

Meeting of the National Archives Advisory Council,

13 April 2021

(Draft)

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

Apologies: Dr. Natalie Harrower and Professor Deirdre Raftery

1. Minutes of Meeting on 25 January 2021 (for approval)

1.1 Approved.

2. Presentation of NAI Strategy, *Shaping our Future in the Information Age 2021-2025*

2.1 The NAI Director presented the above titled strategy document to Council Members. It is proposed that the five-point strategy plan (attached) will shape the National Archives over the next five years.

2.2 The Director outlined some of the key challenges facing the NAI and stated that the adequate provision of human and financial resources is the responsibility of stakeholders.

2.3 The Director further stated that the document has been presented to the Department and to Minister Martin.

2.4 In terms of executing the key proposals, the Director outlined that elements of the strategy are each year incorporated into the NAI's Annual Business Plan. The Senior Management Team of the NAI monthly reviews the Annual Business Plan through a "Traffic Light

System” by which the colours red, yellow and green designate levels of urgency in respect of implementing certain initiatives.

2.5 A question was raised as how the NAI might enact steps to bring about a cultural change across government in order that the annual transfer of records is given sufficient priority by the different departments.

2.6 The Director responded that getting a professional archivist in each department is key to bringing about a cultural change, adding that HR in this department (Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media), has been working with the Public Appointments System (PAS) to establish a permanent panel of archivists.

2.7 Another aspect of bringing about a cultural change involves NAI staff going out to departments to do a review of records; to establish relationships with counterparts and to promote the value of their working with the NAI in transferring material.

2.8 The question of how to raise the visibility of departmental archivists was also raised and it was proposed that this issue could possibly be communicated to central government. On this point the Director explained that before COVID-19 a network of staff across different departments had been established and that when the situation normalises again this group could be brought together in a more structured way.

2.9 The Director further stated that in terms of achieving outcomes of the strategy, staffing is the biggest issue. As such Heads of Division in the NAI have identified necessary staffing levels in each strategic area. However, it is important to balance prioritising professional and corporate staffing.

- 2.10 With reference to the 2019 Fórsa Report which recommended the NAI should be allocated a minimum of 60 staff, the Director stated that the NAI now has a staff of 56 but that management are looking at going beyond the recommended 60 staff. She further stated that a strategic approach also needs to look at other archives internationally and see how they are operating in certain key areas.
- 2.11 The Director further explained that in terms of improving efficiencies across the organisation, management have been working with the department in the area of IT in the context of a new Departmental IT Strategy. In terms of expanding sections, particularly in the area of IT and Digitisation, she stated that there is a balance in terms of having core permanent staff and hiring in contract expertise to respond to changes and evolution in technology..
- 2.12 The question was raised as to what kind of feedback has the Director received from the Management in the Department in relation to the proposed strategic plan. The Director explained that the response has been very positive.
- 2.13 The question of how the NAI will partner itself with other organisations was raised, and what role can the NAAC play. In respect of the latter, the Director responded that conversations like this are very helpful in familiarising the NAAC with the direction of traffic on certain issues, so that the NAAC is more effectively supporting the strategy. In respect of the former, the Director emphasised the importance of online material, stating that the ambition is for the NAI to curate online platforms by identifying key pieces of information that should be in the public domain.

- 2.14 The question was asked as to when the 1926 Census will be made available. The Director stated that it will be made available on 18 April 2026, adding that work has started on this and that there was a recent meeting between the NAI and the CSO on formulating a plan.
- 2.15 It was suggested that the NAI could consider linking up with an organisation such as IPUMS International who collect, harmonise and disseminate census data from around the world free of charge.
- 2.16 It was stated in relation to the NAAC's role in supporting the NAI strategy proposal that the strategy document is a good framework for the NAAC to engage with developments and for NAI management to seek out the expertise of council members.
- 2.17 Also, the idea of liaising with other archives provides the opportunity for the international archival community to give added weight to any innovations and to expand the field in terms any tendering processes.
- 2.18 The Chair recommended that the strategy document be put on the agenda for the next meeting of the NAAC so that the council members can discuss when they have had a chance to better look at the proposals.

3. Update from the Director

- 3.1 The Director informed council members that the Minister has approved the Archives Repository Project (ARP), so works will hopefully go ahead when the construction industry returns to work in May.
- 3.2 However, the new repository building will now be later being completed.

- 3.3 In respect of the 20-Year Rule, the Minister has now signed the commencement order. As the order concerns the release of documents pertaining to Anglo-Irish relations, the departments concerned, D/Taoiseach, DFA & D/Justice, AG, will now start work on preparing material for transfer.
- 3.4 The Director informed the Council that it is expected that the Reading Room will re-open on 10 May, possibly sooner, depending on the number of COVID-19 infections in the next couple of weeks.
- 3.5 In relation to the Commemorations Programme and the hiring of an Artist in Residence, the Director informed the Council that nineteen applications have been received. She also stated that the Military Archives, the National Library, Beyond 2022 and the National Museum will also be hiring an Artist in Residence.
- 3.6 In a further update on the Commemorations work, the Director explained that Epic Interpretive Design will assist in developing the Treaty Exhibition scheduled to be launched in the Coach House, Dublin Castle on 6 December.
- 3.7 She also stated that there have been very positive meetings between the NAI and the Embassy of Ireland in London with a view to maybe holding an exhibition in the Embassy building in Grosvenor Place. There were also good meetings with Embassies in the US with a view to possibly holding a main exhibition in Washington and a pop-up exhibition in other cities.
- 3.8 The NAI is also working with RTÉ on a co-commissioned documentary to be released next year.

4. Annual Report 2020

4.1 The Council's Annual Report for 2020 was sent to Minister Martin on 23 March 2021. The Irish version of the report went to the Minister's office on 9 April 2021. The Report will now go before the Oireachtas before it is then published on the NAI's website.

5. AOB

- 5.1 A question was raised concerning the re-opening of the Reading Room and the backlog of appointment requests. The Director explained that RR will re-open on a ten people per day, first come first served basis, adding that NAI staff are working with the company that developed the on-line appointment system to see if there is a way to stop "no shows."
- 5.2 On the point of block booking months in advance it was suggested to the Director releasing appointment calendars one or two weeks in advance. The Director agreed that this is something that NAI staff will look into.
- 5.3 The Director also stated that staff will return to the building on a rostered basis in order that social distancing and other public health guidelines may be observed.
- 5.4 In relation to the NAAC's letter of 27 October 2020 to Minister Martin concerning the archive of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, the Chair enquired whether any response had been received at Bishop Street. The Director responded that no response from the Minister was received at Bishop Street.

Brian Bermingham
Secretary to the Council