

Meeting of the National Archives Advisory Council,

25 January 2021

In attendance were: Mr. John Hedigan, (Chair); Ms. Orlaith McBride (NAI Director); Dr. Hiram Morgan; Dr. Ciara Breathnach; Mr. Kieran Hoare; Dr. Natalie Harrower; Dr. Elizabeth Mullins; Ms. Catriona Mulcahy; Mr. Michael Nolan; Mr. Brian McGee; Comdt. Stephen Mac Eoin and Professor Deirdre Raftery

Apologies: Mr. John Grenham.

1. Presentation by Public Services Division.

1.1 Two representatives from Public Services Division spoke to the Council, outlining the work of the Division, how it operates and how it is coping under the current COVID -19 restrictions.

1.2 It was mentioned that Public Services Division represents the public face of the NAI and it operates through managing the Reading Room, the NAI website, the NAI Public Outreach Programme and the NAI Twitter account.

1.3 The structure of the Division is - Keeper (Head of Division); one Senior Archivist; 4 archivists; one HEO, one EO and 4 COs. At the moment the team of four archivists has been reduced to two due to the death of Gregory O'Connor and another archivist being on long term leave.

1.4 In normal circumstances the Reading Room is open 10am – 5 am, Monday – Friday, with the exception of public holidays, staff training days and

Media Preview Week in December. It was mentioned that work in the Reading Room can be demanding and not for everyone.

1.5 The immediacy associated with the work requires staff to have well developed inter-personal skills and the mission is to provide a high quality service. Counter staff in particular undertake a myriad of functions ranging from general admin. to assisting in resolving technical queries. There is a Duty Archivist on duty in the RR to answer any queries that cannot be answered by counter staff

1.6 The user profile of the RR is changing and now comprises more diverse groups, e.g. more professional genealogists; local historians and visitors from abroad tracing their Irish roots. As well as this research topics are becoming more obscure.

1.7 Accessing archival material can at times be difficult as it is done through complex lists and indexes. A function of the Duty Archivist is to ensure that researchers can utilise all available material. In addition, many queries are of a sensitive nature and relate to the records of, for example, inquest files & hospital records – particularly Grangegorman, St. Columba's in Sligo, St. Brigid's in Galway and The Coombe.

1.8 In 2017, an officer was appointed to oversee the NAI Outreach Programme which involves facilitating the monthly meeting of Culture Club, the monthly Evening Lecture Series and workshops run in cooperation with the History Teachers' Association of Ireland. The NAI also participates in the annual Back to Our Past event.

1.9 Another aspect of the work of the RR is the Professional Genealogy Service whereby members of the public can avail of free expert advice. The

service which is operated by genealogists affiliated with Accredited Genealogist Ireland has been a great boon to the NAI.

1.10 With regard to stats it was stated that there has been a decline in Readers since 2015 which can be taken as measure of the success of various online projects. From 2016 onward the number of visitors to the NAI has been around 8000, annually. This works out at about 32 people per day, while on a busy day the NAI could receive up to 50 people. However, it was further stated that while numbers of visitors have reduced, it is the case that smaller numbers of Readers are accessing larger numbers of documents.

1.11 It was stated that the recent retirement of two long-time members of staff and the passing of Gregory O'Connor, who was widely regarded as the authority on obscure material and courts records, has impacted the corporate knowledge of the organisation. In addition it was suggested that had COVID-19 not happened, the general lack of staff might have necessitated a reduced provision of Public Services.

1.12 Due to social distancing measures, and prior to the current level 5 restrictions, access to the Reading Room had been subject to an appointment system, and only ten Readers were permitted per day. Furthermore, RR staff had been assisting in retrieving requested material, while the Genealogy Service has moved online. As a result of COVID-19 restrictions, there has been an increased use of website facilities.

1.13 An overview of the digital side of Public Services Division was provided, and the point was made that the many layers of content on the website has enabled the managing of queries and referring people to certain material online. It was also stated that Public Services Division operates an Enquiry

Management System which has the benefit of generating reports – so, for instance, it has been calculated that the volume of incoming emails has increased by 245% in the 2019 –2020 period. In addition the ability to offer an online genealogy service is a huge benefit and the volume of incoming queries there has increased by 558% in the same period.

1.14 Public Services Division has been working in recent weeks with AGS to enable access to the 1990 government releases on the website. It is the first time that annual releases have been made available online, and while the outcome has been successful, there is a way to go in improving the NAI's digital platform.

1.15 With regard to Twitter, it was stated that while archives were traditionally seen as passive, it is now necessary for the NAI to be engaging, relevant and creating more of a digital presence. This requires us being more creative and consistent in our approach. Recently Twitter followers have increased from 5000 to 11400, which is a good reflection of the work that has gone into cultivating a social media profile.

1.16 A question was raised as to what issues might arise in relation to inquest records, etc. It was explained that the material can be sensitive from the perspective of a relative of someone involved in an accident, and that often the file will be viewed by an archivist in advance to ensure they can prepare the relative for any sensitive information. It is also the case that a relative might be looking for information in relation to a genetic concern, e.g. a post mortem report.

2. Minutes of Meeting on 23 November 2020

2.1 Several amendments were suggested and accepted. The finalised minutes will be circulated shortly.

3. Update from the Director

3.1 The Director began by updating Council Members in respect of the 30-Year Rule. The NAI re-opened when the Level 5 restrictions were lifted on 1 December providing two weeks for AGS to receive, process and scan all the files. However, while the COVID situation has opened opportunities for making material available on the website, the Director further stated that an amount of work needs to be done in providing digital records.

3.2 With regard to the 20-Year Rule, the Director informed the Council that there has not been a commencement order to date. The objective is for the NAI to align with PRONI in respect of Anglo-Irish papers, and to release files from the 1991-1998 period in December 2021.

3.3 On the issue of staffing, the Director stated that the NAI has received twenty-two applications for the recently advertised archivist positions. However, the aim is to have new staff appointed by the end of February. The director also stated that it may be necessary to replace Gregory O'Connor. On the issue of Service Officers, the Director stated that there is now a panel in place and that currently there is a Garda clearance process underway.

3.4 In relation to the Archives Repository Project, the Director explained that while it was hoped to commence work in January, the current public health restrictions affecting the construction industry have delayed the project.

3.5 With regard to the Commemoration Programme and specifically the Treaty Exhibition which will open in Dublin Castle on 6 December 2021, the Director explained that plans are continuing in conjunction with UCD, the National Library and the Military Archives. It is also hoped that the NAI can launch an artist in residence which will allow an artistic response to the collections/archives. The NAI is also working closely with the Embassy of Ireland in London on possibly holding a preview exhibition there.

3.6 Generally speaking, the Director outlined that the exhibition will encompass themes such as what life was like for the Irish delegates in London at the time; what was the international reaction to the Treaty, and what role did the women play. The intention is to make the exhibition as broadly appealing as possible.

3.7 A point was raised with regard to the seemingly Dublin-centric focus of the exhibition, and questions were asked as to whether the exhibition might benefit from an outside influence, and also if the NAI had been in contact with the Women's History Association of Ireland. The Director explained that an approach has been taken to partner with universities that hold certain material, for example UCD is the repository of the DeValera papers.

4. Annual Report 2020

4.1 It was agreed that Council sub-committees would each prepare a draft review of their focus area which then will be drawn into an overall draft report by the end of February. The aim is to have the Annual Report for 2020 finalised by the end of the first quarter.

5. Code of Conduct

5.1 The issue of a Code of Conduct arose out of a question in relation to communication with the Minister in relation to the recent Mother and Baby Home Commission's Report and the proposed legislation in relation to certain materials and the issue of confidentiality. It was broadly acknowledged that the Council inhabits a grey area in that it is not a statutory body but rather an advisory group.

5.2 There was also discussion regarding how individual members should engage with the media. It was agreed that in accordance with the draft Code of Conduct presently being discussed, 'The Chair will act as the only spokesperson for the NAAC representing its agreed position on any given subject,' and that Council Members are required to 'recognise that only the Chair is authorised to speak on the NAAC's behalf or communicate its position.'

5.3 However, it was suggested that the proposed Code of Conduct should overtly state that the above stipulations do not prohibit individual Council Members from speaking to the media in their personal capacity.

5.4 On a related matter, Council Members representing the Irish Manuscripts Commission sought clarity on whether or not they are permitted to report back on Council discussions. It was agreed that such reporting is ultimately in the Council's interest but that it should be stipulated in the Code of Conduct that IMC members of the Council are legitimately permitted to do so.

5.5 It was agreed that this provision would only pertain to IMC members given that it is the only body prescribed in the National Archives Act 1986 as having representation on the Council.

5.6 Furthermore it was agreed that a line stipulating that council members are required to 'not engage in excessive advocacy at NAAC meetings on a particular issue,' should not be included in the finalised Code of Conduct, as this would diminish the Council's capacity for robust discussion. It was also stated that the Council must maintain its ability to be dissenting.

6. Publication of Minutes

6.1 It was proposed that publishing the Council minutes would be an effective way of ensuring transparency in relation to how the Council conducts its business as well as providing a sense of the depth of the discussions that take place at meetings and the extent to which the Council reflects on the big issues impacting the NAI and archive/records management in Ireland.

6.2 The Council agreed to the publishing of the minutes on the NAI website. It was agreed that future minutes should be drafted without attributing comments to certain individuals.

7. AOB

7.1 It was agreed that condolences should be expressed on behalf of the Council to the family of Gregory O'Connor, paying tribute to his 30 years of dedicated service to the NAI, and more generally to his invaluable contribution to the world of archives and historical research in this country.

Brian Bermingham
Secretary to the Council