

INCEPTION DEVELOPMENT OPERATION

DR GILLIAN O'BRIEN



A Report on Best Practice for Site-Specific Museums & Heritage Centres

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SUMMARY

Liverpool John Moores University sponsored a workshop held at Nano Nagle Place, Cork on 12 March 2018 to discuss best practice in relation to the inception, development and operation of site-specific museums and heritage centres. The purpose of this workshop was to identify the key challenges faced by those developing and operating site-specific museums and heritage sites. Participants explored a range of issues relating to site-specific museums and heritage sites and also issues that are applicable to all heritage and museum developments (particularly focussing on the very early stages).

This report incorporates both the workshop discussions and the insights of other heritage professionals and offers a number of recommendations and suggestions for anyone involved in the inception, development and operation of site-specific museums and heritage centres.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Spike Island, Co. Cork

PHOTO GILLIAN O'BRIEN



Pearse Museum, Dublin

Section 1.0

INCEPTION, DEVELOPMENT, OPERATION

1.1

INCEPTION

STRATEGIC VISION

The project leader must hold a clear vision of the project – not just the building element. It is vital that the competencies that the project requires are identified at an early stage. The key members of the team should be retained for the duration of the project if possible. Additionally, there is a need for a curatorial plan and to listen to conservators/professional advisors from the outset rather than just bringing them in at design and operation stages. It is important to consider whether or not the site itself is the entire experience, or whether there is the likelihood of including a museum collection (at the outset or later).

Engagement with related sites at an early stage is important. These sites may be local, national or international or a combination of all three. Such links can be very effective for accessing funding streams, generating temporary exhibitions, sharing competencies and resources and the development of a community based on themes – eg a network of prison museums.

A detailed budget plan is required with a list of needs/wants very clearly outlined in terms of priority.

Museum ethos must be clear from the outset – a mission statement should be provided.

FEASIBILITY STUDY

A feasibility study is recommended at an early stage. This should draw on the initial brief representing the strategic vision.

Site-specific developments often have challenges not faced by bespoke museums and these often include complex sites and complex access routes. Issues that should be considered include projected visitor numbers eg can coach groups be accommodated? Is there parking nearby?

THINGS TO BE CONSIDERED WITHIN THE FEASIBILITY STUDY

Visitor Experience

- An understanding of who the audience will be is crucial from the outset. Who is the museum/heritage site for? What is it for?
- If repeat visitors are important than a temporary exhibition or performance space is vital. However, if a site is likely to only get visitors to a location rather than have a repeat local audience than the capacity to host temporary exhibitions is less important. If a temporary exhibition space is incorporated it is worth considering using it for non-site-specific exhibitions and/or community events.
- It is important to have an outward focus from the beginning, rather than being wrapped up in a local desire for a museum.

Building Regulations

- Those involved in the development (particularly the heritage aspect of it) need to be aware of building regulations etc. which may impact on the ability to develop the site to their vision.

Accessibility

- Physical access in the form of ramps, lifts, toilets is important, but making content accessible also needs to be considered at the very outset. This will impact on where displays are placed, the type of lighting used, the sort of technology employed etc.
- If the site intends to cater for large groups appropriate services need to be provided.

Sustainability

- Funding: Both capital funding and long-term sustainability must be considered. Very often capital funding is provided to prepare a site to become a heritage centre or museum, but little consideration is given to the longer-term strategy around running it. Resource implications must be considered at the beginning to ensure the development is sustainable. It is also vital that a long-term strategy is in place which allows for maintenance, updating and development of the offering included so that the site remains vibrant.
- Many lessons are learnt in the first few years of operation. However, many sites have limited budgets and often don't have the resources or the flexibility within the infrastructure to adapt to how visitors are using the site. Where possible it is advisable to hold a part of the capital budget in reserve so the site can be responsive to the needs of the public once it has opened.
- Financial planning for the ongoing life of an institution must explicitly address the question of whether it will charge admission or not. Most heritage institutions cannot expect to make more than a third of their costs from admissions. Alongside that, consideration of whether a shop and/or café will be part of the offering or whether there will be spaces available for hire etc must all be part of all financial discussions.

- Each different service/facet of the museum (shop, café, conferencing etc.) requires different management/staff skillsets and has an impact on wage costs. Wage costs will always be one of the highest demands on a museum budget and this must be factored in at an early stage.

Stakeholders

- When and how to involve them? How to identify them? Many site-specific developments grow out of community and volunteer organisations and although they are usually involved intensely at the outset they often get dropped as the project progresses. It is vital that this does not happen as the community will sustain the project and their expertise and buy-in is essential. They will be the advocates for that museum or heritage centre in its region. Regular meetings, updates and social media activity can avoid a sense of alienation and help develop connected communities.

Services

Consideration needs to be made of the flow through the site when it opens. Planning must consider the practical needs of visitors from the outset.

- Accessibility
- Toilets: numbers and location (particularly relevant if large groups are catered for).
- Café: size should be considered. If coach parties are to be catered for it should be remembered that a large coach can hold 60 people.
- Shop
- Education Rooms: child safeguarding is paramount – a safe space with bag storage, lunch area, separate toilet if possible.
- Parking: will parking be available? If so, what sort – disabled, set-down, coach?
- Staff: offices, kitchen and lunch room, locker rooms, showers should be considered.

Education

- Alongside the content that is being developed for the heritage centre or museum there should be some consideration of future education programmes (and the costs associated with developing and running these). Questions that might be considered include:
 - How will education programmes use the space?
 - How will they engage with the content of the site – buildings, panel text, primary sources etc?
 - Which primary sources will make good school resources?
- Education generally forms a sizeable aspect of museum offerings, often with a strong focus on 'school groups'. It should be borne in mind that:
 - Education, in its broadest sense, should encompass families, pre-schoolers, primary and secondary school groups, tertiary involvement where possible, lifelong and accessible learning. Plan for all of these.
 - School group rates should be kept low to facilitate accessibility.
 - If education programmes are run with real learning outcomes and engagement in mind the money paid by school groups will rarely repay the staff time and effort expended. Thus do not plan for school group income as a revenue stream.

- Consideration should be given to how elements of the museum or heritage site could be taken to schools and integrated into curricula as case studies or transition year projects etc.
- Beyond traditional education other aspects are fundamental to keeping a site vibrant and relevant and sites could consider hosting men's sheds, active retirement groups etc.

Collections

It is important to decide whether or not there will be a collection associated with the site. If there is then there needs to be a collection policy in place. Some site-specific developments do not have a collection when they first open, but public donations are often received when a site opens so an appropriate collection policy and storage space is required. If the site intends at some point to seek museum accreditation it is important to be aware of what this entails so that decisions made at an early stage help rather than hinder that process. Both accession and de-accession policies must be considered.

New museums may not be ready to consider or desire to apply for eligibility to become a Participant in the Heritage Council's Museum Standards Programme for Ireland (MSPI) but it would be helpful from inception and during development if they were aware of the MSPI guidelines from the outset. The scope of the Programme standards and guidelines, from management and governance, collections management to visitor services, including exhibition and education, will inform a new organisation of all the areas that could or should be considered during the planning stages and assist in understanding what to consider for day to day management of the museum when it opens. Whether or not a museum wishes to become accredited this may ensure that collections are better taken care of, exhibited and interpreted, and could avoid cost implications whether in staff or volunteer time or budget at a later stage.

BRIEF

This should be created based on the findings of the Feasibility Study.

TENDERS

Cost cannot be the only factor when judging tenders. Very often the cost is prioritised so tenders include minimum costs when it comes to content, research & development, education programmes and staffing. Eye-catching audio-visuals are often prioritised over actual content. If decisions are made on minimum cost/maximum return basis there is no space for innovative practice when the site opens.

FINANCIAL REALITIES

Accessing publicly available documentation on running costs of museums is advisable. A document that lists the running costs and financial shortfalls of museums would offer a very helpful insight into the financial realities of establishing and running a museum.

PROJECT STAGES

It is vital that there is a clear plan of the phases of the project from the outset and a project management model should be implemented.



1.2 DEVELOPMENT

STAKEHOLDERS

The project leader should provide regular updates to stakeholders.

DOCUMENTATION

At the development stage there is great potential for additional research to be conducted that could be used for education programmes, guidebooks and training. It is cost effective to do this at this point (and preferably alongside those who will operate the site) rather than doing it from scratch at operation phase. An eye to the future is essential – guidebooks need images, rights should be sought for publication of images at the outset as well as for use in exhibition panels, and photography should be commissioned before collection items are placed in cases.

Turnover of staff is very high at many sites so policies and manuals need to be developed at the development phase to ensure continuity.

ACCESSIBILITY

Site-specific museum and heritage centres often have considerable accessibility issues, not all of which are surmountable. It worth considering including some/all of these below in the museum/heritage centre element:

- Multisensory displays
- Audio descriptions
- Labels in large print, high-contrast colours and braille
- Sign language in a filmed performance
- Three-dimensional objects
- Catalogue in multiple formats – large print, braille, audio
- Accessible websites
- Sign-language tours by arrangement
- Development of access and education programmes
- Languages: providing access to the site's content in a range of languages and in a range of formats is important.

TECHNOLOGY

Eye-catching audio-visuais cannot be static. Over time there will be a need to amend and adapt these. It should be possible for this to be done by those operating the site. However, very often at development stage contracts are agreed with third parties which means that the content of the audio visuals cannot be altered without considerable additional cost. Consider using open source materials as much as possible.

Physical access to technology should also be considered at this point so that sockets, lights, screens etc. can all be easily accessed should maintenance or repairs be required.

CONTENT

This should be developed by professionals. It is not enough to employ a design team there must also be a research professional on board, as well as someone who has experience in developing panel text etc so that complex stories are told in an accessible manner. Content should inform technology not vice versa.



Café at Oldbridge House, Co. Meath

PHOTO GILLIAN O'BRIEN

1.3 OPERATION

STAFF

Site-specific museums & heritage centres are often very complex sites with multiple purposes. It's vital that the manager of these sites has some heritage experience. There needs to be some overlap between the project leader and the site manager. A detailed handover document is required.

Ideally soft openings should occur where possible, so that all systems can be checked before the official opening to the public.

Site-specific developments often have few full-time staff. A manager may have to oversee the building, finances, staff recruitment, marketing, public outreach, education activities, research and venue development. No one (or even two) individuals can be an expert in all these areas and it is key that there is an advisory board that can provide active and continued support for the site.

For some sites the management is a management board consisting of volunteers. There may be no paid staff and the board may oversee CE scheme employees. Training and support need to be in place for volunteer-run sites.

VOLUNTEERS

Although volunteer guides can make a meaningful contribution to heritage sites, their involvement has huge time implications for those who are to manage them in the form of:

- Recruitment & Vetting
- Education & Training
- Day-to-Day & Long-Term Management
- Engaging with Volunteer Ireland is an excellent way to both find volunteers and gain knowledge of how to work with volunteers well.

TOURS

A tour script should be developed. Individual personalities of the guides are important, but there must be an emphasis on consistency and historical accuracy.

Guidance and training must be provided for tour guides. There must be managed oversight of the content of the tours without these becoming prescriptive. Tours should be reviewed and refreshed annually.

It is suggested that for every tour a 'Top 10' of things that must be included is devised.

DOCUMENTATION & TRAINING

- Disability equality training
- Staff Training (internal and by external parties such as Fáilte Ireland)
- Volunteer Inductions & Training
- Guide training
- Collections management training

COMMUNICATION & MARKETING

- Social media – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram can be used for a range of purposes. They can engage stakeholders, generate new audiences and communities, provide communication about news and events, help to layer stories, aid crowd sourcing information, generating buzz about an exhibition or event etc.
- It is useful to engage with sites such as TripAdvisor.

USEFUL CONTACTS

Physical Access

Arts and Disability Ireland (ADI): www.adiarts.ie
National Council for the Blind: www.ncbi.ie

Volunteers

Volunteer Ireland: www.volunteer.ie

G.P.O., Dublin



Strokestown Park House, Co. Roscommon

PHOTO DEREK CULLEN

Section 2.0

RECOMMENDATIONS

KEY ISSUES

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACCESSIBILITY

- Physical access and access to content are equally important.

COLLECTIONS

- Whether or not a site will have a collection should be considered at an early stage. If there is to be a collection then a clear accession and de-accession policy should be in place.

COMMUNICATION

- Individuals and organisations should be provided with all relevant contact details so that they can communicate directly with each other if needs be. While a Project Manager needs to lead the project not all communication should be filtered through him/her.
- Handover documents should be provided at each stage.
- Executive summaries should be regularly provided for all documentation to facilitate handovers.

CONTINUITY

- It is essential that there are links between the inception, development & operation phases.
- A Project Manager should run the project from inception to operation. Ideally, they should have some heritage experience if not they need to work closely with someone who does know the sector.
- Management and running of the museum must be part of the discussion from the outset so that any innovative practices involved in the research & development can be continued when it opens (or if there is a desire for innovation in the operation stage this must be clear from the outset too, so spaces and technologies are in place for it).
- Board with relevant expertise should continue to advise well into operation.
- Museum/heritage site's ethos and values must be clear from the outset – a mission statement should be provided.

KEY ISSUES

RECOMMENDATIONS

ENGAGEMENT

- Engagement with related sites at an early stage is important. These sites may be local, national or international or a combination of all three. Such links can be very effective for accessing funding streams, generating temporary exhibitions, sharing competencies and resources and the development of a community based on themes – eg. a network of prison museums.

EXPERTISE

- Many site-specific heritage developments have complex sites. Engineers, architects, conservation professionals are often brought in at an early stage, but it is equally important to have historians, archaeologists, conservators, designers and especially museum professionals with a good working understanding of operational realities consulted from the outset in order to communicate a shared vision for the site.
- Many sites do not employ a curator, historian, education specialist etc, but it is vital that such skills are available to be drawn upon at all stages whether that is through the advisory board, part-time staff or other avenues.
- A tour script must be developed in conjunction with experts. Tours must have an emphasis on consistency and historical accuracy.

FUNDING

- Capital funding and long-term financial security should be considered from the outset.
- A detailed budget plan is required with a list of needs/wants very clearly outlined in terms of priority.
- A decision needs to be made at the outset as to how the museum or heritage centre will generate income (or indeed, if it will). Admission fees/shops/café all must be considered from the beginning of a project.

MUSEUM STANDARDS

- New museums may not be ready or desire to apply to become a Participant in the Heritage Council's Museum Standards Programme for Ireland (MSPI) but it would be helpful if they were aware of the MSPI guidelines from the outset. The scope of the Programme standards and guidelines will inform a new organisation of all the areas that could or should be considered during the planning stages and assist in understanding what to consider for day to day management of the museum when it opens. Whether or not a museum wishes to become accredited this may ensure that collections are better taken care of, exhibited and interpreted, and could avoid cost implications whether in staff or volunteer time or budget at a later stage.

KEY ISSUES

RECOMMENDATIONS

PROJECT STAGES

- It is vital that there is a clear plan of the phases of the project from the outset and a project management model should be implemented.

SITE

- Those involved in the development (particularly the heritage aspect of it) need to be aware of building regulations etc which may impact on the ability to develop the site to their vision.

SUSTAINABILITY

- A feasibility study should be conducted at the outset.
- Possibility of phased projects should be considered.
- Stop/Go series of questions or checklist should be part of the feasibility study to help decide whether a project should go ahead, and what form it should take if it is developed.
- Consideration of how to ensure repeat visitors is vital if they are important to the sustainability of the site.
- Once a feasibility study has been prepared the project team/client should write the brief to go to tender.
- A long-term strategy should be put in place which allows for maintenance, updating and development of the offering included so that the site remains vibrant.
- Where possible it is advisable to hold a part of the capital budget in reserve so the site can be responsive to the needs of the public once it has opened.

TECHNOLOGY

- Content should inform technology not vice versa.
- There should be an emphasis on using open source, extendable, widely available and easily editable technologies so that museums are not locked into costly relationships with digital interpretation firms.
- Social media – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. should be harnessed to build awareness of the museum or heritage site, particularly sites that do not benefit naturally from passing footfall. These need to be active not dormant. Social media can also help engage stakeholders, generate new audiences and communities, provide communication about news and events, help to layer stories, aid crowd sourcing information, generating buzz about an exhibition or event etc.

VISITOR

- The visitor is crucial to the success of any museum/heritage centre. It is vital that at the outset there is a realistic assessment of who they will be, why they should or would visit and what they will learn at the site.



Nano Nagle Place

PHOTO NANO NAGLE PLACE

Section 3.0

APPENDIX

Workshop

Nano Nagle Place, Cork

12 March 2018

PURPOSE

To make the transition between the inception, development and operation of site-specific museums and heritage centres more effective.

OUTPUT

An Open Access report offering examples and suggestions under three headings: Inception, Development, Operation

On 12 March 2018 a workshop was held to discuss best practice in the inception, development and operation of site-specific heritage centres and museums. Workshop participants included representatives from academia, together with conservation, heritage and museum professionals. Throughout the workshop, participants thought critically about key challenges faced by site-specific museums and heritage centres and suggested ways in which these challenges could be dealt with. There was an awareness that many of these projects are one-offs and the teams assembled to plan, develop and operate them very often only do this once. A lot is learnt during the process but this information is not passed on to others who are developing their own sites. There is little residual or institutional memory and this report – and the subsequent best practice or guidelines document – is an attempt to address this lacuna.

The objectives of the workshop included:

- Identification of issues particular to site-specific heritage centres and museums.
- Identification of ways in which initial planning of these sites can be improved.
- Identification of ways in which inception, development and operation of these sites can be linked in a more effective manner.
- Identification of ways in which all stakeholders can play a valuable part in the development and operation of the site.
- Identification of ways in which knowledge can be shared between those with experience in planning, developing and running site-specific museums and heritage sites.

PARTICIPANTS

GILLIAN O'BRIEN

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DANIELLE O'DONOVAN

Programme Manager, Nano Nagle Place
She has previously worked at Fota House and Strokestown Park House for the Irish Heritage Trust and with the Tenement Museum Dublin.

GINA O'KELLY

Director of Operations, Irish Museums Association
She has previously held senior roles with Black Church Print Studio, Common Ground, Solomon Gallery and Dalkey Castle and Heritage Centre.

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Coordinator, The Heritage Council's Museum Standards Programme for Ireland (MSPI) and a member of the Board of Directors of the Irish Museums Association

JESSIE CASTLE

Visiting Research Fellow, Liverpool John Moores University
& Historic Building Consultant at JCA Architects, Cork
She has been involved in a number of site-specific developments including Spike Island, Co. Cork, Nano Nagle Place, Cork, Lifetime Lab (former Cork City Waterworks) and Michael Collins House, Clonakilty.

PETER FOYNES

Director, Butter Museum, Cork
Previously trained and worked as an archivist and recently completed the Diploma in Heritage and Interpretation at the University of Leicester.

KELLY FITZGERALD

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CATHERINE CASEY

Heritage Officer with Laois County Council
This Heritage Council-funded role involves working with a range of community groups on issues relating to local heritage management.

ANN-MARIE SMITH

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She has previously worked at Glasnevin Cemetery Museum, GAA Museum and Kilmainham Gaol.

Victoria Tammadge

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Inception, Development, Operation
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Museums & Heritage Centres

Dr Gillian O'Brien



Spike Island



Spike Island PHOTO JANVSIVIDAR (SIMON HILL)



Spike Island PHOTO JANVSIVIDAR (SIMON HILL)



Nano Nagle Place, Cork
PHOTO NANO NAGLE PLACE

REPORT DESIGN IDE DELOUGHRY