

**A CITY
IMAGiNING**

Belfast

SUPPORTING
CULTURAL
RECOVERY



Belfast in 2020

Belfast is an international city with a rich and eclectic cultural community and arts sector, a diverse built environment, thriving business sectors and a growing number of visitors.

However since March, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact worldwide and has altered Belfast's physical, economic and social landscape. It has caused us all to rethink how we work, live and interact within public spaces and with each other, and has triggered a need to reconsider our plans on a strategic and operational level.

Yet it is in this reexamination of our priorities that the hope articulated in Belfast's Cultural Statement

resonates with a belief in:

‘the transformative power that culture, art and creativity have to spark a new relationship with ourselves as individuals, communities and as a city.’

As we embark on the road to recovery it is our cultural and creative sectors that can help imagine our future city.

Creative interventions are fundamental to aiding our city's recovery and will contribute to the evolving and new use of public space in the city centre environment and in our neighbourhoods. It is through cultural placemaking that a safe, vibrant and welcoming city can continue to thrive.

VISION FOR 2035

BELFAST WILL BE A CITY...



Strategy

A *City Imagining*, a ten year cultural strategy for Belfast, was the culmination of extensive public and sector engagement. It recognised the need for long-term commitment over a decade in order to drive transformation. However, it also presented a dynamic model for change to ensure resilience to external factors and potential social, economic and environmental shifts. Consequently, while the full scale and impact of Covid-19 remains unknown and the level of structural change to the city's overall and cultural ecosystem is uncertain, the strategy remains valid presenting a strong framework for any recovery plans.

The framework supports cultural engagement and participation by aligning to wider council strategies such as the Belfast Agenda.

It is critical that the implementation of the strategy recognises the impact of Covid-19 on the cultural sector, responds accordingly and plans for long-term stability.

The strategic aims and projects contained within the strategy can now become vehicles for recovery if public and private sectors stakeholders work collectively to ensure that the sector is protected and supported whilst recognising the cultural dimension to successful economic and social recovery.

The immediate impact of the pandemic illustrated the importance of engaging with the arts and creativity. This reinforced the relationship with education, health and wellbeing highlighting the personal and societal benefits of cultural participation.

Financial Impact

Whilst the impact of Covid-19 is ongoing, the majority of economic sectors are now operating again though often at reduced levels. Unfortunately, the cultural sector remains one of the sectors severely limited in what can be operationally delivered within the current restrictions. Should these limitations be reduced opening up the possibility of a return of cultural programming, further work is still required to analyse the viability of re-opening and to better understand audience sentiment and confidence. Further consideration also needs to be given to the complexities associated with cultural engagement in a participatory environment.

The Arts Council has estimated that the cultural sector in NI is facing an estimated initial loss of box office income of £25 million and have stated that it could take up to a year-and-a-half for the arts sector to recalibrate itself after the crisis. Given the level of cultural infrastructure and workforce in Belfast, this has clear implications for the city.

The operating environment is extremely challenging across the city for all organisations due to the immediate impact on revenue streams and functionality. The ongoing restrictions on physical contact, cultural performances, group gatherings and public events have meant that the cultural sector and the hospitality and tourism sectors it works in tandem with, continue to have major barriers to re-opening and generating income. This includes not only box office but other investment such as sponsorship and project specific restricted grants.

This should also be considered in the context of existing financial and operational vulnerabilities prior to Covid-19, including lower public investment in the arts in comparison with the rest of the UK and ROI and restricted ability to generate income due to regional audience reach and corporate footprint.

ACNI has also stated that as a result of the pandemic, the creative sector in Northern Ireland is projected to lose 20% (6,000) of its creative jobs and see a 23% (£300 million) drop in creative industries Gross Value Added, while the funded arts sector currently supports approximately 7,500 jobs as per the Annual Funding Survey 2018/19 published by ACNI.

The cultural sector also supports a huge range of individuals working freelance or as independent artists who are part of the overall ecology of the city. The timing of the pandemic has also coincided with organisations addressing the potential implications of Brexit on project and partnership development, revenue, and artist mobility.

Recent findings include:

- ↓ Losses of £9.5 million in box office revenue to date.
- ↓ On average, cultural organisations lost 72% of their anticipated 2020-21 box office revenue.
- ↓ Losses of £5.3 million in ancillary income.
- ↓ £1.3 million has already gone towards refunds and vouchers from cancelled performances or programmes this year.

Impact

Impact on audiences

Research conducted by Thrive in partnership with Indigo Consulting offers an important insight into audience sentiment and confidence. Data captured within two *After the Interval* surveys, in May and July, collated information from a wide range of cultural charities and non-charities in NI and ROI. Audiences were asked how they felt about returning to arts events, booking tickets now and in the future and missing out on live events during lockdown

Only 19% would feel comfortable attending events as soon as venues reopen.

More than two thirds would feel more confident if measures were in place such as 2m distance, avoiding queues, hand sanitiser and signage, and limits on attendance.

64% of respondents in July would not consider booking for live events for at least another three months.

96% of people are interested in culture outdoors, and over three quarters said they would pay for it.

93% of people surveyed in May were missing live events.

Only 16% of respondents were currently booking events.

80% of people are interested in digital cultural content, and two thirds would consider paying for it.

Sector support packages

As the lead body to distribute central government cultural investment, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) has operated the Artist Emergency Programme (AEP), since April 2020 distributing up to £500,000 of National Lottery funding. Over 200 artists have so far benefited from grants of up to £5,000.

ACNI have commenced distribution of a £4m funding package called the Creative Support Fund, on behalf of the Department for Communities to support the arts, creative industries and cultural sector during the current pandemic.

This includes Individuals Emergency Resilience Programme (IERP), worth £1m from the Department for Communities and an additional £100,000 from Future Screens NI, offering individuals up to £5,000 each.

The Organisations Emergency Programme (OEP), is worth almost £2m to support 150 small and medium sized arts organisations with grants of up to £25,000 each. Some resources are yet to be committed.

In addition and as a result of the Barnett consequentials, Northern Ireland will receive a £33m support package as part of the £1.57 billion investment in cultural, arts and heritage announced by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. The allocation of this funding will be determined by the Northern Ireland Executive including the level and type of investment made in the cultural sectors.

In line with the Cultural Strategy for Belfast there is an opportunity for this package to help mediate the current crisis whilst also supporting innovative approaches that will promote longer term stability, resilience and transformation in the cultural sector in order to overcome longstanding structural issues.



Belfast City Council Response

Strand one: Stabilisation

To date the response has focussed on protecting the investment made in cultural infrastructure through the new multi-annual funding scheme that became operational in April 2020. This has included support for:

- ✓ 49 arts and heritage organisations through: 11 one-year Transition grants, 9 four-year grants and 29 two-year grants.
- ✓ 18 festivals and events through: 2 one-year grants, 4 four-year grants and 12 two-year grants.

This support has been important in helping to give organisations some level of security in recent months. However, there is now a requirement for all funders to work together to ensure the stabilisation of the sector in what remains uncertain and challenging times.

The pandemic has understandably exposed some of the existing fault lines in the sector and there is an opportunity to ensure that any recovery phase considers the potential to rebuild the sector in a more sustainable way including:

- Audit of existing infrastructure identifying primary areas of need that will ensure that the investment in capital and soft infrastructure to date is protected and resourced.
- Gap analysis of infrastructure including identification of under provision in cultural infrastructure such as secure, sustainable maker space and studios (as identified in *A City Imagining*).
- Greater understanding of the ecology of cultural workforce including relationship between funded organisations, freelance artists and producers and the wider creative industries and supply chain.

It is therefore recommended that Belfast City Council in partnership with government agencies and departments undertakes to produce the following:

- ✓ report on infrastructure prioritised for culture and creative industries
 - analysis of existing strategies, studies and reports as well as primary research, to ascertain immediate, medium, and long-term physical resource needs
 - benchmarking with other cities to compare our provision and identify gaps
 - analysis and mapping of current and potential availability, quality, and suitability of sectoral accommodation, e.g. galleries, dance space, theatres, space for clustering, workshops and studio resources
 - recommendations on alternative and innovative investment models including public sector, private sector and partnerships
- ✓ report on soft infrastructure of culture and creative activity
 - collect, record, analyse and synthesise information to identify the cultural resources, networks, links and patterns of cultural practice
 - data collection will include desk research, primary research with partners and community networks, public engagement, crowdsourcing, etc.
- ✓ Digital cultural map product
 - Build a digital cultural map for city centre and neighbourhoods with interactive functionality (potential to apply approach regionally)
 - data monitoring, tracking and live updating to ensure ongoing relevancy and accuracy

Strand two: Developing the sector

Transform

The cultural strategy recognised that one size fits all was not an effective investment model for culture in the city. The priority was to replace the core multi-annual funding scheme that was due to come to an end in March 2020 with a new fit for purpose programme. The new cultural multi-annual grant (CMAG) scheme has been operational since April 2020. At this time a commitment was also made to consider the wider investment model required to fully realise the ambition set out in the strategy. This included a number of strands of investment including:

- Project grants
- Development grants

While it has not been possible to progress with a new project funding scheme due to the impact of the pandemic it is recommended that initial plans to design a new development grant are progressed. This type of grant recognises that project funding alone cannot support the development of new, transitioning or innovative organisations or challenge areas of under representation. These development grants would support organisations that did not have the capacity to meet the full criteria for CMAG however have clear ambition to grow and develop. Following benchmarking with other grants of this type it is proposed that these 'Transform' grants would include:

- Support for either an individual supported by an organisation or an organisation.

- A health check to establish specific areas of support.
- A tailored support programme including training, mentoring, exchanges etc
- Commissioning - to support the development of new work or the delivery of an identified strategic initiative.

An initial investment of £20,000 would be made in up to 4 organisations following an open call and competitive assessment against criteria.



Strand Three: Increasing capacity

Across all initiatives aligned to the cultural strategy is a capacity building dimension. However the Equality Impact Assessment that was conducted as part of the strategy development and further analysis of specific programmes has identified the need for a tailored and more innovative approach to building capacity across the city to support and celebrate the cultural diversity of our people and communities.

The programme therefore will foster creativity at all levels considering how capacity can be enhanced in relation to:

- Employability and Skills (career level)
- Co-creation
- Participation
- Audience
- Volunteering

Capacity is created and creativity thrives when the relationship between each of these dimensions is understood and supported. This programme will therefore take a new approach to developing the connection between individual agency, community capacity and inclusive society and will include:

- Cultural mapping and understanding barriers (research and engagement).
- Building confidence and creating opportunity (development programme such as training, mentoring, peer learning etc)
- Supporting cultural expression (project funding)

Capacity

Phase 1: Research and Engagement

Phase 2: Principles of co-design at a programme level

Phase 3: Delivery

Tailored strands e.g. Section 75, PUL, language

Cross-cutting programmes supporting multiple identities

Review and implement funding schemes

Strand Four: Rewarding Innovation

The development of the new cultural strategy and approach to culture in the city has demonstrated the richness of our cultural offer and the creative potential of our city that could be realised if we create the environment where ambition is to be encouraged and rewarded. There has been recognition, now more than ever, that in order to maintain civic momentum, secure buy-in from city partners, build the capacity of our cultural sector and give Belfast's culture the global recognition it deserves then a well-considered and planned for cultural programme of the scale and ambition for 2023 is critical as we respond, recover and rebuild our city post COVID-19. However we also know that the success of any such initiative is dependent on the individual artists and creatives that are currently struggling to maintain their livelihoods.

A key ambition of the cultural strategy and the initiatives contained within it such as 2023 and City of Music, is to build the capacity of our creative sector, encourage risk taking and develop serious ambition with regards to scale and creativity among our artists. Therefore in line with existing commitments it is proposed to progress with a dedicated bursary programme as a vital part of this much needed development for the sector, now more than ever as many artists and arts organisations struggle to recover from the economic and social repercussions of the pandemic.

Through this programme we will support 5 artists across all artforms. A further 5 artists will be supported who specifically work in music across a variety of genres as an essential pillar for developing the city's music strategy as we build our application for UNESCO City of Music status in 2021.

These 10 artists will be awarded bursary support to give the financial stability that allows them to develop their own practice and ambition. This will give these artists the space, time, expertise and tools to shape an ambitious, home-grown project of scale as part of the 2023 programme. This commissioning process and bursary scheme is deliberately flexible and will be responsive according to the needs and ambitions of each individual awardee to allow for real innovation and experimentation. Council will work with these artists through the 2023 creative project team, who in turn will help identify local and international partnership opportunities, skills development programmes and potential mentorship schemes to develop and take forward new commissions.

Each awardee will receive £10,000 in the first year of this programme, anticipated to commence in October 2020. The awardees will be considered as the city's artists in residence with opportunities for civic engagement and celebration. This is an important addition to existing programmes that focus on organisational support. This will be an authentic co-design process that is designed to support and develop individuals in a co-operative approach strengthening the links between the city, communities and artists.

Strand Five: Building audiences

Since the beginning of lockdown, thrive (dedicated audience development agency for culture) has been conducting research to hear from cultural audiences on a range of topics including when they are likely to return to live events, and how they have been engaging with culture online. It is recommended that Belfast City Council works in partnership with thrive on the following research proposal.

We know from the most recent analysis of the type of data cultural organisations collect, and how they use it, that there remains a gap in information that will help to develop relationships with audiences. The information most commonly gathered is demographic and geographic. While this is useful, it does not help us to understand how audiences live their lives and how culture fits within this.

We know that cultural organisations are open to gathering audience information that will help to shape their plans however the capacity to run regular audience research is limited.

What we want to do

- Provide a way for cultural organisations to continue to hear from audiences on a regular basis, and about relevant issues
- Continue to move to an “artistically led, but audience focused” mind set within the sector
- Make sure we are hearing from a range of voices including those underrepresented in cultural engagement, vital if we want to build back a sector that can contribute to the social and economic recovery of Belfast.

How we will do it

The Audiences

- We want to create a panel of people who will be regularly consulted on a variety of issues throughout the next 12 months. We know that people’s thoughts and behaviours change with the rapidly evolving circumstances therefore it will be important to continue to monitor intentions alongside actual behaviours at regular intervals.

We will use a mix of data collection methods:

- Monthly polls or short surveys to take temperature checks on specific issues
- Quarterly focus groups to allow for deeper consultation on more strategic or long term concerns
- The panel will be recruited with the help of cultural organisations and will be a mix of regular, and less regular attenders. We will also do a general population call out. We will collect basic demographic information and will proactively recruit those whose voices are not heard as often.

The Cultural sector

- The Audience Panel is an opportunity for sector wide insight. However for it to have maximum insight, the information collected needs to be informed by the needs of the sector.
- Thrive will act as the bridge between the sector and their audiences. They will have regular conversations with both individual organisations and wider groups (like Belfast Visual Arts Forum and Festivals Forum) about the information that they collectively need and want.

Strand Six: Promoting cultural place-making

Cultural animation and creative interventions are fundamental to aiding our city's recovery and will contribute to the evolving new and mixed use of public space and the city centre environment. These interventions have a place-making role in helping to create a multi-purpose city centre and neighbourhoods that are welcoming, vibrant and attractive but also prioritises people's health and safety, adhering to the restrictions placed on public space due to COVID-19.

Respond, Rebuild, Recover

We are working with key stakeholders to develop Belfast Recovery & Cultural Animation Programme 2020-21 which will support the first phase of the city's response, rebuild and recovery plan.

This animation programme will be rolled out in several stages commencing in Autumn 2020, a significant part to be delivered during the festive season in the lead up to Christmas and into January 2021. The programme will seek to offer a suitable and safe response to the devastating impact of COVID-19 and effect positive change on Belfast's physical, economic and social environment. It will involve a combination of safe and socially distanced creative interventions such as street performance, music, window dressing, street art, lighting installations and creative solutions for external queuing, barriers and signage associated with social distancing and phased reopening measures. These programmes will help build confidence and create a safe and welcoming environment for people to visit and work. This is a critical part of the recovery process and will continue to help us reimagine and develop the city as an attractive space.

Programme overview

An overarching creative framework will be developed to support activity. This will be developed under one core theme supported by a series of sub-themes. The purpose of the programme is to recognise the role of cultural placemaking to:

- Improve the quality of the city centre and neighbourhood experience
- Support orientation and connectivity across the city
- Support business recovery
- Challenge anti-social behavior by improving the look and feel of the city centre
- Develop an authentic and diverse Belfast offer reflected in marketing and communication campaigns.

Thematically the programme will build over autumn with clear messaging around back to Belfast culminating in strong creative theme for Christmas marketing campaign supported by street activation, animation and programming.