

Arts Council of Northern Ireland response to the Department for the Economy consultation on a draft Tourism Strategy

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) welcomes the development of a 10-year Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland and very much supports the ambition of establishing Northern Ireland as a year-round world class destination.

We share many of the ambitions and goals set out in the draft tourism strategy, in particular, those that relate to social cohesion, economic prosperity and opportunity and the quality of life.

What we do.

The Arts Council is the development agency for the arts in Northern Ireland, providing the main support for artists and arts organisations throughout the region through a range of funding opportunities.

Our current strategic plan Inspire, Connect, Lead (2019 to 2024) has supported the development of a rich and diverse cultural and artistic product which has been an integral part of Northern Ireland's tourist offer for many years, attracting local and international visitors alike.

We are currently in the process of consulting on our next strategic plan, details of which can be found on the [Arts Council website](#). It will span the next 10 years (2024-34) and has been designed to support and enhance economic and social prosperity, wellbeing, and creativity. The themes of partnership and collaboration run through the new strategy and were highlighted by many of the consultees engaged in its design. In times of such restricted financial resourcing for all public sector bodies, this approach is particularly vital.

The Arts Council has a track record of successfully building partnerships to share knowledge and expertise in order to maximise the funding we receive to co-fund projects and programmes. We will continue to do this. Partners include, Public Health Agency, Baring Foundation, The Executive Office, Urban Villages, British Council, Education Authority, Invest NI, NI Screen, Future Screens NI, Local Authorities, Tourism and many more.

We operate as a non-departmental public body and distribute public money and National Lottery funds to organisations and people who develop and deliver arts programmes across all of society.

Arts and culture intersect with heritage, festivals, and special events to harness a unique mix of tangible and intangible benefits that can boost economic growth and lead to job creation, regeneration, and the protection of natural and cultural heritage.

A challenging operating environment.

In 2023/24, the Arts Council invested £9.6m of exchequer funding in supporting artists and arts organisations. This equates to £5.07 per head of population, the lowest level of investment, by some margin, by any of the four home nations.

Driven by a strong entrepreneurial spirit, organisations we invest in capitalise on this investment to generate income from other sources. In 2022/23, every £1 in Annual Funding Programme (AFP) funding increases non-AFP income by £1.39.

Increasing precarity for local artists and funding uncertainty for arts organisations has created a challenging operating environment but despite this, arts and culture plays a hugely important role in attracting tourists to Northern Ireland.

During more buoyant economic times, in 2011, 10m inbound visits to the UK involved engagement with the arts and culture, representing 32 per cent of all visits to the UK and 42 per cent of all in-bound tourism-related expenditure. (Source: *The Value of Arts and Culture to the People and Society*, Arts Council of England).

Despite limited resources, the arts sector continues to grow post-pandemic, employing 6,497 individuals in full-time and part-time capacities in 2022/23. (Source: Annual Funding Survey).

Our large-scale venues (including the MAC, Lyric Theatre and Playhouse (Derry~Londonderry) continue to stage groundbreaking home grown and touring productions that attract local and international visitors alike. In 2022/23, our local arts venues generated £13.4m in box-office receipts.

We note reference in the draft strategy to the role 'screen tourism' will play over the next strategy period as a key driver for economic growth. This is

undoubtedly an important driver, but, as recent research conducted by Tourism NI (2023) highlights, there is significant demand for NI based arts and culture product that extends beyond screen.

Survey respondents were asked to identify 5 things that would most interest them during a short break in Northern Ireland:

- 23% stated that visiting art galleries.
- 23% included performing arts shows (music, dance, theatre).
- 5% exploring screen tourism.

Findings from the same survey shows that:

- 57% would be interested in finding out more about the local arts and crafts.
- 46% would be interested in local connections with literature.
- 52% would like to see artists at work.

Including theatre, exhibitions and our burgeoning festivals sector, organisations we invest in achieved over 5 million engagements in 2023/24. Visits to our local theatres, exhibitions and festivals also generates Additional Visitor Spend (AVS). This helps to grow local economies by boosting bed nights and contributing to the local hospitality sector.

The need for an all-island, integrated strategic approach.

The Arts Council feels it is important the strategy recognises the need for an all-island approach to supporting tourism. With over 70% of our visitors to Northern Ireland arriving via Dublin there is a need to ensure the cultural and artistic product continues to attract visitors north and south of the border.

This will require investment in our cultural infrastructure but will ultimately lead to the creation of more immersive homegrown co-productions, like Brian Friel's 'Translations', which enjoyed hugely successful runs at both the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and Lyric Theatre, Belfast.

Friel's modern classic excavated small town, rural Ireland to interrogate language, the impact of words and how we communicate. Its exploration of myth and history within a small community appealed strongly to international visitors seeking authenticity in the local theatre product.

We are concerned that following the UK's withdrawal from the EU, Northern Ireland's ability to attract visitors, creatives and touring organisations alike has

been compromised through increased border controls that have inflated costs for local arts organisations, particularly those receiving houses. We are concerned also that the planned electronic travel authorisation system will place a further burden on visitors and touring agents, making Northern Ireland a less appealing destination.

Creating immersive, local experiences

There remains a huge opportunity to animate and deepen the visitor experience through enhanced collaboration with the arts sector. Visitors want to engage with the authenticity of the destination and its people and the best way to deliver an emotional connection is through the arts.

In 2019, the Arts Council and Tourism NI delivered four unique visitor experiences, engaging a wide range of cultural organisations across the arts and tourism sectors.

‘Embrace the Place’ was a pilot initiative developed following an investment by Tourism NI and an open call for the best talent in the arts sector to create new innovative content to animate key tourism sites across Northern Ireland.

A Bellaghy Tale, involved an immersive tour, which began at Seamus Heaney HomePlace¹ and linked key sites closely related to the life and work of Seamus Heaney in the village of Bellaghy. Produced by Kabosh Theatre Company, it allowed visitors to connect with the sense of home and belonging, a strong theme of the work of Seamus Heaney.

Such initiatives and their connection to key NI cultural infrastructure like the Seamus Heaney Centre provide strong drivers for place-based regeneration and leads to more diverse and equitable distribution of benefits and inclusive communities.

Environmentally responsible and cultural stewardship

The Arts Council welcome the high-level commitment to sustainability and protecting the environment. Placing emphasis on increasing the length of time visitors stay in Northern Ireland will potentially reduce the carbon footprint of visitors.

¹ Seamus Heaney Home Place received 33,600 visitors in 2019/20

This focus could be strengthened further by introducing more progressive forms of regenerative tourism that use sustainable way of travelling and exploration to create a positive cycle of impacts on local communities and economies.

Despite tourism's clear potential as a driver for positive change, it is important to strike a balance between economic gain and cultural integrity by ensuring tourism growth isn't achieved at the expense of unsustainable pressure on local communities and infrastructure.

Whilst recognising the potential value of cultural assets in Northern Ireland to support and enhance tourism we have a responsibility to protect them, particularly in light of climate change which is likely to result in extensive landscape modification.

In Scotland, parliamentary actions on climate change include measures to protect natural and built heritage, which addresses the management of areas under threat – this includes cultural assets. We think this is a measured and proportionate response to the threat posed by climate change and would encourage similar action in Northern Ireland.

Working with government, agencies, and arms-length bodies

There is an overriding need for the NI Arts Taskforce or working group assembly to be reinstated. This will enable an Executive to oversee the development of a new Programme for Government capable of co-ordinating this and other important strategies, including the Culture Arts and Heritage Strategy.

It is important that cultural and social drivers for positive change are used, in tandem with economic ones.

We very much share the vision set out by the Department for Communities in its Culture Arts and Heritage Strategy. Investing In Creative Delivery (communities-ni.gov.uk) which acknowledges the role the sector can play in contributing to the 'whole of government' approach which invests in and strengthens the very sectors which underpin our region's innovation ecology, fuel our creative industries, drive our tourism offering, and enhance pathways to employment, well-being, and thriving places and communities (Investing in Creative Delivery, 2023)

If the stated reorientation of how the culture, arts and heritage sectors is to be realised, a significant increase in public investment is needed to action the ambitious plan.

We noted with particular interest how well the Culture, Arts and Heritage Ministerial Recovery Taskforce worked after being set up by Communities Minister in response to COVID-19 and would suggest a similar model be used in delivering the Tourism Strategy.

The taskforce developed measures to support reopening and recovery of the sector in the short-term, paving the way for a longer-term strategy for culture, the arts and heritage and drew membership from across government, arts sector, local government, and wider community / voluntary sector.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your strategy, we look forward to reviewing the final version once the consultation has been completed and working with you to deliver priorities identified.