



**From: The Minister**

**Level 9  
Causeway Exchange  
1-7 Bedford Street  
Belfast  
BT2 7EG**

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Mr Liam Hannaway  
Chair, Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Via email: [REDACTED]

Dear Liam,

## **LETTER OF EXPECTATIONS**

I am writing to provide a letter of expectations for the work of the Arts Council in advance of completion of the Arts Policy. The letter sets out my priorities, to allow you to frame the work of the Council to align with those priorities.

I recognise the ongoing challenging budget position, and the impact that this has for the budget of all parts of the NI public sector; including the money we have available to spend on arts activity and the significant benefits it can deliver to individuals and communities. The budgetary situation, I know, creates a range of challenges; and I am cognisant of some specific issues for the Council in terms of its lottery spending levels. It also makes it vital that we collaborate and align to the greatest possible effect, and ensure that available funding is constantly reviewed and focussed to address priorities.



I recognise that the Arts Policy is currently under development, and not at this stage able to provide specific strategic context for the Council's decisions. The attached letter is therefore designed to assist the Council in its work by drawing my priorities together.

The letter includes monitoring arrangements, which my officials will be setting up in the coming weeks. I hope, through these, that we can continue to work together to refine any areas where additional clarity is required, and make a substantive change in the impact that departmental funding can have on arts activity and the positive difference it can make to people, to communities and to places.

I would be grateful if you would share this letter and the letter of expectations with your Board colleagues and the Council's management team.

Yours sincerely,

**Gordon Lyons MLA**  
**Minister for Communities**



## **DELIVERING ON THE DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES' PRIORITIES**

### **EXPECTATIONS FOR THE ARTS COUNCIL OF NORTHERN IRELAND FOR THE 2025-2026 YEAR**

#### **The statutory functions of the Arts Council**

The Arts Council (NI) Order 1995 sets down the following functions, duties and powers of the Arts Council:

4.—(1) The functions of the Arts Council shall be—

- (a) to develop and improve the knowledge, appreciation and practice of the arts;
- (b) to increase public access to, and participation in, the arts;
- (c) to advise the Department and other government departments, district councils and other bodies on matters relating to the arts; and
- (d) such other functions as are conferred on the Council by any other statutory provision.

(2) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), the Arts Council may, for the purposes of those functions...

(3) It shall be the duty of the Arts Council to consult regularly with district councils on the exercise by the Council of its functions.

(4) In addition, the Arts Council shall make provision for regular consultation with members of district councils on the development of the arts.

(5) The reference in paragraph (3) to the functions of the Arts Council does not include a reference to national lottery functions.

#### **The intent of this letter**

The Arts Council is an Arm's Length Body of the Department for Communities, and therefore works under my overall policy direction as Minister. The formal statement of policy with regard to the arts is being developed as part of the Heritage, Culture and Creativity programme.

In the interim, I have prepared this statement to enable strategic alignment between the aims, objectives and expected outcomes and results of the Arts Council and the Department. This will be a key element in ensuring that, in *exercising its functions*



*Arts Council has absolute clarity on how its purpose and objectives align with those of the Department as set out in paragraph 9.2 of the Partnership Agreement between my Department and the Council.*

This letter applies for the period until the publication of the Arts Policy, unless replaced or withdrawn.

### **Planning and budgeting for 2025-26**

At this stage of the budget cycle, I am unable with certainty to provide a budget level for the Council. I am conscious of the social value and economic impact that engagement with the arts can bring for communities and for individuals, and will take this into account in what is likely to be another very challenging budget process. Given the tightness of budgets, it is vital that all parts of my Department and its ALBs focus on my strategic priorities, within the context of the Programme for Government. I have previously stated that the Council's Strategic Plan will need formal review and revision when the Arts Policy is finalised, and anticipate this occurring in the 2025-26 year. I recognise however that many funding decisions are made in the early part of the financial year, and therefore will be shaped by this letter.

In line with the provisions of the Partnership Agreement, I will provide formal approval for the proposed work of the Council for 2025-26 through reviewing and approving the Council's Business Plan for the year, which I would ask is provided to the Department at an early date following confirmation of the Council's budget. The plan should take full account of the contents of this letter.

Budgeting for future years will be progressed during 2025-26. My officials will provide guidance at the relevant stages of this process as to how the Council should rely on this letter, and on the Arts Policy as it is developed, approved and finalised.

### **The basis for the priorities and expectations**

These priorities are based on my Written Statement of 3 July 2024 on the Heritage, Culture and Creativity programme. My Statement included the following principles and priorities:



- a focus on the contribution each of the sectors can make in terms of equality of access and opportunity across socioeconomic grouping, age, geography and so on;
- the encouragement of greater participation, particularly from people and communities that might feel that heritage is not for them or that their cultural and artistic activities and traditions don't quite fit; and
- exploring the potential for encouraging new and deeper collaborations and partnerships; supporting greater financial sustainability across the sectors; and identifying approaches and opportunities that maximise the value of these important assets and their potential for identifying, measuring and increasing their contribution to achieving Department and Executive policy outcomes, including in relation to health & general wellbeing, education, net-zero and the economy.

These seem to me to align comfortably with the functions of the Council under the provisions of the 1995 Order.

### **Expectations**

I expect all proposed activity of the Council that is funded by my department to be framed and tested against the above-stated principles and priorities. A more fundamental review of priorities will be led by my Department once the Arts Policy (and the other Heritage, Culture and Creativity Policies) are further developed.

In its work, I expect the Council to engage closely and collaboratively in partnership working with other ALBs of my Department, other Executive Departments and district councils to make the maximum possible impact with the finite funding that is available. This will require the Council to ensure it has a broad knowledge of all parts of the arts sector and their potential to deliver community benefit.

It will require close working with other public bodies which have traditionally funded aspects of arts activity; or whose work, in conjunction with arts activity, can increase the positive difference that is achieved in support of the policies and principles.

I expect to see some substantial funding streams made available in 2025-26 which focus on the priorities above, alongside continuation of existing funding arrangements where they deliver on the priorities. I recognise – given the



challenging public sector finance position – that this may require reductions in the scale of, or recasting of, some existing funding programmes.

I have a particular concern to ensure that:

- younger people from more deprived areas;
- those living in rural areas and areas distant from Belfast; and
- those not currently engaged in cultural activities

are given clear priority in the funding decisions the Council makes.

I expect to see funding streams structured to encourage innovation and collaboration between organisations in achieving these priorities.

Given the Council's statutory duty to consult regularly with district councils on the exercise by the Council of its functions, I expect that this will occur on a regular basis with each district council during the year. I expect these discussions to enable councils to understand the spread of funding across council areas, supported to data to show how this appropriately supports equality of access and opportunity by the residents of each district to arts activity.

I expect to see the Council reporting on metrics which include reach to those traditionally harder to reach; the extent of its engagement with all parts of the arts sector across Northern Ireland; and the extent to which it has widened access to arts activity for everyone.

To ensure maximum accessibility and inclusion, I expect the Council in the terms and conditions of its funding programmes to ensure that any activity disrespectful of any tradition, in locations or by groups receiving Council funding, results in specific and substantive action as regards funding.

I expect the focus of the Council, now that the Department is taking the lead in policy development, to be on delivering the maximum possible community benefit with the funding available to it, progressing grant programmes that focus on delivery of that community benefit, and taking full account of the priorities set out in this letter.

The Council is a public body sponsored by my Department. It is important that there is alignment between the public statements of my Department and its Arm's Length Bodies. It is therefore important that the Council ensures that its public statements align with lines taken by me and my Department and do not go beyond them. Our sponsorship arrangements provide for open communication between my Department



and its ALBs, which allow for internal debate on issues and agreement of a common approach.

I expect the Council, in support of this focus on increasing reach for arts activity, to make progress on streamlining its grant application processes and ensure that those processes are fully proportionate to the value of funding being made available. As part of this, I expect the Council to work with the Department on its work towards a single IT system for all grant applications,

### **Monitoring arrangements**

I have asked the Department's Director of Culture to arrange regular meetings with the Chief Executive Officer of the Council, and senior managers as the CEO considers appropriate, to monitor progress on the expectations in this note. These meetings will start on a monthly basis, with the frequency being adjusted as agreed by the Director to be to best effect.

I have asked the Deputy Secretary of the Department's Engaged Communities Group to meet regularly with the Chair of the Council with a similar remit. These meetings will start on a bi-monthly basis, with the frequency being adjusted as agreed by the Deputy Secretary to be to best effect.

I plan to meet with the Chair of the Council quarterly, with that meeting informed by a scoreboard of metrics collated by the Council of how my expectations are being delivered.