

Extracts from Reflecting the People – Maureen Mackin February 2010

“5. PRINCIPLES for SHARED SPACE and PROGRAMMING

“there is now an opportunity for the Council to enhance the overall sense of shared experience and community involvement, to promote maximum participation by all communities and to provide access to attractive, high quality and unique services in relation to the City Hall.

Principles underpinning this Action Plan

- 5.5 “In theory, the fabric of the City Hall and the range of objects displayed could be continuously added to, depending on available budget and taking due cognisance of the need to fit with the ambience of a listed building. However, the image of the City Hall might be equally enhanced with a body of well-publicised activity and information-based services which demonstrate that the building is representative of all political persuasions and is open and welcoming to all.
- 5.6 This report recommends that the Council takes a broad approach to development which addresses both the fabric of the building and its displays as well as commissioning additional artwork and developing a high quality programme of events. It is recommended that the programme is wide-ranging with some events being popular, entertaining and targeted at a family audience while others might be more tailored to those who wish to debate their history and heritage and the influences that these have on Belfast today.
- 5.7 While the City Hall aims to address the issues pertinent to ‘good practice’ in shared ‘physical’ space, so, too, the events programme would be subject to similar ‘proofing’ in terms of its content, marketing and promotion, and implementation. The Community Relations Council’s *Guidelines for a Cultural Diversity Policy* (2001) contains suggestions for the organisation and implementation of events / event programmes e.g. festivals, which aim to be culturally diverse. The guidance advises that major events classified as cultural diversity events should:
- represent all communities / clients living in the area for which the organisation has responsibility
 - include all age groups
 - cover the whole geographic area
 - involve all abilities
- 5.8 The guidelines also recommend that events and programmes should encompass:
- a range of organisations
 - a range of delivery mechanisms – concerts, exhibitions, workshops etc
 - a range of projects which have the potential of covering all age groups and address:
 - heritage (the past)
 - contemporary interests (the present)
 - creative projects (the future)
 - a wide variety of topics and approaches including:
 - identity (ethnic, religious, political etc)
 - local history
 - heritage
 - arts
 - music
 - language
 - faiths
 - sports

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6.2 The process of moving towards ‘balance’ will not be easy and the challenges are recognised by Members. Conflict and violence between and within communities has left a deep and negative legacy in Belfast and Councillors face the consequences of this in their daily work. Despite recent positive developments in the political arena, Belfast people live, attend school, celebrate traditions, play sport and socialise separately. Aspects of our culture have become ‘contested spaces’ (faith, language, sport, cultural heritage and interpretations of history) rather than areas of commonality that we would be naturally disposed to explore together.

6.3 Against a backdrop of ongoing and energetic political activity, addressing and presenting the many aspects of Belfast’s civic, social and political history is a challenge which requires sensitivity, skill and collaborative working. Re-claiming our various histories and presenting our cultural backgrounds to one another in an open and non-threatening way will need facilitation and patience. Engaging meaningfully with the contemporary dimensions of the city deserves attention also and will assist in helping citizens to move into the present and forward into the future.

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- *provision of physical space and presentational opportunities for additional and differing perspectives (historic and contemporary) through additional artefacts, commissioned artworks, commissioned large-scale photographs, purchased affordable contemporary artworks, exhibitions, publications, multi-media guides, introductory / visitor orientation film;*
- *implementation of well-defined, Council–initiated events within City Hall paying due regard to community background and geographic spread;*
- *development of the City Hall as a year-round cultural venue for activities which are aligned with MWG objectives and integrated with other relevant Council initiatives e.g. Cultural Tourism, City of Festivals, Events, Anniversary celebrations;*
- *development of partnerships with individuals, organisations and institutions with the specialist expertise necessary for the optimum delivery of the programme;*
- *establishment of quality standards for the activities in relation to content, production values and adherence to cultural diversity principles;*

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Exploring Differing Perspectives

7.12 Dealing with the historic aspects of our culture and addressing issues of identity and political allegiance based upon personal and collective interpretations of history is a challenge in Northern Ireland. A lack of knowledge in relation to the complexity of history or a disinclination to engage with it can result in skewed interpretation which when presented as the ‘final word’ on a subject can cause confusion and misunderstanding. There is a need to explore the complexity of our society as it was in the past and as it is now.

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Anniversaries

7.17 The forthcoming decade will see a number of important anniversaries in the Belfast calendar. It is recommended that preparations for these commence as soon as possible in order that events will be of good quality and inclusive in terms of content and community involvement. It is also recommended that an over-arching title is used here again. The title ‘Belfast – a century ago ... a hundred years on ...’ would point to both years, past and present, and allow both the historic and contemporary stories to be told. For example, 1912 is the year of the signing of the Ulster Covenant while 2012 is the

Olympic year. The signing of the Covenant would be explored within a wide historic context and the contribution of Belfast to the Olympics plus other significant contemporary events could be included. The inclusion of an exhibition on boxing in 2012 might be appropriate and an excellent exhibition recently curated by the Ulster American Folk Park might be pursued. The 400th anniversary of the signing of Belfast's charter will take place in 2013; the historic and contemporary could be explored and presented (in this case, a different over-arching title would be required to indicate 400 years). Other events could be similarly treated e.g. 1914 (beginning of First World War) / 2014; 1916 (anniversary of Easter Rising) / 2016.

Extract from the Taoiseach's speech entitled ""A Decade of Commemorations: Commemorating Our Shared History" to the Institute for British Irish Studies, University College Dublin, 20 May 2010

"For our part, the Government has considered these issues in recent weeks and has decided that its approach will be guided by several principles

We want to see full acknowledgment of the totality of the island's history and the legitimacy of all the traditions on the island that draw their identity and collective memory from our shared history.

We want the process of commemoration to recognise the totality of the history of the period, and all of the diversity that this encompasses,

We believe that mutual respect should be central to all commemorative events and that historical accuracy should be paramount.

Based on those principles, we will engage in a programme of outreach to all those who are interested in commemorating our history, in all its dimensions, with pride and with respect.

That will, of course, include all of the political parties on the island, as well as leaders of civic society and cultural institutions. The parties in the Oireachtas have been working together on these issues and that consensual approach will be crucial in the period ahead."