



Northern
Ireland
Office

INDEPENDENT ADVISORY PANEL

Meeting 2

Tuesday 18 June 2024 at 09:30

[Virtual via Google Meet]

Chair: Dr Caoimhe Nic Dhaibheid

MINUTES

Attendees:

Lord Paul Bew
Dr Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid
Professor Henry Patterson
Dr Edward Burke
Professor Richard Bourke
Professor Ian McBride

Northern Ireland Office (secretariat)
Cabinet Office

Apologies: Helen Parr

1. Approval of minutes

Minutes from the advisory panel's last meeting (23rd April) were approved with minor amendments.

2. Open forum for general comments

The panel discussed developments since the last meeting, including the implications of the snap General Election as well as some of the public commentary since the project's announcement in April. Use of the term 'Public History' was discussed. The panel adopted this to replace 'Official History' as recommended in the Pilling Review and to reflect a renewed emphasis on public engagement. While this original reasoning was sound, panel members felt that in practice the term has been counterproductive. Public commentary generally referred to the project as an 'official history' anyway and some within academia were uneasy about using the existing term 'public history' in this context. Arguments over whether this is or isn't a 'public history' have been an unnecessary distraction. 'Official History' - while not perfect - has precedence and clarity, being consistent with similar work that has taken place previously and around the world. It was unanimously agreed that the term 'Official History' would be used going forward - but without losing sight of the emphasis on public engagement. The value of having an informal cross-Whitehall liaison group; a political/Westminster consultative group; and potentially also a wider stakeholder/practitioner

group was discussed - in keeping with the Pilling Review recommendations and as a vehicle for dealing with any potential blockages. NIO was asked to explore setting up a xWH practitioner group in the first instance, and to facilitate meetings between panel members and departmental historians or other relevant officials - as an opportunity to ask practical questions around resourcing and processes for accessing records.

Action: NIO to gather contacts for a cross-Whitehall liaison group and facilitate early meetings between panel members and relevant officials.

3. Official history background/process

The Cabinet Office lead for Official Histories (CO), attending as a guest, answered some practical questions panel members have had since the last meeting, including on publishing arrangements. Panel members were told that in the past royalties from official histories have typically been small, but usually go back to the Treasury to offset some of the costs to the public purse. While the UK Government has a legacy contract with Routledge, there is no requirement to use this publisher as part of this project and the Pilling Review recommendation to hire a literary agent to undertake negotiations with publishers was noted. The overarching aim to maximise readership was accepted as a guiding principle here, and the need to keep costs associated with any final book/product as low as possible - to maximise affordability and therefore readership. That official historians do not personally financially benefit from sales of the book was also noted as an important consideration for ethical reasons. Even small details will require careful thought - for example, the title of any final book needs to be exciting enough to be marketable (and therefore maximise readership), but also needs to be academically rigorous. It was accepted that decisions on publishing arrangements are not needed urgently, and should wait until conversations can be had with the official historians (when appointed).

4. Forward Planning

The NIO advised that the new ministers should be in place within 24 hours of the election, but due to a triaging of issues it may take several weeks to fully brief them about this project. The aim is to have the job post (for the official historians) and the project website ready to be published pending signoff from the new ministerial team. The panel also discussed the upcoming Ethics workshop on 1st July (to be covered as a separate agenda item) as well as planned engagement with victims groups and other stakeholder groups in September.

5. Website

The NIO provided an update on its action from the previous meeting, to identify options for building a website, as a vehicle for the panel to proactively put information about the project into the public domain. The NIO advised that Government digital services would allow a site to be built quickly and at almost no cost. The panel would need to decide on a domain name (e.g. TroublesOfficialHistory.org.uk) and other details, as well as provide content. After a high level discussion about key requirements, the NIO was asked to circulate a document to panel members, with headings indicating where the panel's contributions were required.

Action: NIO to share website options to panel for consideration, e.g. domain, colour scheme etc and document indicating content contributions required.

6. Ethics conference

The advisory panel has been organising a workshop on ethics, to take place at the British Academy on 1st July. The purpose of this workshop is to discuss some robust ethical principles to underpin the project going forward. It was noted that this is uncharted territory for official histories, which generally have not sought formal ethical approval from academic institutions in the same way most contemporary research projects might. The Cabinet Office's guest attendee highlighted the Propriety and Ethics Group at the Cabinet Office, and adherence to the ministerial code, civil service code, special advisers code, etc - ethical processes which have developed over time similar to those of universities. Additional potential invitees to the workshop were put forward. In terms of format, there will be several panels with speakers each having 10 minutes to make their presentations, which will be followed by group discussion.

7 Process for appointing official historians

Panel members considered suggested changes to the draft job post (to be published on jobs.ac.uk) inviting expressions of interest for the role of official historian, including clarifying the selection process. On contractual arrangements it was noted that the preferred option would be for the relevant universities to invoice the NIO for the historians' time. Cabinet Office rep advised that this has been the arrangement for most previous official histories. In terms of timelines, if the post goes live mid-July, the panel suggested sifting and interviews would take place in September, before a recommended shortlist is presented to the NI Secretary of State. While Developed Vetting (and subsequently a UK residency footprint) is normally required for official historians, panel members discussed the importance of considering all possible options and to be as flexible as possible here to ensure a broad and diverse pool of applicants. It was also noted that the security clearance requirement was an entirely reasonable expectation, and requiring some sort of vetting in order to get access to sensitive national security information was normal state behaviour - as much about protecting people's civil liberties and personal data.

Action: Panel co-chair to circulate updated job post for panel's final approval.

8 Stakeholders and dissemination

Panel members briefly discussed the possibility of approaching former official historians to write about their experiences, and enhance wider understanding of these works.

9 AOB

None

Ends.

Date of next meeting: 10 September 2024 at 1.30pm via video conference.