



Department for

**Communities**

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# Culture, Arts and Heritage A Way Forward

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# A Way Forward

As Minister for Communities, I want to propose a way forward in co-designing a culture, arts and heritage strategy. It is not a prescriptive steer on content, themes or specific actions, as that's for all partners to work together to determine. It's more my reflection on what I've heard from a wide range of stakeholders in their calls for a co-designed 10-year vision as the basis of a 5-year strategy for culture, arts and heritage. I want to advance that co-design process so a draft vision and strategy can be brought forward by Spring 2023 for subsequent wider public consultation.

But I want to go further. I want to approach this in ways which empower the culture, arts and heritage sectors and other stakeholders to articulate, catalyse and embed a shift in how these sectors are more fully recognised, harnessed and supported as key enablers of equality, inclusion, innovation and social and economic change.



**Deirdre Hargey**  
**Minister for Communities**



Survive, Stabilise, Strengthen

In 2021 we were all navigating the impact and restrictions arising from the worst of the Covid pandemic. I convened a Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce to support the reopening and recovery of these sectors. Its report – the Art of Recovery<sup>1</sup> – was published in August that year and shaped a range of measures to help the sectors survive, stabilise and strengthen.

Short-term emergency responses included 1,433 grants totalling £2.7m to enable creative practitioners to maintain their trade and activities during lockdown restrictions; and financial support for organisations which allocated £14.5m across the arts, heritage, sport, languages, and voluntary/ community sectors.

The work of the Taskforce provided the impetus for a £20m employability and skills initiative to further support these sectors. This was launched in January 2022 and funded schemes over three years include support for 199 jobs across the Arts (£4.4m), heritage (£2.6m) and creative industries (£4m) sectors. This investment has indeed begun to shift focus towards the longer term and ways to strengthen the sectors.

The view of the Taskforce was that structural fragilities and barriers existed which limited and, worse, negatively impacted on the sectors long before the pandemic. It brought these issues to the fore. The diversity and interdependencies within the culture, arts and heritage ecosystem were better revealed by the Taskforce report and the process also highlighted other voices and issues which need further examination, such as freelancers and those working in the night-time economy.

The Recovery Taskforce included a remit “to identify medium to long term actions which might be considered in the development of a new Culture, Arts and Heritage strategy”. It led wider engagement with sectoral focus groups and highlighted a range of issues and building blocks for the approach going forward.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/art-recovery-survive-stabilise-strengthen>

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Photo credit: Arts Council Northern Ireland

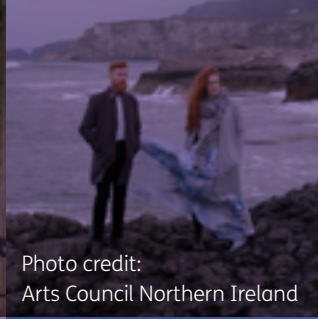


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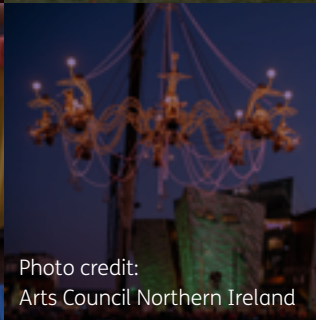
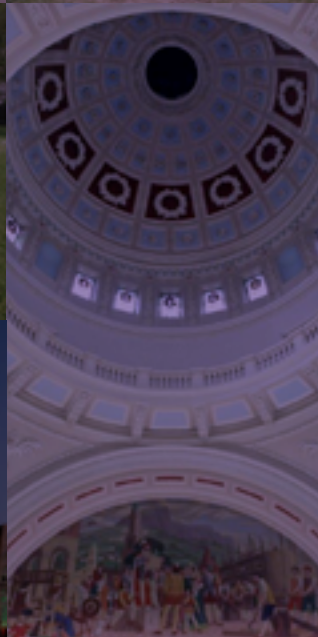


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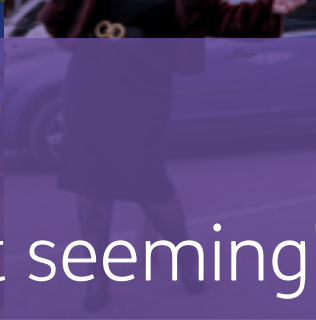
Photo credit: Arts Council Northern Ireland



Photo credit: Arts Council Northern Ireland



# Ubiquitous but seemingly on the fringe





There is a global body of evidence on the role of culture, arts and heritage as key drivers of equality, inclusion, and social and economic change. They are innovative sectors, with people, organisations, places and spaces physically and organically embedded within and part of communities. These sectors catalyse innovation more widely and are consistently utilised to reach the hardest to reach. Responses to the pandemic exemplified their role in reconnecting and strengthening the social fabric and promoting individual and community resilience.

It is difficult to summarise this reach and value concisely. Beyond the lens of my own Department, the role and potential of culture, arts and heritage is visible in major initiatives such as City Deals and Peace Plus.

Even a brief examination of activities advanced across central and local government will observe direct and catalytic contribution in areas such as mental health and well-being; tackling educational underachievement; tourism; wider economic and industrial/sectoral innovation; re-engagement with training and employment; volunteering; good relations, racial equality, cultural identity and expression; attracting inward investment; High Street regeneration; addressing rural isolation; tackling violence against women and girls; and supporting sustainable development and practices as part of green growth and climate change action.

I know from my own experience, and those shared by communities across this island, that it is culture, arts and heritage that give all of us the connection to where and how we live. When people are given opportunities to develop better ways to support each other; to build stronger and more resilient communities; and to shape and improve the places where they live, the innovations they employ consistently harness culture, arts and heritage.

Yet sectors here feel constantly on the defensive, repeatedly having to justify their existence. They feel overly 'instrumentalised' yet insufficiently recognised or resourced, with key aspects of the culture, arts and heritage ecosystem not fully understood by decision makers and funders.

The Recovery Taskforce highlighted structural underfunding and the need to address regional and demographic inequalities wherever they are found. It emphasised the need for a definitive policy reaffirmation and economic protection of the central role culture, arts and heritage can and do play.

We must start from there.

There is an absence of an underpinning vision and strategy for culture, arts and heritage in this jurisdiction. This contrasts with more helpful articulation of the role, impact and value of these sectors by other administrations across Ireland, Britain and elsewhere.

Paradoxically, stakeholders here seemingly operate within a strategy laden environment which includes corporate strategies by an extensive range of relevant Arm's Length Bodies overseen by my own Department and others. Added to these are culture, arts and heritage strategies individually and independently developed by the eleven local councils across this part of Ireland. It is notable that the creative industries are rightly prioritised within this region's economic vision; but it is the underpinning culture, arts and heritage ecosystem from which such creative talent and innovation emerges. Likewise, our historic places, spaces and heritage are rightly promoted as drivers of tourism, community regeneration and social cohesion; but growing funding pressures hinder the logical need to protect, conserve and promote these cultural assets.

New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitments are being progressed by my Department through development of key strategies which will span anti-poverty, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and active ageing. Similarly, an Irish Language strategy and an Ulster Scots Language, Heritage and Culture strategy are being co-designed; and a refreshed Sign Language Framework will be brought forward. There are many other relevant areas such as the review of the 'People and Place' strategy; Community Wealth Building, and the work of other public bodies in, for example, housing, sport and those with remits supporting children, young and older people and disabled people.

The culture, arts and heritage infrastructure of organisations, venues, places, people, networks and activities will undoubtedly provide key delivery mechanisms and innovative approaches to help realise these ambitions and ways to maximise their impact and reach. It can provide the space, catalyst and connectivity to shape how we want this place to be and how we want to be viewed by each other and the world.

However, individual and collective creative and cultural talent, assets and resources do not necessarily spontaneously come into being. Any ecology can thrive with the right components and resources; but imbalances and barriers will ultimately strip the outcomes which naturally flow from a thriving culture, arts and heritage ecosystem.

These sectors acutely feel the absence of a vision and cohesive roadmap which can drive joined-up approaches with and across central and local government. This hinders efforts to prioritise actions, tackle barriers and mobilise efforts supporting and fully unleashing the potential of this ecosystem.

The Recovery Taskforce informs four underpinning ways of working to how we move forward:

**1) Policy reaffirmation and whole of government approach**

A vision and strategy for culture, arts and heritage cannot be for only one part of

government or any single Arm's Length Body. It must enable alignments which maximise support for the sectors. This will enable them to reciprocate and maximise and sustain impact and benefits elsewhere. Possibilities should not be limited by organisational, sectoral or geographic boundaries.

Policy reaffirmation and navigation of this strategic and policy landscape goes beyond a paper-based articulation of relevant synergies. It involves designing structural mechanisms, alignments and partnerships which enable the culture, arts and heritage ecosystem to work better together and to tangibly connect into, inform, benefit from and amplify the impact and reach other initiatives.

I intend to advance a 'whole-of-government' approach and seek endorsement from a restored Executive for a vision and strategic framework which recalibrates how the sectors are recognised, harnessed and supported in delivering PfG outcomes. This will provide the policy and strategic foundation for stakeholders to work across organisational, sectoral and geographic boundaries to strengthen the culture, arts and heritage ecosystem, amplify its impact and reinforce its direct outcomes and catalytic role.

## **2) Support the ecosystem**

This approach should more fully explain, support and enhance a culture, arts and

heritage ecosystem and identify opportunities for cross-fertilisation and collaboration. It will aim to align and amplify sub-sector approaches already in place or planned. These include those corporate strategies and previously described policy initiatives led by departments, arm's length bodies and local government. As advocated by the Recovery Taskforce, it involves comprehensively articulating, co-ordinating and supporting the contribution and stimulus provided by culture, arts and heritage across wider social and economic policy areas.

## **3) Work together to align and amplify**

Collaborations, partnerships and alignments should underpin all efforts but I particularly want to highlight the role of local government. The Recovery Taskforce called for strategic partnerships with local councils; culture, arts and heritage strategies and approaches are being taken forward by all eleven local councils and they support community planning in each locality. These strategies have been developed through extensive co-design and community-based engagement. It is logical and advantageous to reflect these place-based perspectives, harness existing stakeholder and public engagement networks, align ambitions and coordinate efforts to amplify the impact of localised and joined-up approaches across central and local government.

I also want to highlight those public bodies and responsibilities overseen and supported by my Department. This includes our museums, libraries and those supporting the arts, heritage, historic environment, public record, language sectors and screen industries. In other jurisdictions these are collectively positioned as ‘cultural institutions’. I feel the creative and cultural infrastructure here are key ‘centres of gravity’ along with the partners, networks, venues and places they support. They can have their collective mandates strengthened and better enabled across government by a culture, arts and heritage vision and strategy.

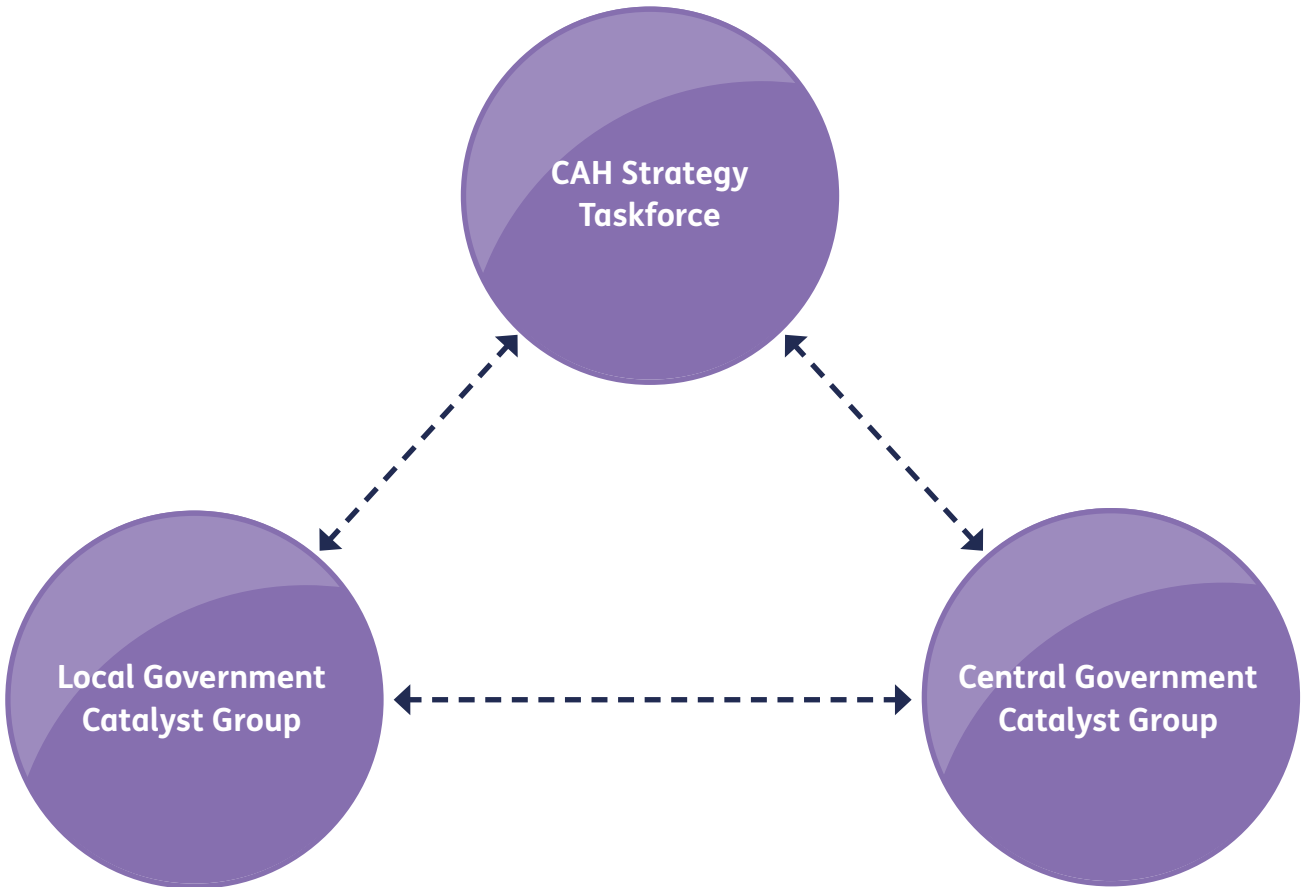
#### **4) Engage people and communities**

The Recovery Taskforce stated that “there should be a clear commitment to increasing public understanding and promoting the positive impact and benefits of culture, arts and heritage in reflecting an increasingly diverse contemporary culture and to promote equality”.

It is a given that a draft strategy will go out for statutory public consultation but, as advocated by the Recovery Taskforce, enhancing public engagement and voices right from the start can only enhance a co-design process and build momentum for the type of policy reaffirmation, recalibration and whole of government approach we aspire. Let’s show what is possible and amplify those voices.



## Next steps



I won't prescribe actions or predetermine themes but I do believe these underpinning ways of working and moving forward provide helpful framing and scaffolding to build on the work of the Recovery Taskforce. The inherent creativity and innovation among stakeholders will imagine better ways and means to realise these ambitions.

The above model summarises practical structures to advance work at this time. Demonstrable continuity from the Recovery Taskforce and its established sectoral engagement and codesign foundation is beneficial to further development, partnership working and delivery.

I therefore intend to reconvene this group and modify its terms reference to advance as the **Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy Taskforce**. This sectoral expertise constitutes the primary co-design group informing development of the vision and strategy. Previous membership will be retained, with additional representatives reflecting the pivot in operational purpose. The Taskforce was already of significant size but delivery in developing its report demonstrated ability to harness wider networks and actively involve additional voices. This will continue through self-organisation of specific work-strands and wider engagement. The Taskforce structure

will provide a cohesive focal point and meet in plenary as appropriate.

I will ask local councils and their representative bodies to participate in a **Local Government Catalyst Group**. This recognises the key role they play and the insight and support they can provide and receive in creating alignments and designing meaningful and sustainable mechanisms and community focused initiatives to realise the ambition of localised and region wide approaches to culture, arts and heritage.

My officials will convene a **Central Government Catalyst Group** to consider the content of an action plan and resources that will sit alongside the new strategy. It will explore better ways for departments to connect and collaborate over the longer term, with each other and with local government and the culture, arts and heritage ecosystem. This work will proactively identify and assert the relevance, current impact and potential of culture, arts and heritage to enhance departmental programmes and priorities. This will be supported by case-studies derived from stakeholder and public engagement and collation of up-to-date research and evidence from sectoral partners and international comparators.

These three structures provide focal points which provide access to much wider

networks, views, perspectives and a considerable body of evidence and community informed insight. I ask all participants to bring these to bear in creative, innovative and inclusive ways. I fully expect they will.

The central and local government catalyst groups will work alongside and with the Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy Taskforce to shape a vision and agree actions and milestones within a draft strategy which are targeted, measurable and aligned to PfG and community planning outcomes.

I want the full co-design process to commence in October 2022, with submission of a draft vision and strategy by Spring 2023. This should lead to a subsequent statutory public consultation and ultimately Executive endorsement and launch of the vision and strategy later in 2023.

This timescale aligns with that suggested by the Recovery Taskforce; and I believe it is feasible as it will harness and build on co-design processes and outputs already established through the Recovery Taskforce and local government. It also reflects an intent to establish a vision and strategic platform which connects to, aligns and amplifies the impact and reach of multiple strategies, initiatives and actions being taken across central and local government.

You have established the groundwork to shape our shared ambition and now together we have the scope and opportunity to catalyse ‘whole of government’ reaffirmation of what you do and recalibrate ways this is recognised, harnessed and supported.

Many in the culture, arts and heritage sectors will recall the early days of devolution here and the involvement of world-renowned educationalist and creativity advocate Sir Ken Robinson. The launch in 2000 of ‘Unlocking Creativity – A Strategy for Development’ included an approach jointly published by four Executive Departments. It initiated a range of activities including a Creativity Seed Fund supporting educational projects and helped established digital skills initiatives and the Creative Learning Centres which are to this day supported by my Department through funding to NI Screen.

Many aspirations highlighted then probably remain applicable today. It predated the PfG’s outcomes-based approach and formal recognition that working together and across boundaries and disciplines is the only way we can effectively tackle the challenges we face. The approach then recognised what we still advocate today – that culture, arts and heritage is a driver and enabler of equality, inclusion, innovation and social and economic change.

This work advocated that creativity involves connecting things not previously or sufficiently connected. A new vision and strategy for culture, arts and heritage here can finally connect and fully unlock our creative potential.



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