Committee for Communities

Report on Engagement with the Arts Sector

Contents

Powers and Membership

Powers

The Committee for Communities is a Statutory Departmental Committee established in accordance with Paragraphs 8 and 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement and under Assembly Standing Order No 48. The Committee has a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department for Communities and has a role in the initiation of legislation.

The Committee has power to:

- consider and advise on Departmental budgets and Annual Plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;

- approve relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation;

- call for persons and papers;

- initiate enquiries and make reports; and

- consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by the Minister of Communities.

Membership

The Committee has nine members, including a Chairperson and Deputy

Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is

as follows:

- Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)

- Nicola Brogan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

- Andy Allen MBE MLA

- Kellie Armstrong MLA

- Maurice Bradley MLA

- Brian Kingston MLA

- Sian Mulholland MLA

- Daniel McCrossan MLA

- Maolíosa McHugh MLA

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

used in this Report

ACNI   Arts Council of Northern Ireland

AFP   Annual Funding Programme

DfC   Department for Communities

NICVA   Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

OECD   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PfG   Programme for Government

RaISe   Research and Information Service

ToR   Terms of Reference

Executive Summary

1. This report sets out the findings and recommendations from the Committee for Communities' recent engagement with the arts and cultural sector in Northern Ireland. This engagement was initiated to provide a platform for the sector to articulate the challenges it faces and to identify potential solutions in partnership with policymakers.

2. The Committee's methodology involved two main strands of evidence gathering. Firstly, a call for information was issued via the Citizen Space platform, which received over 40 responses from a broad range of arts organisations and individuals. This was followed by a "World Café" style stakeholder engagement event held in Parliament Buildings on 13 February 2025, which allowed for direct dialogue with MLAs on key themes. Committee engagement has also been informed by ongoing correspondence, including communications from the sector in May 2025 regarding funding delays.

3. The evidence revealed a passionate and resilient sector that states it is under immense pressure. Four key themes of concern emerged:

   Arts and Public Policy: There is a disconnect between the sector and government. The absence of arts and culture from the Programme for Government was seen as a signal of low political priority, leading to a "siloed" approach that confines policy to the Department for Communities and fails to recognise the sector's cross-cutting impact on health, the economy, and education.

   Accessibility and Engagement: The primary barrier to participation in the arts was reported as financial, driven by a lack of resources for organisations to deliver programming. This is compounded by infrastructural deficits, particularly in rural areas, and inconsistent transport options.

Inclusivity and Diversity: The sector has a strong, inherent commitment to diversity, but its ambition is "stymied by the infrastructure" and a lack of sustained funding for inclusive practice. Some stakeholders warned that race remains a "blind spot" in strategies and that leadership is needed from the Executive on this issue.

Health & Wellbeing of Artists: A "crisis" was reported in the mental health of artists, which was described as "abysmal and poor". This was reported as being driven directly by low pay and extreme precarity, with a system of delayed, single-year funding having a "severe and detrimental impact" on the workforce.

Recommendations

4. Based on its findings, the Committee makes a series of recommendations to the Minister for Communities, including:

   - To immediately address the funding crisis by implementing a multi-annual funding model of at least three years, with funding notifications issued in a timely manner.

   - To increase the proportion of core funding for organisations and conduct a review of per-capita arts investment in Northern Ireland compared to other jurisdictions.

   - To develop a new cross-departmental Arts and Culture Strategy and ensure it is embedded within the Programme for Government.

   - To establish strategies for sustainable creative infrastructure and the implementation of fair pay for arts workers.

   - To enhance dedicated funding for accessibility and diversity and establish a formal, ongoing forum for engagement between the sector and the Department.

5. The full recommendations may be found in the relevant section of this report.

Introduction

6. Since the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly in February 2024, the Committee for Communities has received a significant number of requests from arts sector organisations to present their concerns. Recognising the scale of these requests and the commonality of the issues being raised, the Committee determined that a comprehensive sector-wide engagement was necessary.

7. The Committee therefore initiated a focused engagement exercise into the state of the arts and cultural sector in Northern Ireland. The purpose of this work was to provide a forum for the sector to articulate its challenges directly to MLAs, to identify barriers to its sustainability and growth, and to collaboratively develop potential solutions. This report is the culmination of that engagement.

8. The Committee's role, as clarified to stakeholders at the outset of its engagement, is not one of a direct funder. Rather, it is a statutory body with the power to scrutinise the policy and spending of the Department for Communities (DfC). This includes reviewing the Department's budget, advising on the development of new strategies, and holding the Minister to account.

9. This report summarises the extensive evidence gathered through the Committee's work. It synthesises written submissions received via the Citizen Space platform, detailed testimony from a stakeholder event held in Parliament Buildings, and ongoing correspondence from the sector.

10. The report presents a detailed analysis of the key themes that emerged and concludes with a series of evidence-based recommendations for the Minister for Communities to consider. The Committee's objective is to ensure that the lived experiences of artists and arts organisations, as captured in this report, directly inform the development of future policy.

Context and Methodology

11. The Committee's engagement was initiated against the backdrop of a sector facing what many respondents described as systemic and urgent challenges. While the arts sector is a significant driver of economic growth, tourism, community cohesion, and public wellbeing in Northern Ireland, representatives state that it is operating in a state of financial precariousness.

12. Evidence presented to the Committee pointed to a series of interconnected pressures that are threatening the long-term viability of many of Northern Ireland's cultural organisations. These pressures, detailed in the analysis that follows, include:

   - **Funding Insecurity:** A decade or more of standstill funding has amounted to a significant real-terms cut for many organisations, who face steeply rising operational costs. This is compounded by a reliance on short-term, project-based grants, which inhibits long-term planning.

   - **Workforce Instability:** The sector is struggling with issues of low pay, job insecurity, and a lack of employment protections, leading to a "brain drain" of talent to other, better-funded jurisdictions.

   - **Infrastructure Deficits:** A lack of affordable and secure creative workspaces is forcing many artists and organisations into unstable rental agreements in often inadequate facilities.

   - **Barriers to Access:** Disabled artists and marginalised communities face significant barriers to participation, with insufficient sustained funding available for necessary access and inclusion measures.

13. To understand these complex challenges, the Committee adopted a multi-stage methodology designed to gather both quantitative data and qualitative, lived experience from a broad cross-section of the sector. This approach

comprised two main strands of evidence gathering, supplemented by ongoing engagement.

14. **Citizen Space Call for Information:** In advance of direct in-person engagement, the Committee issued a call for views via the Citizen Space platform. The survey asked a series of structured questions about arts sector organisations' objectives, funding models, financial challenges, and what support they needed from government. Over 40 responses were received from a diverse range of stakeholders, including local councils, theatre companies, independent arts collectives, music groups, and advocacy bodies. The findings from this survey provided foundational evidence for the Committee's work.

15. **Stakeholder Engagement Event:** On 13 February 2025, the Committee hosted a major stakeholder event in the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings. The event was designed to move beyond written evidence and allow for direct, face-to-face dialogue between MLAs and those working on the front line of the arts sector. Using a "World Café" format, Committee members rotated between tables to discuss four key themes: Arts and Public Policy; Accessibility and Engagement; Inclusivity and Diversity; and the Health and Wellbeing of Artists. The detailed conversations were captured by staff and by a graphic artist, whose work provided a visual record of the discussions.

16. **Ongoing Engagement:** The Committee's engagement with the sector did not conclude with the stakeholder event. It continues to receive correspondence from organisations and individuals, which serves as a real-time indicator of the pressures they face. On 20 February 2025, the Committee received oral briefings from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and ACNI. In late May 2025, the Committee received a number of emails highlighting the acute

impact of ongoing delays in the issuing of funding letters of offer for the 2025-26 financial year. This correspondence provides a contemporary illustration of the systemic issues raised throughout the Committee's engagement with the sector.

Analysis of Evidence: Key Themes

17. The Committee's engagement with the arts sector, through the Citizen Space survey, the stakeholder event, and ongoing correspondence, produced a rich and detailed body of evidence. Across all strands of this work, four distinct but interconnected themes emerged as being of critical concern. This section provides a comprehensive analysis of each theme, synthesising the evidence received to present a clear picture of the sector's current state and its relationship with public policy.

Theme 1: Arts and Public Policy

18. A primary concern articulated throughout the Committee's engagement was the profound disconnect between the arts sector and the machinery of government. Stakeholders expressed a consistent and deep-seated frustration that the sector's value is not recognised in major government strategies, that its voice is not adequately heard in policy-making, and that it is consequently left in a position of perpetual uncertainty.

19. Many arts organisations feel they have little to no meaningful influence on the formation of public policy. Despite extensive consultation on previous strategies, there is a perception that their contributions are often disregarded. At the stakeholder event, representatives noted that while some recent engagement from DfC officials has been positive, it is unclear what this will lead to.

20. This sentiment was underscored by the experience of the Culture, Arts & Heritage Strategy Taskforce, whose collaborative, co-designed report was felt

to have been rejected, leading organisations to conclude that there is "no channel for adequate policy influence".

21. This feeling of disconnection is compounded by a sense that the sector is often "reactive rather than proactive in helping shape policy". Organisations report fulfilling their monitoring and evaluation requirements, for example by submitting quarterly reports to the Arts Council, but are "unsure of the value of this information when it comes to public policy making". There is a clear desire within the sector to move from being a passive recipient of policy to an active partner in its development.

22. One of the most powerful symbols of this disconnect, cited consistently across all evidence-gathering forums, was the absence of arts and culture from the Executive's Programme for Government (PfG). Stakeholders view this omission as a clear signal that there is "no priority for the arts" at the highest level of government. This lack of political prioritisation is seen to have a cascading effect, permeating all levels of policy and funding allocation and leading to a perception that the arts have "no value politically".

23. The consequences of this are twofold. Firstly, it removes any strategic imperative for cross-departmental action, making it difficult to embed arts and culture into wider government objectives. Secondly, it reinforces the damaging and widely contested perception that the arts are an "optional extra" or merely "the icing on the cake rather than the cake itself", rather than a core component of a functioning and healthy society. At the stakeholder event, this was described as a "damning indictment of how seriously it is taken by the Executive".

24. A recurring argument made in both written submissions and oral evidence was the urgent need for a cross-departmental approach to arts policy. It was strongly felt that confining responsibility for the arts to a single department fails to recognise the sector's significant impact across a wide range of other policy areas, including health, education, the economy, tourism, and community relations.

25. Participants at the stakeholder event gave numerous examples of this crossover, such as arts organisations filling gaps in the education system or delivering anti-poverty work, yet not being consulted on policy in these areas. The Citizen Space survey report highlighted calls to engage with Departments beyond DfC to demonstrate the return on investment in the arts.

26. The fate of the previous cross-departmental taskforce report, which had recommended a ten-year, cross-cutting strategy, was a source of major disappointment for the sector, prompting the question: "is anyone listening?".

27. Without a formal, cross-cutting strategic framework, the sector fears that opportunities are being missed to maximise the impact of public investment. This siloed approach is seen as a barrier to recognising, for instance, the role of creative education in delivering the skills and innovation agenda essential for economic growth.

28. Stakeholders at the engagement event reported a "huge variation across local councils in support/funding and organisation". In some council areas, the arts portfolio sits within tourism, while in others it is managed alongside leisure or community services, indicating a lack of a unified understanding of the sector's primary value. While some participants noted goodwill from their local councils,

they also stated this did not always translate into financial support. This inconsistency creates a "postcode lottery" for arts organisations and the communities they serve, further exacerbating regional inequalities.

Theme 2: Accessibility and Engagement

29. Stakeholders argued forcefully that while the arts sector in Northern Ireland has deep expertise in community engagement and a strong ethos of accessibility, its ability to put this into practice is being severely hampered by systemic funding issues, infrastructural deficits, and geographical barriers. There was a clear consensus that accessibility is not merely about physical access to buildings, but about a much broader set of financial, social, and geographical factors that determine whether a citizen can participate in the cultural life of the region.

30. The most significant barrier to accessibility identified by participants was financial. The core issue is not a lack of will on the part of arts organisations, but a chronic lack of resources that restricts their ability to provide programming. As one participant noted, "Accessibility issues are less about getting into venues but more about not having funding to put on a programme of work". Another stated that participation in the arts is decreasing precisely because "resources are plummeting". The Citizen Space survey reinforced this, with many respondents highlighting that there is limited funding available specifically for inclusion measures.

31. This lack of resource creates a two-fold barrier. Firstly, it limits the number of events and programmes organisations can offer. Secondly, it creates a cost barrier for audiences. Organisations are often forced to increase ticket prices to

cover costs, making events less accessible, particularly for those in areas of deprivation.

32. In response, many arts organisations have developed innovative but precarious models to maintain access, such as offering subsidised £5 tickets for those in need or adopting a "pay what you can" approach. While these initiatives demonstrate the sector's commitment to inclusion, they are acts of "risk taking" that are difficult to sustain without adequate core support. The irony, as one stakeholder pointed out, is that organisations are often asked to share these innovative practices at conferences abroad, but "cannot afford the costs of attending" to do so.

33. While financial constraints are the primary concern, physical access to venues and workspaces remains a significant issue. The Committee heard that there has been "chronic underinvestment in venues so accessibility takes a back seat in order to pay routine bills". Capital expenditure for improvements, such as installing a lift, requires planning permission and incurs significant ongoing maintenance costs, which must be paid from already stretched operational budgets. Stakeholders argued that what is needed is multi-annual funding that includes a dedicated, ring-fenced capital element for accessibility improvements.

34. The issue of infrastructure also extends to the artists themselves. Many are forced to work in substandard buildings or studios that lack basic facilities such as heating or inside toilets. This not only impacts the quality of their work but their health and wellbeing.

35. Accessibility is not evenly distributed across Northern Ireland. Evidence highlighted a significant disparity in the resources and value placed on the arts between the major urban centres of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry and the rest of the region. This is compounded by the "cost and availability of transport to venues and events," which was cited as "a significant issue, particularly in rural areas". This creates a major barrier to participation for rural communities and reinforces regional inequality.

36. Stakeholders expressed frustration with the narrow metrics often used to define and measure engagement. There was a strong feeling that a focus on quantitative data like "bums on seats" fails to capture the true value and impact of the arts. Participants argued for the importance of recognising the deep, qualitative impact of their work, citing examples such as engagement with individuals who have experienced trauma or the social benefits of informal arts activities like community "knit and natter" groups.

37. It was suggested that evaluation should move towards capturing richer data, measuring outcomes like "self-efficacy, mastery and learning", with the work of Thrive cited as a positive example of an organisation asking participants how engagement made them feel. However, the constant pressure on artists and organisations to "justify what they are already doing" places considerable strain on their limited resources. The sector possesses a wealth of evidence demonstrating its impact, but a challenge lies in finding effective ways to communicate this rich data to policymakers.

Theme 3: Inclusivity and Diversity

38. The evidence presented to the Committee shows a sector that considers itself inherently inclusive, diverse, and often ahead of wider society in its commitment to representing all communities. However, this commitment is severely constrained by a lack of resources, and its success was contested by some who believe significant blind spots remain, particularly around racial equality.

39. There was a strong consensus among participants that the arts sector is populated by "reflective people and critical thinkers" for whom inclusivity is a core principle, not an add-on. Stakeholders asserted that the sector has always been "ahead of the game" in reflecting the diversity of society, citing a history of projects engaging with Chinese, Indian, and Polish communities as evidence of its proactive, intercultural model. The "will is there for organisations to increase inclusivity and diversity but the means are not".

40. This ambition is directly "stymied by the infrastructure". Organisations stated that while they have the desire to be even more proactive in reaching diverse audiences and employing a diverse workforce, "the funding and infrastructure required is not there". This aligns with evidence from the Citizen Space survey, which called for increased, dedicated funding for accessibility and inclusion measures to support disabled and marginalised groups.

41. While the general self-perception of the sector is one of strong commitment to diversity, this view was challenged during the stakeholder event. One participant noted that the attendees at the event itself were not representative of Northern Ireland's diversity, and that there was a lack of leadership on this

issue from the Executive. This was echoed by another who stated that "race is a blind spot in strategies and how things are evaluated". These perspectives indicate that while the sector may be successful in many areas of inclusion, more work is needed to ensure that this extends to all communities and is embedded meaningfully in funding and strategic decisions.

42. Ultimately, stakeholders argued that for the sector's work on diversity to be sustainable and effective, it must be supported by political leadership. The fact that diversity "does not appear in the Programme for Government" was described as a "damning indictment of how seriously it is taken by the Executive". The graphic recording from the event captured the call for "a signal of support from our political leaders". To achieve genuine and lasting inclusivity, it was argued that "longevity is key with the need to fund people properly to improve representation". Without this strategic priority and the long-term funding that flows from it, the sector's efforts to be inclusive will remain precarious and constrained.

Theme 4: The Health and Wellbeing of Artists

43. Acute concerns raised during the Committee's engagement related to the health and wellbeing of artists and others working in the sector. Stakeholders described a workforce that is passionate and resilient, but also exhausted, undervalued, and operating under unsustainable levels of stress and precarity. The evidence demonstrates that this is not an abstract issue but a direct consequence of the sector's funding and employment conditions.

44. The language used by participants to describe the situation was stark. The wellbeing of artists was described as "abysmal and poor". The Committee

heard that there is a "crisis in health and wellbeing in the sector," which was described as being "on its knees" with many individuals experiencing "burnout". One graphic recording from the engagement event noted that 60% of people in the creative industries have experienced suicidal ideation. This mental health crisis is leading to people leaving the sector altogether, draining Northern Ireland of its creative talent.

45. The evidence was clear that the primary driver of this crisis is financial instability. As one participant stated, the "key to health and wellbeing for artists is fair pay and enough work". However, low wages and precarious employment are endemic. The Committee heard that 20% of artists are living on or below the poverty line and that there is a widespread culture of expecting artists to work for free or "for exposure". The Citizen Space survey report highlighted sector-wide concerns about low wages, the lack of employment protections, and the loss of talent to other regions, proposing a Fair Pay Strategy as a key solution. The sense of being undervalued is compounded by the knowledge that Northern Ireland is the "worst funded region in the UK" for the arts.

46. The single greatest cause of stress, anxiety, and poor mental health identified by stakeholders is the system of annual funding, and in particular, the chronic and repeated delays in communicating funding decisions. At the stakeholder event in February 2025, participants warned that late notifications mean that staff "cannot take the risk of not having a contract in the next year", creating huge uncertainty that "cascades down through arts organisations, to freelancers, to their families".

47. The fears expressed in February have been realised in the subsequent months. In late May 2025, nearly two months into the new financial year, the

Committee received several pieces of correspondence from arts organisations on the brink. This correspondence provides a real-time account of the "devastating" impact of the funding delays.

48. This correspondence, from several organisations, highlights delays in funding as "untenable", "relentless and exhausting", and "undermining the very foundations of our work".

49. The clear and consistent solution proposed by the sector is a move away from the current system of precarious, single-year funding to a multi-annual model. The Citizen Space survey found a near-universal call for a three-to-five-year funding cycle, which would "align Northern Ireland with best practices in the Republic of Ireland and other UK nations". This would allow organisations to "plan strategically instead of operating on a year-by-year survival model", retain staff, and reduce the immense administrative burden of constant grant applications.

50. Alongside a move to multi-annual budgets, stakeholders stressed the need for timely communication. At the stakeholder event, it was suggested that to allow for proper planning, organisations should be notified of funding outcomes by December of the preceding financial year. This would end the destructive cycle of uncertainty that currently defines the start of every financial year and is the single biggest contributor to poor mental health in the sector.

Committee Recommendations

51. Having considered the extensive written and oral evidence presented during its engagement, the Committee for Communities puts forward the following recommendations for consideration by the Minister for Communities. These recommendations are designed to address the systemic challenges identified by the arts sector, to stabilise its foundations, and to ensure it can continue to deliver its significant cultural, social, and economic benefits for all.

Recommendation 1: Immediately Address the Funding Crisis by Implementing Multi-Annual Funding Cycles and Timely Notification

52. The Committee heard substantial evidence that the current system of single-year funding, compounded by delays in decision-making, is the single greatest cause of instability and poor mental health within the arts sector. This is articulated in correspondence received by the Committee in May 2025, where organisations were two months into a financial year without clarity on their budgets.

53. **The Committee recommends that the Department for Communities, in conjunction with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, transition from an annual funding model to a multi-annual funding model of at least three years.** This would align Northern Ireland with best practice in other jurisdictions and allow organisations to plan strategically, retain staff, and reduce the administrative burden of constant grant applications.

54. **The committee further recommends that the Department ensures a new process is implemented once a multi-year budget is in place to**

communicate funding decisions in a timely, perhaps by 1 December of the preceding year. This would provide the certainty needed to plan effectively and end the reported cycle of anxiety in the current system.

Recommendation 2: Increase Core Funding and Conduct an Urgent Review of Per-Capita Arts Investment

55. The Committee heard that a lack of core funding is placing many organisations at risk, forcing them to spend excessive time applying for multiple project-based grants instead of focusing on artistic delivery. This model fails to cover essential operational costs such as salaries, rent, and utilities, forcing many to deplete their own financial reserves to remain solvent.

56. **The Committee recommends that the Department for Communities, through the Arts Council, increase the proportion of its arts budget allocated to core, multi-annual funding relative to project-based funding.** This will provide the stability required to maintain consistent staffing, keep venues open, and deliver high-quality programming.

57. Furthermore, given the evidence that Northern Ireland is the worst-funded region in these islands for the arts, **the Committee recommends that the Department conduct an urgent comparative review of per-capita arts investment in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.** The findings of this review could be used to make the case to the NI Executive for an uplift in the overall arts budget to bring it into line with neighbouring jurisdictions.

Recommendation 3: Develop a Cross-Departmental Arts and Culture Strategy Embedded in the Programme for Government

58. The Committee accepts the evidence that confining arts policy to the Department for Communities alone fails to recognise the sector's vital contribution to health, education, the economy, and tourism. The current "siloed" approach leads to missed opportunities and reinforces the incorrect perception that the arts are not a core government concern.

59. **The Committee recommends that the Department for Communities lead the development of a new, long-term cross-departmental strategy for arts and culture.** This strategy should be co-designed with the sector and have clear buy-in from the Department for the Economy, the Department of Education, the Department of Health, and others.

60. **The Committee recommends that this new strategy, and a commitment to arts and culture, be explicitly included in the next iteration of the Programme for Government.** This would provide the political prioritisation required to drive meaningful, long-term change and ensure the sector's value is recognised at the highest level of government.

Recommendation 4: Establish a Strategy for Sustainable Creative Infrastructure

61. The Committee's engagement identified a crisis in the availability of affordable, secure, and fit-for-purpose creative workspaces. Artists and organisations report being forced out by rising rents or are working in substandard conditions, which stifles creativity and growth.

62. **The Committee recommends that the Department develop a dedicated strategy to secure and sustain arts infrastructure.** This strategy should include a fund to support organisations with capital costs for accessibility and should actively explore mechanisms such as: Community Asset Transfers, to

allow arts organisations to take ownership or long-term stewardship of suitable unused public buildings; and Affordable Rent Initiatives, to collaborate with local councils and property owners to create subsidised, secure workspaces for artists and creative enterprises.

Recommendation 5: Implement a Fair Pay and Workforce Development Strategy

63. The Committee is concerned by the evidence of low pay, job insecurity, and the resulting "brain drain" of talent from the arts sector. The Committee heard that 20% of artists live on or below the poverty line and that salaries do not reflect the level of expertise required.

64. **The Committee recommends that the Department, as part of a new cross-cutting strategy, consider the development of a Fair Pay Strategy for the arts.** This could include the establishment of sector-wide pay benchmarks in line with UK and Republic of Ireland standards and protections for the freelance workforce, who are particularly vulnerable. This is essential to retain talent and ensure that a career in the arts is a viable and sustainable choice.

Recommendation 6: Enhance Funding and Policy for Accessibility and Diversity

65. The Committee acknowledges the sector's proactive commitment to diversity and inclusion but recognises that this is undermined by a lack of dedicated resources and, in some cases, strategic blind spots.

66. **The Committee recommends that the Department ensures there is specific, ring-fenced funding available for accessibility measures.** This should include grants for sign language interpretation, venue adaptations, and accessible programming to support the full participation of disabled artists and

audiences. Furthermore, the Committee recommends that all publicly funded organisations should be required to meet clear and robust inclusion standards, with a particular focus on addressing under-representation of artists from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Recommendation 7: Establish a Formal, Ongoing Sectoral Engagement Forum

67. While stakeholders appreciated the Committee's engagement event, they expressed a clear desire for more frequent and structured dialogue with policymakers to ensure the sector's voice is consistently heard.

68. **The Committee recommends that the Department for Communities establish a permanent, collaborative forum for ongoing engagement with the arts sector.** This could take the form of an Arts Advisory Panel or an annual sectoral conference. This would build trust and ensure that policy and funding decisions are continuously informed by the real-world, lived experiences of those working in the sector.

Conclusion

69. The evidence gathered by the Committee for Communities throughout its engagement with the arts sector paints a clear and compelling picture of a sector that is integral to the cultural, social, and economic life of Northern Ireland, yet is simultaneously under great pressure due to a system that is no longer fit for purpose. The arts sector is not asking for a handout; it is asking for a partnership with government built on stability, respect, and a shared understanding of its intrinsic value.

70. The passion, resilience, and innovation demonstrated by artists and arts organisations in the face of immense pressure is remarkable. However, resilience should not be a prerequisite for survival. Funding delays, the absence of strategic priority, and the constant need to justify its own existence are taking a heavy and unsustainable toll on the sector's workforce.

71. The Committee wishes to place on record its sincere thanks to all the organisations and individuals who responded to the Citizen Space survey or attended the stakeholder event at Parliament Buildings. Their detailed and thoughtful input was invaluable in furthering Members' understanding of the challenges faced by the sector, as well as in the provision of data and accounts of lived experience to inform the content of this report.

72. The recommendations set out in this report provide a clear, evidence-based roadmap for the Minister for Communities and the wider Northern Ireland Executive to address these long-standing issues. By implementing multi-annual funding, increasing core investment, and developing a cross-departmental strategy that places culture at the heart of government, the Executive can

provide the foundations for the sector to not only survive, but to thrive. The Committee trusts that the Minister will give this report and its recommendations the serious and urgent consideration they deserve.

Appendix: Graphic Recording of

Stakeholder Engagement Event

The following images are four graphic recordings created by artist Stéphanie

Heckman during the Committee's stakeholder engagement event. The illustrations

capture the key points raised by participants under each of the four discussion

themes.

This Report can be made available in a range of formats including large print, Braille etc. For more information, please contact:

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