Northern Ireland museums transformed thanks to National Lottery

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The Museums Association Conference and Exhibition 2018, the biggest event of its kind in Europe, gets underway in Belfast tomorrow (8 November). The theme of this year's event is Dissent: inspiring hope, embracing change; a fitting topic for a city which has changed dramatically since the conference was last hosted here 30 years ago.

The local museum sector has been transformed since then, with National Lottery funding playing a key role since 1994. HLF has awarded a huge £53million to 95 museums, libraries, archives and collections-based projects to create the vibrant, thriving cultural offering that can be found across Northern Ireland today.

HLF funding has benefited both large and small museums, supporting infrastructure and capital projects including those at the Braid, Ballymena (£4.4m), Bagenal's Castle, Newry (£1.5m) and Enniskillen Castle (£2.3m). It has helped develop collections such as the Armada Exhibition at the Tower Museum in Derry (£1.4m), conserved the historic O'Laverty Library at St Malachy's College, Belfast (£592,500), and provided skills development opportunities and traineeships to enhance or kick-start a career in heritage.

Small grants have brought big benefits too such as improving visitor facilities and access at Armagh County Museum (£90,000) and supporting creative new ways to inspire and connect with new audiences through initiatives like the Northern Ireland Museum Council's Playful Museums Festival (£99,000).

Head of HLF Northern Ireland, Paul Mullan, said: "In Northern Ireland our heritage is often contested and is at times difficult, so it is vital that we have a robust network of museums, programmes and initiatives to facilitate discussion and exploration of our past and help place these diverse narratives into a wider context.

"Thanks to National Lottery players crucial funding has been provided to create a local museum sector that is creative, adaptive and outward looking. Much can be learned from our local sector and we hope the delegates at this year's event are inspired by our story."

HLF's support for the redevelopment of the Ulster Museum amounted to £4.7m, which was at the time the largest grant made in Northern Ireland. William Blair, Director of Collections, Ulster Museum said: "The Heritage Lottery Fund has provided important support for the Ulster Museum's modernisation and development. A grant towards the refurbishment of the Museum provided the catalyst for a major investment aimed at making the Museum and its collections more accessible. The success of this project was recognised by the Ulster Museum winning the prestigious UK Art Fund Prize in 2010.

"Since then HLF has supported the Ulster Museum in meeting key challenges around engaging more effectively with contested history and helping to address the legacy of our recent past. The new approaches can clearly be seen in the Modern History and Troubles and Beyond galleries at the Museum.

"HLF support has enabled us to be more courageous and to deliver more fully on our role and purpose in society. We will continue to use our collections creatively to engage our visitors in new conversations about our past, present and future."

HLF support has been used to create a world-class heritage attraction and engage new audiences in Fermanagh.

Sarah McHugh, Museum and Heritage Manager, Fermanagh & Omagh District Council, said: “HLF has been instrumental in transforming Fermanagh County Museum's ability to engage with diverse audiences and care for collections at its base within Enniskillen Castle. Thanks to HLF’s support, Fermanagh County Museum and the wider Enniskillen Castle complex is in a much stronger, more vibrant position to respond to new demands while safeguarding facilities and services for the enjoyment of generations to come.”

Other projects to benefit include the Museum of Free Derry, which received £808,000 to redevelop and extend the museum, improve facilities and increase access to its collections. Adrian Kerr, Manager at the Museum of Free Derry, said: “HLF has provided vital support to the Museum of Free Derry, both capital and revenue. Without this financial support, and the support of HLF staff, the museum could certainly not have developed as well as it has done. We look forward to continuing to work with HLF as we now consolidate our new museum and work towards fully realising the potential of our collections.”

In Newry and Mourne HLF support was used to restore and reuse the 16th century Bagenal’s Castle and adjoining 19th century warehouse as a Museum and Tourism Information centre. Noreen Cunningham, Museum Curator, Newry and Mourne Museum, said: “The Museum in Newry has benefitted greatly from HLF support, not just with our Bagenal's Castle capital project and opening of the Museum in 2007, but also through various projects we have been involved in as partners with other stakeholders - including a reminiscence project, the Collections Skills Initiative with Northern Ireland Museums Council and National Museums Northern Ireland.”

Notes to editors

Thanks to National Lottery players, we invest money to help people across the UK explore, enjoy and protect the heritage they care about - from the archaeology under our feet to the historic parks and buildings we love, from precious memories and collections to rare wildlife.

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