Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Response to Call for Evidence

National Lottery Review

23rd September 2026

arts council of Northern Ireland

Introduction

- The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the review of National Lottery funding. Through funding from the National Lottery and Exchequer, we support the work of hundreds of artists, creative practitioners, arts organisations, community groups, and venues in Northern Ireland. Our Arts Development Officers offer specialist guidance on funding and project development to artists and organisations working across the spectrum of arts activity in Northern Ireland. We distribute funding to organisations and individuals in the creative sector who develop and deliver arts programmes across all of society. We deliver workshops, peer learning and knowledge exchange sessions to support the development of the sector. We support art in the community, in our schools, healthcare environments, and in the creative industries. We work in close partnership with other National Lottery distributors, and key cultural and sectoral organisations to support projects, organisations and artists.
- Our draft 2024-34 Strategic Plan is centred on delivering six long-term outcomes that strengthen both the arts sector and wider society. The strategy aims to create a more financially sustainable arts sector, support artists and arts workers through better development opportunities and greater inclusion, and foster innovation, experimentation and artistic risk-taking. It also seeks to maximise the arts' contribution to social wellbeing, peace-building, combatting racism, economic prosperity and environmental sustainability, while ensuring that people from all backgrounds can access and enjoy high-quality arts experiences. Underpinning all of this is a commitment to increasing the value placed on the arts across government and society by demonstrating their impact on creativity, health, community cohesion and economic growth. Through investment and partnership working, the Arts Council's vision is for a thriving arts sector that is recognised as essential to Northern Ireland's wellbeing, cultural life and future prosperity.
- Over the past decade, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland has faced a sustained decline in government investment. Exchequer funding has fallen from £14.1 million to £10.1 million, representing a 27% cash reduction and an estimated 50% reduction in real terms once inflation is taken into account. At the same time, National Lottery funding has become increasingly important, now accounting for approximately half of the Arts Council's overall resources and helping to sustain activity that might otherwise be lost. Lottery investment has proven highly effective in leveraging additional resources, with Annual Funding Programme organisations generating £1.39 in additional funding for every £1 invested by the Arts Council. However, growing reliance on Lottery income to support core activity is not sustainable and, without increased Exchequer investment, the sector faces significant risks to employment, artistic production, audience reach and its ability to attract further public, private and philanthropic funding.

- The Lottery review provides an important opportunity to explore how Lottery funding can continue to deliver the greatest possible benefit for communities. It focuses on funding structures and distribution mechanisms, with emphasis on the outcomes and impacts that Lottery investment generates across society. We have encouraged artists, arts organisations and creative practitioners across Northern Ireland to actively engage with the consultation process to ensure the distinctive nature of the arts, community and grassroots ecosystem of Northern Ireland are fully reflected in the call for evidence.
- This response outlines the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's experience as a National Lottery distributor and describes the vital contribution Lottery funding makes to communities, artists and cultural organisations across Northern Ireland. It highlights the economic, social and community benefits generated through Lottery investment, the growing importance of this funding in the context of declining Exchequer support, and its role in leveraging additional resources and partnerships. It also examines the impact of place-based and grassroots investment, the Arts Council's approach to effective and accountable funding delivery, and the importance of balancing community-led activity, strong governance, evidence-based decision making and long-term capacity building to maximise public benefit.

Our investment

- Thanks to National Lottery funding, arts and cultural organisations across Northern Ireland deliver significant economic, social and community benefits. Data from the Annual Investment Survey for 2024/25 demonstrates that Arts Council investment supports a large and diverse sector that reaches communities, creates employment, attracts additional income, and improves access to the arts. For instance, organisations funded through our two major funding schemes (the Annual Funding Programme and National Lottery Project funding):
    - Employed 9,900 workers during 2024-25, most of them freelancers or on a contractual basis. Small-scale organisations recorded workforce growth of 43%, showing the role of investment in sustaining grassroots cultural organisations and local creative economies. Similarly, the sector generated more than £60 million in annual income, combining earned income, public investment, charitable contributions and capital funding.
    - Delivered 7,376 performances and more than 31,000 participation events, providing extensive opportunities for people to engage with arts and culture throughout Northern Ireland. In one year, exhibition activity increased by 64%. This translated into audiences of more than 1.06 million to performances and 337,000 participants through workshops, classes, community programmes and other creative activities. Furthermore, funded organisations reported 318,000 visits to their exhibitions and 259,000 attendees to their festivals.
    - Prioritised community benefit, with 43% of programme activity targeted at people living in deprived neighbourhoods, 39% focused on children and young people, and 31% supporting health and wellbeing objectives.
- **Economic impact:** The Arts Council of Northern Ireland's 2025 economic impact analysis found that its investment portfolio plays a major role in Northern Ireland's arts sector. The study found that 126 funded organisations generate an estimated £104 million in Gross Value Added (GVA) annually, equivalent to around 80% of the combined GVA of the region's museums, galleries, libraries, and performing and visual arts sectors. Of this total, ACNI's own funding of approximately £13 million is estimated to directly generate £24 million in annual economic activity, demonstrating that every £1 invested creates almost £2 of economic impact. After accounting for displacement effects, ACNI funding is estimated to contribute £11.2 million in net additional GVA and 174 jobs each year to the Northern Ireland economy. The study highlights how ACNI funding often acts as a catalyst that enables organisations to attract further investment from other sources, amplifying its impact, while also noting that these figures reflect only economic benefits and do not yet capture the wider social, cultural, wellbeing and community outcomes of arts funding, which will be reported separately.
- **Social impact and Partnerships**: National Lottery funding enables the Arts Council not only to support individual projects, but also to attract additional

investment and develop strategic partnerships that increase the overall impact of public funding. NI faces increasing challenges relating to mental health, loneliness, social isolation, inequality and community division. The Public Health Agency's Mental Health Survey found that 40% of adults reported experiencing mental ill health at some point in their lives, while around one in five people experience potential psychiatric morbidity in any given period. Northern Ireland also has one of the highest suicide rates in the UK, with 12.3 deaths per 100,000 population recorded in 2022. Furthermore, loneliness remains a key wellbeing concern, recognised by The Executive Office as a core measure of individual wellbeing in Northern Ireland. Social and economic inequalities also persist, with 17% of people, equivalent to approximately 331,000 individuals, living in relative poverty in 2023/24, including around 104,000 children. These challenges are often interconnected, with evidence showing that poverty, deprivation, social exclusion and experiences of conflict or division increase the risk of poor mental health and reduced wellbeing. ACNI's strategy seeks to ensure that our arts funding and development programmes can play an important role in fostering resilience, understanding and belonging. By working with partners such as the Public Health Agency and the Baring Foundation, National Lottery funding acts as a catalyst for wider investment in programmes that address some of these major social challenges. This collaborative approach extends the reach of arts interventions beyond the cultural sector and demonstrates how relatively modest arts investment can unlock wider public and charitable resources. For instance,

  - Mental Health and Arts Programme: Working in partnership with the Baring Foundation, the Arts Council is currently supporting more than 20 projects that bring artists and arts organisations together with partners in the mental health field. The programme uses creative practice to support wellbeing, social connection and recovery, while also investing in the capacity of the sector through dedicated training for artists, including self-care and evaluation support. An independent evaluation of the programme is currently underway and will report later this year.
  - Arts and Older People Programme: The Arts and Older People Programme, funded in partnership with the Public Health Agency demonstrates, how arts investment can deliver significant health and wellbeing benefits. Since 2010, the programme has invested around £3 million in over 300 projects, benefiting approximately 35,000 older people across Northern Ireland. Evaluation findings show that participation in this scheme helps reduce loneliness, improve wellbeing, strengthen social connections, challenge age-related stereotypes and increase older people's involvement in community life. The programme is recognised as an effective intervention in tackling social isolation and supporting positive mental health and wellbeing among older people.

- **Place-based funding:** National Lottery funding provides the foundation for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to develop and deliver place-based

approaches that respond to the particular needs and characteristics of communities across Northern Ireland. Through targeted investment, the Arts Council is able to fund directly grassroots organisations, community groups and local partnerships that are often best placed to understand and respond to local circumstances. This approach recognises that communities experience different social, economic and cultural challenges, and that locally designed arts interventions can play an important role in strengthening community life, wellbeing and social connectedness.

- One example of this approach is our investment in rural communities. Through small-scale grants ranging from £500 to £10,000, local organisations are supported through the Rural Engagement Arts Programme to develop arts activity that reflects the needs, identity and aspirations of their communities. Northern Ireland has a higher proportion of its population living in rural areas than England, Scotland or Wales, alongside a network of small and dispersed communities that can face barriers to accessing cultural opportunities and services. (Northern Ireland: around 36% of people live in rural areas; Wales: around 33%; England: around 21%; Scotland: around 17%). REAP enables the Arts Council to reach groups that may have limited engagement with mainstream arts provision and to support activity in areas where geographical isolation, limited transport and reduced access to services can create additional barriers to participation. Evaluation findings demonstrate the impact of this locally rooted model. In one funding round, 63 organisations received support, with every funded project demonstrating a contribution to reducing isolation and promoting social inclusion. Over 90% of projects included cross-community activity, 83% included intergenerational engagement, and all projects reported positive wellbeing outcomes for participants. Sixty per cent incorporated specific mental health supports, while more than 620 volunteers and over 520 artists were involved in delivery, the majority of whom were based in rural areas. A key strength of this approach is that it works through trusted local organisations with strong community relationships. Evaluation found that 85% of funded organisations developed enduring partnerships with community groups and local stakeholders. Projects were frequently co-designed with local residents, delivered through existing community networks and shaped by local knowledge. This creates strong levels of community ownership, helps build lasting relationships and leaves a legacy that extends beyond the funded activity itself. The evaluation also highlighted significant additionality and value for money. Almost three-quarters of organisations reported that they would have been unable to deliver their project without Arts Council support, while the majority secured additional resources alongside their grant. The programme was found to strengthen community cohesion, support wellbeing, build confidence in local organisations and contribute to the long-term development of cultural infrastructure within communities.
- Alongside these place-based investments, the Arts Council provides grants to small grassroots organisations, with awards starting from as little as £500. These funds are often the first point of contact for community organisations engaging with public arts funding and help widen participation, improve equality of access and support creative activity in

communities that may otherwise be underrepresented. Together, these approaches demonstrate how we are in a position to build relationships at community level, support locally led solutions and deliver cultural investment that is responsive to the diverse needs of people and places across Northern Ireland.

- Other related schemes include the Creative Schools Partnership scheme, the Musical Instruments Programme, and the Artists in Residence programme. These schemes focus on schools, community groups and artists that prioritise the needs of the communities involved, with local people playing an active role in shaping activity and determining outcomes. Artists are often embedded within communities, schools and local organisations, helping to build creative skills, strengthen participation, create new opportunities for engagement and support communities to address local challenges through creative practice. This approach ensures that investment is responsive to local circumstances and delivers both cultural and wider social benefits. In particular, the Musical Instruments for Bands Programme reflects a distinctive aspect of Northern Ireland's cultural landscape. Community bands are deeply embedded within local life and often serve as important centres of participation, volunteering and intergenerational engagement. By enabling bands to replace and upgrade instruments, the programme helps sustain organisations that bring together people from different age groups and backgrounds through a shared commitment to music, cultural expression and community activity. In many areas, particularly rural communities, bands provide an accessible route into the arts and play an important role in strengthening local identity and social connection.

Our ways of working

- The Arts Council continually reviews how it delivers funding and support, recognising the need to maximise impact while operating within a constrained funding environment. Alongside our separate submission on the costs and administration associated with grant processing and reporting, we would emphasise that driving efficiency and improving effectiveness is already embedded within our approach. As a relatively small organisation, the Arts Council has increasingly adopted delivery models that make best use of specialist expertise within the sector. Rather than directly delivering a range of developmental programmes ourselves, we invest in resource organisations that can respond more quickly and flexibly to the needs of artists and arts organisations. These organisations provide targeted support in areas such as audience development, inclusion, accessibility and sector development, allowing expertise to sit closer to communities and practitioners while ensuring public investment achieves greater reach and impact.
    - One relevant example of the work we do with resource organisations is the Engage and Impact research by Thrive. Their latest IMPACT audience research highlights the growing importance of social connection in arts engagement. While audiences continue to attend arts and cultural events primarily to be entertained (71%), see a specific artist or performer (50%), and spend time with friends and family (48%), the research found a notable increase in people attending in order to feel part of a community, rising by 6% over the past three years. The findings suggest that arts and cultural experiences play an increasingly important role in fostering belonging, shared experiences and social connection.
    - Building on this insight, we have been working with Thrive to explore similar questions from a participation perspective. Through ongoing research, Thrive is testing how participation in arts activities contributes to community connection, belonging and wellbeing, helping to better understand the wider social value that arts engagement can generate for individuals and communities.
- Partnership working is central to our work. We collaborate closely with other National Lottery distributors and cultural agencies to identify opportunities for shared learning, greater consistency and reduced duplication. This includes participation in cross-sector initiatives such as the development of common data frameworks and shared approaches to measurement and evaluation. While challenges remain around data standards, technology and legislative requirements, we are committed to supporting greater alignment and streamlining wherever possible.
- The Arts Council also places a strong emphasis on listening to those who use and benefit from our programmes. Through a range of deliberative forums and engagement mechanisms, we regularly consult with artists, arts organisations and communities, including those from rural areas and Global Majority backgrounds. This engagement helps inform programme design, identify barriers to access and ensure that application processes, guidance and

reporting requirements are kept under continual review. Balancing simplicity with the requirements of transparency, accountability and good governance remains an ongoing priority.

- Evidence and learning are central to how we operate. We support sector-wide audience and participation research, collecting data on audience engagement, participant experiences, equality monitoring and satisfaction levels. More recently, this work has expanded to provide a stronger understanding of participation in creative activity and the wider social outcomes generated through engagement with the arts. This allows us to make more informed decisions and demonstrate impact more effectively. Across our funding portfolio, programmes are routinely evaluated using outcomes-focused and theory of change approaches. This enables us not only to assess delivery against planned activities and outputs, but also to understand the difference programmes make for individuals, communities and the wider sector. Evaluation findings are used to improve programme design, target resources more effectively and strengthen future investment decisions.
- Our relationships with local authorities are particularly important in supporting participation and place-based development. We work closely with councils on data, planning and consultation, and through programmes such as artists-in-residence initiatives that encourage collaborative working between artists, councils and local communities. These programmes place co-creation, participation and community engagement at their core, ensuring that cultural activity reflects local priorities and strengthens local capacity.
- We are in the process of implementing a digital transformation plan. We have undertaken the discovery phase and identified a number of changes we need to implement. One change is the use of AI tools/features to assess the administrative sections of grant applications we receive. This is something we are implementing as a pilot to report progress to the Board once the pilot is completed. The pilot is currently at the initial procurement stage. We are aiming to start implementing it later in the financial year.

Scale, Impact and Accountability

- Our experience as a National Lottery distributor demonstrates the importance of combining community engagement, local responsiveness, accountability and strategic capacity in order to achieve meaningful and lasting impact. Across our portfolio, some of the most successful programmes are those that connect grassroots participation and community leadership with the organisational structures, partnerships, expertise and governance arrangements necessary to sustain activity over time and generate wider public benefit. National Lottery funding supports a diverse ecosystem of artists, community groups, voluntary organisations, cultural organisations and strategic partners. Each plays a distinct but complementary role. Community organisations often possess deep local knowledge, trusted relationships and an ability to engage people who may not otherwise participate in arts and cultural activity. Artists bring creativity, facilitation skills and the capacity to work with communities to explore local issues, develop confidence, build relationships and create opportunities for expression and participation. Larger organisations frequently provide specialist expertise, infrastructure, governance, evaluation capacity and partnership networks that enable activity to be delivered consistently and at scale.
- Our experience suggests that lasting outcomes are strongest when these different elements work together. While many social challenges are experienced locally, addressing them effectively often requires coordination, expertise, evidence and long-term investment. This is particularly true where National Lottery funding contributes to wider public outcomes such as health and wellbeing, social inclusion, community cohesion, education, skills development, environmental sustainability, rural isolation, healthy ageing or mental health. The ability to connect local activity to wider strategic outcomes remains an important strength of the current funding ecosystem.
- A recurring lesson from our work is that scale should not be understood simply in terms of organisational size. Rather, scale is reflected in the ability to generate impact beyond individual projects and to create learning, partnerships and infrastructure that deliver benefits across communities and sectors. Many relatively small investments have proven highly effective because they have been connected to wider support structures, specialist networks or strategic partnerships. Equally, many larger investments derive their value from their ability to support and strengthen smaller organisations, artists and community groups.
- At the same time, our experience highlights the importance of transparency, governance and accountability in maintaining public confidence in Lottery investment. Public funding carries responsibilities that extend beyond the successful delivery of individual projects. Strong governance arrangements ensure that resources are distributed fairly, decisions are made transparently, and investment reaches intended beneficiaries. These structures also provide assurance that funded activity contributes to wider public objectives and that learning from investment can be captured and applied in future decision-making. We have found that evaluation is a particularly important part of this

process. But evaluation should not be viewed solely as a mechanism for accountability or reporting. While demonstrating impact and accountability remains essential, evaluation is equally valuable as a tool for organisational learning, programme development and continuous improvement. Across our programmes, outcomes-based evaluation and theory of change approaches are increasingly used to understand not only what activities took place but how and why change occurred. This creates opportunities for funded organisations to strengthen delivery, improve practice and increase their effectiveness over time.

- The benefits of evaluation are amplified when knowledge is shared across organisations and sectors. Our participation in collaborative initiatives such as the One Data Strategy reflects a recognition that shared approaches to data collection, indicators and definitions can reduce duplication and improve the quality of evidence available to funders and stakeholders. While practical challenges remain, particularly around systems, legislation and data standards, the direction of travel is positive. There are further opportunities to build on this foundation through more coordinated approaches to research, evaluation and impact measurement, allowing Lottery distributors collectively to generate stronger evidence of public value while also providing organisations with more useful insights into their work.
- Our experience also suggests that community voice and accountability are strengthened when people have opportunities to contribute to governance and decision-making. Across the cultural sector, there is increasing recognition of the value of diverse boards, advisory structures and lived-experience perspectives. However, meaningful participation requires capacity, support and investment. Individuals often face barriers relating to time, caring responsibilities, travel, confidence and access to governance experience. Supporting the development of future trustees, board members and community representatives may therefore represent an important area of investment in its own right, helping organisations broaden representation while maintaining strong governance standards.
- The Arts Council's work with local authorities illustrates the value of combining local insight with strategic partnership. Through initiatives such as Artists in Residence, place-based activity is developed in collaboration with councils, artists and communities, ensuring that creative activity responds to locally identified priorities while benefiting from wider learning and support structures. Similar principles underpin programmes focused on rural communities, schools, older people, mental health and community participation. In each case, the strongest outcomes have emerged where artists, communities, public bodies and specialist organisations work collaboratively around shared objectives.
- Taken together, our experience indicates that the greatest value from National Lottery funding is achieved when community-led activity, artistic practice, strong governance, strategic partnership, robust evaluation and long-term capacity building operate in combination. These elements should not be viewed as alternatives to one another. Rather, they are mutually reinforcing components of an effective funding ecosystem. The impact of Lottery investment is strongest when communities have genuine opportunities to shape and participate in activity, when organisations have the capacity to deliver and learn, when governance and accountability maintain public

confidence, and when evidence is used not only to demonstrate success but to improve future outcomes. This combination has allowed National Lottery funding to contribute far beyond cultural participation alone, generating benefits for individuals, communities and society that continue long after individual projects have concluded.

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