



## **NATIONAL ARCHIVES ADVISORY COUNCIL**

### **Annual Report 2021 – June 2022**

#### **1. Introduction**

Section 21 of the National Archives Act, 1986, requires the NAAC to submit its report to the Minister who must then lay it before each House of the Oireachtas. This report covers the 18-month period from January 2021 to June 2022, which marks the end of the current board's term. The current Council was appointed in July 2017, and held its first meeting 25 October 2017, with 2021 representing its fourth full year in operation. This report notes the continued challenges facing the National Archives of Ireland (NA) regarding its statutory obligations. 2021 saw the continuing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on operations and access to holdings, as well as the phased re-opening of services in line with government public health guidelines.

The Council note in particular the excellent work of the Director of the National Archives and the implementation of her planned strategy for the NA. Replenishment of staff numbers in the current climate is particularly welcome given the increased demands on the National Archives with the 20-year rule. The high visibility of the NA in commemorative events such as the *Treaty Exhibition and the Virtual Record Treasury of Ireland* are remarkable, especially when pandemic-related restrictions are taken into account.

Concerns remain, in particular, in relation to the planned building of an extension to the National Archives and the infrastructure for the management of digital holdings, and we will endeavour to support the efforts of the Director in this direction.

**Sráid an Easpaig, Baile Átha Cliath 8, D08 DF85**  
Bishop Street, Dublin 8, D08 DF85

**Chair**  
Mr. Justice John Hedigan

**Council Members**  
Dr. Ciara Breathnach; Mr. John Grenham; Dr. Natalie Harrower; Mr. Kieran Hoare; Comdt. Stephen Mac Eoin; Mr. Brian McGee; Dr. Hiram Morgan; Ms. Catriona Mulcahy; Dr. Elizabeth Mullins; Mr. Michael Nolan and Professor Deirdre Raftery

## 1.1 Membership

All members of the NAAC serve pro bono. The historians, archivists, specialists and users on the Council give of their time and expertise in the hope of improving the situation of the National Archives and that of archives generally in Ireland. The members are listed below and were appointed on 19 July 2017.

The Hon Mr. Justice John Hedigan (Chairman)

Dr Ciara Breathnach (Irish Manuscripts Commission nominee)

John Grenham

Dr Natalie Harrower

Kieran Hoare

Comdt Stephen Mac Eoin

Brian McGee

Dr Hiram Morgan (Irish Manuscripts Commission nominee)

Catriona Mulcahy

Dr Elizabeth Mullins

Michael Nolan

Professor Deirdre Raftery

Secretary to the Council, Mr Brian Bermingham, National Archives (to November 2021), then Simon Willmott, National Archives (March 2022).

## 2. Meetings and Report of the Council

The NAAC met on four occasions in 2021: Monday 25 January; Tuesday 13 April, Wednesday 15 September and Tuesday 23 November. Three meetings were held in 2022, on Tuesday 15 February, Tuesday 26 April and Wednesday 22 June. All meetings apart from the last one were held online in line with government guidance. The NAAC have continued to receive presentations from staff at the National Archives to help provide a better understanding of the work of the different sections. These have included presentations by the Public Services Division and Corporate Services.

In April 2021 the NAAC had a presentation from the Director of the National Archives on the five point strategic plan entitled *Shaping our Future in the Information Age, 2021-2025*, which has informed much of the discussion at our meetings. These goals reflect many of the issues raised by the NAAC in our last Annual Report in the areas of Advocacy, GPDR and Digitisation issues. The five goals are to:

1. Ensure that services are relevant and promote best international practice
2. Develop digital services to enable better access to archives in our custody, enhance public service delivery and increase public engagement through an enhanced education and outreach programme
3. Secure and preserve the records of the state for current and future generations
4. Develop capacity to be a leader in the digital age
5. Strengthen the institution to be an innovative, responsive and dynamic National Archives

The NAAC fully endorse *Shaping our Future in the Information Age, 2021-2025* and have endeavoured to support its implementation and outcomes in every way it can.

To that end the Chair met Minister Martin in June 2021 and outlined a range of concerns the Council had in terms of staffing, digital capacity and ability to deliver on its statutory position, as well as pressing for a review of the National Archives Act [1986]. He also sought the establishment of a high-level review group to examine the role and position of the National Archives across government. We note the Public Services Review undertaken on the National Archives and look forward to seeing its recommendations.

The NAAC recognizes and welcomes the high public profile which the NA has developed on a number of fronts over the period covered by this report. This includes use of social media platforms, online presentations by National Archives staff and a number of public events. Noteworthy among these were:

- ‘Protecting the Public Record: models of international best practice’ (24 June 2021)
- The NAI 2021 Commemoration Programme including a number of public talks; the Treaty Exhibition held in London, Dublin and a number of regional centres in partnership with Local Authorities; the work of artist-in-residence John Beattie.
- An in-person and online seminar entitled ‘The National Archives – the Memory of the Nation’ by our Chair Mr. Justice John Hedigan with responses from members of the NAAC (12 May 2022).

- 'Public Record Office of Ireland: The Story of a Building' launched by Minister Catherine Martin (30 June 2022).

Other work by the NAAC includes a letter to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on concerns around the resourcing of Local Authority Archives. In April 2022 in relation to the proposed establishment of the National Centre for Research and Remembrance the Council agreed the following statement:

The NAAC welcomes the recent announcement of plans to create a National Centre for Research and Remembrance to honour all those who were resident in Mother and Baby Homes, Industrial Schools, Reformatories, Magdalen Laundries and related institutions. The NAAC also welcomes the central role given to the National Archive of Ireland in the professional management of the archival records linked to the proposed repository. It notes the need for the allocation of additional resources to support this as part of the planning process.

The NAAC wish to note with sadness the passing of Gregory O'Connor, archivist. His many years of service to the National Archives and as an advocate of archives is well remembered by us all. It notes the retirement of Tom Quinlan, Keeper. We would like to acknowledge the work of Brian Bermingham as secretary to the NAAC and wish him well in his new role, as well as thanking his replacement Simon Willmott for supporting the work of the Council. Finally, we would like to thank the Director of the National Archives of Ireland, Orlaith McBride, for her leadership, professionalism and vision, and the energy and enthusiasm she has brought to the NA and to the work of the Council since her appointment.

### 3. Conclusion

The NAAC remain concerned around issues of capacity and staffing when compared with other national cultural institutions in Ireland as well as international comparators. We note the continued exemplary work of the staff of the National Archives, the leadership of its Director and the vision outlined in the National Archives Strategic Plan. We also welcome staffing improvements, increased capacity and the enhancement of the public role of the National Archives within the cultural life of the nation. We would also highlight the importance of progress in the Archives Repository Project, the development of capacity to manage born digital records, the implementation of recommendations from the Public Services Review once completed, the primacy of a statutory framework fit for purpose to underpin the work of the National Archives, and the provision of professional archivists and records managers within all government departments and statutory bodies.

## 4.1 Assent

The members of the National Archives Advisory Council hereby, on 13 July 2022, assent in the annual report of 2021-2022.

The Hon. Mr Justice John Hedigan (Chairman)

Dr Ciara Breathnach (Irish Manuscripts Commission nominee)

Dr Hiram Morgan (Irish Manuscripts Commission nominee)

John Grenham

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## Appendix

### Function and Remit of the National Archives Advisory Council (NAAC)

The NAAC was first established in January 1987, its principal function being to advise the Taoiseach, now the relevant Minister (currently Minister Catherine Martin, Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and The Media) in the exercise of her powers under the National Archives Act, 1986 and as amended by the National Archives (Amendment) Act of 2018. It also advises on all matters affecting archives and their use by the public. Under the Local Government Act of 1994 and the Harbours Act of 1996, the Council may also advise the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine on any matters affecting local archives and harbour board archives respectively.

In particular, the Council advises on issues of policy relating to management, staffing and accommodation of the National Archives, the disposal of records by government departments and other public bodies, the transfer of departmental records to the National Archives for preservation as archives, the acquisition of archives from other sources, the availability of archives for public inspection, the preservation of archives and the services provided by the National Archives to members of the public.

The core function of the National Archives is the conservation and preservation of the records of government and the provision of access to those archives. The function is legislated for in the National Archives Act, 1986, and as amended under the National Archives (Amendment) Act, 2018. The main provisions of the Act regarding departmental records are summarised as follows:

- All departmental records must be preserved, unless their destruction is authorised in writing by the Director of the National Archives or another officer of the National Archives designated by the Director for the purpose (Section 6 of the Regulations, 1989).

- In general, all Departmental records which are more than 30 years old must be transferred to the National Archives Act, 1986. Those records deemed appropriate by the Minister and relevant government minister, which are more than 20 years old, under the provisions of the National Archives (Amendment) Act, 2018 will also be transferred. Particular records may be retained by Departments and/or be withheld from public inspection only if they are covered by certificates stating either:

- o That they are in regular use in a Department or are required in connection with its administration, or

- o That making them available for inspection by the public would/might:

- Be contrary to the public interest, or
- Constitute a breach of statutory duty, or a breach of good faith on the ground that they contain information supplied in confidence, or
- Cause distress or danger to living persons on the grounds that they contain information about individuals or would or might be likely to lead to an action for damages