



Northern  
Ireland  
Office

## OFFICIAL HISTORY ADVISORY PANEL

Meeting 3

Tuesday 10 Sep 2024 at 13:30

[Virtual via Google Meet]

Chair: Dr Caoimhe Nic Dhaibheid

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## MINUTES

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### Attendees:

Lord Paul Bew  
Dr Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid  
Dr Edward Burke  
Professor Ian McBride  
Professor Helen Parr  
Northern Ireland Office (NIO) - secretariat  
Cabinet Office (CO) - guest

Apologies: Professor Henry Patterson; Professor Richard Bourke

### 1. Approval of minutes

Minutes from the advisory panel's last meeting (18th June) were approved with minor amendments.

### 2. Project update

NIO gave a high-level update on developments in the wider legacy landscape since the change of Government, as well as new ministers' early views regarding a Troubles-related official history. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is happy to meet with the panel to discuss the project, and panel members indicated they would want to meet as soon as possible in order to get a clear steer on direction and next steps. CO provided a further update on other ongoing official history projects: there are still no plans for new commissions, with the priority being to work through existing titles. This includes Official Histories of the Criminal Justice in England and Wales (vol 5) and of the Joint Intelligence Committee (vol 2) - both nearing completion - and vol 3 of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent, which is underway.

**Action: NIO to arrange a meeting between the advisory panel and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as soon as possible.**

### 3. Ethics Workshop

Panel chairs provided some reflections from the workshop on ethics, hosted by the advisory panel at the British Academy on 1st July. In summary it was a useful exercise, underscoring the need to think of ethics as an ongoing process to provide a duty of care to all involved or affected - including the eventual official historians themselves. It was settled that individual researchers/historians working on the project will need to go through the established ethical approval processes at their home university. Options for ethical approval were considered for any historians appointed that may not necessarily be attached to a particular university - including outsourcing to an appropriate institution or society.

There was a discussion about specific ethical components, for example protection of interviewees data. It was also noted that other processes may incidentally have an ethical dimension - for example, the security clearance process, which ensures the protection of the civil liberties of individuals named in closed records. More broadly, the overarching aim of the official history project enhances civil liberties - increasing transparency and openness, including by referencing otherwise closed documents which creates the opportunity to follow up with FOI requests etc.

Consideration is being given to how advice on ethics can be sought on an ongoing basis, including regular training sessions and regular meetings with experts in the field. However, it was also felt that the ethical component should be proportionate to the context and parameters of the project i.e. this is an official history of *policy* which shapes the type of source material historians will generally be working with. Therefore, certain ethical protections that may be needed in some other historical projects, may not necessarily be relevant or appropriate here.

**Action: Panel chairs to circulate a draft ethics policy statement in due course**

#### **4. Website**

The NIO summarised the panel's previous discussion regarding a website, which would serve as a means of putting information about the project into the public domain proactively, pre-empting any misunderstandings about the project's purpose or remit. It would also be in keeping with the spirit of the Pilling Review, which recommended better engagement with the public and the wider academic community during the course of official histories. It was decided that the NIO will continue to collate content from the panel via correspondence. Examples of websites for similar projects were discussed as comparators, and the website for the '*Netherland and Afghanistan 2001-2021*' project was suggested as a good model. In terms of timing, the panel agreed it would be preferable to launch the website at the same time as the recruitment process (i.e the publication of the invitation for expression of interest) for the official historians - as a way of providing further information about the project.

**Action: NIO to collate website content by correspondence.**

#### **5. Engagement with Government departments**

NIO provided an update on engagement that has been carried out with government departments and agencies regarding the project, including the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, The National Archives and others. NIO reported that there has generally been support for the project, with discussions centering on practical/logistical details. One concern raised is how the risk of 'scope creep' might be

managed i.e. how the project will deliver within a reasonable timescale and keep within budget constraints considering the scale of some of the archives and sources of information. The importance of managing limited time and resources to ensure timely delivery for the public was agreed. While a terms of reference will be developed with the Official Historians when they are appointed, it was also noted that scope was already significantly constrained to being a history of British *policy-making* (towards Northern Ireland during the Troubles). This should, however, not preclude academic freedom to go into operational details when relevant to the policy. The NIO will also arrange meetings between advisory panel members and relevant officials, to build working relationships and further understanding of some of the issues regarding the archiving, handling and disclosure of sensitive records.

**Action: NIO to arrange meeting between advisory panel members and contacts in relevant departments.**

## **6. Stakeholder engagement**

The panel discussed ideas for another workshop/closed event to take place in late Autumn, in keeping with the Pilling Review recommendation to engage, and draw in wider expertise. Suggestions of themes for such an event included access to records. This could either involve brokers in this space (e.g. departmental historians and current/former officials); or alternatively serve as an opportunity to hear from those academics and historians who have had difficulty in accessing records in the course of their normal academic research, to get a better understanding of issues here. The panel felt the former might be more beneficial, as the grievances of academics not getting access to records have been well publicised, but pressures on the other side (processes; resourcing; classification; legal and other issues relating to disclosure) are less understood.

The need to socialise the concept of official histories, and place the UK official history series within the wider global tradition was discussed, and that it may be beneficial for the panel to meet with official historians from other countries to draw on international experience. Panel members committed to looking to arrange meetings with these historians. The desirability of engaging with other stakeholder groups throughout the project was also agreed, as well as communicating what the scope of this project is (i.e. the focus on policy-making rather than specific cases).

**Action: Panel members to arrange meetings with official historians from other countries.**

## **7. Appointment of official historians**

The panel considered the latest draft of the job post inviting expressions of interest for the official historian roles, which is to be posted on jobs.ac.uk. A few minor changes were suggested, for example, to make clear that expressions of interest are welcome from academics at all stages of their career (i.e. junior, as well as senior, researchers). It was also felt that the EOI should make clear the scope of the project is not restricted to those with an expertise in intelligence or military history, but that wider social, economic, political expertise will be relevant. It was noted that, with 3-5 official historian posts, there is room to configure a team that collectively represents expertise across a range of fields.

The EOI is to remain live for at least 4 weeks, following which a smaller selection panel will conduct interviews. This selection panel will comprise two or four panel members, and one external expert not connected to the project, in order to ensure balance and that proper public appointments processes are adhered to. To ensure a broad range of applicants, the EOI requirements will be relatively light - a CV, writing sample, and 1000 word statement of suitability. References, and project pitches may be considered later during the short-listing and interview stages. Administrative requirements for the recruitment process were also discussed, such as the need for a shared folder on secure NIO servers to store and review applications.

## **9 AOB**

The date of the next panel meeting is to be agreed by correspondence, as this will be determined when the EOI goes live - panel chairs suggested it would be beneficial to meet in person, shortly after the EOI process has closed.

Ends.