis these sectors play an important and practical role across the range of Executive priorities and policies. They contribute significantly, directly and indirectly, to the economy including as a magnet for tourism; and as a driver for entertainment, leisure and the nighttime economy. They are a catalyst for the design and creativity that can develop products; transform processes; improve productivity; and drive our digital, screen and other industries.

Across health and well-being they add real value in prevention, mitigation and treatment. They are ubiquitous across education, child-care and youthwork; and

crucial cornerstones in our communities in place-making, in peace-building, and in helping us all to understand our past and each other.

When equality of access and opportunity remove barriers to participation, the arts and heritage can also be key drivers for building community cohesion and supporting individuals to realise their aspirations and reach their potential.

Today I am announcing the approach I will be adopting to provide, for the first time, a comprehensive collection of culture-related policies.

Under the heading of “Heritage, Culture and Creativity”, this programme will address actions to conserve, protect and promote our cultural heritage and historic environment; and to encourage, support and develop the curiosity, active engagement and creativity it helps to inspire particularly through the arts.

Heritage, Culture and Creativity will build on the important work and the extensive engagement and consultation that was undertaken by the Culture, Arts and Heritage Taskforce. Its focus will be expanded to include the review and refreshment of policies in respect of public libraries and of museums.

Rather than concentrating on the creation of a single, compendium strategy, the new programme will deliver separate policies for heritage, arts, museums and public libraries but, given the many common themes running through the work, these will be brought together again through a collated action-planning approach.

This approach will give each of the constituent parts the status they merit; provide each of the communities of interest their own focus; and allow each exercise to proceed on its own timetable.

The approach taken in the work will, as far as is practicable, be based around a common set of principles and priorities. Those will include:

- a focus on the contribution each of the sectors can make in terms of equality of access and opportunity across socioeconomic grouping, age, geography and so on;
- the encouragement of greater participation, particularly from people and communities that might feel that heritage is not for them or that their cultural and artistic activities and traditions don't quite fit; and
- exploring the potential for encouraging new and deeper collaborations and partnerships; supporting greater financial sustainability across the sectors; and identifying approaches and opportunities that maximise the value of these important assets and their potential for identifying, measuring and increasing their contribution to achieving Department and Executive policy outcomes, including in relation to health & general wellbeing, education, net-zero and the economy.

Given the range of interests and the current and potential value that the culture, arts and heritage sectors bring to the work of Departments and the achievement of Executive objectives, I have written to Executive colleagues to seek their support and endorsement.

This represents a significant body of work. Each exercise will involve engagement with stakeholders and the identification of proposals for a public consultation which will inform the development of final policy positions. I am keen to progress the work as quickly as reasonably possible and so initial work on all four exercises has begun. I will, in due course, provide further information including on anticipated timing and approach.

There can be few areas of the work of the Executive that are so engrained in our people and in our environment, or which offer such opportunity for the future. This includes the potential for creating quality places and improving opportunities and life chances for communities and individuals who might not currently see heritage, culture and creativity as being open to them.