

# 'Donegal: A Creative County - making connections, creating opportunity'

Speaking notes

for

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**Chief Executive**

**An Chomhairle Oidreachta**

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“Heritage – Inspiring Innovation for Economic Growth”

## Introduction

Good morning. It is good to be back in Ballybofey. The last time I was at anything official here was most likely a Horslips or Planxty concert in the Sir Isaac Butt Memorial Hall (sort of dates me) or a Finn Harps match against Derry City ( which doesn't date me quite so much). I have also supped many a good bowl of soup at a range of family events over the years in Jackson's Hotel and often passed through Ballybofey and Stranolar en route between home on the Inishowen Peninsula and my parent's birth places in Inver and Ballintra. There is a bit of a Donegal pedigree and I for one felt that Donegal should have been in the all Ireland final last month – and indeed deserved to be there – the begrudgers notwithstanding.

I have to admit that since coming back to work in Ireland as Chief Executive of the Heritage Council my sojourns to the North West have been declining year on year – so I can empathise with the general sense of isolation that can be felt in the County. Others in the organization get the nice jobs. However I recall in 1998 shortly after taking up my appointment, the shock some members of the audience expressed whilst I was attending an event in the Blasket Islands Centre beyond Sleah Head in Kerry when I stated that I hadn't been that far south since I was a child. However on asking how many of them had been to Malin Head I was met with a resounding silence. One up to Donegal! You see we too would have beaten Kerry.

And so to the task in hand. Words such as *creative, innovative, inspiring* all encourage a sense of optimism. Donegal in hosting today's conference is in fact taking a lead, allowing thoughts to be sharpened in a way that will help our Country to escape from the current malaise. It is the Heritage Council's intention to encourage/incentivize others to follow suit in the wake of the Heritage and Innovation conference taking place in Dublin on the 27<sup>th</sup> October. Certainly my intent at the end of this short presentation is that you are all feeling positive and ready to grasp the opportunities that heritage can present when we think and act *creatively, innovatively and inspirationally*.

## A heritage sector - fact or fiction?

I suggest we start by thinking of heritage differently i.e. as a sector. The heritage sector – now there is an interesting term. Does such a sector exist or is heritage a series of fragmented interests that shelter occasionally under a "heritage" flag of convenience? If we look at the State's traditional structures for the management and conservation of our national heritage you would have to say that the flag of convenience analogy is still the most appropriate. Silos still exist within which architects act as architects, archaeologists as archaeologists, biologists as biologists, museum curators as museum curators etc. Excuse the over generalisation but if that

is the case then, in my view, the structures within which they operate need to change to make them fit for purpose and relevant to today's circumstances.

Our national heritage (in the Heritage Act (1995)<sup>1</sup>) is defined as including many more of the above disparate interests. Can they be encouraged to operate as a sector rather than or as well as, an interest? One of the most progressive aspects of the Heritage Act is that it encourages and provides the potential for heritage to be conserved, managed and planned in an integrated and multidisciplinary manner. Natural and Cultural heritage are not considered in isolation and the internal structures that Council has established and constantly reviewed do not encourage anything other than an integrated and multidisciplinary approach. Similarly the heritage infrastructure that Council has built (see section below) since it was established all operate within a philosophy that sees the need for a strong and competent heritage sector to complement its constituent parts. They may meet some particular interest or gap in a particular area, a new business niche, but they all demonstrate how "things" can be done differently, innovatively and creatively.

### **New Structures - new ways of working**

In the 15 short years since its establishment the Heritage Council has carved out a unique niche and built a heritage infrastructure that operates in an empowering, enabling and facilitating way. It works hand in hand with a range of key partners and local communities in particular. It has created new ways of working that complement (and certainly don't replicate) the more established state heritage services whether within the OPW or the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Council's business can be characterised as operating in the 80% of Ireland where state ownership or designation is not the only measure by which state support is forthcoming i.e. in the heritage space that lies outside the core remit of the other state bodies. This involves a much greater emphasis on reaching out to, and working within the majority of the people's heritage, a heritage from which many would argue "the people" had been disenfranchised. Heritage until recent times was seen as the preserve of experts. I have to admit here that whilst the President of the EUROPARC FEDERATION<sup>2</sup> I upset a lot of "experts" by writing a short essay entitled "We need to de-expertise protected areas". Experts and scientists will always have their important role to play but there is an obligation to involve the wider public who bring their own creative understanding, values and sense of place to all

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<sup>1</sup> The Heritage Act (1995) section 6 describes the national heritage as including, monuments, archaeological objects, heritage objects, architectural heritage, flora, fauna, wildlife habitats, landscapes, seascapes, wrecks, geology, heritage gardens and parks and inland waterways.

<sup>2</sup> The EUROPARC Federation is a pan-European federation that is the voice of Europe's National and Regional Parks. It has over 400 members in 40 European countries

aspects of heritage conservation and its management and their voice also needs to be included – the ‘experts’ can not nor should not purport to speak for a sector!

The heritage infrastructure that has been created and supported by Council thinks and works in an integrated and multidisciplinary manner, never in isolation and are all in their own manner innovative and contributing to our national economic and social recovery. In some cases there is a joint public private role and in most there is a very strong community involvement, the energy and enthusiasm of which is tapped to drive new ways of doing things.

Finding common goals within the heritage sector is especially important at this time and while we may be some ways behind certain sectors we have come a long way over the past decade, There is now more than ever a very real sense of a sector coming together and having a collective voice. This is witnessed in the support across the country for heritage week, involvement in village design programmes, the heritage in schools project and the ongoing work of the heritage infrastructure created or supported by the Heritage Council over the past decade including.

- the Heritage Officer Programme,
- the Irish Walled Towns Network (IWTN),
- the Irish Landmark Trust,
- the National Biodiversity Centre (NBDC),
- the Discovery Programme (DP),
- the Museums Standards Programme of Ireland (MSPI),
- the Woodlands of Ireland,
- the Wicklow Uplands Council,
- the Bere Island Initiative
- Ireland Reaching Out or others too numerous to mention,

In essence the model that Council has created, and now operates within, is itself creative and provides the opportunities for others to take risk, to innovate and often to inspire. Is that not the type of heritage sector we all want to see in the future?

For example both the NBDC and the Discovery Programme (whilst based on the soundest principals of natural science and cultural research) are operating at the cutting edge of information technology – and in certain areas leading in European terms. If you doubt that just come to the conference on the 27<sup>th</sup> or check out their web sites. The IWTN network and the MSPI both operate in an environment where they are encouraged to be masters of their own destiny, networking and drawing support from others in the same business. They create solutions to their own problems and are constantly testing new ground to make their operations relevant and dynamic. Communities in Bere Island and Wicklow have created new frameworks and structures within which, to a large extent, they plan for, manage and conserve their own heritage. Ireland Reaching Out is standing some of the traditional approaches to genealogy on their head and is capturing the imagination nationwide.

Structures such as this need to be made more widely available, allowing others to benefit. It is for this reason that Council has lobbied long and hard for a national landscape strategy<sup>3</sup> and for new legislation (A Landscape Ireland Act) to implement the strategy and to make such benefits and structures available nationwide. The development of a Landscape Observatory of Ireland (LOI) as proposed by the Heritage Council to Government in 2010<sup>4</sup> to act as an accessible and user friendly repository for all aspects of our natural and cultural heritage would be a hugely innovative step for Ireland – ultimately supporting and encouraging further innovation and enterprise

### **Arguing the Case – facts not fiction**

Council has therefore been innovative in its approach and encouraged others to be so. Council has not followed the traditional public sector model whereby it would have grown in to a huge bureaucracy based in Kilkenny, using over 70-80% of its turnover for wages and overheads. Rather it has kept its wages and overheads at levels lower than 20% and used the other 80% to provide a service that enables, encourages and facilitates the “sector” to remodel its infrastructure and to assist local communities to enhance the quality of their heritage. The list of grants appended illustrates how far that approach has reached recently in Donegal.

With the above approach the Heritage Council has directly created 70 full time posts in the heritage infrastructure listed above. The Heritage Officers (26) are the only public sector workers in that 70 and are employed in partnership with local authorities. They are the lynch

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<sup>3</sup> The Government recently published the Draft National Landscape Strategy for public consultation – period ends in November 2011

<sup>4</sup> Proposals for Ireland’s Landscapes 2010 – The Heritage Council

pin of the Heritage Council's outreach to local communities. The other jobs are in a range of models including direct employment in the private sector through service level agreements, or companies limited by guarantee or the establishment of charitable trusts.

The value for money and creativity that this involves has never been more important in these times of economic stringency and the long standing embargo on recruitment in the public sector. However it is not economics or embargos that have driven the Heritage Council approach. Rather it is a deep rooted conviction and philosophical approach that there is a better way of doing things. In fact there is a thesis that says the Heritage Council was established with its own legislation to do just that – demonstrate a new way of working – something which it was felt more traditional bodies would resist.

The approach also offers real value for money. New research to support this view will be headlined at the conference in Dublin on the 27<sup>th</sup> October to be opened by Mr Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. As a taster of the results it can be shown that for every €1m of grant support from the Heritage Council in 2010/11, 449 jobs are supported across the Country. Of these

- 69 are direct jobs created including crafts, conservation and highly skilled jobs
- 73 are jobs that would have been lost if no grant had been given
- 307 are jobs indirectly servicing projects

These are not extrapolated figures but factual ones. In essence €10k invested by the Heritage Council in the sector results in support for 4.4 jobs. This is employment which generates tax and other revenues for the state at a fraction of the cost within other sectors. We need to become much more focused in getting such information across and the 27<sup>th</sup> October conference is one step along that way.

## **Conclusion**

It may be no small coincidence that the disproportionate cuts received across the sector last December were in part because the sector was not perceived by government as existing at all. The range of apparently disparate interests that make up our national heritage were easily picked off one by one. The high level of "sectoral" support for the position adopted by Council in the face of such cuts illustrates the positive impact that the collective voice can have. Now 12 months on let us hope for all our sakes – and not just those who think they belong – that the value and significance of the heritage sector's contribution to all our lives is now better understood and appreciated – and never taken for granted. There is certainly a degree of futility in investing tens of millions of euro in marketing our heritage as a tourism produce whist

at the same time failing to provide adequate resources for people to manage and conserve the quality of that heritage. Others today will speak at more length about tourism opportunities but to emphasise the latter point it is worth tasting a little more of our emerging research

- 77% of Heritage Council projects support local tourism
- 62% of organisations in receipt of grant believe tourism would have declined if they had been unsuccessful
- €1 spent by the Heritage Council results in €4.4 for the tourism industry

It is not being overly optimistic to say that we are in a better place now than we were 15 years ago to argue the case for the heritage sector. The list of infrastructure listed above is there to help us all, as is the new found confidence within local communities, fostered by targeted grants programmes, that they can make a difference to the quality and levels of understanding of their heritage. Given that franchise and an infrastructure that is supportive and not overly prescriptive and there will be only one outcome – a positive heritage sector that is recognised as a major contributor to the economic, social and environmental well being of all the people of Ireland.

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