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Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Follow-up Inspection

of

The Work of the Education, Learning and Outreach Section

of

The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland

January 2008

FOLLOW-UP TO THE SURVEY INSPECTION OF THE WORK OF THE EDUCATION, LEARNING AND OUTREACH SECTION OF THE PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

The survey inspection in October-November 2005 highlighted many strengths in the work of the Education, Learning and Outreach (ELO) section of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). These strengths included the expertise, helpfulness, and commitment of the ELO officers, the significant extent to which the PRONI focus on outreach reflects developments in the United Kingdom, the extensive links with a broad range of groups, the extent to which the schools valued the consultancy role of the ELO section, the cross-community contact provided through the historical re-enactments and the success of shared initiatives.

The inspection also identified the need for improvement in the following areas:

- additional resources, as recommended in DCAL's Archives Policy for Northern Ireland Consultation Document (2004), to sustain and develop further PRONI's ELO strategy, and to provide suitable training for the ELO officers;

- more sustained developmental contacts with the education sector at all levels including teacher education, and more proactive links with local history societies;

- improved on-line links to PRONI's resources and a greater emphasis on working with schools, to provide local archival materials, with more attention to 20th Century issues and trends;

- the implementation of more rigorous internal monitoring and evaluation to determine more clearly, the effectiveness of the section's work, and to inform future developments;

- a greater emphasis on those elements of PRONI's work which contribute to cross-community understanding in Northern Ireland's (NI) divided and increasingly pluralist society; and

- greater connectivity and partnerships among archival and related providers in NI, on initiatives involving ancestral, cultural and academic tourism, and on local issues.

In the interval since the inspection, the following actions which affect the work of the ELO have taken place:

- a reduction in the staff within the ELO section to one full-time officer and an administrative assistant;

- the limitations in development occasioned by the change in PRONI's strategy, to promote clients coming into PRONI rather than prioritising the outreach work of the ELO section; and

- the account taken of the inspection findings by the ELO section's business plans.

The Education and Training Inspectorate carried out a follow-up inspection in January 2008.

The following are the most important improvements since the survey inspection:

- there are improved on-line links to PRONI's resources, and to the ELO officers;
- in working with schools and other client groups, a more effective focus has been given to providing opportunities for staff to develop their capacity in the use of the archives;
- there is a more focused approach to the provision of local archival material to schools, and the development of an effective on-line resource about life in NI during the Second World War has increased access to 20th Century material;
- there are improved links with post-primary schools through PRONI's on-line developments; links have been developed with further education through a creative writing non-fiction course and higher education institutes use PRONI's archival material in the development of the students' research skills;
- a good start has been made to the more systematic targeting in ELO's business planning, of activities which relate to cross-community understanding in NI's divided and increasingly pluralist society; and
- the increased level of partnership work on behalf of the ELO section with other archival and related providers in NI, on initiatives involving ancestral, cultural and academic tourism, and on local issues.

Following the announcement of the follow-up inspection, the ELO section completed a report in which the staff evaluated the progress they had made. The report represents a good beginning to internal quality assurance and self-evaluation, but the process is not yet well enough embedded to inform development planning. There remains a need for the senior management of PRONI to develop a clearer, costed, strategic development plan for the ELO section.

Much of the good work identified in the original survey inspection still continues and the ELO officers have demonstrated a high level of commitment to addressing the areas for improvement identified. In spite of the constraints resulting from reduced resources since the inspection, the ELO section has made good progress in most of the areas for improvement which were identified during the original survey inspection. The staff have also demonstrated the capacity to address the minor areas still requiring improvement.

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