



## Belfast City Council

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| Report to:         | Development Committee                                       |
| Subject:           | The Black Box   |
| Date:              | 10 February 2010  |
| Reporting Officer: | Shirley McCay, Head of Economic Initiatives, ext 3459       |
| Contact Officer:   | Kerrie Sweeney, Tourism, Culture and Arts Manager, ext 3586 |

### Relevant Background Information

Members will be aware that at a meeting of the Development Committee on the 7 March 2008, Committee agreed to offer a two year funding package comprising £25,000 in each of the 2008/9 and 2009/10 financial years to the Black Box. Committee also agreed that it would not provide any further financial assistance to the Black Box in those or any further year.

Support was approved as the Committee recognised there was a major gap in the physical infrastructure pending the completion of a major capital development, the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC). This was on the basis that, on opening, the MAC development would fulfil the cultural infrastructural needs in the Cathedral Quarter. Since the opening of the MAC has now been delayed until 2012, the need for a temporary venue remains as there is still no mid-scale home for festivals and events in the City centre and the Black Box has become a crucial focus for cultural and tourism activity. BCC has received a request from the Black Box to review its decision of March 2008 and to consider financial support for a further 2 years to enable the Black Box to become wholly self-financing. Presently the Black Box is 82% self financing.

### Key Issues

Since the Black Box opened in April 2006, it has become an essential part of Belfast's cultural infrastructure with over 55,000 people attending events in 2009. It has received many awards and was most recently described by the Irish News as 'Belfast's Premier Arts Venue'. It is the hub of cultural tourism activity in Belfast since its programming, which includes live music, theatre, literature, comedy, film, visual art, live art, circus, and cabaret, is indigenous and authentic. It has provided the focus for Belfast City Council's Sunday's Programme, Late Night Art, Music Tourism and Culture Night. It also plays a vital role for Creative Industries with most local unsigned musicians choosing it as the venue to launch and profile new albums.

More critically the Black Box is now home to most Belfast Festivals, including The Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, The Belfast Film Festival, The Open House Festival, Out to Lunch, Belfast Children's Festival, Belfast Nashville Songwriters' Festival, The Sonorities Festival, Oscillations, Belfast Pride Week, Moving on Music, Outburst and Trans Urban Arts Academy.

It has succeeded in meeting each of these seven objectives:

1. To meet an urgent need in the local arts infrastructure, specifically in the Cathedral Quarter, with the opening of a temporary venue by January 2006;
2. To contribute to the regeneration of Belfast's North City centre through the arts and cultural sectors;
3. To assist in the promotion of Belfast as an attractive cultural tourist destination, with 180 events during a twelve month period;
4. To provide a showcase for the best of local talent;
5. To highlight the social, celebratory and enjoyable aspects of engagement with the arts;
6. To appeal to less mainstream, less traditional and younger audiences;
7. To create employment for eight people

At a meeting held on 16 December 2009 with Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), Department for Social Development (DSD), Belfast City Council and the Black Box, it was evident that the future of the Black Box will be secured only if public sector support is continued. ACNI agreed to commit a two year funding package of £25,000 in each of the 2010/11 and 2011/2012 years, and will not commit any further assistance once the MAC opens in 2012. ACNI have made this conditional offer on the basis of match funding from Belfast City Council. The Black Box will also source funding from the DSD's Laganside grant scheme. ACNI have commissioned an independent review to determine the future of the Black Box with the aim of the organisation becoming self-sustainable by 2012.

The Black Box state they can only continue if public support is made available for the next two years. Closure would result in a major gap in Belfast's cultural infrastructure. The amount requested is a low percentage of public sector funding and has offered a very good return on investment for Belfast City Council. It underlines the high level of earned income as it is 82% self funding, a figure unparalleled in the Arts Sector. The Black Box will play a key role in profiling the opening of the MAC and further enhance the development of Cathedral Quarter as the cultural hub of the City – ensuring that arts is placed at the centre of this area's regeneration.

### **Resource Implications**

A two year funding package comprising £25,000 in each of the 2010/11 and 2011/12 years to come from within the Tourism, Culture and Arts budget.

**Recommendations**

It is recommended that Committee agree to offer a two year funding package comprising £25,000 in 2010/11 and 2011/12 to come from within the Tourism, Culture and Arts budget.

**Decision Tracking**

Further to ratification that the funding payments be allocated to the Black Box

Timeframe: April 2011

Reporting Officer: Kerrie Sweeney

**Abbreviations**

ACNI – Arts Council of Northern Ireland

DSD – Department for Social Development

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