

Department for
Communities
www.communities-ni.gov.uk

ARTS CONSULTATION BACKGROUND

November 2026

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Consultation Overview

The Department for Communities (DfC) is the Northern Ireland Executive department with responsibility for the arts and is currently developing a new Arts Policy.

DfC plays an important role in setting policy direction for the arts and provides funding, primarily through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. The Arts Council is an Arm's Length Body of the Department and the main funding and development organisation for the arts in Northern Ireland. The Arts Council's legislative duties and responsibilities are set out in **The Arts Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1995**.

DfC also plays a role in supporting the creative industries and provides funding towards cultural, educational, careers and outreach initiatives through Northern Ireland Screen, the national screen agency for Northern Ireland.

DfC has developed a draft Vision Statement for the arts along with 17 draft Policy Aims. The draft Vision and Aims are suggested as the basis of the new policy for the arts.

Through this consultation your views on the draft Vision and Policy Aims are being sought. Your views are important to us and will help inform the future policy development work for the arts in Northern Ireland.

DfC is seeking your views through a questionnaire. If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, we would ask that only one person from each organisation submits a response.

A paper-based questionnaire is available on request from **HCCpublicconsultation@communities-ni.gov.uk**. To support an effective and holistic analysis of all responses, we ask that all respondents answer the questions set out in the questionnaire and use the questionnaire format.

For this consultation, we may publish all responses except for those where the respondent indicates that they do not wish for their responses to be published. All responses from organisations and individuals responding in a professional capacity may be published. We will remove any personal data, including email addresses and telephone numbers, from these responses; but apart from this, we may publish them in full. For more information about what we do with personal data please see our **Privacy Notice.**

Your response, and all other responses to this consultation, may also be disclosed on request in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR); however, all disclosures will be in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA) and the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR).

If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential it would be helpful if you could explain to us why you regard the information you have provided as confidential, so that this may be considered if the Department should receive a request for the information under the FOIA or EIR.

In order to facilitate the survey, Citizen Space, which is not operated by DfC, is used as a data processor. Details of Citizen Space's privacy policy can be found online at **Citizen Space Privacy Notice.**

Ministerial Foreword



As Minister for Communities, I am pleased to present this public consultation on the development of a new Arts Policy for Northern Ireland.

The arts have always been central to life in Northern Ireland. They shape our earliest memories, give expression to who we are, and foster activity and social connection in our communities. From school plays and church choirs to internationally acclaimed poets, writers, musicians and performers, creativity is woven into our identity and shared experience.

They enhance our daily lives, supporting personal wellbeing and inspiring creativity from an early age; and benefit wider society, contributing significantly to education, health, community cohesion and economic prosperity. The arts also shape our sense of place and identity, offering ways for individuals and communities to express themselves, share their stories, and build connections across traditions.

It is an important principle that everyone, regardless of background or circumstance, can access and benefit from the arts. Grassroots and community based organisations are particularly important in engaging those who may not currently see the arts as accessible to them and in widening participation. We must also work together to ensure that our arts organisations and creative practitioners have the strong foundations, skills and opportunities needed to innovate, grow and contribute fully to a vibrant cultural infrastructure.

We should also be realistic about the challenges and the pressures on public finances that are likely to continue. Building capacity, strengthening infrastructure and widening access, all of which are essential to realising our long-term vision, will take sustained commitment and cannot be achieved overnight.

This consultation sets out a draft vision and series of aims that are intended to form the basis of a new policy for the arts in Northern Ireland. Your views will play a crucial part in shaping this policy, which will guide planning and delivery across the sector over the next ten years.

I encourage you to share your perspectives and experience. Your engagement will help us develop a policy that reflects the value of the arts to our people and our places, supports future growth, and strengthens Northern Ireland's cultural and creative life.



GORDON LYONS MLA
Minister for Communities
12 November 2026

Introduction and Context

1. The Department for Communities (DfC) is the Northern Ireland Executive department with responsibility for the arts in Northern Ireland.

2. This consultation is an important part of the process to inform the direction of a new DfC policy for supporting and developing the arts across Northern Ireland.

3. The focus of this consultation is on the draft Vision for the policy, the 17 Aims that are proposed as the basis of a new policy, and on a number of emerging issues where action might be taken. It is intended that the new policy should have a lifespan of ten years, with a mid-life review.

4. Policy development to date has been underpinned by the significant work of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Taskforce, particularly its extensive programme of engagement and consultation with the sector.

5. Consistent with one of the Taskforce's core recommendations, the process has included comprehensive engagement across central and local government. This stakeholder input – combined with desk-based research, an assessment of existing evidence, and a review of other relevant policies and strategies – has been instrumental in identifying the sector's current challenges and opportunities and in shaping the draft Policy Aims.

6. There are many definitions of the arts, but in this document, and in the Arts Policy that it will inform, when we use the term 'the arts' it covers a wide range of activities involving using creativity and imagination to create objects, performances or experiences that can be shared and enjoyed by us all and whose importance in our everyday lives and across our communities is hard to overstate. It encompasses dance, music, theatre, the literary and visual arts, crafting, and the technical and production disciplines that make them possible.

The Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme

7. The work to develop a new Arts Policy forms part of the Heritage, Culture and Creativity (HCC) Programme. The Programme was established by the Minister for Communities in July 2024 and will see the development of new polices for arts, historic environment, public libraries and museums. This approach will give each of the policy areas the status they merit and provide each of the communities of interest with their own focus. More information can be found at **Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme.**

Guiding Principles for Policy Development

8. The Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme is built on a shared set of guiding principles for the policies to be developed under it. Those principles are that the sectors and their activities should:

   - be **valued** by all
   - be **inclusive**, recognising and respecting difference in our society

- bring **equitable** access to opportunities and experience
- **enhance** the lives of people and communities
- be **sustainable** in the face of economic and environmental challenges

The Purpose of a New Arts Policy

9. The new Arts Policy will be the first developed since Devolution in 1998. The policy intent is to reinforce and promote the valuable contribution that the arts make across Northern Ireland Executive functions and the Programme for Government Wellbeing Framework, and to build a solid and evolving evidence base that supports the case for meaningful investment across arts activity.

10. The policy will guide the actions and interventions of central government and its Arm's Length Bodies over the next decade. As such, it will help shape the nature and focus of the support provided to the individuals and organisations working in the arts, so that the sector can strengthen, grow and thrive.

11. It is also intended that the policy, and the actions that will flow from it, will influence the actions and decisions of other stakeholders, including across local government, to provide a coherent, connected suite of support and opportunity for the arts.

Background Data and Information

Arts Structures and Funding

12. DfC has policy responsibility for the arts and within this role sponsors the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (the Arts Council).

13. The Arts Council is the principal funding and development body for the arts in Northern Ireland and is responsible for developing and improving the knowledge, appreciation and practice of the arts; increasing public access to and participation in the arts; and acts as an advisory body on matters relating to the arts including responsibility for developing the creative industries. Full legislative duties and responsibilities are set out in **The Arts Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.**

14. DfC provides funding to the Arts Council each year to undertake its statutory obligations. Resource funding provides grant support to the arts sector for programmes and activities and meets day-to-day operating costs such as staff salaries and overheads. Capital funding provides grant support for projects such as purchasing equipment, refurbishing buildings, and maintaining arts venues and premises. DfC's resource and capital investment in the Arts Council over the last five years is illustrated in the table below.

Year	Resource Funding (final budget)	Capital Funding (final budget)
2025/26	£12.71 million	£1.96 million
2024/25	£12.25 million	£1.27 million
2023/24	£11.80 million	£1.30 million
2022/23	£12.37 million	£1.32 million
2021/22	£11.31[1] million	£1.59 million

15. The Arts Council is also the statutory body responsible for administering and distributing National Lottery funds to the arts in Northern Ireland. These funds sit within the National Lottery Distribution Fund which the National Lottery etc.

1 Excludes £4.85m covid specific funding allocated in 2021/22

Act 1993 places under the control and management of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

16. Funding for the arts in Northern Ireland has faced significant pressures over the past decade as wider constraints on public expenditure have impacted budgets across many areas of government. While efforts have been made to support the sector, including through additional in-year funding allocations where possible, arts organisations have continued to operate in an increasingly challenging financial environment contributing to instability and uncertainty across the sector. This has been characterised by a sense of talent loss, as people interested in a career in the arts either looked elsewhere for that opportunity or opted to find work doing something else. The constraint on budgets and prospects has also been felt through increasingly constrained career pathways for those already working in the sector.

17. Compared with similar jurisdictions elsewhere in the UK, public investment in the arts in Northern Ireland remains relatively low. Against this backdrop, arts organisations have had to adapt to changes arising from the UK's exit from the European Union while navigating the financial pressures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation and rising living costs.

Creative Industries Role

18. DfC provides annual funding to Northern Ireland Screen to support educational, cultural, careers and outreach activities for the creative industries.

19. Under departmental restructuring in 2016 the Executive agreed the transfer of sponsorship responsibilities for Northern Ireland Screen to the Department for the Economy; however, DfC (then the Department for Culture, Arts & Leisure DCAL) retained responsibility for the body's educational and cultural dimensions, to be managed through service level agreements. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is in place between the Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy regarding this continued funding. The Arts Council also has responsibility for aspects of the creative industries.

20. The following table shows DfC's resource and capital investment in Northern Ireland Screen for the last five years.

Year	Resource Funding (final budget)	Capital Funding (final budget)
2025/26	£2.17 million	-
2024/25	£1.99 million	£250,000
2023/24	£1.46 million	-
2022/23	£1.92 million	£53,000
2021/22	£1.83[2] million	£333,000

Economic Impact

21. The broader creative industries continue to demonstrate strong economic performance. While the most recent data shows a slight decrease in Gross Value Added (GVA) for 2023, the sector's contribution remains substantial at £1.595 billion. Overall, the long-term trend indicates sustained growth, with GVA for the creative industries in Northern Ireland generally increasing over the period from 2010 to 2023[3].

2 Excludes 100k covid specific funding for 2021/22

3 Creative Industries Economic Estimates for Northern Ireland - from DCMS Sector Economic Estimates 2025 – Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA)

22. The range of the creative industries in Northern Ireland highlights the importance of accurately measuring the economic contribution relevant to culture. To that end the Department commissioned internal statistical analysis to provide a clearer evidence base, with a view to developing consistent metrics for the heritage, culture and creativity sectors. The findings show the sectors to be a significant economic contributor, comprising approximately 1,960 businesses (2.5% of all businesses), supporting over 13,000 jobs (2% of employment), and generating around £903 million in turnover (1.1% of the total) in 2022.

23. Creative industries growth brings with it new and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, which can offer transformative opportunities to enhance output and increase access to artistic media. However, these advances are increasingly being seen as constituting a measure of risk and raise crucial concerns on issues such as the exploitation of intellectual property and the potential displacement of artists and creatives.

Engagement and Participation

24. Over the course of 2024/25, just over four out of every five adults (82%) said they engaged with the arts. Those findings also indicate that the vast majority experienced benefits from their engagement, with 81% citing that they had fun and a significant proportion (62%) reporting a positive impact on their wellbeing. Other commonly noted benefits included enabling communication with family and friends, and increased knowledge.

25. Across a range of measures of individual wellbeing: life satisfaction, self-efficacy, locus of control and loneliness, analysis shows higher individual wellbeing among adults who engaged in culture, arts and heritage than among adults who had not engaged in these activities[4].

26. These findings align with a recent general population survey in which 72% of respondents agreed that the arts have a positive impact on the quality of life in their community. There was also strong support for public investment in the arts, with 79% of respondents agreeing that there should be public funding for arts and cultural organisations, and 70% expressing the same view in relation to individual artists.

Wider Societal Benefits

27. A high proportion of respondents also recognised wider societal benefits, with 86% agreeing that the arts contribute to jobs and tourism, and 87% acknowledging their significant role in health, wellbeing and educational attainment[5]. A wealth of evidence has fed into changing attitudes and the increased recognition of these broader societal and economic benefits of the arts.

4 Experience of culture, arts & heritage by adults in Northern Ireland – Findings from the Continuous Household Survey 2024/25 – Northern Ireland Research & Statistics Agency (NISRA)

5 Engagement and perceptions about the arts in Northern Ireland: Results from the General Population Survey 2022-23 Arts Council of Northern Ireland September 2023

28. The recognition of the benefits of the arts for mental health is reflected in the use of arts therapies in healthcare settings and in the prescribing of activities such as dance and singing for therapeutic purposes. This is underpinned by evidence, including a 2019 World Health Organisation (WHO) report[6] which found strong evidence that the arts benefit both mental and physical health. It also highlighted their potential to address complex challenges and noted that some arts interventions can be as cost-effective as, or more cost-effective than, traditional health approaches.

29. Subsequent research[7] has found strong evidence to support the use of music to support infant social development, the use of music or reading for speech and language development amongst infants and children, and the use of the arts to support aspects of social cohesion, improve wellbeing in adults and reduce physical decline in older age.

30. The arts play a vital role in education from early years through primary school and Key Stage 3, supporting creativity, confidence and communication. Embedded across the curriculum, they help children develop practical and cognitive skills, emotional understanding and social interaction, while encouraging self-expression and a lifelong engagement with learning.

31. More recently there has been increasing evidence emerging to indicate that the arts could also make a significant contribution within the criminal justice system in terms of rehabilitation and preventing reoffending. A recent UK research report[8] found that there was a clear link between taking part in arts-based activities and the movement towards a continuing non-offending lifestyle. The arts also provide a powerful means of communicating public messages, raising awareness and influencing opinion on issues such as addiction, domestic abuse and caring for our environment.

Opportunities and Challenges

32. The policy is intended to provide a platform for long term re-investment and to strengthen the case for additional financial support, drawing out the reasons for government investment in the arts and how best to prioritise this.

33. Recognising the challenges facing the sector, and the likelihood of continued budgetary constraints, progress will need to be delivered incrementally over the ten-year lifespan of the policy. Available funding will not allow every ambition to be realised at the same time, and considered decisions will therefore be required about the sequencing of delivery and where the resources that are available can have the greatest impact.

34. It is both realistic and necessary to focus first on the fundamentals. Strengthening the resilience, capacity and sustainability of the people and organisations in the sector is a natural precursor to achieving wider ambitions for innovation and growth. By securing these foundations at the outset, we can lay the groundwork for more ambitious development and growth as opportunities and resources permit.

6 World Health Organisation - Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report 67 – What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing? A scoping review by Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse Finn.

7 Department of Behavioural Science UCL – The role of arts in improving health & wellbeing – report to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport – April 2020.

8 National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance - Re-imagining Futures – Exploring arts interventions and the process of desistance – research by Northumbria University and Bath Spa University

35. A number of specific opportunities and challenges are now considered.

Equality of Opportunity and Regional Reach

36. Achieving the aims and ambition of the policy begins, and ends, with people and with the creativity, talent and aspiration found in every community. Realising this potential requires a sustained focus on equality of opportunity: extending participation, expanding reach, and ensuring that barriers — whether geographic, socio-economic or cultural — do not limit who can take part or thrive.

37. The policy will be based on a principle that opportunity should not be limited by location, and that individuals and organisations should have the same opportunities wherever they are in Northern Ireland.

38. Engagement with delivery partners and organisations across the sector consistently highlights a concern over the regional distribution of arts funding across Northern Ireland and a view that funding is disproportionately concentrated in major urban centres.

39. Arts Council funding data indicates that application rates vary significantly across council areas, with some areas submitting comparatively low numbers of applications for Lottery-funded grant programmes. This suggests that differences in funding outcomes may, in part, reflect disparities in levels of engagement with funding opportunities.

40. We consider it important that individuals and organisations across all regions have an equal opportunity to access arts funding. Where lower application rates are identified, further analysis should be undertaken to understand the factors contributing to this pattern. These may include issues relating to awareness of available funding, organisational capacity, access to support networks, opportunities for participation, or other barriers to engagement.

41. Subject to the findings of this work, the Department will work with the Arts Council and other relevant partners to develop targeted interventions aimed at addressing any identified barriers and improving equitable access to funding opportunities across all council areas. This could include measures to increase awareness, strengthen local capacity, enhance outreach activity, and support greater participation by communities and organisations that are currently underrepresented in funding programmes.

Key Role of Community Arts

42. Arts in, and for, communities are an essential foundation from which we can seek to address the challenge of widening participation to those who may feel that the arts are not for them. Grassroots community organisations and local volunteers are often at the heart of delivering accessible, locally relevant activity, particularly to underserved and rural communities.

43. There has been recognition of the need to strengthen access to the arts in rural areas, and some steps have already been taken such as the introduction of the Arts Council's Rural Arts Deliberative Forum and dedicated Rural Engagement Arts Funding.

44. However, barriers to participation extend beyond geography. Evidence[9] shows lower levels of engagement among people with disabilities, older adults, men, and those living in the most deprived areas. Some of these disparities emerge early in life, with data[10] indicating that boys and young people entitled to free school meals are less likely to participate in arts activities.

45. We consider that a focus on community arts is crucial to build capacity, reduce barriers and widen participation. By embedding arts provision in familiar settings and using trusted local networks, community-led initiatives can build confidence, develop skills and reach those less likely to engage through traditional venues.

46. Arts Council's Musical Instruments Programme demonstrates how targeted practical support can widen participation and improve access to the arts, particularly among young people and those from underrepresented backgrounds through the Performing Groups and Bands strands of the programme.

47. Building on this approach, we propose that the Department works with the Arts Council to explore the development of a dedicated Community Arts Programme. Such a programme could provide small-scale, accessible grants to community groups, amateur arts organisations and local creative projects, helping to meet the costs of equipment, materials, venue hire and other essential resources.

48. By supporting grassroots activity, the programme would help to remove barriers to participation, strengthen local cultural provision and enable more people to engage in creative activities within their communities.

Talent Development

49. But participation alone is not enough. A thriving sector must also identify, nurture and invest in emerging talent wherever it is found.

50. From early creative experiences through to advanced development, people who wish to progress should be supported to move through the system with confidence and ambition and ensure that talent, wherever it is found, has opportunity to excel.

51. Evidence[11] shows that disabled workers, women and working-class workers are currently underrepresented in the creative industries as compared to the industry average. To address this, we propose to work with the Arts Council to explore ways to support talent pipelines and create accessible, sustainable pathways to bridge amateur to professional careers in the arts.

Skills Development

52. Retaining talent requires more than opportunity; we need to ensure our talented people can have opportunities to learn their trade and the potential to pursue a varied and satisfying career here. When those things are possible, people are more likely to stay and

9 Experience of culture, arts & heritage by adults in Northern Ireland – Findings from the Continuous Household Survey 2024/25 – Northern Ireland Research & Statistics Agency (NISRA)

10 Experience of Culture, Arts & Heritage by Young People in Northern Ireland – Findings from the Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitude Survey 2022 – Northern Ireland Research & Statistics Agency (NISRA)

11 Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre - The Good Work Review – Job Quality in the Creative Industries – February 2023

play a full part in wider community life. Where people do choose to leave, a healthy arts infrastructure with good jobs, fair conditions and viable long-term prospects will also provide them with motivation to come back. Without this, we risk losing promising artists and practitioners to other regions or industries.

53. Investing in people therefore means investing in the whole ecosystem of skills, employment and progression — supporting organisations and individuals to build capacity, develop expertise and adapt to a changing landscape. This includes strengthening skills development at all levels: from community facilitators and small organisations through to established professional practitioners and established enterprises.

54. Many creatives, technicians and crafters, for example, operate as sole traders or microbusinesses and might benefit from targeted skills development and business support. Priorities might include strengthening digital capability, particularly in marketing, ticketing and online engagement, alongside specialist support in areas such as financial compliance, business resilience and business planning. Building capacity in these areas would support the sustainability of these smaller businesses and support the broader creative economy. The Department is currently engaging with academics to understand digital capacity within the culture sector and to identify gaps.

55. Engagement also highlighted a need to support grassroots community organisations and volunteers in skills development. These groups often require support to build the capacity to manage projects, navigate governance requirements, and strengthen digital capability and succession planning. These are common themes across the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sectors and organisations, and may highlight a need to connect arts-based community groups more strongly into broader existing VCSE sectors and umbrella organisations.

56. As one of the fastest-growing sectors of our economy, the creative industries will increasingly need to draw on a skilled workforce in the coming years. Providing creative learning opportunities for our children and young people is vital to enable them to become the next generation of artists and creatives. Initiatives such as Northern Ireland Screen's work with CCEA on delivering Moving Image Arts qualifications which are designed to help students develop relevant skills through practical filmmaking, provide a key stepping stone to employment.

57. Skills is one of a number of recurring themes identified during engagement, which we consider best addressed through a wider HCC Programme review, including an assessment of future skills requirements and the development of a strategy to meet need, strengthen the sector's core and transferable skills base, and support its long-term sustainability.

Producing High-Quality Work

58. Research and Development (R&D) is as important in the arts as it is in any business environment. R&D is crucial to supporting the creation of

new, high-quality work and supporting innovation across disciplines, allowing for creative experimentation. Mentoring and opportunities for peer review can act as a bridge between that experimentation and the proving of concepts to real-world viability, helping to raise standards, encourage collaboration and support artistic excellence.

59. Arts Council programmes such as Support for Individual Artists (SIAP), Digital Evolution Awards and the Creative Industries Seed Programme provide opportunities for artists and organisations in Northern Ireland to develop their practice, access mentoring, and explore innovative immersive and emerging technologies.

60. This type of support is critical to a successful and vibrant sector. In this context, and subject to the availability of funding, we propose that consideration should be given to dedicating more support for initiatives that generate the creation of new, innovative, high-quality work.

Raising Our Profile

61. Support for showcasing work is critical to building confidence, enhancing visibility and sustaining career momentum. It enables professional artists to extend their reach and develop their careers in new markets, and supports grassroots practitioners, such as pipe bands and traditional dancers, to share their work more widely and help raise the profile of our distinctive cultural identity.

62. Showcasing is also important in the wider presentation of Northern Ireland, where the reputation for talent, innovation and quality of our arts and of those who produce it, can also serve to highlight the potential for Northern Ireland as a place to invest in and to visit.

63. The success of the recently introduced Arts Council Travel Awards for Bands programme, alongside plans to expand the scheme to include choirs, demonstrates both the value of this type of support and the appetite for opportunities that enable artists and performers to showcase their work beyond Northern Ireland.

64. To consolidate and build on this foundation, and subject to funding, we propose that the Department and the Arts Council work together to explore extending travel support opportunities across a wider range of grassroots activity, for example traditional dance, theatre troupes, folk groups and other community-based cultural organisations, while also considering how showcasing support for arts organisations more generally might be strengthened.

65. This expanded approach would also complement existing support available through Arts Council programmes for individual artists, helping to ensure that artists and cultural practitioners at different stages of their development can access opportunities to build audiences, develop networks and raise the profile of Northern Ireland's cultural sector at home and abroad.

66. Taken together, these actions help create the conditions in which creativity can flourish – ensuring that people from all backgrounds not only participate in the arts, but are empowered to succeed, lead and shape its future.

Capital Strategy

67. Arts and culture play a vital role in shaping vibrant, attractive places. They help to build community cohesion, strengthen place identity, and improve quality of life, making areas more appealing in which to live, work and visit. Through festivals, events, and creative activity the arts support regeneration, attract footfall and boost tourism, with cultural experiences forming an important part of the visitor offer.

68. The impact of the arts in stimulating growth in other sectors, including hospitality, tourism and the night-time economy, is evidenced by a 'multiplier effect', whereby, alongside direct contributions, additional economic activity is generated in related sectors, further increasing Gross Value Added and employment[12]. If further evidence is needed of the contribution the arts can make in terms of economic contribution, then the experience of the Fleadh in Belfast in the summer of 2026 provides it.

69. To realise this potential, investment in our cultural infrastructure is essential. This includes major venues, smaller, local community facilities, creative workspaces and artists' studios, and the equipment that enables artistic production.

70. Engagement has highlighted that some areas lack affordable creative premises, limiting opportunities for growth and career development. Exploring ways to support shared studios and collaborative workspaces could help to strengthen networks, encourage innovation and foster more sustainable creative communities.

71. Culture-led regeneration is increasingly recognised as a powerful driver of social and economic renewal - creating jobs, boosting local economies, attracting investment, and strengthening place identity.

72. Artists and arts organisations play a key role through the repurposing of buildings and community-led initiatives that revitalise areas. Expanding support for programmes and partnerships across government, heritage and community sectors can help unlock this potential and support the reuse of vacant or underused spaces.

73. There is also a need to complement more immediate, practical solutions with long-term strategic planning for capital investment that ensures regionally balanced, accessible creative infrastructure that is fit for purpose, responsive to technological change and aligned with wider heritage, regeneration and environmental priorities.

74. The need to assess current and future infrastructure requirements is not unique to the arts. Given the frequent links and synergies across the culture and heritage sectors which DfC supports, there is real merit in taking a programme-wide approach to capital planning.

75. We therefore propose that the Department, working with its arm's length bodies and key stakeholders, undertake a strategic assessment of capital needs across the culture and heritage sectors to inform the development of a coordinated long-term capital strategy.

12 Contribution of the arts and culture industry to the UK economy - Centre for Economics & Business Research (CEBR) report for Arts Council England – May 2020

Research and Evidence

76. Maximising the impact of the arts requires collaboration across sectors, across government and beyond regional boundaries. Stronger partnerships, underpinned by robust research and evidence, will be essential to making the case for continued investment and to demonstrating the full value of the arts.

77. While we have established that a wealth of evidence already exists to support the wider benefits of the arts, gaps remain, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland-specific research. Engagement with experts through the policy development process has already yielded valuable outcomes in terms of strengthening the local evidence base, including bespoke reports produced by the **Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland** and the **Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland**.

78. Building on the available evidence, and commissioning further research to address identified gaps, will strengthen understanding of how the arts contribute to wider Executive priorities and help us to make a compelling case for additional support.

79. In recent years, new ways to measure the social value of the arts in economic terms have been emerging. For example, a major UK study[13] found that the annual monetised general health benefits of cultural engagement among adults aged 30-49 amount to £8.08 billion, with a further £4.42 billion linked specifically to mental health benefits.

80. Stakeholder engagement highlighted both a strong desire to capture and demonstrate the social value of the arts here, and the challenges involved in doing so. Exploring more consistent and joined-up approaches - across all the HCC sectors and at both central and local government levels - will be beneficial in strengthening how social value is understood, measured, and communicated.

81. On that basis, it is proposed that a programme of research should be implemented to explore the social and economic value of the HCC sectors and their contribution to the priorities established in the Programme for Government and other Government policies and programmes.

Collaboration and Partnership

82. Local councils play a central role in delivering on arts and cultural provision within their areas; strengthening working relationships with them will be fundamental to achieving shared objectives. Established collective mechanisms, such as Community Planning, offer an important platform for more cohesive and joined up approaches.

83. To support strategic alignment and maximise impact across localities, we propose that the Arts Council should become a statutory partner in a future iteration of the Community Planning process, helping to ensure that arts and creativity are embedded within local strategic planning and delivery.

13 Culture & Heritage Capital: Monetising the Impact of Culture and Heritage on Health & Wellbeing – Frontier Economics report for DCMS Nov 2024

84. During the course of policy development, engagement with colleagues across Executive departments confirmed an appetite for more joined-up working approaches and the development of partnerships that deliver shared benefits. Successful examples of established cross-departmental partnership working can be seen in the Arts Council's Arts & Older People and Creative Schools programmes, delivered in partnership with the Public Health Agency and the Education Authority respectively.

85. Engagement with other jurisdictions, both across the UK and internationally, is also critical - ensuring that Northern Ireland keeps pace with policy developments, shares best practice and maximises opportunities to harness the soft power of culture. There is also an important role in influencing on behalf of the sector in areas determined at a UK level, such as taxation, regulation and employment frameworks.

86. Collaboration must also extend beyond traditional boundaries. Working in partnership across organisations – including the voluntary and community sector, education providers and the creative industries – can unlock new opportunities, share expertise and drive innovation. For example, Northern Ireland Screen's ScreenWorks and Screen Academies demonstrate effective partnership working, with expert delivery organisations and industry professionals providing hands-on work experience, training and mentoring to young people, helping shape skills development for future talent.

87. To realise the benefits that collaborative and partnership working can bring, as demonstrated by the successful models highlighted above, we propose a specific HCC Programme-wide action to support the culture of collaboration within and across the HCC sectors. This could include developing new network forums, reinvigorating pre-existing collaborative structures and creating opportunities for regular engagement, knowledge exchange and partnership development to maximise the collective contribution of the HCC sectors to wider social, cultural and economic objectives.

Broadening Funding

88. It is important to bear in mind that organisations in the arts sector tend to have a commercial aspect and raise significant amounts to cover their own running costs, for example through membership fees, charges for classes or sales of tickets. While public investment will remain an important element for many parts of the sector, it is rarely the sole source of support and there may be scope, where appropriate, to further diversify income streams and attract investment from a wider range of sources. This could include strengthening relationships with business and industry while also exploring opportunities to maximise the use of alternative funding streams beyond grants, such as Shared Island Funding, Capital Asset Transfer, access to Financial Transaction Capital, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and Trusts and Foundations.

89. In consideration of this, we propose that the Department will lead work to support

the HCC sectors in adapting to the current funding environment by exploring the means to maximise revenue streams beyond public funding and by applying existing available funding options. In recognition of the diversity of the sector, support should be tailored to different organisational needs and capacities, including strengthening financial and business development skills, particularly within smaller and micro-organisations. This would help organisations of all sizes to maximise appropriate opportunities for income generation, investment and growth, building resilience and supporting long-term sustainability.

90. By working together, the arts can be better positioned to respond to challenges, seize opportunities and play a full and active role in shaping a more creative, resilient and innovative future.

The Draft Vision for the Arts Policy

91. In the consultation questionnaire you are invited to offer your views on the draft Vision for the Arts Policy, which is intended to succinctly describe what the policy is aiming to achieve. Having taken account of extensive stakeholder engagement, we propose the following Vision:

> 'Arts for all: unlocking creativity, fostering talent and working together to realise the full value of the arts.'

92. The draft vision seeks to capture, at its core, our ambition to widen participation in, and extend the reach of, the arts. That includes ensuring the arts are accessible to everyone - regardless of background, circumstances or geographical location; that creativity can be unlocked in every community; and that talent can be identified, supported and developed. It reflects our recognition of the value of the arts for both the intrinsic ability to bring pleasure, expression and wellbeing to everyday life; and the contribution to a wide range of positive cultural, social and economic outcomes, including health, education and the economy. It also reflects the importance of partnership working across public bodies and the wider sector to realise this potential.

The Draft Policy Aims

93. In developing the draft Policy Aims, the Department has taken account of:

- Government policy priorities, including Programme for Government
- Legislative duties as set out in the Arts Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, Departments Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 & the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016, and the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986
- Extensive engagement across local and central government and other stakeholders
- Literature review and best practice examples from elsewhere in the UK and Ireland and in other countries

94. The Policy Aims also draw on the 2023 Culture, Arts & Heritage Taskforce report 'Investing in Creative Delivery', and are based around three priorities: Strengthening, Connecting and

Innovating. In common with other policies in the Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme, these priorities are combined with the key themes of People and Communities, Places and Partnerships to form a matrix which is the basis for the presentation of the Policy Aims.

95. The matrix below sets out 17 draft Policy Aims for the arts. The new Arts Policy will rest on these aims, and you are invited in the following pages to offer your views on them.

	HCC Policy Goals	People and Communities	Places	Partnerships
Arts	**Strengthen:** Build resilience Grow capacity Ensure sustainability	1. Investing in the arts sector and its people 2. Supporting jobs, skills, capacity building and resilience 3. Enabling opportunities for creative learning for children and young people	4. Supporting strategic capital investment across the sector 5. Valuing the contribution of the arts in place-shaping and quality of life	6. Demonstrating the value and impacts of the sector to government outcomes 7. Working in partnership across government to address regulatory and legislative issues
	Connect: Realise potential Build connections Forge partnerships	8. Supporting accessibility, diversity, inclusion; and promoting equality of opportunity 9. Valuing the contribution of grassroots community and voluntary organisations	10. Maximising North/South, East/West and international creative connections 11. Recognising the contribution of the arts to cultural identity, community cohesion and good relations	12. Collaborating across organisational boundaries to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes 13. Developing a sectoral research and evidence work-strand
	Innovate: Foster innovation Fuel growth Increase reach	14. Driving research and innovation, and embracing new technologies 15. Supporting the development of high-quality artistic works and opportunities for showcasing	16. Exploring culture-led regeneration approaches in relation to securing creative spaces	17. Recognising the arts for contributions to innovative solutions to economic, social and environmental issues

The Culture and Heritage Institutional Framework

96. Though not specifically related to the Arts Policy, the development of new ten-year policies for the Heritage, Culture and Creativity (HCC) sectors provides a timely opportunity to consider not only **what** government support might be delivered, but also **how** that support is organised and delivered.

97. As the HCC Programme has progressed, and as opportunities for greater collaboration across sectors have emerged, it has become increasingly apparent that there are significant differences in the development, delivery and funding structures that underpin each sector.

98. These arrangements have evolved over time in response to the specific needs and circumstances of individual sectors. As a result, a range of models now exist across the HCC landscape. Some functions are delivered directly by the Department, while others are undertaken through arm's length bodies (ALBs).

99. These different approaches offer varying degrees of independence, sectoral expertise, ministerial oversight and operational flexibility. Differences are also apparent in scale, with the NI Museums Council at one end of the scale and Libraries NI at the other.

100. As new ten-year policies establish long-term priorities and outcomes for government support of the HCC sectors, it is prudent to examine whether the structures through which that support is delivered remain the most effective means of achieving those ambitions. As such, the Department intends to commission a review of delivery, development and funding structures in the HCC sectors. The purpose of the review will be to ensure that future policy objectives are supported by governance and delivery models that are capable of responding to emerging opportunities, challenges and sectoral need.

101. The purpose of such consideration will not be to question the contribution or performance of any individual organisation, nor to suggest that a particular structure is inherently preferable. Rather, it will be to ensure that delivery arrangements remain fit for purpose in the context of evolving policy ambitions, changing sectoral needs and increasing expectations around efficiency, effectiveness and public value.

102. A number of issues merit examination. These are likely to include:

- the extent to which current structures provide clarity of purpose and accountability
- whether roles and responsibilities across the system are clearly defined and complementary
- the balance between policy development, policy implementation and operational delivery functions
- the degree to which existing arrangements support collaboration across HCC sectors
- whether organisations are appropriately resourced and configured to deliver their statutory and strategic responsibilities

- the effectiveness of current development and funding mechanisms in achieving government priorities
- whether existing models continue to represent the most efficient and effective use of public resources

103. Consideration of these questions will include benchmarking against arrangements in other jurisdictions, recognising both similarities and the unique characteristics of Northern Ireland. It will also take account of wider public sector reform principles and ongoing arrangements for periodic reviews of arm's length bodies and public investment.

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