



Northern
Ireland
Office

INDEPENDENT ADVISORY PANEL

Meeting 1

Tuesday 23 Apr 2024 at 13:00

HM Treasury Building

1 Horse Guards Road

London, SW1A 2HQ

Chair: Dr Caoimhe Nic Dhaibheid

MINUTES

Attendees:

Lord Paul Bew
Dr Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid
Professor Henry Patterson
Professor Michael Kerr
Dr Edward Burke
Professor Richard Bourke
Professor Helen Parr
Professor Jennifer Todd
Professor Ian McBride

Northern Ireland Office (secretariat)
Cabinet Office

1. Project background and outline

After brief introductory comments, the panel reviewed the broad parameters of the project and its wider context. The independence of the panel was confirmed. High level aims of the project were discussed. The panel considered the scope of the project, including potential date ranges. It was decided that in general, certain details (including dates) should only be determined following consultation with the public historians, when in place. There was a discussion about the suitability of the term 'Public History', as suggested by Sir Joseph Pilling, and whether it would be better to reclaim the term 'Official History.'

2. Role of the advisory panel

The panel discussed the three primary areas of activity for the panel during the course of the Public History project: supporting the public historians; engaging with the academic community; and engaging with the public. It was agreed that members of the panel might concentrate more on any of these strands than others. Security protocols and wider policy/processes around access to information generally were also suggested as other possible areas for the panel to explore.

3. Ways of working

The panel discussed matters of process, including the sharing of minutes and ways of communicating between meetings. With a number of minor edits, the panel agreed to the proposed terms of reference. It was suggested that, for consistency, the panel's chairs should be the vehicle through which the panel responded to media queries, or would seek to escalate issues through government.

Action: NIO to amend terms of reference and confirm with chair before publishing.

4. Background on official histories

The Cabinet Office lead for Official Histories (CO), attending as a guest, provided a brief overview of the official history programme, before addressing the panel's questions and concerns. This included discussion on: the rationale/need for Developed Vetting (DV) clearance; the nature of any restrictions around access or use of material on e.g. national security, risk to life, or reputational grounds; how manuscripts are reviewed and cleared. It was generally understood that the public historians will have access to closed files, and that they are allowed to write about what they see in those files - there is a conversation that happens with the historians, to agree on a form of words that allows the understanding of what is in the files to be shared, without detail that could potentially cause harm upon publishing being shared. It was confirmed that the panel, or some members of the panel, could have a role in the clearance process (i.e. the conversation with the historians) for transparency. The panel considers these issues to be of central importance to the project, and agreed on the need to develop a statement or set of principles to capture and articulate these processes for accountability.

Action: Panel and NIO to work up a summary document, setting out the key principles around clearance and access to files.

5. Process for appointing official historians

The panel agreed to the proposed approach of openly advertising the Public Historian posts via jobs.ac.uk, and that the panel should consider expressions of interest before interviewing a short list of candidates (in line with the Pilling Report recommendation). A number of changes were suggested by panel members to improve the draft job post, to make it more inclusive, accurate and attractive to potential candidates. The panel discussed timescales for the recruitment process, determining that it would be unrealistic to work towards having the Public Historians in post for the start of the academic year - feeling January 2025 to be more practical. The panel agreed to the approach of publishing the job post (inviting expressions of interest from historians) shortly after the NIO's announcement, to leverage publicity and widen the audience - in terms of potential candidates. It was agreed that the closing date for expressions of interest should be 4 weeks after the job is posted which would allow several weeks for the panel to narrow down a shortlist in advance of the next panel meeting.

Action: Chair to update job post and circulate before publishing.

6. Public messaging

The NIO's draft statement announcing the establishment of the Public History expert advisory panel was circulated to panel members for consideration. After discussion, and with

a number of changes to wording, the panel approved the statement and agreed to the proposed plan to publish on 26 April. The panel discussed some public/stakeholder perceptions on official histories, and subsequently the key messaging for the project - in particular, the need to emphasise the independence of historians involved.

Action: NIO to update draft announcement and confirm with chair before publishing.

7. Dissemination

The panel discussed a range of potential project outputs and means of disseminating information about or related to the project - such as podcasts, seminars, etc - in light of the Pilling Review recommendation to maximise accessibility and engagement during the course of writing a Public History. A number of ideas were put forward for both the public historians and panel members, and the need for a 'dissemination strategy' was put forward. The appropriateness of the term 'dissemination' was questioned on the basis that it implied a one-way process. There was a discussion about the degree to which 'public' history necessitated more active public involvement, for example via consultation process; university meeting; or focus group. The advantages and challenges of both approaches were discussed.

Action: NIO to explore options for focus groups (or similar)

Action: Panel to bring back ideas of dissemination to future meetings to inform a strategy

8. Stakeholders

The panel briefly discussed some key stakeholders in the public, academic and policy spheres, and how these might be engaged as part of the project. It was suggested that former official historians be invited to a future panel meeting. Due to a shortage of time however, the chair recommended adding this item to the next agenda.

Action: NIO and chair to invite former official historian to a future advisory panel meeting.

9. Any other business

None

Ends.

Date of next meeting: 18 June 2024 at 9.30am via video conference.