



House of Commons
Committee of Public Accounts

Collections Management in the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland

Third Report of Session 2006–07

*Report, together with formal minutes, oral and
written evidence*

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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Powers of the Committee of Public Accounts are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 148. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/pac>. A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Session is at the back of this volume.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee is Mark Etherton (Clerk), Christine Randall (Committee Assistant), Emma Sawyer (Committee Assistant), Oliver Denton (Secretary), and Luke Robinson (Media Officer).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk, Committee of Public Accounts, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 5708; the Committee’s email address is pubacom@parliament.uk.

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Summary

Museums and Galleries Northern Ireland (MAGNI) is a Non-departmental Public Body of the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (the Department). It is responsible for the development, management, care and interpretation of Northern Ireland's national collection. This comprises approximately 1,450,000 artifacts and works of art of significant monetary, historical, scientific and cultural value which are held across each of its four museum sites (the Ulster Museum, the Armagh County Museum, the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and the Ulster American Folk Park).

Two previous reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General¹ highlighted numerous and long-running failings in the management, documentation and computerisation of the collection's records and its storage. Despite these warnings and recommendations for improvement, MAGNI is unable to confirm the extent to which the national collection has been documented to the national and internationally recognized SPECTRUM standard; it has no performance measure for documentation nor has the Department sought to have put such a measure in place. Moreover, contrary to MAGNI's own policy, annual management "audits" of the collection have been sporadic, ineffective and in two sites, non-existent.

To enhance records management, MAGNI introduced, in 2005, a new computer network linking its four sites. This provides the potential for all authorised staff to access a common collections management database that had originally been acquired by the Ulster Museum. However, while the IT infrastructure is in place, and computerisation of collection records is well advanced in three of the four MAGNI sites, less than 10% of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum's records have been computerized. This is despite previous recommendations, some going back 17 years, by the Comptroller and Auditor General. The lack of progress is an indictment of management at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and has undoubtedly hindered academic and public access to information about this unique part of the national collection.

Like most museums, only 10% of MAGNI's collection is on display at any given time. Therefore, the quality of storage is of paramount importance. However, up to 60% of the floor space in MAGNI's stores was either "Poor" or "Unacceptable". Despite this MAGNI estimates that 90% of the items in the national collection are held under suitable conditions and are not at risk.

The Department has allocated some £3.2 million to address problems identified by a Buildings Survey of MAGNI Stores carried out in June 2004. MAGNI is also planning a major review of its long-term storage requirements to protect the national collection and make it more accessible.

In the meantime it is embarking on a major capital works programme at the Ulster Museum, which will necessitate decanting its collections for up to four years. Unfortunately,

¹ DENI: *Management of the Collections held by the Ulster Museum and Ulster Folk and Transport Museum* (HC 328, 1988–89) and *The National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland: The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum* (HC 916, 1997–98)

MAGNI has not aligned the availability of proposed new storage facilities to the commencement of these work.

The Department's governance and oversight of MAGNI was found to be deficient; it failed to establish, as part of its funding arrangements, meaningful performance measures. For example, in contrast to the position in England, no measures were put in place for assessing the storage of the national collection or for increasing accessibility to it via the internet. Furthermore, the Department, in conjunction with the Board of Trustees and Chief Executive, failed to see the need to incorporate the risk of damage or loss to the national collection in MAGNI's Statement of Internal Control.

In its report, "*Collections for the Future*", the Museums Association concluded that disposals should be an integral part of collections development and is part of any museum's professional and ethical responsibility. However, MAGNI policy seems to have a strong presumption against disposal, particularly selling-off artifacts to fund further acquisitions. This needs to be reviewed. In practice implementation must take account of constraints on storage and financial realities.

On the basis of the Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland,² the Committee examined the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure on the record keeping, storage, acquisition and disposal of the Museums and Galleries Northern Ireland's National Collection of artifacts and works of art.

² C&AG's Report, *Collections Management in the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland* (HC 1130, Session 2005–06)

Conclusions and Recommendations

- 1. The proper management and security of Northern Ireland's national collection requires the maintenance of complete, accurate and up to date records that comply with accepted standards.** We were therefore disappointed to learn that MAGNI was only able to confirm that those artefacts acquired since 1994 have been documented to the nationally and internationally recognised standard (SPECTRUM). Its failure to have any documentation for 87,000 artefacts, or 6% of its collection is of particular concern. We expect MAGNI to give priority to improving this position.
- 2. The response to previous recommendations arising from Audit Office Reports has been totally inadequate.** In the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, despite previous NIAO recommendations (1989 and 1998) to computerise its records, and commitments by the museum to comply, only 10% of its collection's records have been computerised. Northern Ireland departments and the bodies they are responsible for, need to know that issues raised by the Comptroller and Auditor must be taken with the utmost seriousness. Failure to comply with recommendations arising from an audit report, or renegeing on commitments given, without a clear and unambiguous reason, could lead to the Accounting Officer being called before this Committee to explain their inaction. We look to the Department of Finance and Personnel to make this particular message clear to all Northern Ireland Departments and their NDPBs.
- 3. We were surprised to learn that there is no reference to the risk of damage or loss of the national collection in MAGNI's Statement of Internal Control.** We consider the loss or damage of artefacts in the national collection to be one of the main risks to the achievement of MAGNI's objectives and to its reputation. The Statement of Internal Control is an important facet of Corporate Governance providing an opportunity for an organisation to explain the scope of its responsibilities, the risk and control issues facing it, the framework of internal controls in place to address these and how its management board has reviewed the effectiveness of that framework.
- 4. We are not convinced by the assurances given to us that no artefacts had been lost or stolen over the last 14 years.** It is not clear to us, particularly given the deficiencies in documentation and in the absence of annual "audit" checks, that MAGNI knows with any degree of certainty what assets it has, where they are, what their condition is or their value is. Until can demonstrate its collection is documented to SPECTRUM standards; that the condition of some of the stores (such as the Banbury Store at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum) is significantly improved; it conducts annual audit checks at each museum; and the collection records are fully computerised, we do not believe it is in a position to make such statements with any degree of confidence.
- 5. We expect all public bodies to have appropriate performance measures in place. We are therefore concerned that the Department has not introduced, as a condition of funding, measures to assess and encourage improvement in**

MAGNI's performance in areas such as documentation, storage and accessibility. The introduction of such measures would facilitate both internal performance review (from one period to another), and external performance review (between similar organisations in the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland and indeed world-wide) and encourage regular monitoring of progress and a programme of continuous improvement.

6. **It is deplorable that up to 60% of the storage area available to MAGNI is in either a "poor" or "unacceptable" condition.** While MAGNI claims that around 90% of the national collection is held in appropriate conditions, both the Department and MAGNI need to recognise that storage is crucial to its long-term management and preservation. To persist with this standard of facilities in a museum collection is folly; in the long-term this may lead to more being spent on conservation and restoration of the collection and replacement of artefacts; in many cases, this may not be a feasible option. Therefore the issues of both security and environmental conditions need to be tackled to prevent loss, theft or damage to the collection. In this respect, we were encouraged to hear that MAGNI is bringing forward a storage development plan and that the Department has made £13.5 million available over the next three years of which £2.5 million could be used to improve some of the buildings requiring attention and also to improve storage. However, as part of this exercise, MAGNI needs to carefully consider whether it will continue to retain such an extensive collection, as this is crucial to assessing future storage provision.
7. **Disposal and acquisition of artefacts should be an integral part of collections management.** With limited acquisition budgets opportunities to acquire new artefacts for the national collection are undoubtedly being missed. However, it does not make sense for MAGNI to keep spending public money on works which will never be seen or utilised, such as the rows of grandfather clocks highlighted in the C&AG's Report. Making decisions about acquisitions and disposals is part of a museum's professional and ethical responsibility. Disposals also offer the opportunity to generate income which can be reinvested for the benefit of the collection and future generations. We welcome the assurance from MAGNI that it will consider a more proactive disposals policy but recommend that it subjects its policy to public consultation. Indeed we would extend this recommendation to all such bodies throughout the UK.
8. **All museums should seek to develop exhibitions which appeal to the widest cross section of the community.** The ability of MAGNI to attract visitors from wide socio-economic backgrounds is laudable. This coupled with visitor satisfaction rates reflects very positively on MAGNI's performance. MAGNI's visitor figures, as a percentage of population, compare favourably with those of the National Museums of Scotland. However, there is clearly scope to enhance visitor numbers to the four MAGNI museums as they fall significantly short of those visiting the National Museums of Wales.
9. **With regard to *The Result* we were astonished by the admission that, while a number of options had been explored for its future use, "the business case never stacked up".** The case study presented in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report clearly demonstrates the importance of subjecting investment decisions to the

well established principles of economic appraisal. Appraisal is not an option; it is always an essential part of good financial management and it is vital to decision-making and accountability. In the case of *The Result*, despite it being purchased 36 years ago and being one of 46 vessels compiling the UK's core collection of historic vessels, it has never been fully restored. Instead, it remains under awning on dry land, albeit refurbished to a state that ensures that its long-term preservation remains as an option. Preserving our heritage is important but not at any cost.

- 10. The Department and MAGNI should carry out a comprehensive review of its estate to determine the potential for disposal of property which is not essential for its core functions.** Given the challenges posed by MAGNI's budget, particularly on capital spend, the conditions of its storage, and the aspirations for a National Gallery, we believe that it should consider the viability of disposing of part of, what is, a very valuable estate, with a view to reinvestment. In keeping with guidelines the level of income retention from any sale will be subject to negotiation with the Department of Finance and Personnel. In addition, any proposal for reinvestment must be supported by a robust business case which will be subject to review and approval, where necessary, by the both the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Department of Finance and Personnel.

1 The standard of documentation and recording of the Collection

1. The Museums and Galleries Northern Ireland (MAGNI), which is a Non-departmental body of the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (the Department), has approximately 1.45 million artefacts its collection.³ This estimate is based upon exercises carried out as far back as 1997.⁴ Although all of the artefacts which MAGNI has acquired since 1994 have been recorded to what is acknowledged to be the international standard (SPECTRUM),⁵ its inability to confirm the total number of artefacts documented to this standard is disturbing. Surprisingly, around 87,000, or 6% of the collection are undocumented. These artefacts include archaeological material, pre-history excavation material charts, maps and objects relating to 19th century/early 20th century history.⁶

2. Closely associated with documentation is the computerisation of collection records. Significant progress has been made at three of the MAGNI sites, with the Ulster Museum having computerized records for 98% of its collection.⁷ However, we are disappointed that only 10% of records have been computerised at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. This is despite previous NIAO recommendations (1989⁸ and 1998⁹) and commitments by the museum to comply.¹⁰

3. The Department told us that, following the 1989 Report, it immediately employed consultants to produce a feasibility study on the computerization of documentation at the Museum.¹¹ The feasibility study was subsequently developed into a business plan which estimated the project costs to be around £6 million – a cost which the Department deemed unaffordable.¹² However, since 1999 MAGNI has developed a system in the Ulster Museum at a cost of about £0.5 million which it plans to cascade down to the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.¹³

4. Further concerns were raised in relation to the custodianship of the collection due to the lack of annual management “audit” checks performed on the artefacts. We were told that the Board of Trustees, who exercise overall responsibility for policy and planning, and the Chief Executive, were unaware that annual “audit” checks had not been completed.¹⁴ None

3 Q 2

4 Q 3

5 SPECTRUM (Standard ProcEdures for CollecTions Recording Used in Museums) was created by the Museum Documentation Association.

6 Q 45

7 Q 4

8 C&AG’s Report, DENI: Management of the Collections held by the Ulster Museum and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (HC 328, Session 1988–89)

9 C&AG’s Report, Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (HC 916, Session 1997–98)

10 C&AG’s Report, paras 11, 2.19

11 Q 37

12 Q 38

13 Q 41

14 Qq 27–30

have been carried out in the Ulster Museum and Armagh Museum since 2003¹⁵ and, no audit checks had ever been performed on the Collections in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and the Ulster American Folk Park.¹⁶ Even more disturbing to the Committee was the fact that MAGNI only became aware of the deficiency in its procedures when it was drawn to its attention by the Audit Office.¹⁷

5. To address these failings, MAGNI has appointed a new Director of Collections and Interpretation to bring greater co-ordination to the management of the Collection. Responsibilities of the post-holder include the need to assure the Chief Executive that these checks are carried out. We welcome the Chief Executive's assurance that he will take the Audit Office's recommendation on board and that the results will be reported in MAGNI's annual report and assurance incorporated into his statement of internal control.¹⁸

6. Despite these shortcomings, MAGNI told us that it has not lost or had stolen any artefacts as a result of poor storage or documentation. Indeed, there has been no record of any losses or theft from the collection in over 14 years.¹⁹ While the Committee accepts MAGNI's assurance, we believe that inadequate records and documentation may have contributed to losses going unreported.

7. A worrying omission in the oversight of documentation standards was the lack of a key indicator against which to monitor and benchmark MAGNI's performance.²⁰ Surprisingly the Department has not sought to put such a measure in place; this is in contrast to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's approach to museums in England. As a result, MAGNI was only able to demonstrate that 4% of the collection was in compliance with internationally recognized standards (SPECTRUM).²¹ We welcome the acceptance of the Audit Office's recommendation by MAGNI and Department to address this shortcoming.

15 Q 27

16 Supplementary memorandum

17 Q 32

18 Q 33

19 Qq 82–84

20 C&AG's Report, paras 13, 2.27

21 C&AG's Report, para 10

2 The inadequacy of storage in each of the MAGNI Sites

8. Storage is crucial to the management of all national collections given that a small percentage of the artefacts are on display at any given time. However, both the Audit Office's and MAGNI's own assessment of each of the 50 stores, paints a disturbing picture with 60% of the floor space considered to be either "poor" or "unacceptable".²² In one example at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, the store resembled a junkyard, much of which was found to be spare parts rather than part of the collection.²³ A further example, was the Numismatics (Coins) Store at the Ulster Museum, which we were told was in an unacceptable and untidy state at the time of the review, but had since been tidied, was secure and met the environmental requirements of the artefacts.²⁴ We welcome this improvement.

9. While the Department has estimated that that around 90% of the collection was held in an appropriate environment, no information on the value, volume, or nature of the artefacts stored at each location was available.²⁵ This reflects the inadequacy of storage management in MAGNI which has been exacerbated by the lack of a suitable performance measure. Proper management of the collection is further diminished by the lack of any form of systematic benchmarking of funding against other similar operations in the UK, or in the Republic of Ireland. Indeed no institution had even been identified for such purposes.²⁶

10. To address storage issues, the Department carried out a survey of the entire MAGNI estate in 2004, following which, it made available £677,000 in funding. A further £13.5 million has since been made available, £7 million of which has been allocated for the refurbishment of the Ulster Museum; £2.5 million of the funding may be used towards improving some of the other buildings that need immediate attention, which will include improving some of the storage areas.²⁷ The Department told us that this funding had been awarded in an environment of competing priorities, together with MAGNI's annual revenue allocation of £11.2 million, and it believes the level of funding received is not unreasonable. MAGNI believes that the provision of additional funding, particularly capital funding, could transform its situation. However, within the funding allocated, it recognises that there is more the organisation can do and should do to maximise efficiency and effectiveness.²⁸

22 C&AG's Report, paras 15, 3.6–3.7, 3.32

23 Q 55

24 Q 58

25 Q 9

26 Qq 59–68

27 Q 8

28 Qq 50–54

3 Utilisation and Conservation of the National Collection

11. Key to any collection is the ability of the museum to attract the widest possible cross section of the general public into visiting its exhibitions. The statistics on the socio-economic backgrounds indicate that visitors, particularly from lower groupings,²⁹ are particularly strong, and compare favorably with the National Museums of Scotland and Wales.³⁰ Moreover, the satisfaction rates of those who visited MAGNI museums exceeded those in Great Britain.³¹ MAGNI told us that it has recently appointed a new Director of Marketing and Communications and Trading, who will not only address the issue of visitor numbers but also explore the potential to increase self-generated income, including the on-site sale of memorabilia and souvenirs.³²

12. Despite the relative success in attracting visitors, MAGNI has failed to fully address the utilisation and accessibility of its artefacts. One stark example is the schooner, *The Result*. The Department told us that the schooner was of pre-eminent significance and has been classified as one of 46 compiling the UK's core collection of historic vessels, which includes such ships as *HMS Belfast*, *SS Great Britain* and the *Cutty Sark*.³³ It was purchased by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in 1970 for £6,000 (£60,000 at 2004–05 prices); since then, over £500,000 (2004–05 prices) has been spent on its repair, refurbishment and maintenance. A business case was produced following its purchase with a view to reinstating its three masts and top sail and creating a mock dock at the museum. However, this proved to be too expensive.³⁴ Consequently, *The Result* remains under awning on dry land, albeit in a state of preservation. While the Department considers it to be on public exhibition, the reality is that it has never been on full display over the 36-year period it has been in the ownership of the Museum.³⁵

13. The Department told us that *The Result* has had to compete with other priorities within MAGNI, such as securing the funding for what is now the award-winning rail and road galleries; while it has been able to secure the integrity of the vessel, it has been unable to attract the funding required to restore it to its original glory.³⁶ We are aware that this is not the only case of this nature in the UK. For example, there are parallels with the *Ross Tiger*³⁷ in Grimsby, and it is important that lessons are learned.³⁸

29 Skilled manual workers, unskilled/semi-skilled manual workers, and low waged/unwaged

30 Qq 70–71

31 Supplementary Memorandum

32 Q 72

33 Qq 11, 14–15

34 Qq 19–24

35 Qq 10–12, 25–26

36 Qq 46, 48

37 The *Ross Tiger* was the only vessel of her class that served 27 years in the fishing industry and 7 years as an oil-rig standby vessel. In July 1992 it was sold for £1 to the city of Grimsby to be re-fitted as a trawler and displayed as part of the National Fishing Heritage Centre.

38 Q46

14. MAGNI's budget for acquiring new artefacts, in recent years, was limited to £50,000 and in the current year has been reduced to £25,000. However, we understand that additional funding from sources such as the National Lottery has been available to MAGNI. Nonetheless, as a result opportunities to purchase new artefacts are being missed. Following the Audit Office Report, both MAGNI and the Department have determined that there is a need to focus on the storage facilities and documentation to ensure that custodianship of what it already has is in a proper state.³⁹

15. In pursuing the potential to dispose of artefacts, with a view to generating additional income, the Department told us that, while disposal may be more proactive over the next few years, its policy does not permit the sale of artefacts with the principal aim of generating funds. This reflects the approach adopted by museums across the UK and the codes of ethics of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Accreditation Scheme.⁴⁰ It believes that collections are held in perpetuity for the public good and the stewardship of them needs to be looked at in a continuum beyond current financial pressures.⁴¹ However, a recent report by the Museums Association⁴² considered that *“disposals should be seen as an integral part of collections development”*. The report concluded that *“museums cannot keep spending public resources caring for objects that will never be enjoyed or used. Making decisions about disposal is part of a museum's professional and ethical responsibility. Disposal is not risk free, but neither is unthinking retention”*.⁴³

16. We note that there is also scope within MAGNI to explore the potential to increase self-generated income, including the on-site sale of memorabilia and souvenirs. In 2004, we recognised in our thirty third report,⁴⁴ that there was scope for growth across a wide range of activities including catering, shops, mail-order and e-commerce in the 17 museums and galleries sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in England. Fundraising and venue hire were also recognised as promising areas for income growth which usually give a high return. To this end we expect MAGNI to be able to demonstrate that it will develop a more vigorous marketing strategy encompassing each of these areas.

17. Within the MAGNI estate the Ulster Museum and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum occupy valuable sites (£5 million and £14.7 million respectively).⁴⁵ In keeping with the Lyons Report,⁴⁶ should it sell off any fixed assets, it may, subject to centrally determined priorities, retain up to 50% of the proceeds, or up to £10 million; through negotiation, there may be potential to exceed the limit. To this end, MAGNI has already identified two possible asset sales with a view to applying the proceeds towards a

³⁹ Qq 74–77

⁴⁰ Qq 56–57, 79–81

⁴¹ Q 57

⁴² *Collections for the Future* (2005)

⁴³ C&AG's Report, paras 28, 3.30

⁴⁴ *Income generated by the museums and galleries* (HC 430, Session 2003–04)

⁴⁵ Qq 85–87

⁴⁶ *Well Placed to Deliver? – Shaping the Pattern of Government Service* (2004)

Collections Resource Centre on the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum site as opposed to the development of a new National Gallery.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Qq 53, 88–95

Formal minutes

MONDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2006

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair	
Mr Richard Bacon	Mr Austin Mitchell
Mr David Curry	Dr John Pugh
Mr Ian Davidson	Mr Don Touhig

Oral evidence

Sir John Bourn KCB, Comptroller and Auditor General, was in attendance and gave oral evidence.

Mr Marius Gallaher, Alternate Treasury Officer of Accounts, was in attendance.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's Report on Delivering successful IT-enabled business change (HC 33-I&II) was considered.

Mr Ian Watmore, Permanent Secretary and Head of Group, Delivery and Transformation Group, Cabinet Office, and Mr John Oughton, Chief Executive, Office of Government Commerce, gave oral evidence (HC 113-i).

Draft Reports

A draft Report (Improving literacy and numeracy in schools (Northern Ireland)), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 19 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Another draft Report (Collections management in the national museums and galleries of Northern Ireland), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 17 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Third Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Another draft Report (Gas distribution networks: Ofgem's role in their sale, restructuring and future regulation), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 39 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fourth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Another draft Report (Postcomm and the quality of mail services), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 30 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fifth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Another draft Report (Gaining and retaining a job: the Department for Work and Pensions' support for disabled people), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 28 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Sixth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Spring programme

The Committee considered this matter.

[Adjourned until Wednesday 29 November at 3.30 pm.]

List of Witnesses

Mr Paul Sweeney, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, **Mr Tim Cooke** and **Mr Marshall McKee**, National Museums and Galleries (MAGNI).

List of written evidence

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Ev 10

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Fifth report	Postcomm and the quality of mail services	HC 111

The reference number of the Treasury Minute to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number

Oral evidence

Taken before the Committee of Public Accounts

on Wednesday 21 June 2006

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon
Mr Ian Davidson

Mr Austin Mitchell
Kitty Ussher

Mr John Dowdall CB, Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland, was in attendance.

Mr David Thomson, NI Treasury Officer of Accounts, HM Treasury, was in attendance and gave evidence.

REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES OF NORTHERN IRELAND (HC 1130)

Witnesses: **Mr Paul Sweeney**, Permanent Secretary, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure; and **Mr Tim Cooke**, Chief Executive, and **Mr Marshall McKee**, Director of Operations, National Museums and Galleries (MAGNI), gave evidence.

Q1 Chairman: Good afternoon and welcome to our second session on Northern Ireland where today we are considering the findings from the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland's Report on Collections Management in the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland. Mr Sweeney, I think you have only recently taken up your post so congratulations, and perhaps you would introduce your colleagues.

Mr Sweeney: Thank you, Chairman. On my right-hand side is Mr Tim Cooke, Chief Executive of Museums and Galleries Northern Ireland. He has been in post since September 2003 and he is spearheading the modernisation and reform programme within MAGNI. On my left Mr Marshall McKee. Marshall McKee is the Director of Operations at MAGNI and his responsibilities include the estate management and the delivery of services. He has been in the museums sector for 28 years.

Q2 Chairman: Okay, can we perhaps look at the number of artefacts you have. This is dealt with on page 23. Do you know how many artefacts you have?

Mr Sweeney: The Report puts the figure at 1.45 million. In terms of actually documenting what we have and where we have it, I am advised with authority we can state that we have documentation at that basic inventory level for 94% of that 1.45 million number of objects. There are 6% which are at this moment in time not documented but stored in a secure environment.

Q3 Chairman: If we look at the Folk and Transport Museum, it has got 568,739 records based on an estimate produced in 1997. Why are you using 1997 estimates?

Mr Sweeney: I am advised that those estimates were quite detailed. For example, a big section of that collection is photographic negatives so you might have a box with 100 negatives in the box so some estimation might be made around the number of boxes that might hold say, for example, 100 negatives, so that is where the term "estimation" comes in here.

Q4 Chairman: It is a bit like weighing boats, is it, but you weigh boxes? Can we look at paragraph 2.27. It is obviously important to improve the quality of information held and access to it by the public and I am sure you agree that is important, do you not? What action are you taking to ensure that your records are computerised and will be available more widely to the public and have you got a timetable?

Mr Sweeney: It is true to say that in terms of the computerisation of records, some progress has been made on a number of sites, particularly at the Ulster Museum where today I am advised that 98% of the objects have been—

Q5 Chairman: You keep saying you are advised. Do you know or has someone told you?

Mr Sweeney: I have been advised by MAGNI.

Q6 Chairman: Okay, so it may or may not be right?

Mr Sweeney: Well, we will come on to the issue of verifying MAGNI's figures, but I have been, as you might imagine Chairman, spending some considerable time over the last several weeks trying to get levels of assurance around the figure work that MAGNI have been providing to me.

Q7 Chairman: Given they do not know what they have got how much credence can we place on this advice?

Mr Sweeney: In terms of their computerisation they have advised me with authority that in the Ulster Museum 98% of the objects are computerised. That is less the case in some other sites.

Q8 Chairman: Okay, if we look at paragraph 3.6 we see that 60% of your storage area is considered either “poor” or “unacceptable.” What have you done to address this?

Mr Sweeney: In the past, some attempts have been made to address the nature of the storage facilities but more recently the Department has done the following: in 2004 there was a survey of the entire MAGNI estate, which includes amongst others 50 stores, and the Department made available approximately £677,000 at that time. Subsequently we have made £13.5 million available. £7 million of that will be for the adaptation of the Ulster Museum but within that is there a figure of £2.5 million which could be used towards improving some of the buildings that need immediate attention. I am advised some of that will include improving some of the storage areas.

Q9 Chairman: You told the Audit Office in February 2006 that around 90% is held under appropriate conditions. How can you say this with any confidence, Mr Sweeney, when you do not know absolutely how many artefacts you have and apparently all the records are not computerised? Can we be sure that this reassurance given in 2006 was actually correct?

Mr Sweeney: This is a qualitative study carried out by MAGNI, as you say, in February 2006 where they compared the footage area in the stores with the nature, the volume and vulnerability of the objects held. By taking those two classifications they reached a figure of 90% of the collection being stored in suitable conditions. Again, Chairman, in terms of preparation for today’s hearing, I took it upon myself to look at three-quarters of the storage space in both the Ulster Museum and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, along with the senior management team at MAGNI, looking at the methodology they adopted, I am very much aware I am a lay person in terms of my degree of expertise in artefacts, so I sought to walk the stores and to give myself at least degrees of assurance around the robustness of this figure of 90%. Chairman, I also took some comfort from the fact that the Northern Ireland Audit Office itself concluded that the bulk of the collection was being held in good or excellent conditions.

Chairman: Lastly, I want to look at this incredible case study on page 34. This is a schooner that you have had for 36 years, Mr Sweeney, not knowing what to do with it. This is the tale of the incredible hulk. I know that people would accuse me of being a hulk here in this building without much use for 23 years, and Mr Mitchell even longer—

Mr Mitchell: Thank you!

Q10 Chairman: But what are you going to do with this hulk, Mr Sweeney. This could make a programme in *Yes, Minister*, could it not, a government museum having a huge object like this which it does not know what to do with for 36 years.

Mr Sweeney: I think, Chairman, how I would respond to that is that over the last 36 years—in Northern Ireland there has been a whole range of options explored in terms of the future of this vessel.

Q11 Chairman: Well, that follows. It was a long debate obviously!

Mr Sweeney: I have to say that in terms of the subjectivity with which a person can bring to these matters that the National Historic Ships Committee take the view that this is of pre-eminent significance and have classified this particular vessel as one of 46 compiling the UK’s core collection of historic vessels, so our custodianship of this ship is such that we have it on public exhibition at the moment. We have arrested the deterioration in the hull—

Q12 Chairman: You really think that is going to draw the crowds, do you, looking at the photograph? That is the result of 36 years’ work, is it?

Mr Sweeney: Chairman, I can only speak from anecdotal evidence. I have brought my four children to this site on a number of occasions and it is quite awesome to behold.

Chairman: Alright, we do not want to be rude about your hulk. Mr Bacon?

Q13 Mr Bacon: What is most awesome, its size or the 36 years that your Department and its predecessors have been pondering it?

Mr Sweeney: There is an interpretation plaque alongside the vessel where one can read the history of it.

Q14 Mr Bacon: It does not tell us a lot about the history in the document except that it is a matter of historic importance, a vessel of considerable importance illustrating an important phase of British merchant shipping history.” When you say one of 46, one of 46 what, that are in Northern Ireland, that are extant on the planet, of which this is the only one in the British Isles? What is special about this one out of the 46?

Mr Sweeney: Apparently in terms of the complement of 46 it would include, amongst others, *HMS Belfast*, *HMS Caroline*—

Q15 Mr Bacon: *HMS Belfast* here on the River Thames?

Mr Sweeney: Yes. *SS Great Britain* and the *Cutty Sark*.

Q16 Mr Bacon: And most of those are floating. Does this one float?

Mr Sweeney: I cannot say with authority the number of the 46 vessels which are floating.

Q17 Mr Bacon: I am talking about this one. Does this one float?

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Mr Sweeney: No.

Q18 Mr Bacon: Why not? Has it got a hole in it?

Mr Sweeney: Actually it does not float but I am told that there are a range of options which could include, but again—

Q19 Mr Bacon: You could set it on fire. Andrew Lloyd Webber said about the Millennium Dome that every Victorian impresario knew that there is nothing the crowds like as much as a blaze. You could set it on fire and charge disaster movie directors to come and watch and film it and you would make revenue for Northern Ireland for many years to come.

Mr Sweeney: From my point of view there are a range of options that have been explored in the past. Frankly, the business case never stacked up.

Q20 Mr Bacon: The business case for what?

Mr Sweeney: For example, when the vessel was brought to Northern Ireland way back in 1970 the original intention was to reinstate its three masts and top sail.

Q21 Mr Bacon: And make it float?

Mr Sweeney: No, to create a mock dock at Cultra.

Q22 Mr Bacon: A mock dock?

Mr Sweeney: At Cultra.

Q23 Mr Bacon: Was the fact it is at Cultra that is the important bit or the fact it is a mock dock.

Mr Sweeney: Just coincidental.

Q24 Mr Bacon: And that was proven to be too expensive?

Mr Sweeney: Presumably.

Q25 Mr Bacon: This is a period which, funnily enough, coincides more or less exactly with the 30 Years War and the Second World War combined together. You could do quite a lot in that time, 36 years. What is your explanation for the fact nothing was done and this thing was not just seized by the scruff of the neck and somebody made a decision of some kind about it?

Mr Sweeney: Over the last 36 years, if I was trying to look at this from a positive point of view, the work that was spent in terms of acquiring the vessel and the work that was spent on refurbishing the hull of the vessel has ensured that its long-term preservation remains as an option.

Q26 Mr Bacon: That is absolutely marvellous. I am sure the people of Northern Ireland will be ecstatic at that news. Can I move on to paragraph 2.10 in the Report. Can you tell us what is the purpose of the audit check that is referred to there in paragraph 2.10?

Mr Sweeney: The purpose of the audit check would be to spot-check a number of objects in the custodianship of MAGNI to satisfy oneself in terms of the inventory being intact.

Q27 Mr Bacon: It says at the bottom of the paragraph there: “No further ‘audit checks’ have been carried out since 2003 due to a lack of resources, despite museum policy stating that such audits should be carried out annually.” Did the trustees of the museum know the museum’s own policy was not being complied with?

Mr Sweeney: Yes, in 2004 an audit was not carried out.

Q28 Mr Bacon: And the museum trustees knew that the museums policy was not being complied with. That is my question. Did the trustees know?

Mr Sweeney: I cannot answer that question specifically. If you wish I could refer it to the Chief Executive.

Q29 Mr Bacon: If somebody in the room could tell me, yes.

Mr Cooke: I do not believe the trustees knew.

Q30 Mr Bacon: The trustees did not know?

Mr Cooke: No, they did not and I think here the Report identifies a deficiency in our system.

Q31 Mr Bacon: An inefficiency?

Mr Cooke: A deficiency in our system. I think what we should have had in place and what we will have in place is a system whereby if an audit check is not carried out it is automatically escalated to our audit committee. That would be the procedure in the future.

Q32 Mr Bacon: You were content with the fact that the audit checks were not carried out and the trustees who were responsible and the guardians of this did not know?

Mr Cooke: I was not content with that. In fact, I only knew it had not been carried out, Mr Bacon, when the Audit Office drew it to my attention. I think that exposes, as I say, a deficiency in the process. These checks should be carried out annually. They are an important part of museums policy and its verification procedure and we are putting in place a fail-safe system so that we would be in a situation where these things are automatically reported on an annual basis to the audit committee of the board of trustees and they are reported in our annual report as recommended by the Audit Office.

Q33 Mr Bacon: And that would be the case if at any of the other sites audit checks were not carried out?

Mr Cooke: That would be the case. We have recently appointed a new Director of Collections and Interpretation to bring greater co-ordination to the whole of our collections management. One of his key responsibilities will be to assure me as Chief Executive that these audit checks are carried out. They will be reported in our annual report and I will be translating assurance in relation to documentation and audit checks into my internal control statement.

Q34 Mr Bacon: How often are audit checks performed at the other collections at the various different sites?

Mr Cooke: There again you identify a problem that—

Q35 Mr Bacon: You do not know?

Mr Cooke: Yes, I do know. There has been an issue here and there is not a policy in place on the other sites. That is one of the issues that I have asked Dr McGreevy, our new Director of Collections and Interpretation, to address as a matter of urgency.

Q36 Mr Bacon: Could you send the Committee a list of all the sites with the details of the last time that there was an audit, including the date of that audit and the findings of the audit for each of the different sites? Can you do that?

Mr Cooke: Yes I can.¹

Q37 Mr Bacon: Thank you. Can I ask you to turn to paragraph 2.19. It says there that not only was there a report by the NIAO in 1989 saying that the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum had committed to a three-year evaluation and the report recommended that the evaluation would lead to the introduction of a computerised documentation system, but that there was a further report some nine years later in 1998 expressing concern at the lack of progress in the development of a computerised collections management system for the museum. Do you take any notice of these NIAO reports? It is quite obvious there has been this recommendation around for a very long time. Why over a period of 17 years has nothing happened?

Mr Sweeney: Mr Bacon, you are quite right, whereas earlier on I drew attention to the fact that the Ulster Museum computerisation programme had been impressive, this Report takes the view that the computerisation programme for the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at less than 10% today is untenable. I have had a look into the reasons why that has been the case and I could offer the following context and explanation, if it would be helpful. It is true to say that when I looked at what happened from 1989 onwards in terms of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, immediately Coopers & Lybrand were commissioned to look into putting together a computerised documentation feasibility study—

Q38 Mr Bacon: Just a feasibility study?

Mr Sweeney: That feasibility study was worked up to a business plan stage.

Q39 Mr Bacon: By Coopers & Lybrand as well?

Mr Sweeney: By Coopers & Lybrand.

Q40 Mr Bacon: What were the total fees paid to Coopers & Lybrand?

Mr Sweeney: I cannot answer that question at this moment in time.

Q41 Mr Bacon: Is there anyone in this room who can? Can you write to the Committee with that information?²

Mr Sweeney: That work that Coopers & Lybrand did in 1992 came to a head whereby the Department of Education at that time took the view that no resources could be put in place to take forward the computerisation programme and resources could not be anticipated for the foreseeable future. During the 1990s and right up to 1999, whereby at that stage a £6 million package was worked up into a business plan, it was concluded at that stage that that package of £6 million was “unaffordable”. What has happened since 1999 is that MAGNI has involved itself in what I would describe as a self-help approach to the computerisation programme and therefore the good work that has been done at the Ulster Museum and the hardware and software that has been put in place there at a cost of about £0.5 million will now be cascaded down through the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, and I think the Report was very balanced in acknowledging that progress had been made there and there is the potential now to put what I call this self-help model of computerisation into place.

Q42 Mr Bacon: Can I stop you because it is a rather long answer and I have got one more question I would like to ask apart from this present one. First, could you write to the Committee with an explanation of all the costs involved in the feasibility studies and the building up of options for the £6 million package which was unaffordable *et cetera*, including the cost of any external advice, not just from Coopers & Lybrand but from any others, from the original NIAO report in 1989 until the present date?

Mr Sweeney: Specifically around computerisation at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum?

Q43 Mr Bacon: Yes.

Mr Sweeney: I would be happy to do that.³

Q44 Mr Bacon: One other question, you mentioned the 1.45 million artefacts and 94% were documented and therefore presumably 6% were not, which is around 87,000 items. Did I understand you to say that the 6% as opposed to the 94% were mostly photographic negatives or was that just a small proportion of the collection that was not classified?

Mr Sweeney: I used that, Mr Bacon, as an example in terms of the 1997 reference to an “estimate” of the collection. I was trying to give an example there of where a scientific estimation can be made.

Q45 Mr Bacon: What I am really trying to get to is what do you know roughly about what the 87,000 artefacts that you have not got fully classified are? You must have some notion. Anecdotally it is said of any EU official, Defra official or Northern Ireland agriculture official they go into a field with a clip board and say, “It looks like 100 cows to me.” You

² Note by witness: Total fees paid to Coopers and Lybrand were approximately £6,000 between 1989 and 1992.

³ Ev 10–11

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must have some notion of how many of these things are pottery, how many of these things are photographs, how many of these things are rare precious metals, or whatever it is, and roughly of what does it all comprise?

Mr Sweeney: I can invite Mr McKee to give you some detailed response to that, if I may.

Mr McKee: You are right, Mr Bacon, the Report itself does recognise that part of the undocumented collection is archeological material, pre-history material from an excavation. That forms part of the undocumented collection. There are also other undocumented elements at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, some charts, some maps and some artefacts relating to 19th century/early 20th century history. So, all in all, we reckon from our records about 6% of the collections are undocumented. 94% of the collections, which Mr Sweeney referred to, are documented to a level where we know what we have and where it is. I would stress that that does not mean that they are documented to SPECTRUM standards. We could maybe tease that out a little later on but in terms of a record of what the object is and where that object sits within our organisation, within our stores then we do have that information.

Mr Bacon: Thank you.

Chairman: Mr Mitchell?

Q46 Mr Mitchell: I just want to start, as we do in political processes, with *The Result* because Mr Bacon has been very scathing but we got ourselves into a similar mess in Grimsby with something called the *Ross Tiger* which was an early construct of a Grimsby fishing vessel which was fetched back from the Faroe Islands with great trumpeting and celebrations and everybody said, "We must preserve this vessel because it is archetypal and no history of fishing is complete without it." It has come back and since then it has lain mouldering in the Alexandra Dock sinking slowly. The council has been desperate for some time to get rid of it but nobody will take it. I think here we have a common problem in the sense that enthusiasts say, "We must have this" and then it is very difficult because it is an expensive, big object to maintain it. Having said that, how much of the problem at the Folk Museum, which seems to be the most difficult area, is due to the drain in money caused by *The Result*?

Mr Sweeney: Well, I think to answer that question *The Result* will always be a candidate for public ridicule because there is—

Q47 Mr Mitchell: Yes, that is true.

Mr Sweeney: Because as you refer there is a degree of subjectivity but it abuts the following.

Q48 Mr Mitchell: It could be a candidate for public respect.

Mr Sweeney: Exactly, depending on whom one speaks to but to fully understand the trustees' dilemma on these matters. *The Result* itself abuts two award-winning museums. In the 1990s when confronted with the dilemma as to where to put priorities, a rail gallery and a road gallery were

created at Cultra at a cost respectively of £2.1 and £2.2 million. These galleries have won awards. The number of visitors increased by a factor of 46% within a number of years, I think within two to three years. So to fully understand the custodianship of the trustees and the dilemma that museums and trusts across the UK are confronted with, there is that conundrum about getting the balance right. They secured the integrity of *The Result* and at least there are options for the future. Ironically, the *Titanic Quarter* in Belfast has now been seen to be one of the iconic regeneration projects for the future of Belfast and who is to say that a vessel such as *The Result* might not find its place in something like that in the future? At least the option theoretically exists.

Q49 Mr Mitchell: If it is allowed to degenerate it should become like the *Titanic*. The question was is it a big drain on the finances of the Folk Museum?

Mr Sweeney: At this moment in time beyond the fact that it was bought in 2004 at a cost of almost £10,000. In terms of the space it is occupying, that is about 400 square metres, I understand, so to really ascertain how much is it costing them at the moment it is part of that greater complex, so proportionately there will be some element of security costs, per square footage costs, and they put an awning in place a number of years ago. We are advised now that the hull has been secured, that the wooden structure internally can now be ventilated by a purpose-built hatch that was put in a number of years ago, so we have at least arrested the decline in terms deterioration and options remain available for the future.

Q50 Mr Mitchell: In my experience problems of this nature affecting museums—and they are not uncommon on the mainland and certainly we have encountered them in our fishing heritage museum in Grimsby—are largely due to lack money. How far is your Department responsible in the sense it has starved the museums of the money that they need to catalogue, to order their exhibits and to generally bring things up-to-date? Does the responsibility really lie with cash starvation? The two museum representatives are trying to look impassive but if they want to nod that in their experience that is true I can say, "Let the record show, Mr Chairman, that the museum representatives nodded assent at this point." I will come to them later so do not look impassive!

Mr Sweeney: To give you an idea of the current context in which the Department approaches these matters, we are a department which at this moment in time is putting in per annum in revenue terms £11.2 million to the museums. To address the issue of under-investment in the estate in the museums, we have agreed a package, as I said earlier, of £13.5 million. In recent years we have also put in place a voluntary early retirement scheme. Earlier on I alluded to this modernisation and reform programme. We put £3.7 million in place to facilitate that modernisation and reform programme which is so important to the future of the museums. It might be self-serving for me to say that within competing

resources, just to give you an example, the Public Records Office in Northern Ireland, one of the three archetypal organisations in the United Kingdom today, its 53 kilometres of public records are in a building that has now been declared unfit for purpose and it will require in the region of £30 million to construct a purpose-designed building to house those essential records. And finally a number of years ago, two or three years ago, we invested £3 million in the Armagh Planetarium. Any department, in this case a small department like DCAL, will always have competing priorities. I personally believe, having looked at a number of other museums in the United Kingdom and talked to a number of people in this field, that our level of resources toward MAGNI is not unreasonable.

Q51 Mr Mitchell: Are Northern Ireland getting an unfair deal compared to museums on the mainland?
Mr Sweeney: I could not make a statement objectively on that.

Q52 Mr Mitchell: Will this Report lead you to improve the financing of the museums?
Mr Sweeney: In reality, we are looking at this modernisation and reform programme, and part of the presumption is to ask if the museums could increase the proportion of their own self-generated revenue because all the indications are that the public expenditure framework within Northern Ireland is likely to be one of constraint rather than expansion.

Q53 Mr Mitchell: Mr Cooke, would you like to tell us, is it basically a problem of shortage of money?
Mr Cooke: Mr Mitchell, I think it would be fair to say that money is also an issue, but I do agree with Mr Sweeney the organisation and the Department are genuinely working together to instigate and see through a widespread reform and modernisation programme within the organisation. That involves a management restructuring and it involves bringing our pay bill down from where it is at the moment. In order to assist us to do that, the Department has provided us with £3.7 million in terms of a voluntary early retirement scheme. The Department has approved the senior management posts for restructuring that I have asked for. The Department has provided us with £13.5 million across the current three-year period. Within that kind of resource envelope we still face many challenges and there are many issues of prioritisation that we face. It is very clear arising out of this Report that we have one major piece of capital development work happening at the moment at the Ulster Museum, which is right at the centre of the city in the Botanic Gardens and covers arts, history and science. It is a major landmark building in Northern Ireland. Coming out of this it is quite clear that the Audit Office is recommending that we look at the possibility of creating a collections resource centre down on the Cultra site in order to take this situation, which is an inherited situation, of 50 stores of very variable quality and trying to rationalise that situation.

Q54 Mr Mitchell: Do I get you saying, to sum that up, that the basic problem is shortage of money but it is compounded by other problems—management, organisation and other difficulties?

Mr Cooke: I would accept that there is more the organisation can do and should do to be as efficient and effective as possible but within that of course we could in the longer term spend more money, particularly capital money, to transform our situation.

Q55 Mr Mitchell: A double-headed question. I just get the impression, certainly from the pictures and photographs in this Report, like the incredible one on page 14 of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum which looks like a junkyard. There are tyres, there is what looks to be a bicycle, there is a grinding wheel, there is what looks to be a stepladder. This is just a junkyard, is it not? How far is the Folk Museum dragging the rest down?

Mr Sweeney: Obviously in terms of my visits to the various stores this was one of the stores that I went to first. The Report itself in terms of this particular photograph on page 14 does allude to the fact that some of the clutter to the forefront is actually spare parts rather than part of the collection, but my earlier impressions at a number of the stores is that there is at one level a very strategic approach required but at the lower level there is a very basic housekeeping approach that is required.

Q56 Mr Mitchell: We have a lovely picture of some grandfather clocks, which you could flog for large sums of money. Why do you not have a disposals policy?

Mr Sweeney: We do have a disposals policy.

Q57 Mr Mitchell: The grandfather clocks would fetch a fortune.

Mr Sweeney: Whether it is proactive or not and whether in this case the grandfather clock collection could be looked at—in this instance I see that Mr Cooke is particularly keen to make a point so I may defer to him.

Mr Cooke: Mr Mitchell, if I can address the issue of the disposals approach. Museums across the UK are guided by a number of codes of ethics and one of them is the Museums, Libraries and Archives Accreditation Scheme by which a museum becomes registered. That accreditation scheme makes it very clear in relation to disposals that decisions to dispose of items will not be made and cannot be made with the principal aim of generating funds. It is this kind of core sense that collections are held in perpetuity for the public good and the stewardship of them needs to be looked at in a continuum beyond current financial pressures. While I suppose one can understand people suggesting that parts of the collection could be sold off in order to deal with immediate funding issues, it is something, I have to say, that is frowned on and is not allowable.

Q58 Mr Mitchell: Okay, so you cannot sell them to tidy things up. I see also that the coin collection at the main museum is in a mess. I would have thought

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coins are fairly easy. In Yorkshire they would be the centre of religion and you would go in and venerate them and yet your coin collection is in a real mess.

Mr Cooke: Could I say to you, Mr Mitchell, that at this point it is not in a mess and that is because a proper and due housekeeping exercise has taken place on that collection. I absolutely accept that at the time the Audit Office visited that collection that it was in an untidy and unacceptable state. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with the store. It was a housekeeping issue, it was untidy; it has now been tidied. It houses something like 46,000 items, coinage and bank notes, it is in a secure place, there is nothing wrong with the environmental controls, and Mr Sweeney and I visited it about 10 days ago and we are satisfied with the state in which the coins are now being stored.

Chairman: Mr Mitchell is a young thruster who likes to get rid of aging artefacts! Mr Davidson, you are the last questioner.

Q59 Mr Davidson: I see in the Report there is mention here in paragraph 2 that: "However, MAGNI told us that its revenue budget for each of the next three years poses substantial challenges." When asked, Mr Sweeney, whether or not you thought MAGNI was underfunded you said you could not compare. Why can you not compare?

Mr Sweeney: Could I ask you for the reference please?

Q60 Mr Davidson: Paragraph 2 on page 9, the bottom sentence.

Mr Sweeney: I have difficulty making out the reference at the very bottom of the page.

Q61 Mr Davidson: The bottom of that paragraph.

Mr Sweeney: I am with you.

Q62 Mr Davidson: Leaving that aside, the point was you said about funding you could not make a comparison and I am asking you why could you not make a comparison?

Mr Sweeney: What I have done is I have looked at the benchmarking exercises on a number of fronts, such as for example computerisation, percentage of artefacts stored in appropriate conditions, and I have spoken to the Chief Executive of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council because you will appreciate I am on a very steep learning curve here. What I have not been able to do and, if I may say so, it is the nature of a complex organisation like MAGNI it is composed of four museums—

Q63 Mr Davidson: Wait, wait, wait, I understand that you are relatively new but the Department is not new. If you are the head of the Department, I would have thought you would have inherited some work that had been done before you. It would appear from what you are saying that the Department has never compared elsewhere. I am just seeking to clarify why that is.

Mr Sweeney: If we looked at, for example, a single site like the British Museum and compared it with the sites that we have in MAGNI—

Q64 Mr Davidson: To be fair, you are bound to be able to find better comparisons.

Mr Sweeney: I have not seen evidence of a systematic benchmarking exercise.

Q65 Mr Davidson: And why do you think that is?

Mr Sweeney: Part of the reason has been just getting a comparator with MAGNI. We have not been able to get—

Q66 Mr Davidson: In the whole of the United Kingdom? Efforts have been made in the whole of the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic and there is no comparison to be found at all?

Mr Sweeney: I have to be honest with you and say that although I have tried to satisfy myself around a range of benchmarking exercises and looked at key performance indicators in terms of today how does our annual funding and capital grant towards MAGNI compare with revenue and capital support across the UK across all the museums, I have not carried out that exercise and I have no evidence to support that exercise.

Q67 Mr Davidson: Mr Cooke, you are more directly involved in this. Have you done any comparisons or have you any feel for this?

Mr Cooke: I have a feel for it, Mr Davidson, but I have not done what you might regard as a scientific comparison. You will be aware yourself of the National Museums in Scotland and the range of activities that they have from the Chambers Street site—

Q68 Mr Davidson: Probably not as much as you.

Mr Cooke: From the Chambers Street site right through to the Flight Museum which houses Concorde and so on. In Wales, I think Wales have eight or nine museums as opposed to our four but they do have folk museums and they do have arts museums.

Q69 Mr Davidson: Have you compared it bit by bit then?

Mr Cooke: What we have done is we have made the case to the Department that particularly on the capital front Northern Ireland has not been as successful at attracting funds to its national museums as Scotland and Wales for example or the big national museums like at Liverpool which perhaps would be similar in size. I think we have had some success with making that argument. In terms of revenue funding—

Q70 Mr Davidson: Can I just come on to revenue funding because we have only got limited time and I am conscious that you want to get a plane out of here at some stage. In terms of admissions and income from admissions and visitors and so on, do you have statistics that indicate the socio-economic backgrounds of the people who come and whether you are reaching all parts of Northern Ireland, both in terms of social class as well as other groupings?

Mr Cooke: We have some information. I do not think it is entirely as widespread as you ask. We know, for example, that 32% of our visitors are from C2DE backgrounds which is a very strong performance in terms of UK benchmarking as a whole. We have a strong sense of repeat visitors coming. We know roughly the numbers of out-of-state visitors and the role that we play in their contribution to tourism.

Q71 Mr Davidson: If we were to ask you to produce figures indicating that you were as good as or better than the appropriate benchmarks in the UK, you would be able to do that, would you?

Mr Cooke: I think there is some commonality in the KPIs which are comparable to DCMS and what the national museums—

Q72 Mr Davidson: If we could have that,⁴ Chairman, I think it would be helpful and it would save me pursuing this, particularly in terms of demonstrating that you appeal or do not to those who traditionally would not be considered museum users, as it were. I think that would be very helpful. In terms of trading I have not been to Northern Ireland all that often but I remember being struck by the amount of cheap tat that there was on sale to tourists. There is bound to be a lot of stuff that you have that could be replicated or copied from which you could draw an income. Has any of that been explored?

Mr Cooke: Yes it has, and it is currently being explored with more vigour. I mentioned that we were reforming and modernising the organisation and just within the last two months we have appointed a new Director of Marketing, Communications and Trading and are intending to appoint a Commercial Manager across the summer. We are very focussed on this issue of self-generated income.

Q73 Mr Davidson: Okay, if that is being pursued I am happy with that. Can I just look at the question of acquisitions for a moment because we discussed what you already have, but I got the impression that you do not have much money for acquisitions and that really what you get depends on what you are left, which presumably means that there are substantial gaps in the range that you would wish to draw out of a museum. Is that fair?

Mr Cooke: That would be fair.

Q74 Mr Davidson: How do your acquisition policy and patterns of funding again compare with similar museums elsewhere in the UK?

Mr Cooke: Our acquisition funding would be much less than similar institutions in the UK, significantly less.

Q75 Mr Davidson: Are there any particular areas where you are short?

Mr Cooke: To be clear our acquisition budget in the last number of years has been £50,000 reduced to £25,000 in the current financial year, and that is a reflection of the flat line grant and the challenges the organisation faces.⁵

Q76 Mr Davidson: £25,000 for acquisitions for all the museums in the whole of Northern Ireland?

Mr Cooke: That is correct, all the national museums.

Q77 Mr Davidson: I find that almost incredible. Mr Sweeney, that is just loose change, is it not really? Your Department will pay more than that for tea and coffee and so on, will it not?

Mr Sweeney: The thrust of this Report is to say that over the next few years the emphasis should be on the storage facilities and the documentation to ensure that our custodianship of what we have at the moment is in a proper state.

Q78 Mr Davidson: I do understand that but presumably there are opportunities being missed as life goes on and that an undue focus upon preserving what you have—and I understand some of the points that have been made by my colleagues—but surely you have got to keep your eye on the ball in terms of the on-going role of museums?

Mr Sweeney: I think the focus over the next few years will be on this more proactive approach to the disposal policy which is in place.

Q79 Mr Davidson: Can I just pick up the question of disposals because retaining things in the museum obviously in the context of having only £25,000 for acquisitions has an opportunity cost. Have you not considered selling to buy and whether if you have 97 grandfather clocks or what have you, selling off some of them in order to buy something that will otherwise go abroad or be lost forever would be worthwhile?

Mr Cooke: Consistent with the guidelines that I mentioned earlier, I think it is incumbent given the situation that has been demonstrated with precision by the Audit Office that the group of museums looks very carefully at its disposals policy and seeks to identify whether or not by following in part a disposals policy, it can—

⁵ *Note by witness:* Mr Cooke responded that MAGNI's acquisition budget in the last number of years has been £50,000 reduced to £25,000 in the current financial year. The figure of £50,000 represents the budget allocated by MAGNI for this specific purpose from the overall Grant In Aid allocation provided by the Department. It does not represent the total funds spent by MAGNI for the purpose of acquiring specimens. When an opportunity arises MAGNI seek additional funding from other sources, for example, the National Arts Collection Fund (NACF) to fund specific acquisitions. All funding obtained and expenditure incurred is noted in MAGNI's account. In 2004–05 the total expenditure on Specimen Purchases was £2,331,808 which also included £46,075 spent on further development of the Open Air Museum at Cultra and the New World in Omagh rather than specific additions to the collections. The budget currently allocated by MAGNI for Specimen Acquisition in 2006–07 is £25,000 but it is anticipated that actual spent will be significantly higher should matched funding be secured from other sources.

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Q80 Mr Davidson: I am sorry, you think it should but you are not actually doing that at the moment?

Mr Cooke: We are not doing it in a proactive fashion. I think the Report itself says that.

Q81 Mr Davidson: So we will see a sell-to-buy policy being carefully examined from now on, will we?

Mr Cooke: I would not describe it as a sell-to-buy policy but consistent with the guidelines of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council we will look to see whether or not we can use disposals in a rationalisation of our stores and not primarily, I have to say to you, because it is contrary to the guidelines for the principal reason of raising funds.

Q82 Mr Davidson: The final point I want to make is in terms of thefts and losses from the museums; are you aware of any of either?

Mr Sweeney: Could I defer to Mr Cooke again for the detail of that please.

Mr Cooke: As a result of this Report one of the things I asked from my senior staff was about losses. There are no losses identified as a result of storage issues or documentation issues, but there have been a number of occasions in the past when items have gone missing, a small number of items I have to say. There was one occasion, for example—I think we are going back to 1991 or 1992—when a coin which was on display in Spain went missing and appropriate action was carried out at the time and a refund was made.

Q83 Mr Davidson: As a result of this exercise, you are not conscious of there having been any pattern of thefts or losses as a result of the fact that things were not adequately catalogued and monitored?

Mr Cooke: Not for any of those reasons.

Q84 Mr Davidson: Sorry, for other reasons then?

Mr Cooke: No, not as a result of other reasons.

Chairman: There is one supplementary from Mr Bacon.

Q85 Mr Bacon: Thank you very much although if I may say it is the same subject divided between Mr Cooke and the Treasury Officer of Accounts for Northern Ireland, Mr Thomson. Firstly, Mr Cooke, can you tell me what the total value of the land is upon which the Ulster Museum and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum sit?

Mr Cooke: Yes I can. The landholdings of the organisation overall, Mr Bacon, are £29.1 million as at 31 March 2006.

Q86 Mr Bacon: And most of that £29.1 million is represented by the Ulster Museum and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum?

Mr Cooke: From the land as opposed to the buildings?

Q87 Mr Bacon: Yes.

Mr Cooke: The land for the Ulster Museum is £5 million. The total, because it is divided into transport and folk, is £14.7 million at the Folk and Transport Museum.

Q88 Mr Bacon: Mr Thomson, you will be familiar with the Lyons Report which records that in GB at any rate departments can keep a proportion of their sales of fixed assets to reinvest. What standing does the Lyons Report have in Northern Ireland?

Mr Thomson: Firstly, we do have a policy which we have had in place for several years now that any department or public body can keep 50% of the proceeds up to £10 million.

Q89 Mr Bacon: Presumably if there were some special negotiation they might be able to do more?

Mr Thomson: Absolutely.

Q90 Mr Bacon: For the sake of argument, if the Ulster Museum of MAGNI wanted to sell some or all of its land assets in order to reinvest to improve its storage, or a national gallery or something like that, your department would not have a problem with that in principle so long as there was a robust business case?

Mr Thomson: We would consider it and put it forward to ministers and ministers ultimately take the decision on the allocation of resources.

Q91 Mr Bacon: Has there been any suggestion from your Department along these lines, Mr Cooke?

Mr Cooke: From the Museums to DCAL as opposed directly to DFP, Mr Bacon, I wrote to the previous Permanent Secretary identifying two specific possible asset sales with a view to seeking support for having the proceeds of these asset sales put towards the Collections Resource Centre that we discussed earlier.

Q92 Mr Bacon: So for improving the storage?

Mr Cooke: That is correct.

Q93 Mr Bacon: Not for a national gallery?

Mr Cooke: No.

Q94 Mr Bacon: There are no plans for a national gallery then?

Mr Cooke: I think we face substantial challenges.

Q95 Mr Bacon: Would not a national gallery be more fun? Why do you not ask the people of Northern Ireland which they would prefer?

Mr Cooke: I guess we have a number of national museums already and my focus, and I think the Department's to be fair, is very much on seeing that those buildings and assets are treated satisfactorily for the future.

Mr Bacon: Thank you.

Q96 Chairman: I will sum up, Mr Cooke. You have been Chief Executive of the National Museums and Galleries in Northern Ireland since September 2003; is that right?

Mr Cooke: That is correct.

Q97 Chairman: From the evidence we have had, it is not clear to us that you know with any degree of certainty what assets you have, where they are, what their condition nor indeed what their value is. The

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only conclusion is that your collection is not well-administered, managed and utilised and that you have largely, or to a certain extent, ignored previous findings of the Comptroller and Auditor of General Northern Ireland. Do you have any comment to make before we consider our Report?

Mr Cooke: The Report makes a remark about a lack of cohesion within collections within the national museums and that is something that would coincide with my own analysis of the situation upon arrival as Chief Executive. I have been very focused since then on creating a framework for systematic and sustainable improvement across the national museums including the appointment of a new Director of Collections and Interpretation, including bringing forward proposals to appoint a new Head of Collections Care and a Head of Collections Management, on refocusing and prioritising effort inside the organisation, on developing an ICT platform which will allow computerisation to move ahead at last at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, and developing with the Department KPIs which will measure our performance in these areas and in bringing forward two key plans, a storage development plan and a

documentation plan, both of which will I believe lead to substantial improvements in this current situation.

Q98 Chairman: Thank you for that. We will hold you to all that. Departments in Northern Ireland must know that when the Comptroller and Auditor General issues reports they are to be taken with the utmost seriousness and if they are not, as happened with computerisation of the Folk Museum, the Permanent Secretary will be summoned here to account for the lack of action on the Comptroller's Report.

Mr Cooke: Chairman, could I just make one point on the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, with your indulgence. I would be concerned if the impression was given to the Committee or publicly that the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum is not a successful visitor attraction. It is an extremely successful visitor attraction. In fact, it currently holds the title "Irish Museum of the Year" so it is very well regarded by both users and its peers in the museums sector.

Q99 Chairman: Thank you very much for that.

Mr Sweeney: Thank you, Chairman.

 Supplementary memorandum submitted by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Question 36 (Mr Richard Bacon): The date and findings of the last audit for each site

- Audit checks were last carried out at Armagh County Museum (ACM) and the Ulster Museum (UM) during 2003 (information provided to the Committee but not printed). The exercise involved the physical verification of 1,200 objects selected randomly across the broad collections areas of Art, History and Sciences.
- At the time of the audit, 97% of the selected objects were located and examined. Of the 34 not located during the audit, 29 were subsequently found. The five objects still to be located are three coins and two mollusc specimens.

[Note: the situation on the day of the PAC was that four coins had still to be located and one has since been found].

Audit checks have not previously been carried out at the Ulster American Folk Park (UAFP) or the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (UFTM). A common methodology for audit checks is to be developed for all four sites and will be applied to ACM, UAFP and UFTM before March 2007. A comprehensive audit will be undertaken at the UM as collections are decanted prior to a major refurbishment project.

Question 43 (Mr Richard Bacon): An explanation of all the costs involved in the feasibility studies and the building up of options for the £6 million package, including the cost of all external advice, from the original NIAO report in 1989 until the present date

In the 1990s computer systems within the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum were included within the development of a wider IS strategy taken forward by DENI, the ISEC strategy. A summary of costs in relation to this strategy for the years 1997—1999 is included in the table below. Unfortunately not all information is held in relation to this project in DENI, as the records have been destroyed in line with the disposals policy within that Department. We must apologise that, as such, we are unable to provide a complete answer.

MUSEUMS COLLECTION PROJECT—IS STRATEGY FOR THE EDUCATION SERVICE

	<i>Consultants</i>	<i>Month</i>	<i>Amount (£)</i>	<i>Total (£)</i>
1997–98				
Admiral	J Sidebottom/A Buddle	September 1997	8,910.58	
		October 1997	7,975.00	
		November 1997	11,165.00	
			8,085.00	
		December 1997	3,850.00	
		January 1998	2,475.00	
		February 1998	2,277.00	
		March 1998	2,362.08	
		March 1998	1,100.00	
				48,199.66
PWC	(For PFI Training)	February 1998	2,500.00	
Total for 1997–98				50,699.66
1998–99				
Admiral	J Sidebottom/A Buddle	April 1998	2,750.00	
		May 1998	£1,650.00	
		June 1998	£5,775.00	
		July 1998	£1,100.00	
		August 1998	£1,100.00	
		September 1998	£2,750.00	
		October 1998	£2,835.00	
		November 1998	£6,073.20	
		December 1998	£5,985.00	
		December 1998	£630.00	
		January 1999	£3,150.00	
		February 1999	£4,907.70	
		March 1999	£3,465.00	
		March 1999	£1,260.00	
Total for 1998–99				£43,430.90

Question 72 (Mr Ian Davidson): Comparison of visitor figures to the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland and other comparable museums in England, Scotland and Wales

PERFORMANCE 2005–06

	<i>MAGNI</i>	<i>National Museums of Scotland</i>	<i>National Museums of Wales</i>
Visitor Figures	749,002	1,586,906	1,343,685
Population*	1,710,300	5,078,400	2,952,500
Visitor Figures as % of Population	44%	31%	46%
C2DE Visitors 05/06	31%	18%	32%
% satisfied/v satisfied	98%	85%	78%

NOTES

* Office of National Statistics website 2004.

While KPI comparisons with English Museums are less meaningful because their catchment area is very different, it can be noted that the C2DE visitor figure for National Museums Liverpool is 25% and for the Victoria and Albert Museum 8%.

Further supplementary memorandum from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Question 72 (Mr Ian Davidson)

This additional information includes visitor numbers to the MAGNI sites and comparisons with Museums in Scotland and Wales. I informed the Committee that the visitor numbers for MAGNI in 2005–06 were 749,002 representing, 44% of the population. I am writing to clarify that these figures include Northern Ireland's Science and Discovery Centre, WhoWhatWhenWhereWhy (W5). W5 is one of five sites within the Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland and the visitor numbers of all five sites provide one of MAGNI's Key Performance Indicators.

Unlike Northern Ireland, the Science and Discovery Centres within Scotland and Wales are not part of their National Museums of Scotland and National Museums of Wales do not include Science and Discovery Centres. National Museums of Scotland has seven “traditional” museum sites and National Museums of Wales has six “traditional” museums sites.

For clarification the Visitor Numbers for the whole of MAGNI in 2005–06 including W5 were 749,002 representing 44% of the population. Visitor numbers of the four “traditional” museum sites, excluding W5, for 2005–06 were 540,579 representing 32% of the NI population.

The other figures supplied for MAGNI, ie percentage of C2DE visitors and customer satisfaction levels did not include W5. The methodology used by W5 for measuring these is not directly comparable to that used for the other MAGNI sites and amalgamating these would not have been meaningful. Both measures are included within MAGNI’s Key Performance Indicators and noted as not including W5.
