

Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Policy Screening

ACNI Creative Progression Scheme Programme 2026/27

16 June 2026



Name of the policy

ACNI Creative Progression Scheme Programme 2026/27

Is this an existing, revised or a new programme?

This is a revised programme by ACNI and funded by National Lottery Funding.

What is it trying to achieve? (intended aims/outcomes)

Purpose

The purpose of this programme is to support artists and creative practitioners from minority ethnic backgrounds, at any stage of their career. A particular emphasis placed upon those who have experienced structural barriers linked to racialisation, migration, and displacement. The previous MERMP scheme focused upon emerging Minority Ethnic Artists only and thus by proxy created structural barriers.

The Creative Progression Scheme is aimed at Artists and creative practitioners from all disciplines in all types of working practices from minority ethnic backgrounds. There is a particular focus on those Minority Ethnic Artists who have experienced structural barriers linked to racialisation, migration and displacement. The Creative Progression Scheme welcomes applications from artists at any stage of their career. The Support for Individual Artists Programme (SIAP) is a range of schemes which aim to support artists across all disciplines to create work and develop their practice. The Creative Progression Scheme sits within this funding category.

Part 1. Policy scoping

Information about the programme

In March 2026, an external evaluation of the MERMP scheme was undertaken by an Arts Sector Consultant; within this evaluation a specified number of Minority Ethnic Artists, Art Galleries and Arts Council Visual Art Officer were interviewed as part of the evaluation process. The MERMP evaluation report, provided the data analysis in which to form the new Creative Progression Scheme and apply the revised aims, objectives and intended outcomes relevant for the sector needs.

This programme review, recognised how artists and creative practitioners from minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds, make a vital and distinctive contribution to the arts in Northern Ireland. The review identified that these artists and creative practitioners faced structural barriers, which limited their ability to develop their practice, sustain careers, and access the full range of opportunities available to their peers. These barriers were prohibitive to artistic ambition and capacity.

The Arts Council recognises its own role within those structures and views the newly revised programme, Creative Progression, as a sector relevant fund for opening access to artists, at any stage of their career and navigate barriers. The Creative Progression scheme exists to help address those barriers directly, and to invest in the long-term sustainability of artists who identify as having a minority ethnic background and/or are migrants, facing structural barriers to their artistic progression.

Structural barriers to access persist across career stages, not only at the point of entry, which is why the aims of the Creative Progression Scheme were altered to reflect; the MERMP scheme focused on entry level artists. Artists from minority ethnic backgrounds and/or who are migrants are more likely to face compounding disadvantages, including limited professional networks, language and cultural barriers in navigating funding systems, and underrepresentation in peer assessment and decision-making structures, that do not tend to resolve themselves as careers develop. Similarly, the mentoring and residency model, while valuable for some, has not reflected the range of practice development needs across the eligible cohort. Artists at different stages, working across different artforms and contexts, should have the option to identify and justify the forms of support most relevant to their own work.

Creative Progression Scheme aims:

The scheme aims to support the artistic development, skills development, and career progression for artists and creative practitioners across all career stages, who self-identify as having a minority ethnic background and/or are migrant.

Project funded by this scheme should enable individual artists to progress within and across Arts Council funding, to build and/or expand their track record, relationships, and professional networks needed to access the wider funding landscape and develop their creative practice further. Artists and creative practitioners will identify and justify the practice development activity most relevant to their needs at the current stage of their career as part of the application process. This may include but is not limited to creating new work, supporting an individual's time where this is related to specific creative outcomes, research and development time to explore practice or develop work, facilitation of innovation and experimentation, receiving mentoring, participating in a residency, and professional development activities that improve network access.

In the interest of Arts Council providing Minority Ethnic Artists a fair opportunity; the Creative Progression Scheme is not available to artist who have been awarded 2 or more Minority Ethnic Artists' Mentoring & Residency Scheme awards.

Creative Progression applicant eligibility:

- Artists of all disciplines and in all types of working artistic practice from minority ethnic background and/or migrant.
- Creative practitioners and arts administrators from minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds.
- Practicing artists from minority ethnic backgrounds and/or migrants who are also undergraduates, postgraduates and academics employed at 3rd level educational institutions are eligible to apply but where their project proposal lies within the same artform area as their study or work they must prove that the funds which they are seeking are for costs which are not properly the concern of their employer and/or are not related to their work or academic study. They must submit evidence of this in the form.

Eligible applicants must also:

- Have contributed to artistic activities and/or creative practice in Northern Ireland within the past 5 years.
- Live in Northern Ireland: ACNI's budgets are limited and subject to extremely high demand. Our priority must be for artists living and regularly contributing to the arts within Northern Ireland. If you are primarily living in another region of the UK, Republic of Ireland or elsewhere (ie. you live in that region for the majority of the year), you should apply to the Arts Councils in the relevant jurisdiction. Where the Arts Council has concerns regarding this matter, we may seek further clarification from you with regard to this.
- Be at least 18yrs old and not in secondary education. Form of a letter on headed paper from their Head of Department.

The maximum Creative Progression award will be up to £5,000; partnership funding is not required for this scheme. However, if an artist's proposal costs are greater than the award value, the artists must detail the total cost of their project and all other sources of funding within their application.

The Creative Progression Scheme will only fund proposals that will take place between 1 October 2026 and 30 September 2027. All eligible expenditure must be incurred within these dates. Artists may apply to more than one scheme they are eligible for but will be awarded only one grant in any funding round.

The ACNI Creative Progression Scheme aligns with ACNI's mission to develop and champion the arts through investment, as set out in its 10 Year Strategy for the Arts (artscouncil-ni.org/strategy), launched 2024.

This National Lottery investment focuses on achieving; Outcome 2 'A sector that develops, looks after its people, and is more inclusive' and Priority 3 'We will create the conditions to grow artistic talent and develop the wider arts workforce'.

The Creative Progression Scheme also aligns to the broader policy ecosystem by delivering practical, targeted support that advances long-term strategic goals around inclusion, regional balance, equality of opportunity, and community-level engagement in the arts.

This programme is inclusive and flexible within its applicant eligibility, in that it is aimed at artists who are at any stage of their career. The Creative Progression scheme is flexible within its eligibility costs to provide a broader degree of support to undertake the artists chosen project. The MERMP Evaluation report told us that mentoring and residency are not necessarily what artists are primarily asking for. Paid development time, stability, visibility and network access were more consistently prioritised by artists; and as such, flexible practice development this has been built into the new programme.

Our Outcomes

ACNI has a set of outcomes for the art sector, and a set of outcomes that the sector then delivers as a result for society.

Arts Sector

- A sector that develops and looks after its people and is more inclusive.
- A sector that is more supported to develop through experimentation and innovation.
- A sector that facilitates platforming and visibility of grassroots organisations.

Society

- People from all backgrounds can enjoy arts experiences.
- Development and evolvment of creativity, diversity, innovation and inclusion.
- A sector that is more valued across society and government.

The outcomes overlap with one another and are reliant on one another. These detailed below are illustrative of the programme and its alignment to ACNI's business and strategy plan for engagement and development for 2025-2026 and the draft Engagement and Partnership Plan 2026/2027.

These outcomes are aligned with increasing our strategic outcome around "a sector that is more valued across society and government", our engagement and partnership work seeks to:

- Strengthen our strategic relationships to scale impact for artists and communities around creative health, education, creative industries and climate change
- Deepen our work with local authorities around supporting artists practice and increasing our understanding of the impact that arts participation has on people's lives
- Increase resources (monetary and non-monetary) so more people from all backgrounds can enjoy arts experiences and artists and arts organisations can engage in more experimentation and innovation.

This includes:

- Raised visibility of artists' contribution to public value.
- Strengthen engagement with artists, arts organisations, local authorities and grassroots and community organisations.
- Monitoring of underrepresented groups and geographic areas.

Are there any Section 75 categories which might be expected to benefit from the intended policy?

If so, explain how.

The purpose of this programme is that all Section 75 categories will benefit from this policy. However, ACNI understands there may be potential barriers for some groups within this programme. If and when these are potentially identified, ACNI will redress with specific actions in place to improve access for these groups.

Who initiated or wrote the policy?

ACNI responded to the 2026 final review for the Minority Ethnic Artists Residency and Mentoring Programme, by revising this programme and translating its sector relevant aims and objectives into the newly created Creative Progression scheme. From January to March 2026, Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Starling Start conducted a consultancy programme briefing in which the aims and objectives of the MERMP programme evaluation were conveyed. During this evaluation period, MERMP partners such as Art Gallery residency hosts, Artists, Arts Council Officers were part of the consultancy process and interviewed using a set criterion of questions devised. These were specifically to capture insights from organisations that hosted ME artists, ascertain if the programme criteria for the artists were fit for purpose,

and reflected across different international practices and professional trajectories; and to include the guidance for Arts Council Officers who were experience in delivering the MERMP Scheme and its functionality in real terms and the partnership management regarding host organisations.

Who owns and who implements the policy?

ACNI is the agency responsible for the implementation and administration of the Creative Progression scheme programme. All artists applying will be welcome to contact ACNI for further advice in advance of making an application. Existing ACNI clients will be recommended to contact their Arts Council Officer before applying so that they can receive the appropriate support/advice to complete their application.

All applications will be judged on merit, regardless of any previous relationship with ACNI or DfC.

Implementation factor

Are there any factors which could contribute to/detract from the intended aim/outcome of the programme? No.

If yes, are they

☐

financial

☐

legislative

☐

other, please specify _____

Main stakeholders affected

Who are the internal and external stakeholders (actual or potential) that the programme will impact upon?

☐

staff

☒

service users

☒

other public sector organisations

☒

voluntary/community/trade unions

☒

other, please specify - commercial organisations/venues

Other policies with a bearing on this policy

The following existing Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) funding schemes support or complement the aims of the Creative Progression scheme programme.

All are owned and implemented by ACNI:

1. Annual Funding Programme (AFP) – Provides core and programming support for key arts organisations across Northern Ireland. It shares the priorities around inclusion, particularly for communities underrepresented in the arts.
2. National Lottery Project Funding – Offers medium-scale project support and targets equality of access for Section 75 groups, mirroring the emphasis on participation by underrepresented communities in the Creative Progression scheme.
3. Support for Individual Artists Programme (SIAP) – Supports individual artists, including those from minority or marginalised backgrounds. Creative Progression is positioned as part of the SIAP family of schemes, focused on individuals.
4. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Policy and Action Plan (2024–34) – Provides the strategic framework for advancing equality across all ACNI programmes. The Creative Progression Scheme operationalises this policy by prioritising participation from all Section 75 groups and underrepresented geographies.

ACNI Data as noted below.

Available evidence

Data Sources:

[AFS Survey 2024-2025 \(opens in a new window\)](#)

[Working and Living Conditions of artists survey 2024 \(opens in a new window\)](#)

[ACNI EQIA Reporting 2023-2024 \(opens in a new window\)](#)

[NISRA Census 2021 \(opens in a new window\)](#)

[Continuous Household Survey 2023-2024 \(opens in a new window\)](#)

While this data shows strong overall engagement, it highlights some disparities related to gender, disability, age, deprivation, and caring responsibilities. These findings reinforce the importance of targeted measures—such as accessibility support and outreach to marginalised groups—within the Arts and Mental Health Partnership Programme, to promote equality of opportunity and reduce barriers to participation.

Section 75 Data – AFS Survey Data 2024-2025

Religion

Religious faith	Managers	Specialist Staff	Artists	Other Staff	Total
Buddhist	2	1	5	0	8
Catholic	85	84	208	228	605
Protestant	41	52	136	167	396
Hindu	0	6	11	0	17
Islam/Muslim	0	0	0	3	3
Jewish	0	0	0	0	0
Sikh	0	0	0	0	0
Other religious faith	38	58	151	60	307
No Religious Faith	6	0	43	5	54
Religious faith not listed specify here	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to say	63	76	254	51	444
Not known	140	1,063	6,146	476	7,825
Total	375	1,340	6,954	990	9,659

ACNI captures religious belief across all sections of all staff, this data represents a sample that the Annual Funding Organisations. Each annually funded body was asked to give a breakdown of their staff, the majority of which responded with not known, prefer not to say, no specified in survey and no religious faith. This illustrates that within the majority of organisations, there is a continuous shift towards non-identity of religion, 605 respondents identified as Catholic and 396 identified as Protestant. Ethnic minority religions are underrepresented in arts organisations Northern Ireland.

The continuous household survey shows that religious background makes a slight difference in engagement, with Protestant respondents (81%) showing marginally higher engagement than Catholics (79%), though both were close to the population average.

Political Opinion

In this screening and to date, there has been no suggestion that any political grouping suffers any adverse impact in accessing and participating in the arts in Northern Ireland. There is no evidence from any monitoring returns of any negative impact with regards to political opinion.

There has been an historical tendency for voting preferences in Northern Ireland to closely reflect the religious affiliations of the population. This implies that those issues and differentials identified in relation to persons of different religion may also impact on persons of different political opinion.

Ethnicity

ACNI captures data on ethnicity of employees working within Annual Funding Programme organisations:

Ethnicity	Managers	Specialist Staff	Artists	Other Staff	Total
White	326	440	3,815	753	5,334
Irish Traveller			8		8
Roma					
Chinese			31	2	33
Indian		5	21	4	30
Pakistani			5	2	7
Bangladeshi			1		1
Other Asian			8	6	14
Asian not listed, please specify here					
Black Caribbean		1	11		12
Black African		2	50		52
Black Other			36	2	38
Black not listed, please specify here					
Arab			20	1	21

Filipino					
Mixed Ethnic Group	3	2	121	7	133
Other Ethnic Group				2	2
Ethnic group not listed, please specify here			78	11	89
Unspecified or Uncollected	11	523	540	14	1,088
Not Known	33	357	2,231	185	2,806
Total	373	1,330	6,976	989	9,668

In 2024-2025, the majority of staffing in ACNI funded arts organisations, was still predominately white with 3,815 respondents return. The second largest response was from those that did not specify, unknown or ethnicity not listed. Ethnic minorities are still largely underrepresented with only 390 respondents of across arts organisations identified as a minority out of 6,976. There is still an increasing underrepresentation across the board ACNI arts funded organisations, this could also partially be due to the population demographics of Northern Ireland and entry points into the arts sector.

This is highlighted in the NISRA census data below from 2021, where whilst ethnic minorities have gained in population since 2001, it has been still at a low % rate.

Ethnic Group	2001 Count	2001 %	2011 Count	2011 %	2021 Count	2021 %
White	1,671,013	99.15%	1,778,449	98.21%	1,837,575	96.55%
Irish Traveller	1,685	0.10%	1,287	0.07%	2,609	0.14%
Roma	N/D	N/D	14	0.00%	1,529	0.08%
Other	12,569	0.75%	31,113	1.72%	61,466	3.23%
Total	1,685,267	100%	1,810,863	100%	1,903,179	100%

[Census 2021 - Briefing](#) (opens in a new window)

Age

ACNI captures data on the age range of employees working within Annual Funding Programme organisations:

Age	Managers	Specialist Staff	Artists	Other Staff	Total
0-15	0	0	4	0	4
16-24	2	20	120	116	258
25-34	19	77	408	156	660
35-44	51	77	369	97	594
45-54	70	68	301	84	523
55-64	46	36	153	47	282
65+	11	7	39	15	72
Prefer Not to Say	4	60	202	0	266
Not known	9	156	1891	376	2432
Total	212	501	3487	891	5091

In 2023-2024, the age range for ACNI arts funded organisations highlights that majority of staffing lie between 25 and 34 and 35 and 44. This demonstrates that young, training and/or skilled staff are underpinning arts organisations. The second highest is between 45-54 and 55 and 64 categories which may represent senior level management of organisations. Although the lowest number of age-related staff is 65+, this may represent a more voluntary base workforce in arts organisations.

According to the Continuous Household Survey 2023/24, 80% of adults in Northern Ireland engaged in the arts either by attending or participating in activities. However, engagement varied notably across demographic groups. Engagement differs across age groups, with younger adults (16–24) reporting 88% engagement, compared to 69% among those aged 75 and over, indicating a participation gap linked to age and potentially mobility or access.

ACNI also captures data on disability access within annually funded organisations under the following headings:

Captioning

British Sign Language

Irish Sign Language

Audio described

Hearing support loop

Large print / braille for programmes

Wheelchair access

Relaxed performances

Disability 2024-2025

Classification	Managers	Specialist Staff	Artists	Other Staff	Total
Disabled	25	30	161	50	266
Non-Disabled	220	301	1,502	522	2,545
Prefer not to say	14	5	45	24	89
Not known	37	968	5,085	371	5,511
Total	346	1,305	5,793	967	9,411

In 2024-2025, the disability range for ACNI arts funded organizations highlights that majority of artists of staffing lie between nondisabled at 1,502 and disabled at 161. 89 respondents preferred not to outline their response.

The data below refers to the total number of organisations (89) with some activities available within each of the accessibility types.

Support	Number of organisations	% of portfolio
Braille	13	0.146067
Large print	24	0.26966
Induction loop	11	0.1235955
Captioning	28	0.3146067

Audio Description	20	0.224719
BSL interpreter	29	0.3258427
ISL interpreter	13	0.146067
Wheelchair access	6	0.0674157
Accessible toilets	6	0.0674157
Lifts	14	0.157303
Signage	14	0.157303
Maps	17	0.1910111236
Relaxed performances	33	0.3707865
Dementia friendly	30	0.33707865
Multisensory workshops	33	0.3707865

Disability access across the arts sector in 2024-2025, suggests that venues are taking into consideration the needs of disability audiences and facilities accessible but also attendance and participatory elements as well, that require descriptive signage and mapping.

According to the Continuous Household Survey, adults without disabilities were significantly more likely to engage in the arts (85%) than those with disabilities (63%), highlighting an important area for continued access support.

Men and women generally:

According to the Continuous Household Survey 2023/24, 80% of adults in Northern Ireland engaged in the arts either by attending or participating in activities. However, engagement varied notably across demographic groups. Women reported higher levels of engagement (83%) than men (78%), continuing a consistent gender trend observed in previous years.

Dependants

Engagement was also lower among individuals with dependants (77%) compared to those without (82%), and among those living in the most deprived areas (74%) compared to the least deprived (86%), according to the Continuous Household Survey.

Marital Status

Differences also emerged in the Continuous Household Survey by marital status: people who were married or cohabiting had an engagement rate of 83%, single individuals reported 82%, while widowed adults had a substantially lower engagement rate of 63%, and those separated or divorced reported 75%. This may suggest specific barriers faced by older or formerly married individuals.

Sexual orientation

The Continuous Household Survey does not report arts engagement by sexual orientation, and therefore no disparities can be identified from this data source. While no evidence currently highlights specific barriers linked to this category, the absence of detailed data on LGBTQ+ participation or on people of different marital status represents a limitation in the available evidence base. These findings reinforce the importance of continued outreach, inclusive design, and targeted support for underrepresented groups to ensure that all communities in Northern Ireland can access and benefit from the arts.

Needs, experiences and priorities

Section 75 category	Details of needs/experiences/priorities
Religious belief	There is no indication of any inequality in access to the arts based on religious belief. Due to the complexities in the subject matter, many respondents to the survey, do not provide this information. This makes this difficult to ascertain the true nature and breakdown of survey participants by religious affiliation. However, in relation to arts access, a proportion of arts related activities by funded organisations are done so through community development and or cross community.
Political opinion	Political opinion is another complex topic and would explain why due to historic circumstances, it can correlate religious belief with political opinion and determine that there is no evidence for any inequality in arts provision by political opinion.
Racial group	Northern Ireland has a relatively small ethnic minority and racial community in comparison to the UK and this is highlighted in the response and proportion of respondents in the arts sector. The size of the sample makes it difficult to predict trends, however the ethnic population growth in the last ten years highlights a 1.5% jump between 2011-2021.
Age	Young people have considerably higher attendance and participation in the arts than any other age group, and older people have lower attendance and participation. The Arts Council recognise both these age groups in their targeted programmes, recognising the formative influence of the arts on young people and the wellbeing benefits

	observed with older people. Our evidence highlights that issues of mobility that could be related to age are potentially limiting engagement.
Marital status	Marital status does not necessarily prevent to working in the art sector for any marital status, however it is likely that age, family commitments and childcare can.
Sexual orientation	Our evidence does not highlight any specific data gaps or targeted support needs related to sexual orientation. However, qualitative findings from the Annual Report reference strong engagement with LGBTQ+ communities in general, and through specific events such as the Outburst Queer Arts Festival, indicating active inclusion in industry activity.
Men and Women Generally	Our evidence indicates strong participation by women in the arts. For example, women represent 60% of the workforce of our sample of national lottery organisations and Annually Funded Organisations, with men, 38%. Only 1% of the workforce identify as non-binary (including androgyne).
Disability	Our Client Satisfaction Survey highlights the need for stronger support for artists with disabilities in terms of support when completing applications. We will continue our work with University of Atypical, where this type of support is provided to artists applying to our programmes.
Dependants	Our evidence does not highlight any specific data gaps or targeted support needs related to dependants.

Part 2: Screening questions

Details of the likely policy impacts on Religious Belief:

The programme is open to all regardless of religious affiliation and encourages participation from underrepresented communities, including faith-based and cross-community initiatives. No adverse impact is expected.

Level of impact: Minor

Details of the likely policy impacts on Political Opinion:

The programme is politically neutral but operates in a region where political opinion and religious background can intersect. The programme aims to reach diverse communities across

all council areas, ensuring political inclusivity.

Level of impact: Minor

Details of the likely policy impacts on Racial Group:

The programme explicitly targets racial minority groups, this is the intentional premise, with the aims and objectives of the Creative Progression scheme as it is a revised version of the Minority Ethnic Artists Mentoring and Residency Programme. This programme still targets the same Ethnic Minority cohort as the former MERMP programme; with enhanced flexibility to meet relevant sectoral needs of this Section 75 Group. The policy will help foster greater community cohesion and positive perceptions between different racial and cultural groups

Level of impact: Minor

Details of the likely policy impacts on Age:

The programme is open to applications involving intergenerational participation, including youth and older people. It complements existing ACNI programmes targeting mental health and wellbeing across age groups.

Level of impact: Minor

Details of the likely policy impacts on Marital Status:

No barriers are presented based on marital status. While not explicitly targeted, the programme's community-based approach is inclusive of family-oriented and single-person households.

Level of impact: None

Details of the likely policy impacts on Sexual Orientation:

The programme is inclusive of LGBTQ+ and is open to participation from all sexual orientations. There is no evidence of structural exclusion.

Level of impact: None

Details of the likely policy impacts on Men and Women:

The programme encourages applications from a wide range of participants regardless of gender. There is currently no evidence of gender imbalance in participation.

Level of impact: None

Details of the likely policy impacts on Disability:

The programme encourages applications that involve artists with disabilities. Accessibility costs are explicitly eligible, and disability access data is monitored.

Level of impact: Minor

Details of the likely policy impacts on Dependants:

While not a core target group, the programme may indirectly benefit people with caring responsibilities, particularly where projects are delivered in accessible locations and formats.

Level of impact: Minor

Are there opportunities for better promote equality of opportunity for people within Section 75 equalities categories?

Religious Belief – Yes

The programme is open to all communities and encourages cross-community and interfaith participation.

Political Opinion – Yes

While politically neutral, the programme's focus on inclusion creates opportunities to promote engagement across political identities, especially in post-conflict contexts.

Racial Group – Yes

The programme's focus is on Ethnic Minority backgrounds, those who have experienced structural barriers linked to racialisation, migration and displacement.

Age – Yes

The programme can support projects that engage both younger and older people, helping to address social isolation and improve wellbeing.

Marital Status – No

The programme remains inclusive to all applicants regardless of marital status.

Sexual Orientation – Yes

The programme is open to LGBTQ+ people. Continued outreach and visibility of LGBTQ+ inclusion will help maximise this opportunity.

Men and Women – Yes

The programme can help address any imbalances in participation by supporting a diverse range of projects, including those that challenge gender stereotypes or create opportunities for marginalised gender identities in the arts.

Disability – Yes

By working with University of Atypical supporting artists with disabilities as they prepare applications, the programme actively promotes equality of opportunity for disabled artists and audiences. It also complements ACNI's wider disability access commitments.

Dependants – Yes

Projects that are designed with flexible access, childcare support, or family-friendly programming can promote equality of opportunity for carers and people with dependants, even if not directly named as a target group.

To what extent is the policy likely to impact on good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion, or racial group?

Details of the likely policy impacts on Religious Belief:

The programme contributes positively to building mutual understanding and respect through shared cultural activity.

What is the level of impact? Minor

Details of the likely policy impacts on Political Opinion:

While the programme does not take a political stance, it fosters participation across Northern Ireland's diverse communities, including areas traditionally associated with differing political identities. This creates opportunities for collaborative arts engagement that can improve understanding across political divides.

What is the level of impact? Minor

Details of the likely policy impacts on Racial Group:

The programme encourages participation from global majority groups, particularly those currently underrepresented in arts funding. By supporting inclusive and intercultural projects, the policy can help foster greater community cohesion and positive perceptions between different racial and cultural groups.

What is the level of impact? Minor

Are there opportunities to better promote good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion, or racial groups?

Religious Belief – Yes

The programme has the potential to support arts projects that facilitate dialogue, shared cultural experiences, and mutual understanding between people of different religious backgrounds.

Political Opinion – Yes

While the programme is politically neutral, it has the potential to support inclusive participation from communities with different political traditions. By funding arts initiatives in both unionist and nationalist areas, and those involving cross-community engagement, the programme can contribute to reducing division and fostering respectful coexistence.

Racial Group – Yes

The programme presents an opportunity to promote intercultural understanding via arts projects. It can also support initiatives that address racism and promote inclusion through the arts, helping to improve community relations across racial and ethnic lines.

Multiple Identity

People can fall into more than one Section 75 category. Are there any potential impacts of the policy or decision on people with multiple identities?

Provide details of data on the impact of the policy on people with multiple identities. Specify relevant Section 75 categories.

No adverse impacts are anticipated for people with multiple identities. The Creative Progression scheme is designed to promote inclusion and equality of opportunity across all Section 75 categories. It encourages applications from underrepresented applicants, offers accessibility support, and is open to applicants who consider themselves an Ethnic Minority.

At present, Section 75 monitoring is collected on a category-by-category basis (e.g. disability, age, ethnicity) and does not allow for reliable cross-tabulation or analysis of intersectional experiences. As such, no direct data exists on the impact of this programme on people with multiple identities.

However, ACNI recognises that multiple identity analysis is important for understanding the lived experiences of underrepresented groups. Opportunities exist to strengthen this through internal evaluation mechanisms, including future monitoring and potential clustering analysis to assess how overlapping identities may influence participation and access. This will be reviewed as part of ongoing efforts to improve data collection and equality analysis.

Part 3. Screening decision

An equality impact assessment (EQIA) is not required for this policy.

The Creative Progression Scheme programme has been designed to increase participation in the arts from minority ethnic backgrounds, particularly those who have experienced structural barriers linked to racialisation, migration, and displacement, by promoting equality of opportunity across all Section 75 categories. It includes measures to remove barriers to participation (e.g. accessibility costs, support for applicants, inclusive eligibility criteria), and it aligns with ACNI's Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Policy and 10-Year Strategic Plan.

There is no indication that any of the protected characteristic groups will be discriminated against as a result of this programme. There is no evidence to suggest the policy will result in adverse or disproportionate impact on any Section 75 group or on people with multiple identities. Instead, the likely impact is positive and supportive of the statutory equality and good relations duties. Where monitoring highlights potential areas for improvement (e.g. intersectionality or access among specific groups), these can be addressed through programme evaluation and future design, rather than through a full EQIA.

No mitigation or alternative policy is required. The Creative Progression scheme programme has been designed to actively promote equality of opportunity and good relations. It includes targeted measures to increase access among Section 75 groups and those from underrepresented geographic areas, with clear eligibility criteria, support mechanisms, and a commitment to inclusive practice.

Although no adverse impacts have been identified in the programme during its initial period, ACNI will continue to monitor participation data and feedback from applicants, with a view to strengthening the policy when required. For example, opportunities may arise to enhance intersectional monitoring or support for specific groups as programme delivery evolves.

Mitigation

Can the policy/decision be amended or changed or an alternative policy introduced to better promote equality of opportunity and/or good relations?

There is no need to amend the policy or introduce an alternative. The Creative Progression scheme programme is a revised version of the former MERMP scheme, which has been evaluated by an external evaluation consultant. The evaluation consultant's report informs the final version which will be designed with the aim of improving equality of opportunity and fostering good relations across all Section 75 categories.

While no changes are required at this time, ACNI will continue to monitor participation data and feedback to identify any opportunities for further strengthening the policy's reach and impact.

Timetable and prioritising

Not applicable – policy will not be screened in for EQIA.

Part 4: Monitoring

Although a full Equality Impact Assessment is not required, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland is evaluating this programme to assess its impact. The Creative Progression scheme programme has been externally evaluated to assess its impact; with evaluation analysis forming the final version of the policy on equality, diversity, and inclusion outcomes. Participation will continue to be monitored across Section 75 categories where data are available, including religion, political opinion, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and dependants.

ACNI will also assess the geographical spread of applications and awards, with particular attention to local authority areas that are historically underrepresented. Feedback from applicants will inform ongoing review of the programme's accessibility and impact.

A review of the revised Creative Progression scheme will take place upon the closing of the funding cycle, followed by an internal evaluation report to ascertain all aims and objectives have been realised or require further revision by Arts Council. This monitoring will support continuous improvement and help identify any barriers or emerging inequalities that may require action in future programme cycles.

Part 5 – Approval and authorisation

Screened by: Elaine McEnarney

Position/Job title: Research & Policy Officer

Date: 11/6/2026

Approved by: Javier Stanziola

Position/Job title : Director of Strategic Development and Partnerships

Date: 16/06/2026