

Public Document Pack

**Democratic Services Section
Legal and Civic Services Department
Belfast City Council
City Hall
Belfast
BT1 5GS**



**Belfast
City Council**

7th April, 2025

MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Dear Alderman/Councillor,

As previously notified to you, I enclose copies of the reports for the following items to be considered at the meeting to be held at 5.15 pm on Wednesday, 9th April, 2025.

You are requested to attend.

Yours faithfully,

John Walsh

Chief Executive

AGENDA:

2. Restricted Items

- (a) Vacant to Vibrant Scheme (Pages 1 - 22)

5. Positioning Belfast to Compete

- (a) Culture Night (Pages 23 - 74)

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By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 6
of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

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Subject:	Culture Night review and recommendations
Date:	09 th April 2025
Reporting Officer:	Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Lesley-Ann O'Donnell, Senior Manager Culture, Tourism & Events Chris McCreery, Culture Manager

Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted?

Yes

☐

No

☒

Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.

Insert number

☐

1. Information relating to any individual
2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)
4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter
5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained
6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction
7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime

If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?

After Committee Decision

After Council Decision

Sometime in the future

Never

☐
☐
☐
☐

Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in?

Yes

☒

No

☐

1.0	<p>Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues The purpose of this report is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update members on sector engagement and recommendations relating to potential delivery and support models for Culture Night 2025 in Belfast and subsequent iterations. • Seek approval for recommendations within this report and launch a public procurement exercise to deliver the 2025 Culture Night programme up to the value of £150,000
2.0	<p>Recommendation The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the contents of the report and Appendix 1 – “<i>Culture Night Sector Engagement and Roadmap for Delivery</i>” • Seek approval for recommendations within this report and launch a public procurement exercise to deliver the 2025 Culture Night programme including supporting marketing activity up to the value of £150,000
3.0	<p>Main Report</p>
3.1	<p>Background</p> <p>At the City Growth and Regeneration Committee on 10th April 2024, Deputy Lord Mayor Cllr Groogan, outlined a proposal to support cultural venues in the City to open on the evening of ‘Culture Night’ in September, within the Belfast 2024 Programme of events. The Committee agreed to refer the decision to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for consideration so that further detail of how this could be facilitated, resourced and managed could be provided. After having considered various options, it was agreed that Belfast would not have a Culture Night event in 2024. Reasons included limited officer capacity, limited delivery lead in aligned to budget approval process and recognition of the volume of cultural activity being delivered across the September period as part of the 2024 programme. Papers also presented detail on benchmarking of delivery models in other cities.</p> <p>3.2 At the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 24th May 2024, members agreed an allocation of up to £30,000 to the facilitation of an engagement programme with the wider cultural sector, key funders, partners and other interested parties in relation to culture night, its purpose and potential delivery models from September 2025 and onwards.</p> <p>3.3 <u>The Culture Night concept</u></p> <p>Established in 2009, Culture Night Belfast was a large scale and free cultural event taking place in the Cathedral Quarter and city centre of Belfast. The concept traces its roots to an initiative of Temple Bar Cultural Trust / Dublin City Council in 2006. The first event in Dublin began as an innovative but relatively modest local event with 40 venues opening free and</p>

	<p>late in the evening in Dublin's Temple Bar, expanding citywide in 2007, more than doubling in size with 87 cultural institutions participating. From this foundation, the Culture Night concept has grown in scale and profile becoming an established and popular part of the cultural calendar across over 40 towns and cities throughout the island of Ireland alongside events internationally such as in London, Paris, Berlin and New York.</p>
3.4	<p><u>Culture Night in Belfast</u></p> <p>Culture Night in Belfast began in 2009 when a number of arts organisations came together to organise the first Belfast Culture Night in September 2010. In 2012/13, the Cathedral Quarter Trust became the custodians of the event, delivering Culture Night in the city until the final event in 2019.</p> <p>As the largest free shared cultural event in the city-centre, audiences grew to an attendance of over 100,000 for the 2019 event held across two days in September 2019. This event was delivered by a core team of a Creative producer, a programme assistant, a marketing manager, a freelance production manager, 15 area managers, internship placements and over 100 volunteers.</p> <p>The budget for Culture Night ranged from £240k in 2016 to over £328k in 2019. Culture Night received £12,000 annually from the councils Core Multi Annual Funding programme from 2016 to 2020. The event received the majority of its support coming from other statutory bodies including the Arts Council NI, The Executive Office, Department for Communities and Tourism NI alongside support from trusts and foundations and the private sector.</p>
3.5	<p>The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the suspension of the event in September 2020 – with a digital version staged instead. In 2020, the Cathedral Quarter Trust and Belfast City Council co-commissioned a Strategic Review and Three-year Development Plan for Culture Night Belfast to be delivered by CQT and retain its footprint within the Cathedral Quarter. This review identified that whilst “Culture Night Belfast was an extremely well attended, much-appreciated and, to some extent, iconic city event, the existing model for Culture Night has become problematic.”. The report highlighted various concerns with the previous Culture Night model including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The audience for the event has grown exponentially whilst the volume and quality in the programme have not; • The idea that artists could, would or should give their time for free is no longer a viable delivery model;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The audience’s relationship with the event has changed so that family audiences feel pushed out and unsafe; • Critically there is confusion over what the purpose of the event in how and what it delivers for the creative sector is and where the responsibility for it effectively achieving that purpose lies <p>This review was completed in spring 2022 and the Cathedral Quarter Trust did not run Culture Night in 2022, with organisers stating that the event had “become too big and unwieldy and the original intention of providing a platform for our artistic and cultural communities to connect with a much wider audience had been lost.</p>
3.6	<p>In January 2023, the Trust undertook a recruitment process to appoint and employ a Creative Director, to be funded by Belfast City Council, to provide a three-year development and delivery plan for an annual large-scale city-centre cultural event. However, on 6th April 2023, the Cathedral Quarter Trust announced that it is “has been forced to cease day to day operational activity, including planning any cultural events, with immediate effect and for the foreseeable future, following the withdrawal of core funding by the Department for Communities.”. The statement continued “Following the withdrawal of its core funding CQT will not be directly involved in the delivery of any future Culture Night and as a Board we will continue to work with Belfast City Council and other stakeholders to explore all options around the future of this popular and important event.” In the operational absence of the Cathedral Quarter Trust, no organisation has taken on the lead organising and delivery role necessary to revive Culture Night in Belfast.</p>
3.7	<p><u>Culture Night in other locations</u></p> <p>In the Republic of Ireland, the Culture Night brand is managed centrally by the Arts Council Ireland, in partnership with local authorities and cultural organisations throughout the island of Ireland. As well as providing financial support to local authorities, Arts Council Ireland manage the core brand, website and major media partnerships such as broadcast events with RTE.</p> <p>Whilst delivery models and challenges vary across different locations, Culture Night is largely led by local authorities in each area. Investment in Culture Night initiatives range from approximately €30k in Cork (led by council staff) to over €190k in Dublin.</p> <p>As the largest Culture Night, Dublin Culture Night attracts over 100k people over 350 events. The event is shaped through co-design with the arts sector, audiences and the local authority. The event takes place across arts and cultural organisations and venues of all</p>

	<p>shapes and sizes, from independent studios and art-spaces to national cultural institutions, by extending opening hours to allow increased access for the public. Unique events and workshops are specifically programmed at participating locations and all activities are made available to the public free of charge. Unlike the Culture Night Belfast model, which was largely about converting the streets of the Cathedral Quarter into a pop-up venue with road closures and on street programming, Culture Night Dublin does not involve road closures and is spread across the whole city.</p>
3.8	<p>Dublin City Council manage the event through procurement for 'single operator frameworks', a multi annual arrangement which can be utilised for four years. This procurement covers the operator who in turn tender out for an event management company so they can recruit additional staff/assistants. The Dublin Council Events unit liaise with police/gardai and insure the event. The procurement for the freelance event company is accountable to the arts manager in Dublin City Council.</p>
3.9	<p><u>Consultation with the cultural sector, audiences and previous funders</u></p> <p>Following approval from SP&R in May to proceed with a procurement exercise, Thrive and Daisy Chain Inc. Were appointed as a partnership to deliver this Culture Night Sector Engagement and Roadmap Delivery contract. Together, they investigated:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the purpose of Culture Night and who owns it • How Culture Night started in Belfast and how it changed over time to better understand the lessons of the past and use these to shape any future iterations • How the cultural sector and audiences experienced Culture Night in Belfast and what they want it to become in the future • What past and potential funders' priorities and any likelihood of funding the event in the future
3.10	<p>To find out the above, they carried out the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk research into comparable events in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, the UK and abroad, to explore and analyse models of programming, budget and delivery • 1x one-to-one interview with Dublin City Council • 7x one-to-one interviews with the founders of Culture Night Belfast and people who have worked as producers or event managers for Culture Night Belfast over the years • A survey aimed at the cultural sector, including artists, venues and producers • 3x focus groups with members of the cultural sector in Belfast • 2x focus groups with audiences

3.11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A consultation with past and potential funders, including Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Tourism NI, Arts & Business NI and the city’s Business Improvement Districts <p>An online survey was administered in February 2025 and 938 responses were collected. This included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 203 sector participants (including venues, artists, producers, libraries, and heritage places who participated in CNB before) • 735 non-participating sector organisations and audiences (people who attended CNB but didn’t participate) <p>Key findings from the survey include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 78% of respondents said they want Culture Night to come back, with just 4% saying no and 18% weren’t sure • 76% said they would be interested in taking part, while just 3% said no. 21% said they didn’t know if they would participate in Culture Night in the future. • Most people mentioned wanting less alcohol and better crowd management • Other themes centred around being more artist-led, having more funding or support for artists and venues, and better communication so people don’t miss events/performances. • 39% of those who incurred costs related to the work said they didn’t receive any additional funding and operated at a loss. A further 35% said they didn’t receive any additional funding, but ‘were able to make it work.’ • A quarter of respondents weren’t able to pay artists involved in their CNB programme • Paying people, logistics, and programme costs were the most challenging aspects for the sector <p>The full report, which includes qualitative feedback from focus groups and funders, is detailed in appendix one of this report.</p>
3.12	<p><u>Key findings and recommendations from the report</u></p>
3.13	<p>Based on this qualitative and quantitative feedback, coupled with research on comparable events and the context of Belfast, the reports authors have produced a range of recommendations. These include:</p> <p><u>Purpose and ideology</u></p> <p>The report recommends that <i>“any return of Culture Night Belfast must be done with eyes firmly fixed on the core ideological pillars that inspired the creation of the event in the first place”</i>, namely:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrating the diverse arts, culture and heritage ecosystem in Belfast and its connection with the people of this place - including venues, organisations and individuals. • Giving the opportunity to audiences to visit places and experience culture they may not have encountered before, for free. • Being inclusive and accessible to all, thus welcoming all kinds of audiences, regardless of age, disability, socioeconomic status or community background.
3.14	<p><u>Recommendations for a 2025 event</u></p> <p>Alongside a range of recommendations for the long-term sustainability of the event, the report recommends an approach to delivering an event in 2025, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whilst a smaller event is deliverable in 2025, with the timeline available, it should be limited to venue-based events. • Additionally, street-based events should not be included in the programme. • It is essential that the creative sector are the main focus. • Given the timeframe for a 2025 event, there is a risk that some organisations and artists won't be able to take part as their programme and schedule for the year are already set. However, it is important that they do not feel obligated to participate.
3.15	<p><u>Procurement approach</u></p> <p>While not a recommended approach for future years, the report recognises that a procurement process is the only approach for 2025.</p> <p>However, this procurement exercise should take into account that, as well as large-scale event management skills and strong health and safety knowledge, what is being sought is not simply a service but a nuanced understanding of the event and its stakeholders. The skills and requirements for a 2025 provider should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Large-scale event management skills and curation of such events, ○ Knowledge of the cultural sector, including funded and non-funded organisations, freelance, artists, libraries and heritage, as well as strong existing relationships with the sector across the city. ○ Marketing resources appropriate for an event of this scale. ○ The successful appointee will be required to lay the foundation for 2026 and create an independent committee, as referred to in the Governance section of these recommendations. ○ Other aspects mentioned in the long-term recommendations should be taken into consideration as part of the procurement process, when possible to

	<p>deliver within the short timescale for 2025. These include the event's delivery model, safety and marketing.</p>
3.16	<p><u>Long-term recommendations</u></p> <p>The report highlights a range of long-term recommendations relating to governance, the delivery model, funding, safety, marketing and growth. These include:</p>
3.17	<p><u>Governance</u></p> <p>On governance for future events post 2025, the report recommends that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture Night Belfast should be led by an independent body that shares the values and ethos of the event highlighted in this report and in the previous recommendations. We recognise this is not achievable for the 2025 event but should be explored for future iterations. • Given CNB's scale and significance, a steering committee is appropriate to ensure the event remains true to its core values in the future. This committee should include and represent Belfast's arts and culture sector in majority. • This newly constituted entity should lead on programming, curation and fundraising.
3.18	<p><u>Delivery model</u></p> <p>On delivery, the report recommends that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture Night Belfast to return with a Receiving House model. This means each organisation or artist that will take part in CNB will programme their own event, pay for it and submit it to the central organising body for inclusion in the programme. • This delivery model will still require a strong, creative, curatorial approach, to ensure The cultural sector stays on the front stage, there is a diverse representation of art forms and organisations and artists can avail of support from the organiser if required • Events are located and scheduled appropriately to avoid crowding. • That the delivery organisation has a programming budget to support artists and venues who may not be able to take part in Culture Night without it. • Belfast City Council may also want to explore alternative ways to engage in some curatorial funding to support creatives to deliver content for the event. • To ensure artists are paid for submitted events, organisations will be required to show how they will pay artists in order to be part of the programme.
3.19	<p><u>Funding and sponsorship</u></p> <p>The report recommends the following approach to funding and sponsorship of the event:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a value-led approach should be undertaken when it comes to funding the event.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future corporate relationships need carefully managed and rejected if not in line with the event's priorities. • In terms of its funding, Culture Night should not be treated like any other festival. As a matter of fact, Culture Night is not a festival and sits outside of festival funding schemes. It is rather a sector development initiative.
3.20	<p><u>Event safety</u></p> <p>To ensure future events are safe, the report recommends that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As part of a procurement process, health and safety should be a mandatory tender requirement. • that the scale of the event is expanded across the city instead of focused in Cathedral Quarter. • Sufficient budget will be needed to ensure the security to be more visible as the event grows
3.21	<p><u>Marketing and communications</u></p> <p>On messaging and communications relating to the event, the report states that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing must set clear expectations about the event's evolution, emphasising the new, community-focused approach and expanded reach across the city, while acknowledging the shift away from its previous scale and structure. • Any communication will have to emphasise that CNB has now expanded into other parts of the city and encourage people to explore their own neighbourhoods. • Although Culture Night has been described by many as an 'audience development tool', one night of engagement is not enough to deepen relationships with new audiences. For this reason, Culture Night should not be advertised as such.
3.22	<p><u>Risks and challenges</u></p> <p>It is worth noting that delivery of an event in 2025 does come with several risks and challenges. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The potential of a lack of suitable responses or suppliers to the public procurement exercise • Subject to approval to issue a tender, the earliest any potential supplier could be appointed is May 2025. This means any supplier would effectively have just over four months to issue an open call, build a programme and ultimately deliver on an event on 19th September 2025

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given the tight timeframe and challenges within the cultural sector, there may be a limited number of responses from venues and organisations across the city to this open call • Any contractor will have a challenge to ensure there is clear messaging around the event. This will need to emphasis the shift from being a large, on street event based in the Cathedral Quarter to a more venue based, city wide programme.
3.23	<p><u>Recommended approach for 2025</u></p> <p>In order to deliver on an event in 2025, it is proposed to follow a similar model to Dublin City Council and issue a public tender to market to deliver the event. This procurement exercise will seek to appoint an external organisation to manage an open call for a series of free events in venues across the city. This contractor would act as a receiving house, collating various events from willing participants under one banner and presenting them to the public as a cohesive programme. This external organisation would be expected to lead on programming, production and marketing of the event. As referenced in the report from Thrive, it is important that the specification for this procurement exercise reflects the complexities and essence of Culture Night. Given the timelines for delivery officers are seeking approval to open the tender process in mid April ahead of council ratification. No spend will be incurred prior to final ratification.</p>
3.24	<p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>The value of this contract will be up to £150,000. This will be resourced from the 2025/26 budget for the Culture and Tourism section of the Economic Development division of the Place and Economy Departmental budget in line with existing approvals.</p>
3.25	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>The cultural strategy, <i>A City Imagining</i> has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) and a Rural Needs Assessment (RNA). Specific initiatives as required will be subject to a further equality screening.</p>
4.0	<p>Appendices - Documents Attached</p>
	<p>Appendix 1 - Culture Night Sector Engagement and Roadmap for Delivery</p>

Full Report

Culture Night Sector Engagement and Roadmap Delivery

March 2025



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Introduction

Established in 2009, Culture Night Belfast was a large scale and free cultural event taking place in the Cathedral Quarter and city centre of Belfast. Culture Night in Belfast began in 2009 when a number of arts organisations came together to organise the first Belfast Culture Night in September 2010. In 2012/13, the Cathedral Quarter Trust became the custodians of the event, delivering Culture Night in the city until the final event in 2019.

Cathedral Quarter Trust lost its core funding in 2023 and ceased all activities with immediate effect. In its absence, no other organisation has yet taken on the lead organising and delivery role necessary to revive Culture Night in Belfast.

In April 2024, Council officers, members of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee at Belfast City Council began exploring options on how an event on the night of Culture Night could be facilitated, resourced and managed in Belfast. At the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, members were presented by council officers with a number of options, including requirements for engagement with the sector. These options were the following:

- Extended Late Night Art. Late Night Art is a pre-existing event, organised independently by visual arts galleries in the city.
- Procurement of an external organisation to manage an open call for a series of free events in venues across the city.
- Produce an event internally through funding mechanisms, which would have meant for the Council to act as curators and invite organisations to apply for small grants to develop and deliver events in venues throughout the city.

Underpinning all suggested options was a need for any new iteration of the event to be developed with the cultural sector in Belfast. Culture Night must be driven by the artists to ensure buy-in, ownership and the success of the event. After having considered these three options, it was decided that Belfast would not have a Culture Night event in 2024. Reasons included limited officer capacity and limited time available for a robust procurement process.

Whilst Belfast City Council can act as a catalyst for the re-emergence of the event, it was necessary to bring on board an independent party, with direct connections to the Cultural Sector, to lead sectoral engagement and public consultations. Indeed, while it is BCC's role to invest in activities that boost civic pride and celebrate what the city has to offer, Culture Night is not and has never been a BCC owned event. Additionally, Culture Night is a concept that did not start in Belfast. As well as meeting the requirements of this contract, this work was an opportunity to question who Culture Night really belongs to and what it is for.

[Thrive](#) and [Daisy Chain Inc.](#) partnered to deliver this Culture Night Sector Engagement and Roadmap Delivery contract. Together, they investigated:

- What is the purpose of Culture Night and who feels ownership of it
- How Culture Night started in Belfast and how it changed over time to better understand the lessons of the past and use these to shape any future iterations
- How the cultural sector and audiences experienced Culture Night in Belfast and what they want it to become in the future
- What past and potential funders' priorities and any likelihood of funding the event in the future

It is worth noting that Adam Turkington, member of Daisy Chain Inc., worked at Cathedral Quarter Trust and delivered Culture Night between 2011 and 2016. For this report to remain objective and with the concern of seeking to avoid any potential conflict of interest, Daisy Chain Inc. were not involved in the sector and funders consultation.

Methodology

To find out the above, they carried out the following:

- Desk research into comparable events in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, the UK and abroad, to explore and analyse models of programming, budget and delivery
- 1x one-to-one interview with Dublin City Council
- 7x one-to-one interviews with the founders of Culture Night Belfast and people who have worked as producers or event managers for Culture Night Belfast over the years
- A survey aimed at the cultural sector, including artists, venues and producers
- 3x focus groups with members of the cultural sector in Belfast
- 2x focus groups with audiences
- A consultation with past and potential funders, including Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Tourism NI, Arts & Business NI and the city's Business Improvement Districts

Executive summary

Key findings

Purpose of Culture Night and ownership

- Culture Night is a non-denominational, apolitical celebration of our local arts, culture and heritage offering. It is a city-wide, free event that invites audiences to visit spaces and experience culture they may not have encountered before. Words to describe Culture Night used by all parties we consulted in this research included diversity, inclusive and fun. This is the essence of Culture Night Belfast.
- In terms of who feels ownership of Culture Night Belfast, many do, but ultimately, our cultural sector, including venues, artists and producers, are those who should own it. Culture Night is about the cultural sector and delivered by the cultural sector. This makes it indisputable that the agency to own Culture Night is theirs.

Challenges from past events

1. Overcrowding and safety

- As visitor numbers grew exponentially, congestion occurred, particularly in Cathedral Quarter, despite attempts to expand the event's footprint.
- Crowd management and security resources were inadequate, with a noted decline in the visibility of security and stewards in later years, making it difficult for attendees to navigate safely.

2. Funding

- Culture Night relied on limited public funding and corporate sponsorships, which led to financial instability and compromises in artistic integrity.
- The event's growth in audience size was not matched by increased financial support, leading to challenges in safety management and event quality.
- The increased commercialisation of the event—such as corporate sponsorships that did not align with the event's values and ethos—further alienated artists and audiences.

3. Lack of support for the cultural sector

- Nearly a quarter of venues and producers could not pay artists at all, while others could only offer minimal compensation.
- However, on the other side of the coin, it is important to address the common belief that artists weren't paid for their work during Culture Night. The story is not as clear cut. Almost half of venues and producers consulted for this report paid artists, either well or very well.
- Many artists covered costs out of pocket, making it difficult to justify participation in future years.
- Some venues felt obligated to participate due to audience expectations, despite financial losses.

4. Alcohol-dominated atmosphere

- While alcohol consumption was always part of the event due to its nighttime setting, the focus shifted from cultural participation to social drinking, especially in later years.
- The introduction of Culture Day in 2019, designed to separate family-friendly activities from the nighttime event, inadvertently reinforced the perception that Culture Night was no longer welcoming for all ages.
- Many venues and artists expressed frustration that bars and hospitality businesses profited significantly from the event, while they remained unpaid or underpaid

5. Governance

- The event changed hands multiple times, starting as an independent initiative before being managed by the Cathedral Quarter Trust (CQT) from 2012 to 2019.
- The absence of a sustainable governance model made the event highly vulnerable to changes in personnel, funding availability, and external pressures.

Recommendations for the return of Culture Night Belfast

Purpose and ideology

Culture Night Belfast should remain focused on its core values:

- Celebrating the city's diverse arts, culture, and heritage sectors, and connecting these with local communities.
- Providing free events for audiences to experience new and diverse cultural activities.
- Ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all.

Governance

- CNB should be led by an independent body aligned with the event's core values. This body should not be an existing organisation, due to the unique challenges CNB faces.
- A steering committee, predominantly representing the cultural sector, should guide CNB's management and programming. Belfast City Council can provide support and funding but should not act as curator or event manager.

Support from Belfast City Council

- BCC should support the cultural sector in leading CNB's return.
- BCC's role should include advocating for the sector, acknowledging its challenges, and responding to its needs where possible.

Delivery model

- CNB should adopt a *Receiving House* model, where individual organisations and artists curate their own events, with central coordination to ensure diversity and accessibility.

- Large outdoor events should be avoided, and resources should focus on supporting smaller, more intimate cultural experiences.
- BCC may consider alternative curatorial funding options, but must avoid overly controlling the creative direction.

Funding and sponsorship

- A value-led approach to funding is critical to maintain the integrity of CNB. Corporate sponsorship must align with the event's priorities, avoiding alcohol sponsorship and potential negative impacts on the event's family-friendly atmosphere.
- Any funding given to the event should support the cultural sector, avoiding excessive corporate influence.

Event safety

- Health and safety, including crowd management, should be a key consideration in CNB's planning, with adequate resources allocated for security and safety measures.
- Expanding the event beyond Cathedral Quarter should be explored to alleviate crowding and allow broader participation from cultural organisations across the city.

Marketing and communications

- Marketing must set clear expectations about the event's evolution, emphasising the new, community-focused approach and expanded reach across the city, while acknowledging the shift away from its previous scale and structure.
- Moving beyond the notion of CNB as a short-term "audience development tool" to focus on long-term, meaningful engagement.

2025 and beyond

- A smaller, venue-based event in 2025 is feasible, focusing on the creative sector rather than the hospitality industry.
- For 2025, a procurement process is necessary. However, the chosen provider must have more than just large-scale event management experience. They should also have:
 - In-depth knowledge of the cultural sector (including both funded and non-funded organizations, freelancers, and artists),
 - Existing relationships within the sector across the city,
 - Strong marketing capabilities for large events,
 - A team that aligns with the values and ethos of the event. Additionally, the provider will need to lay the groundwork for 2026 and establish an independent committee as part of governance.
- Long-term growth for CNB should be measured by cultural impact rather than size. A shift away from large-scale events may help preserve the event's values and success.
- BCC should partner with the cultural sector to appoint a delivery body for CNB's future, ensuring sector-wide buy-in and sustainable growth.

Context of Culture Night Belfast

How Culture Night Belfast started

Culture Night first started on the island of Ireland in Dublin in 2006. It was an initiative of Temple Bar Cultural Trust and Dublin City Council, with 40 venues opening free and late in the evening in Dublin's Temple Bar. In 2008, the opportunity was extended to Belfast was approached by Temple Bar Cultural Trust to bring Culture Night to Belfast, with the same delivery model as Dublin which was a 'Receiving House' model. White Night or Light Night models (which Culture Night is broadly based on) rely on this model across the world.

A public event was organised by 2 people who then went on to become members of the initial committee – Sean Kelly (Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival) and Kieran Gilmore (Open House Festival). The meeting was to gauge interest in bringing the event to Belfast with venues, artists and organisations. The concept was met with enthusiasm – there was genuine excitement. People saw it as an opportunity, not just to meet the strategic objectives of promotion of the sector and the Cathedral Quarter as a hub, but also as an opportunity to be creative without the constraints of funder expectations or sales targets.

At the event, an organising committee was created. Joining Sean and Kieran were Conor Shields (Community Arts Partnership) and Patricia Freedman (Cathedral Quarter Trust).

The committee members brought a range of expertise and motivation to the table. For some, it was about personal connections and circumstances. For others, it was more ideological – a belief in the potential of the event of the event to make the case for the arts as a powerful driver across a number of aspects like social cohesion, economic benefits, quality of life and civic pride.

It is worth highlighting that there was particular alignment between the purpose of Cathedral Quarter Trust and the opportunity presented by Culture Night Belfast. CQT worked to cement the Cathedral Quarter as a cultural hub and as a result this meant that Patricia Freedman was able to give considerable time to Culture Night Belfast which was undoubtedly a massive boost for the event's viability at the start.

Using the existing networks of the four committee members in Belfast City Council and Arts Council of Northern Ireland, £25,000 was secured from each funder and the first Belfast Culture Night was born.

The event ran as a receiving house model where artists and organisations managed their own events, with a small number of street animations curated centrally.

There was an enthusiastic response from the sector, with over 80 events, 7 walking tours and a dozen street performances scheduled in the first year. This appetite was matched by audiences. An estimated 15,000 people attended in 2009, and all events were located in Cathedral Quarter area.

How Culture Night Belfast changed over time

It became obvious that positioning Cathedral Quarter as a cultural hub had worked. The audiences flocked in their thousands to the area whereas events located in other parts of the city struggled. This concentration of audiences in CQ continued over the entire history of the project despite the various initiatives for making events elsewhere a destination, including free buses and funding. This became an asset for the event in many ways, having so much within such a tight walkable space created an utterly unique experience.

In 2012, the Cathedral Quarter Trust took over the event, delivering Culture Night until 2019. The Cathedral Quarter Trust also delivered a new format of the event in 2021 entitled Ogham Grove.

To ensure public safety, between 2011 and 2015, an increasing number of roads in the area were closed to traffic and became additional stages for artistic expression, parades and family friendly activity. Very quickly these road closures became part of the identity of CNB and specific events were curated to make use of these now transformed outdoor spaces.

Between 2011 and 2015, the attendance at the event and the number of submissions also grew exponentially. By 2016, the staff structure in CQT to support Culture Night was the following:

- One year-round admin staff
- Two freelancers who worked on the event for six months ahead of Culture Night
- Two people in charge of programming
- A large number of event staff on the night

In 2016, this team was looking after an event which involved over 300 individual events in six hours and attracted upwards of 80,000 people on a total budget of £150,000. At this point, a lot of the budget and team capacity was dedicated to managing crowds and ensuring safety. The management team felt at this point that the budget had not grown in line with the numbers they were managing. Our research points to audiences feeling that security and stewards became less visible over time which was down to the volume of people. This growth didn't just suck up resources and creative energy but placed a significant amount of mental strain on the staff team who were dealing with a major city-wide event for a fee that was in no way commensurate with this responsibility.

In the period 2016 and 2017, there were a significant number of staffing changes in both the Culture Night Team and the CQT. After six years of continuity, a new creative director was appointed in 2017, and the following year founder Patricia Freedman left her role in the CQT. Understandably, faced immediately with the unique operational task of dealing with this volume of people, the focus turned to raising more money and ensuring that there wasn't dangerous overcrowding.

As will be explored in more detail later in this report, it was during this time that there was a growing perception from both the cultural sector and audiences that the event became more about corporate interests and the profits of the bars than about the creative sector it was supposed to be celebrating. Although not programmed by CNB, a photo of a pop-up Lexus showroom on Hill Street in 2018 with the tag line 'The Death of Culture Night' went viral. CNB leadership was quick to declare it was nothing to do with them and even condemned it, but many saw this as a symptom of a wider problem - corporate interests were taking centre stage and not artists. As the event grew exponentially over ten years, it became evident that funding did not match that growth, and additional income was needed to safely deliver the event. Sponsorship and corporate involvement became a means to an end.

Curatorially, in the later years, there was a focus on staging larger showcase events across the site, spreading the event across a wider footprint in an attempt to reduce overcrowding. In retrospect, this move to bigger showpiece stages and shift in focus away from a collective melting pot of diverse smaller events changed the atmosphere of the event. It lost, for many of the people that we spoke to, the idea of something that you explore, and became a series of large stage performances. Additionally, the large gaps between significant stages, which previously would have been filled with smaller pop-up events, felt empty and populated by street drinking. Even though the plan was to make the event safer by spreading it out more, almost everyone interviewed said they felt less safe.

In the same vein, drinking culture was always a part of CNB. It is a nighttime event in the heart of Belfast. It would be naive to think that you could run an event without it. Another of the unintended consequences of such a high concentration of events in one area was that this equally led to a concentration of people drinking. One factor that also may have contributed to the increased cases of alcohol consumption is the changing nature of the Cathedral Quarter itself from 2008 to 2019, with many new bars and restaurants opening during this period.

This is a reality that any CNB event is going to have to deal with under any model. The way that it was successfully dealt with in the early days was curatorial. The event was programmed to be family-friendly, not just with a family-friendly area but rather the whole event. There was a curatorial style to the event, playfulness, a carnival atmosphere, a sense of the unexpected that would keep the mood light and fun. Additionally, many events were in venues where alcohol was not available (or allowed in many cases). In broad terms, the team attempted to create what many called a European atmosphere, where moderate drinking could co-exist with family friendly activities. Having families as a visible and prominent aspect of the event was very much part of the strategy to manage anti-social drinking.

The biggest shift away from this approach came in 2019 when CNB was split into Culture Night and Culture Day. This ended any notion that Culture Night was family friendly because all the family friendly content was programmed the following day. The expansion of the event into the weekend to deal with overcrowding had been suggested by external stakeholders like Tourism NI and Belfast City Council for a

few years. It had previously been resisted by CNB organisers as they anticipated the initiative would come with challenges in terms of logistics and capacity of the cultural sector, and the further separation of families from the Culture Night event. However, with the funding situation remaining critical, a decision was made to give Culture Day a chance. As a result, there were less programmed events for Culture Night as the cultural sector did not have the capacity nor the resources to do both. With less to do, there was a perception that attendees drank more and the narrative around the drinking culture at Culture Night increased.

By 2019, large sections of the creative sector and the original audiences who had been involved or going to CNB from the start felt alienated from the event. The narrative of ‘overcrowded, corporate, drinking, not family-friendly’ amplified. Aligned with the inability of CNB to further invest in artists fees, Culture Night was not what it used to be. A narrative began to take hold that it became a victim of its own success.

Culture Night Belfast post-Covid

The 2020 pandemic put a halt on Culture Night as an in-person event, although there was a digital CNB in September 2020.

In 2021, the format of the event changed significantly with a move to focus on a central spectacle event, rather than the curation of multiple opportunities. The installation in Writers Square, called Ogham Grove, was advertised as Culture Night Belfast but was such a departure from what people associated with the brand.

Parallel to this, [Pinwheel](#), a consultancy firm based in England, were commissioned by the CQT with funding from BCC, to assess the event and how to take it forward. The 2022 report recommended a move to a new outdoor, cross-artform, standalone, large-scale commission, similar to Ogham Grove. It also suggested the expansion of the event to a 2-day, weekend-long event, instead of hosting it over one night. Following the report, CQT announced that CNB was taking a year off and would return in 2023 with a new format.

While programming, marketing, governance, budgets and fundraising were explored for this new delivery model, two crucial pillars to the success of CNB seemed to be forgotten – Belfast’s cultural sector and audiences. This also speaks to the importance of having a clear, defined purpose for CNB – what, and indeed who is it for? Many people feel a sense of ownership of CNB – but if the event is a celebration of creativity for the people of Belfast, then those are the groups who must shape the event and any future reincarnations.

In April 2023, however, CQT announced that it was to cease day-to-day trading after losing their funding from Department for Communities. This put an end to any planning of any kind of CNB event in 2023. As observed in the media and online comments after the announcement, the general public was confused

about what this meant for the future of CNB. The messaging from the Trust seemed to imply that this was the end for CNB:

“The Board of the Cathedral Quarter Trust, CQT, has been forced to cease day to day operational activity, including planning any cultural events, with immediate effect and for the foreseeable future, following the withdrawal of core funding by the Department for Communities. This DfC decision was communicated to CQT within the past weeks.

We have with regret served notice to our employees and we thank them sincerely for their unrelenting efforts to drive forward the CQT agenda to this point.

The Board, which is representative of businesses, arts, educational and heritage organisations and other civic stakeholders in the Cathedral Quarter will continue to meet and to champion issues that promote the best long-term interests of the Cathedral Quarter, the city centre and the wider Belfast agenda. We will never waver from our belief that the Cathedral Quarter has a critical role to play in driving sustainable and inclusive regeneration in this part of Belfast with a knock-on effect across the whole city and region.

CQT delivered Culture Night in Belfast until 2021, and last year it was announced that a strategic review would be undertaken into the future of the event. Following the withdrawal of its core funding CQT will not be directly involved in the delivery of any future Culture Night and as a Board we will continue to work with Belfast City Council and other stakeholders to explore all options around the future of this popular and important event.”

This confusion, combined with a severely reduced capacity within the creative sector has led to inertia since April 2023.

Benchmarking Culture Night Belfast against other models

Governance models

The return of CNB affords us the chance to examine the previous Governance Models, benchmark other events governance, and explore what model would be most appropriate for CNB going forward. By governance, we mean the legal structure in which the management of the event sits. In the past, the CNB governance has had a significant impact on the event. It is vital therefore, if we wish to avoid this in future, that we re-establish CNB with a firm and ideological structure of management, thereby insulating it from changes in staff, or other outside factors that have the potential to derail it in the future.

There are three models of governance for Culture Night’s in Ireland and for other Light Nights globally. These can play out differently or be used to create secondary governance structures. For example, a council can appoint an artist-led steering committee and remain completely hands off but ultimately the governance remains the responsibility of the council.

Run by local government

Not just in Ireland but across the world, this is the dominant model. Whether it is the Light Night of Toronto, Sydney, Leeds, or Paris, they are all run by Local Government. Animating an entire city is a massive undertaking, therefore it makes sense that Local Government would be involved. In addition, Light Night models are almost always free to attend, while at the same time expensive to run and as a result require significant funding from the public purse.

There are also examples of when the Council almost entirely outsources the management of the events. This is usually down to scale. A lot of smaller Culture Nights in Ireland for example would be run by council officers as part of their annual programme. When events are bigger and require a dedicated team for 6-12 months, it tends to be outsourced. In Dublin, a budget of €150,000 is allocated to an independent event management company to run the event. More funding may be raised via various agencies but crucially in Dublin, this money is spent on a small number of large-scale events. Most of the Culture Night Dublin events are submitted by venues, they are entered into the programme alongside the curated events. The commission is to produce 3-5 large scale signature events on the evening of Culture Night. RTE for example will put on their own concert, venues and others will do the same.

Advantages

- Local authorities are able to support large-scale, city-wide events
- They have significant staff resources
- They can use influence to bring in more partners
- Council not at risk of disappearing like other organisations
- Safe option

Disadvantages

- Risk of political interference or mission creep
- Councils tend to be safe in how they programme
- Procurement processes can be problematic for curatorial skillsets. There is a risk that an event management company could take on an event but lack the curatorial understanding of the event and understanding of the sector. To rectify this, quality would need to be heavily weighted over cost.
- The Dublin Model puts the appointee in charge of 2/3 major events and the rest just happen organically. As we will see later in this report, large scale outdoor events are not appropriate for a Belfast event.
- Local authorities' communications teams, language and tone are not really appropriate for marketing this sort of event. Marketing would need to be outsourced.

Hosted by another organisation

This is how Culture Night Dublin began and what CNB moved to after the first four years. It was also the model for Light Night Liverpool. It is perhaps instructive to note that Dublin no longer operates under this model and Liverpool Light Night, like Belfast, had its last event in 2019.

This model allows for the event to operate free from a lot of the bureaucracy that comes with a Council Project. Under the right umbrella, a Culture Night style event can take creative risks and tap into the networks and resources of its parent organisation and avoid the admin burden of having to set up a separate organisation. This was very much the thinking of the CNB committee when choosing to move to this model in 2012.

Ultimately under this model, the event can fall foul of a shift in the parent organisation's culture, staffing, and funding situation. Not only is the ideological core of the event, which everyone recognises as key, secondary to the objectives of the host but the very existence of the event is subject to the same. In Liverpool, the company chose to stop doing the event. In Dublin, the City Council stepped in because it was felt that the Temple Bar Trust were not sufficiently focused on the arts but rather on their business objectives. In Belfast, a change in personnel brought a change in priorities.

Advantages

- Admin support without political interference
- If the right staff are in place, they can be a great asset
- A larger organisation allows continuity across the year
- Can provide ideological core which short term event staff can then support

Disadvantages

- Very open to mission creep
- Event will come second to core objectives of parent organisation
- Event subject to organisational changes in parent organisation
- If the organisation stops trading, the event falls
- Some funding avenues may be unavailable depending on funding already received by parent organisation

Independent organisation

This was how Culture Night started in Belfast. In general, this model is often adopted by smaller events. Hollywood Culture Night for example, was run by a coalition of interested parties (although it hasn't returned post-Covid). With small events, the organisation tends to usually be unincorporated, with constituent events looking after their own insurance. In Belfast, as the event grew, this became untenable

very quickly and exposed the organisers to considerable personal risk. It is at this point that the CNB committee realised it would be preferable to follow the previous model.

It is extremely difficult to find an international example of a large-scale Light Night that is constitutionally independent, however it is not always obvious from websites whether the Council are delivery partner or if the management is in house. Evidently, there are a number of hybrid models, some of which have Councils as the main driver while having an independent delivery partner.

Perhaps something like the Lewes Bonfire Night is an example of an organic event with lots of constituent parts that will have an organising committee but no formally constituted organising body. While it is a stretch to suggest that CNB can be compared with a tradition that has built up over centuries, it is worth considering the ability of communities to self-organise and the value that is created when events are bottom up rather than top down.

Advantages

- Core values remain intact
- Bottom up/driven from within the arts sector
- Goodwill not filtered through local authority or parent organisation
- All funding avenues open

Disadvantages

- More work
- A danger of splits/in fighting
- Potential of additional overheads such as rent etc.

Delivery models

Artistic programming for festivals falls into two categories. Many festivals include elements of both.

Commissioning model

A Commissioning model is where the festival maintains total control of the curation, and as a result, the financial aspects of each event. The programming team of the festival will approach artists they want to take part, pay the artists, pay for all the production and keep all the ticket income. This is the model of most commercial festivals. If organised by one central body, festival budgets can be seen as a whole, rather than each event needing to make a profit - an event can lose money and be covered by the profits of another. If a festival using this model is funded, funding will be designated to put on shows that have creative value but are not commercially viable, or to reduce ticket prices. Examples of festivals that use this model in Belfast include Belfast International Festival, Festival of Fools, Belsonic, Belfast Children's Festival.

Receiving house model

A **Receiving House model** means that each individual organisation/venue/promoter that takes part, programmes their own event, pays for it and submits it to the central organising body for inclusion in the programme. The festival curatorial team may work with contributors to refine their ideas and ultimately can say no if they feel the event does not match their remit, but essentially these types of festivals involve a disparate group of event organisers clubbing together under one festival banner and using a festival model to become greater than the sum of their parts. The festival will usually run the box office and as a result take a cut of sales, but each event will run as an independent standalone event financially. Examples of festivals that use this model in Belfast include Belfast Restaurant Week, NI Human Rights Festival, or Sound of Belfast.

Mixed model

A large number of festivals will operate a **Mixed Model**. This means that the central curatorial team will program 'headline' elements of a festival, a main stage, or just essentially have a programming budget that they will spend putting on events that match their curatorial objectives. In addition to this, they are known to other promoters to be open to publicising their events along the receiving house model. The festival gets another event to enhance its programme and the promoter gets access to a significant bump in marketing and audience reach. Examples of festivals that use this model in Belfast include Féile en Phobail, Imagine Belfast or NI Science Festival.

Hybrid approach

The Culture Night model is essentially a receiving house model, but most events, including Belfast, would adopt a commissioning element where they felt it was needed, or where specific funding pots became available. There was always a clear narrative why some work was commissioned and not everyone. It would be impossible for CNB to commission all the work that took place without a budget five times the size of what was available, so they took the approach of ensuring that, within reason and where requested, everyone's costs were met and provided a level of production that allowed people to properly showcase their work.

Culture Night Dublin's funding essentially goes onto commissioning art, tentpole events, with the rest of the programme made up of a receiving house model. While replicating this approach in Belfast wouldn't be a model that a Belfast audience would recognise as Culture Night, it is clear that in the current climate it's unthinkable that a higher proportion of the budget isn't released into the creative sector to produce work. Given the history of Culture Night and the volume of arts organisations who have traditionally taken part, we feel that a model similar to Derry/Londonderry where a larger number of smaller commissions are made is more realistic.

The main reason why this approach wasn't used in the past was it was feared it would lead to a two-tier system and resentment from those who didn't get funding, as opposed to the sense of 'We're all in this together'. There's a real danger with this approach that we professionalise CNB and that it's a reflection of bigger, funded, arts organisations rather than the melting pot of passionate hobbyists and eccentricity that made it so unique.

The Belfast context

In deciding an approach for Culture Night Belfast, it is essential to consider the context and circumstances of Belfast and Northern Ireland as a whole. This is particularly relevant when looking at how Culture Night and other similar events happen elsewhere.

Unlike the rest of the UK, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) does not have a national portfolio programme. National Portfolio organisations in the rest of the UK receive ongoing, multi-year funding to support their work. Instead, ACNI has an annual funding programme that arts organisations in Northern Ireland have to reapply to be part of every year.

Additionally, Northern Ireland receives the lowest per capita funding for the arts in the UK and Ireland, at just under £7 per person. This is much less than other UK nations and the Republic of Ireland. In comparison, England is at £9.50, Wales at £10.50 and Scotland, just under £11. ROI invests £25.90 per capita. In the last 10 years, funding of the arts council per person has decreased by 66% in Northern Ireland.

Because arts investment has significantly reduced over the years and costs have invariably risen, the money available for the creation of art has been dramatically affected. The sector must find income from a variety of other sources – which then in turn affects the work created. Creativity must bend to the priorities of funders and leads to the instrumentalism of the work. Work drifts to the mainstream as venues can only programme that which will bring guaranteed sales. Northern Ireland organisations are extremely reliant on box office income to survive. A [recent survey run by ACNI](#) found that box office sales contribute to 53% of organisations' total earned income. In comparison, bar/catering sales make up only 13% of this income for those who do have a bar or café on their premises.

If we look specifically at Belfast organisations in the context of Culture Night, they exist in precarity with no financial stability and have done so for many years. This unsurprisingly has an effect on energy and optimism – both of which are essential for creativity and ambition.

Outside of financial challenges, there is a tendency for large-scale events in Belfast aimed at boosting civic pride and celebrating local culture to be shaped by decisions from the top down. One of the strengths of Culture Night is that it is not tied to any political interest, and this came through clearly in what audiences and artists fed back about the event.

While we can try and benchmark CNB with others elsewhere and with other 'Light Nights' models, plans for the future must be seen through a Belfast lens. An event which celebrates the connection between culture and the people of a place cannot ignore the reality of being an artist here. If the sector needs to be at the core of the revival of Culture Night, it will need support and a sense of ownership and value.

Consultation with the cultural sector

Our engagement with the cultural sector was delivered through a survey and a series of focus groups. Both were aimed at arts organisations and artists who had taken part in Culture Night in the past to learn more about their experience of Culture Night, what the purpose of Culture Night is and what they would like Culture Night to be in the future.

Survey

The online survey was administered on Thrive's SurveyMonkey account and was open from 3rd to 24th February 2025. In total, 938 responses were collected:

- 203 sector participants (including venues, artists, producers, libraries, and heritage places who participated in CNB before)
- 735 non-participating sector organisations and audiences (people who attended CNB but didn't participate)

To identify organisations who had taken part in Culture Night in the past, we reviewed previous years' programmes and pulled together a contact list. The survey was distributed via direct email from thrive and Belfast City Council Culture Team, social media and thrive's newsletter.

Focus groups

Focus groups recruitment was launched alongside the survey. The following steps were undertaken:

- Included a question at the end of the survey asking respondents whether they would be interested in taking part in further conversations. In total, 224 agreed to participate and shared their contact details and preferred time slots.
- Contacted these respondents on a first-come, first-served basis for them to confirm their participation. As the number of places on these sessions were limited, we created a waiting list.

Three focus group sessions were held on the 25th, 26th and 27th February 2025, in University of Atypical in Belfast. The focus groups were composed of 19 participants, including 11 women and 8 men, representing venues, artists and producers.

When we refer to venues, we mean theatres, art galleries, music venues, libraries, museums, etc.

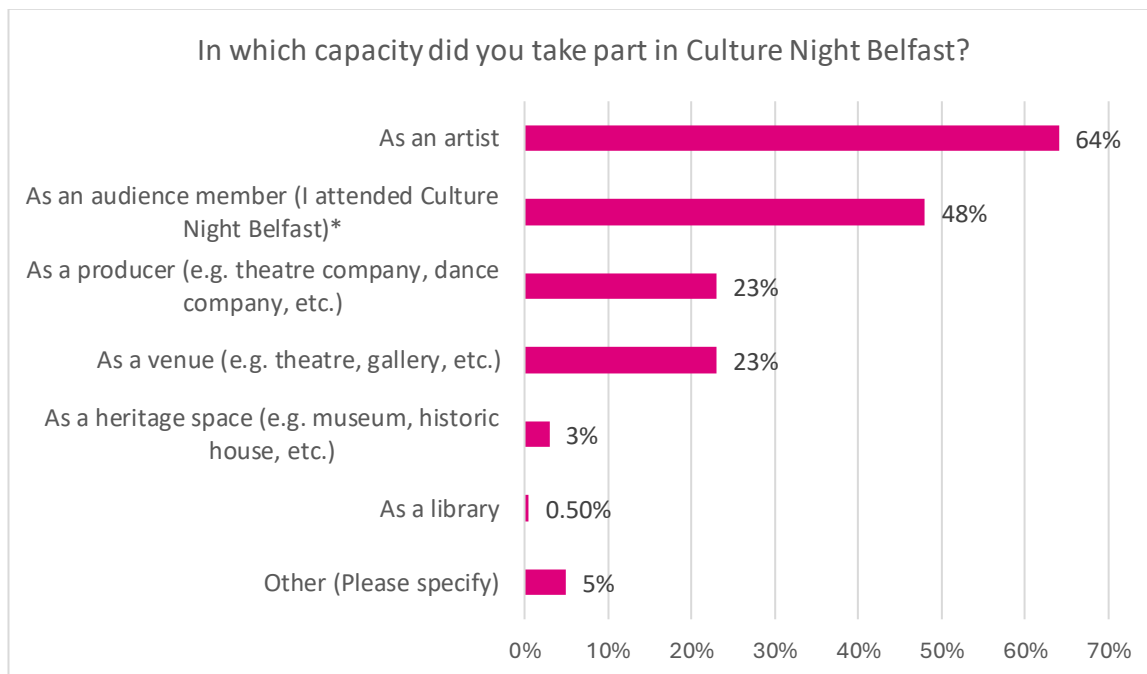
When we refer to producers, we mean theatre companies, dance companies, etc.

Findings

Survey findings

Most participants taking the survey were artists

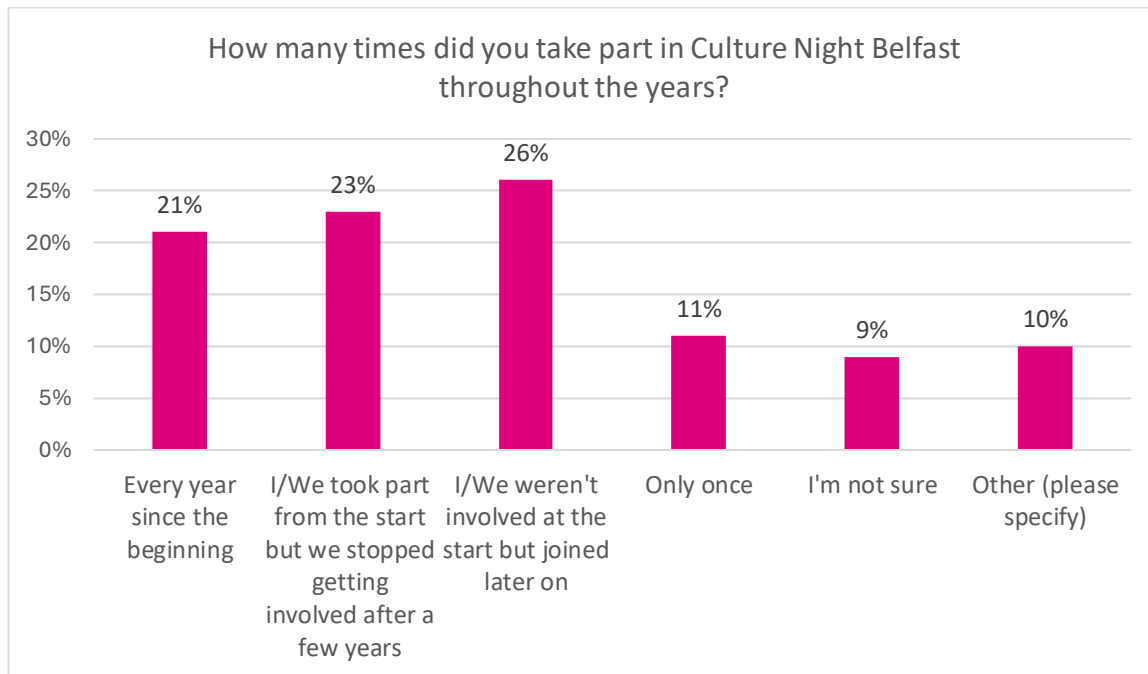
64% were individual artists, followed by 23% who were producers and 23% who worked in a venue. Nearly half (48%) of all sector respondents also attended Culture Night as an audience member.



**48% of sector participants also attended Culture Night as an audience member. The data above doesn't include people who were exclusively attenders of Culture Night.*

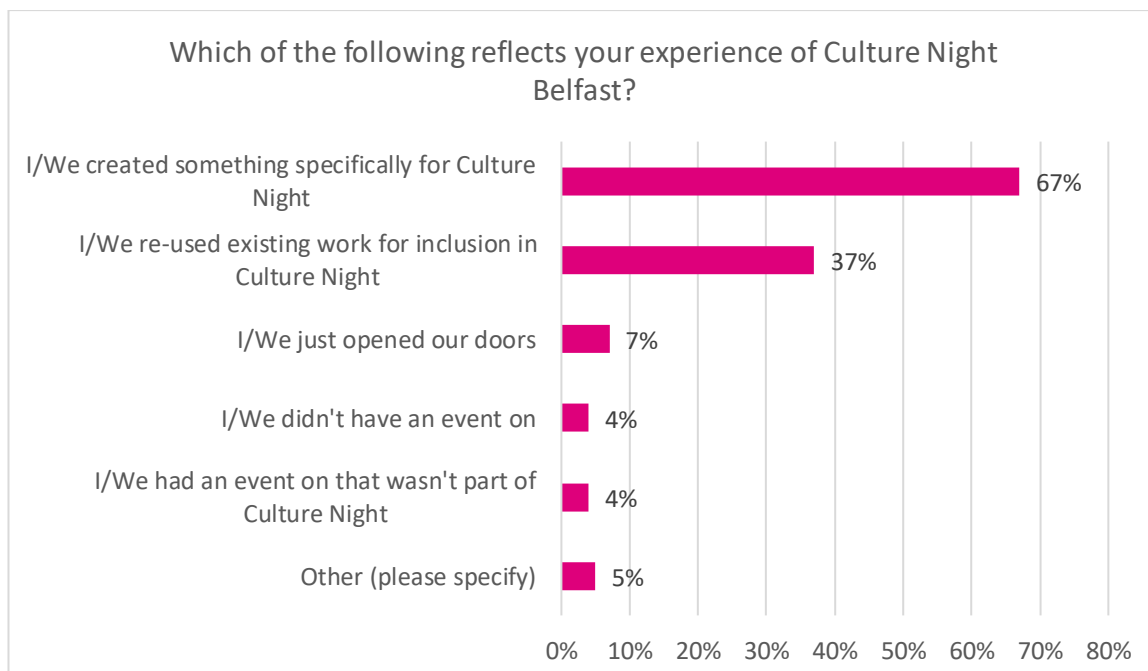
21% were committed to Culture Night, participating every year

A further 23% took part from the start but stopped after a few years, and 26% were the opposite (not involved at the start but joined later on).



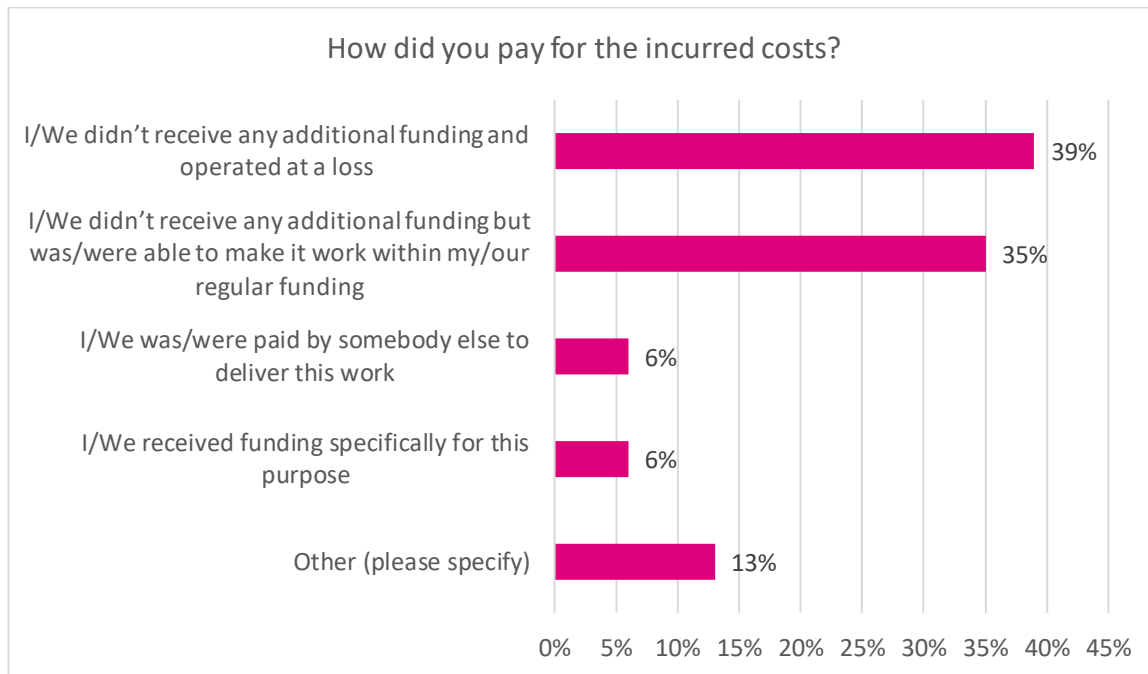
Two thirds created something specific for Culture Night

Of those people, 72% said there were additional costs related to the work.



Nearly 4-in-10 operated at a loss

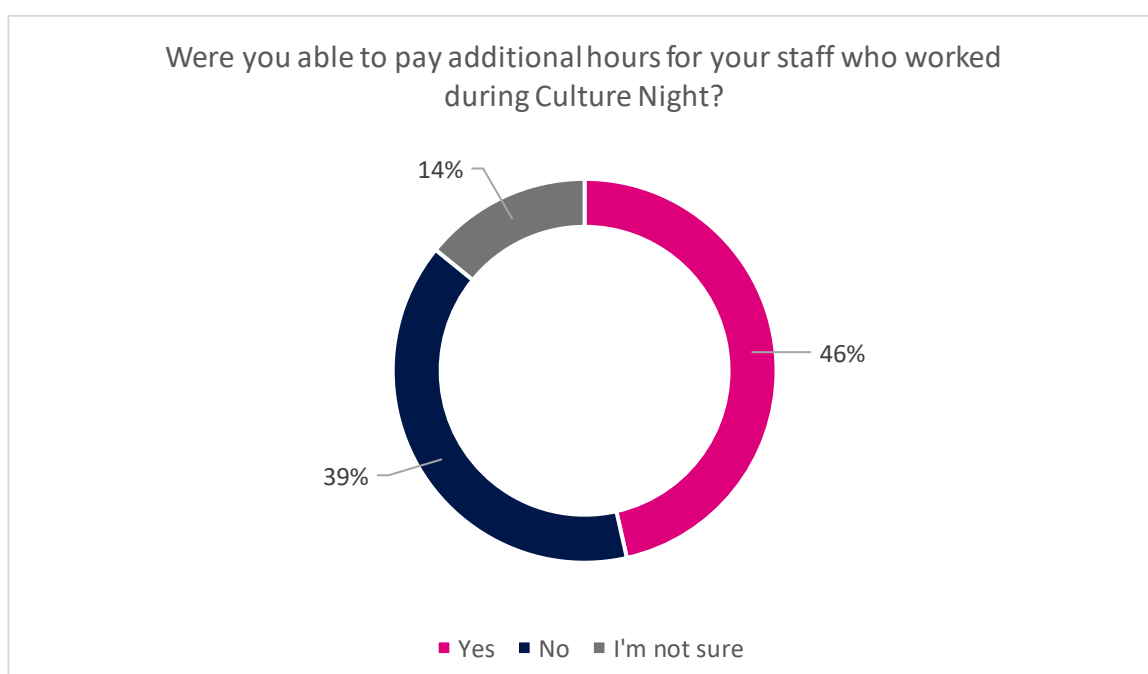
39% of those who incurred costs related to the work said they didn't receive any additional funding and operated at a loss. A further 35% said they didn't receive any additional funding, but 'were able to make it work.'



Nearly a quarter said they asked all members of staff to work on the night

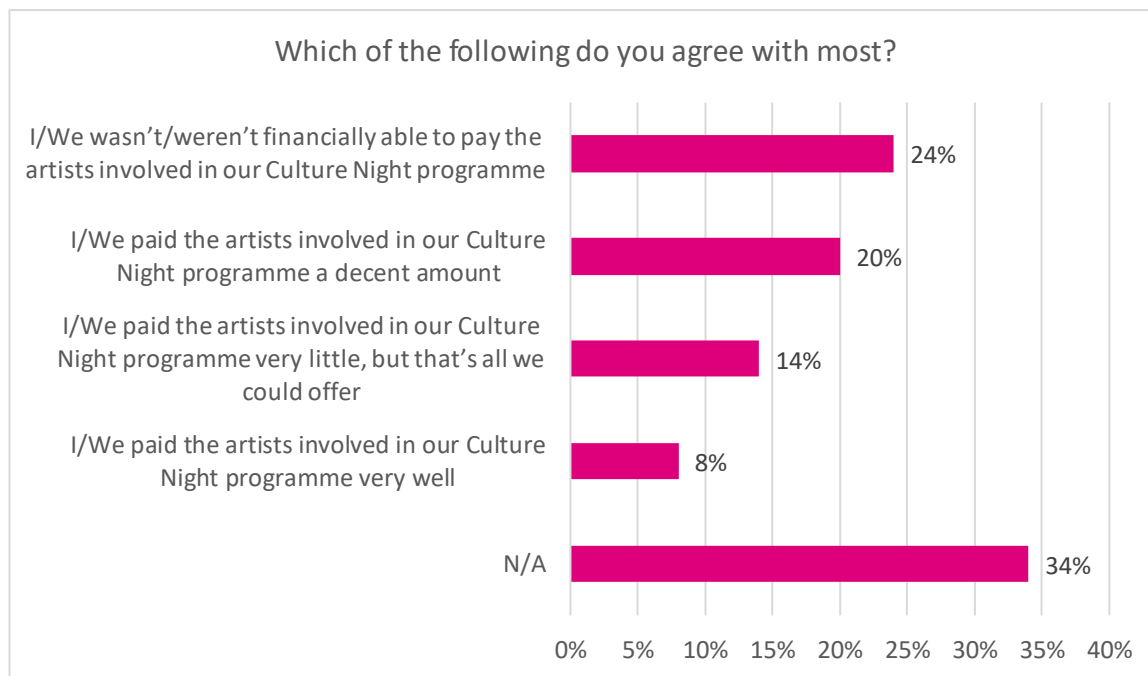
Almost one fifth (19%) said they recruited volunteers, and almost one seventh (14%) said they recruited additional staff specifically for the night. 42% said they didn't have to bring in more staff for Culture Night.

Of those who recruited staff or asked staff to work CNB, 39% were unable to pay staff additional hours
46% said yes, they were able to pay additional hours for staff who worked during Culture Night, and a further 14% were unsure.



A quarter of respondents weren't able to pay artists involved in their CNB programme

A further 20% said they paid the artists a decent amount, and 14% said they paid their artists very little but it was all they could offer. Just 8% said they paid the artists involved with their CNB programme very well.



Participants enjoyed the buzz and sense of community of Culture Night

Sector participants noted the great vibe and atmosphere on the night, saying “it was tangible.” They also remarked about the warm sense of community, giving them a platform to perform and express themselves and feel “part of something bigger.”

Several people mentioned having the opportunity to share their art with audiences new and old, and engaging with those who weren’t normally interested in culture.

What was your favourite thing about Culture Night Belfast?

The buzz/atmosphere

- “The buzz of the city and interactive art displays inside and outside”
- “The energy and vibe of the city! It was tangible”
- “It felt completely free and a little wild and chaotic. There were hidden things to find, and it felt quite anti-establishment in a way.”
- “Great buzz about the city - but especially in the later years it became unclear what cultural events were even happening and became another St Patrick’s day of sorts”

The sense of community

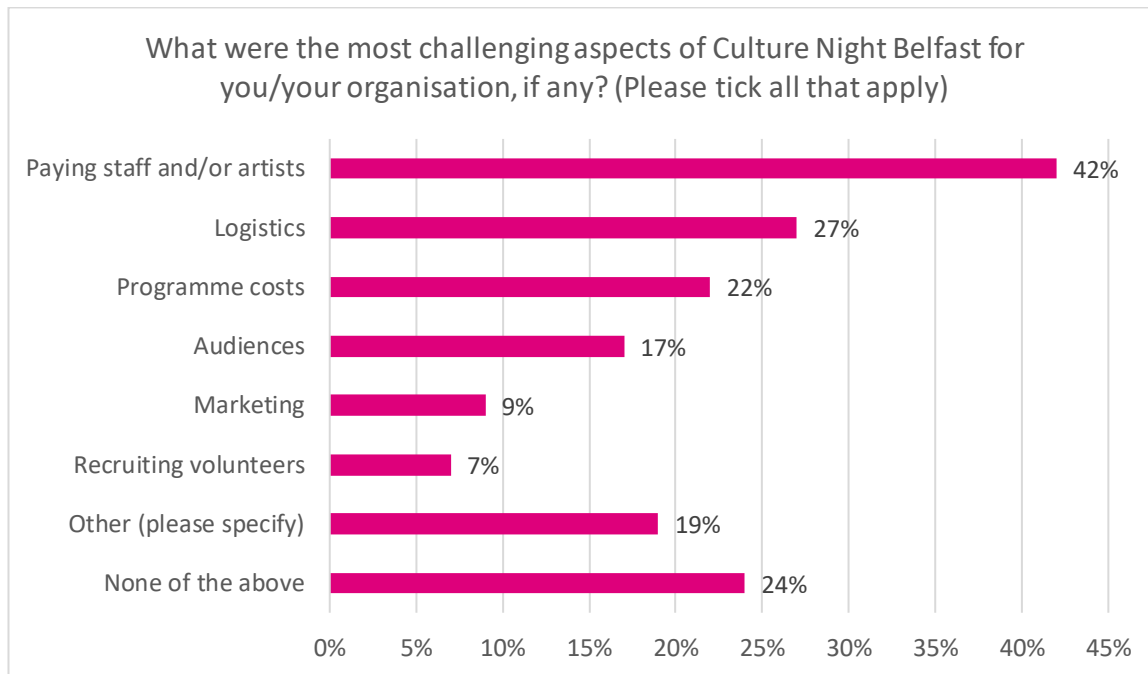
- “Culture Sector pulling together”
- “In the early days it was the sense of community and going from place to place and seeing the artistic community of Belfast coming together. In the latter years it was an absolute shambles and I really think it is a bad idea to bring it back. We already have a festival of drinking day on 17th March”
- “The atmosphere in the city, the support in the arts, the ability to create knowing there is a platform for us artists to express ourselves, we need culture night and it’s a great thing for the city”
- “The atmosphere, the opportunity to perform”
- “How inclusive and non-divisive it was. No orange/green.”
- “Feeling a part of something bigger”

New audiences

- “Bringing something different to audiences who knew us or didn’t know us!”
- “People who weren’t usually interested in culture were interested on the night”

Paying people, logistics, and programme costs were the most challenging aspects for the sector

42% of people said the most challenging aspect was paying staff/artists, 27% said it was logistics, and 22% said it was programme costs. Audiences, marketing and recruiting volunteers were selected by fewer people.



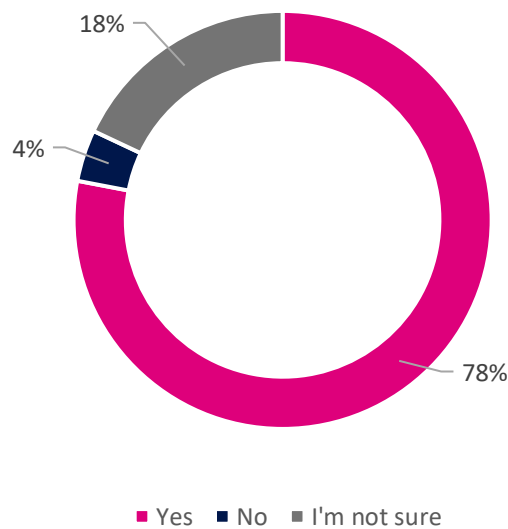
Themes from other responses included:

- Overcrowding and lack of people management
- Lack of support and funding for the arts
- More transparency is needed to enable artists/groups to sign up to perform
- Extra financial challenges for artists
- Atmosphere wasn't ideal, especially in later years

Nearly 8-in-10 want Culture Night to come back

Just 4% said no, and 18% weren't sure.

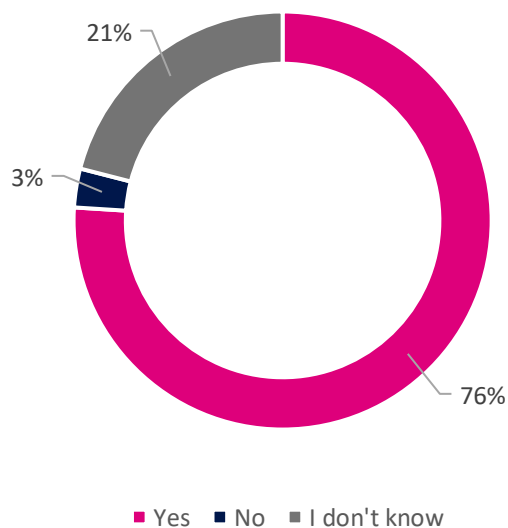
Would you like Culture Night Belfast to come back?



Just over three-quarters would be interested in taking part in the future

76% said they would be interested in taking part, while just 3% said no. 21% said they didn't know if they would participate in Culture Night in the future.

Would you be interested in taking part in Culture Night in the future?



52 people mentioned 'inclusive' and 32 mentioned 'fun.' Other popular words were artist (20), culture (18), funds (17), diverse (15) and vibrant (14).

[illegible]

Other themes centred around being more artist-led, having more funding or support for artists and venues, and better communication so people don't miss events/performances.

If you could change one thing about Culture Night moving forward, what would it be?

Less alcohol and better crowd management/audience safety

- “Less about drinking/clubbing vibes and more about celebrating the arts and culture.”
- “It felt crazy busy at points, claustrophobic and not comfortable especially in some of the later years.”
- “The very alcohol fuelled event it became, it just felt as though arts organisations/artists had to self-fund while publicans raked in the money with one of the busiest nights of the year for them, while they didn't financially contribute to help support costs to organisations”
- “More official volunteers to support events and venues like ours, providing more security and ensuring safety as the event progresses into the late hours.”
- “Make it feel safer and easier for all ages to attend.”

Less commercial, more artist-led

- “Less corporations more genuine culture.”
- “Driven by artists, not by tourism”

Better funding/support

- “Financial support for artists and venues”
- “It needs to be funded. It's not fair that arts venues and organisations subsidised commercial businesses like bars making lots of money but received nothing themselves.”
- “All the benefitting businesses contributed into a central pot to specifically pay artists.”

Communication

- “Clearer sign-posting of acts”
- “Interactive mapping, maybe an app. So, people don't miss shows”

Focus groups findings

The focus groups with the cultural sector enabled us to add a qualitative aspect to our research and dig deeper into the survey findings.

General experience of Culture Night

- Initially, participants enjoyed being part of Culture Night, but over time, many reduced their involvement citing issues such as lack of financial support and limited resources as factors in their decision not to participate in later years. Some felt the event's atmosphere shifted, becoming more focused on alcohol and crowds rather than cultural engagement.
- A recurring concern was the growing commercialisation of the event. As sponsorships increased, the event moved away from its artistic roots. Participants noted how overcrowding in the Cathedral Quarter, particularly later in the evening, created safety issues and hindered cultural participation.
- It was felt the increasing focus on alcohol led the event to become more centred on nightlife rather than arts and culture. This made it difficult for families and those seeking quieter, cultural

experiences to enjoy the event. Many suggested a daytime focus to cater to a broader, more family-oriented audience.

Funding

- A significant concern was the inadequate compensation for artists. Many artists volunteered their time and talent, while the hospitality sector profited from the crowds without contributing to the event's artistic integrity. There was strong support for ensuring that all artists are paid fairly. Some suggested the involvement of local businesses, either contributing financially through sponsorships or small levies.
- Venues and producers often said they didn't benefit from being involved in Culture Night. This was the reason why many of them stopped taking part in the later years as the event focused less on culture. For venues who didn't have a bar or café on their premises, most of them said they operated at a loss. Producers tended to not receive any financial support or payment for their work. Both ensured all artists they worked with during Culture Night were paid, often at the expense of their own stability.
- Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the commercial sponsorship model, suggesting that sponsors should align with the event's cultural ethos rather than solely seeking profit. Some proposed that businesses sponsor specific cultural activities to ensure financial contributions directly benefit the artists.

Challenges

- The growing scale of the event led to logistical and safety concerns. Overcrowding in the Cathedral Quarter and difficult crowd control were major challenges. Participants proposed spreading the event across different areas of Belfast to alleviate these issues and make the event more inclusive and accessible.
- There was strong support for making the event more accessible to diverse communities, including families, people with disabilities, and those from lower-income backgrounds. Better transport options were suggested, such as subsidised or free transport, to ensure the event is inclusive for all.
- Many participants felt that communication between organisers and venues had diminished over the years. A more collaborative approach, where artists and venues are better supported and involved in planning, was seen as key to restoring the event's original spirit.

The future of Culture Night

- Participants agreed that the event should return to its roots as a celebration of the local artists and organisations. There were concerns that the event had moved too far into commercial interests, which risked diluting its cultural value.
- Several participants felt that planning for 2025 was unrealistic, with concerns about the event's scale and the time required to organise it. Many suggested a more gradual, smaller-scale event in 2025, with a focus on thoughtful planning and a return to the event's original cultural purpose by 2026.
- Better event organisation and clearer scheduling were identified as key to improving the experience for both participants and attendees. Suggestions included creating designated zones for different types of cultural activities and ensuring they were spread across the city to reduce overcrowding.
- While participants recognised the importance of financial support from Belfast City Council, many felt the Council should not take over the planning of the event. There was a consensus that the Council should play a supportive role, helping to fund the event without prescribing the creativity and innovation of the arts organisations involved.

Consultation with audiences

Our engagement with members of the public was delivered through a series of focus groups. With these conversations, we wanted to learn more about people's experience of Culture Night, what the purpose of Culture Night is and what they would like Culture Night to be in the future.

To recruit participants, we developed a screener survey that included demographic questions around age, gender, children in the household, disability and access requirements. We advertised the opportunity alongside the screener survey via the following channels:

- **Thrive's Audience Panel mailing list:** In 2021, we partnered with Belfast City Council to run a year-long Audience Panel. This panel received monthly short surveys and took part in regular focus groups around various elements of relationship building. This mailing list currently has 60 members who are keen to contribute to further research.
- **Thrive and Daisy Chain Inc's social media channels,** including Facebook, X, LinkedIn and Instagram
- **Sponsored post on Facebook** targeting adults living in Belfast

In total, we received 34 registrations.

Two focus groups were held on 18th and 19th February 2025, in University of Atypical in Belfast. We spoke to 15 participants, including 10 women and 5 men. Age groups varied, from 35 to 74 years old.

Findings

People's experience of Culture Night

Attendance and engagement:

- **Attendance of Culture Night throughout the years varied.** Most participants went every year, and some went occasionally. However, a majority said they stopped going in the later years because of overcrowding. Some said they couldn't get to the events or performances they wanted to see, others said they attended with family members with mobility issues who could not get through the crowd.
- **Planning vs. spontaneity:** Some planned ahead, while others just wandered and explored events spontaneously.

- **Culture Day:** Most didn't attend and weren't aware of Culture Day in 2019. Those who went had children and enjoyed it because it was less crowded than Culture Night.

What they liked about Culture Night:

- **Diversity:** Focus groups attendees enjoyed that Culture Night was a non-denominational and non-political event that was welcoming to all. Those who had been attending the event since the very beginning noticed how audiences changed throughout the years and became more diverse. This is something they remember fondly about Culture Night.
- **Variety of events and venues:** Culture Night was an opportunity to visit spaces they never went to before and experience art forms they wouldn't have been familiar with.

What they didn't like about Culture Night:

- **Overcrowding:** A common complaint was that Culture Night had become too crowded over the years, making it less enjoyable. Several participants mentioned it had lost its original charm, and became alcohol fuelled.
- **Accessibility and safety concerns:** Issues with accessibility were raised, particularly for individuals with mobility challenges and parents with prams.
- **Cultural vs. Commercial:** The shift from celebrating culture to a more commercial event in the later years (with a strong focus on alcohol and bars) was a common critique.

People's perceptions of Culture Night

- **Missing Culture Night:** All focus groups participants agreed they missed Culture Night and want to see it back in Belfast.
- **Purpose of Culture Night:** Culture Night was perceived by participants as being a celebration of culture, local artists and spaces. It is an event where arts is accessible to all and an opportunity for people to discover and try something new.

The future of Culture Night

Logistics and planning:

- **Geographic spread:** When asked about expanding Culture Night to different parts of the city, many preferred staying within the city centre for convenience, especially for public transport and avoiding travel hassles. However, there was a desire to see the event spread out across a broader area of the city centre, further out than just Cathedral Quarter.
- **Event locations:** Similarly, some areas felt too crowded, while others were empty. Participants suggested to introduce a better balance of event locations, on-street and in-venue events.
- **Extended hours/weekend format:** Participants discussed spreading out the event over a weekend to tackle overcrowding and reduce pressure on a single evening. While some agreed this could be a solution, others thought it would segregate different types of audiences to different days, when the purpose of Culture Night is to be accessible to all.
- **Stewards:** Stewards were noted as not being as visible in later years, which made it harder to navigate the event and feel safe in the crowd. Suggestions were made to introduce stewards to manage crowd control and direct people to events.

Accessibility:

- **Public transport:** The group expressed frustration with Belfast's public transport system, particularly the lack of reliable service, which has deterred people from attending other events in the city. They highlighted the importance of good transport options and Late Night services to encourage participation in Culture Night.
- **Improving facilities:** A lack of toilets, accessible bathrooms and clear signage were raised as issues that should be tackled in the future.
- **Costs:** Although Culture Night is free, there are still costs for attendees such as transport, food or drinks. Some members expressed concern about rising costs, particularly in terms of food vendors at events, and suggested efforts to make it more affordable and inclusive.

Audience experience:

- **Cultural focus:** Audiences we talked to want to see the broad range of events and art forms back with Culture Night, without the commercial focus on inappropriate sponsors, bars and alcohol. They also want a printed programme to plan their Culture Night experience ahead of the event.

- **More family-friendly:** Several members felt that Culture Night had started as a family-friendly event, but this had diminished over time due to overcrowding and a more adult-focused atmosphere. There was a call to bring back family-oriented aspects to the night's programme, with better planning and structure considered of where family friendly events should take place along the route. However, it is important to note that some participants were adamant that family-friendly events should not be physically separated from the rest of the programme. All areas should be welcoming to all.

Consultation with funders

A conversation was held on 5th March with previous and potential funders and stakeholders for Culture Night Belfast. Attendees included representatives of Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Tourism NI, Arts & Business NI and the city's Business Improvement Districts (Belfast One, Destination CQ and Linen Quarter BID).

The purpose of this meeting was to capture attendees' understanding of the purpose of Culture Night, their current funding priorities, and their likelihood of funding Culture Night Belfast in the future.

Findings

The purpose of Culture Night:

- Attendees' opinions aligned with the arts sector and audiences. For them, Culture Night offers a unique way to experience the city, with buildings and venues typically closed to the public being opened for the event. The event is an opportunity to showcase local arts and venues, providing a free, celebratory experience for the public, with the hope that attendees will return to these venues in the future. It is perceived as an event that boosts civic pride, encourages inventiveness, and gives audiences a sense of discovery.
- Some attendees were more interested in tourism. For them, Culture Night can have the potential to attract tourists, as September – when Culture Night is typically held – is an extension of the city's tourism season. They thought Culture Night can encourage tourists to stay, spend, and explore the city.

Current priorities:

- Arts Council of Northern Ireland no longer has the funding streams which would previously have supported CNB. The only way for ACNI to contribute to funding Culture Night would be through their National Lottery Project Funding scheme. However, this is an extremely competitive scheme which is consistently oversubscribed. Many NI organisations who don't receive annual funding from the arts council would turn to this fund to meet their needs. The National Lottery Project Funding is aimed to assist organisations to deliver innovative and original arts projects that involve children, young people, older people or disabled people, with a preference for projects taking place in rural areas.
- For BIDs, it is about prioritising experiences that attract people to live and work in the city, more specifically in the areas they are representing. They want to emphasise safety, a family-friendly atmosphere and make the city feel like home. As members of the Purple Flag steering group, they

are working on improving the city's evening offerings, focusing on safety and inclusivity, including a push for non-alcoholic options.

- Tourism NI are currently reviewing their funding schemes.

Likelihood of funding Culture Night Belfast in the future:

- Funding for Culture Night remains constrained, with Belfast City Council unlikely to increase its contribution. Although no attendee said they would fund Culture Night in the future, it remained clear during the conversation that investing in Culture Night is not just about one night in the calendar year but a long-term commitment that could fit some of the attendees' priorities.
- Destination CQ in particular consulted local businesses in Cathedral Quarter and said 99% wanted Culture Night back. They added that many businesses in CQ do not want their area to 'become another Temple Bar' and are supporting more and more family-friendly initiatives and experiences.

Though participants agree on the purpose of Culture Night at a personal level, their priorities as potential funders do not always align with the event.

There is concern over measuring success by growth in visitor numbers and economic impact. When CNB was still running, the growth in audience numbers and accompanying increased costs to ensure safety was not matched by an increase in funding by stakeholders. This then resulted in the need to fill the growing hole in the budget with income from other sources – notably sponsorship and Trusts and Foundations. Increasing the number of stakeholders and sponsors diluted the spirit of the event and the sense from audiences that it became too commercial.

The success of Culture Night in the future has to be measured against the agreed purpose, not only on numbers and ancillary spend. For Culture Night to remain loyal to its purpose and survive in the long-term, it is necessary that the ideology of its funders or sponsors aligns with its own.

Recommendations

Purpose of Culture Night

Any return of Culture Night Belfast must be done with eyes firmly fixed on the core ideological pillars that inspired the creation of the event in the first place:

- Celebrating the diverse arts, culture and heritage ecosystem in Belfast and its connection with the people of this place - including venues, organisations and individuals.
- Giving the opportunity to audiences to visit places and experience culture they may not have encountered before, for free.
- Being inclusive and accessible to all, thus welcoming all kinds of audiences, regardless of age, disability, socioeconomic status or community background.

We have outlined short-term and long-term recommendations for the event below:

- Short-term recommendations focus on what is required for Culture Night to happen in 2025.
- Long-term recommendations concentrate on the durability of the event beyond 2025.

Short-term recommendations

2025

- A small event is deliverable in 2025. With the timeline available, it should be limited to venue-based events. Additionally, street-based events should not be included in the programme.
- It is essential that the creative sector and not the hospitality sector are the focus. Bars will need to be supportive and get involved, but equally they must be seen to be buying into the ideology of the event, not just about their own profit.
- Given the timeframe for a 2025 event, there is a risk that some organisations and artists won't be able to take part as their programme and schedule for the year are already set. However, it is important that they do not feel obligated to participate. The message that not everyone has to take part should be reinforced.

How can Belfast City Council support this

- Cathedral Quarter BID and others in the cultural sector have engaged with the Ireland-wide Culture Night umbrella and are committed to reviving the event in 2025 with or without BCC. However, without BCC's funding contribution, they will not have the resources required to deliver the event on any scale. There are also dangers in delivering an event that is adjacent to CNB but not CNB, as it could damage the event's reputation further and key relationships needed for its delivery and development. It is important that Belfast City Council is involved in these conversations, to support existing initiatives to revive the event, rather than act in silo.
- While not a recommended approach for future years, we recognise that a procurement process is the only approach for 2025. However, this procurement exercise should take into account that, as well as large-scale event management skills and strong health and safety knowledge, what is being sought is not simply a service but a nuanced understanding of the event and its stakeholders. The skills and requirements for a 2025 provider should include:
 - Large-scale event management skills and curation of such events,
 - Knowledge of the cultural sector, including funded and non-funded organisations, freelance, artists, libraries and heritage, as well as strong existing relationships with the sector across the city. It should be somebody/a team made of people of the cultural sector, who share the values and ethos of the event, to inspire trust.
 - Marketing resources appropriate for an event of this scale,
 - The successful appointee will be required to lay the foundation for 2026 and create an independent committee, as referred to in the Governance section of these recommendations.
- Other aspects mentioned in the long-term recommendations should be taken into consideration as part of the procurement process, when possible to deliver within the short timescale for 2025. These include the event's delivery model, safety and marketing.

Long-term recommendations

Governance

- Culture Night Belfast should be led by an independent body that shares the values and ethos of the event highlighted in this report and in the previous recommendations. We recognise this is not achievable for the 2025 event but should be explored for future iterations.
- We do not recommend for this independent body to be an existing organisation. The context and challenges that the cultural sector faces would prevent any existing organisation from dedicating its time and resources fully to Culture Night.

- Given CNB's scale and significance, a steering committee is appropriate to ensure the event remains true to its core values in the future. This committee should include and represent Belfast's arts and culture sector in majority.
- Like existing forums within Belfast City Council, such as Belfast Visual Arts Forum or Festivals Forum, this steering committee could also include representatives from Belfast City Council. Belfast City Council has a role in supporting and enabling the event to exist and flourish. However, if the cultural sector is truly to be at the core of Culture Night, Belfast City Council should not act as a curator nor as an event manager of the event. Its sole roles are as a supporter and a funder.
- This newly constituted entity should lead on programming, curation and fundraising.

Delivery model

- We recommend Culture Night Belfast to return with a Receiving House model. This means each organisation or artist that will take part in CNB will programme their own event, pay for it and submit it to the central organising body for inclusion in the programme.
- This delivery model will still require a strong, creative, curatorial approach, to ensure:
 - The cultural sector stays on the front stage,
 - There is a diverse representation of art forms,
 - Organisations and artists can avail of support from the organiser if required,
 - Events are located and scheduled appropriately to avoid crowding.
- We recommend that the delivery organisation have a programming budget to support artists AND venues who may not be able to take part in Culture Night without it. There are various ways to allocate this budget such as first-come/first-served, flat fee for everyone, venues with a bar/café are not entitled to financial support, etc.
- Belfast City Council may also want to explore alternative ways to engage in some curatorial funding to support creatives to deliver content for the event. However, there is a fine line between distributing funding and curating. It is therefore important to communicate how decisions will be made.
- In the past, large-scale outdoor events organised as part of Culture Night required a large chunk of the overall budget for the event. As audiences preferred exploring smaller events, we recommend not re-introducing this type of event in the future so its budget could be re-allocated

to support the sector in delivering Culture Night instead. This approach could also be successful at spreading audiences more evenly and safely across the site.

- To ensure artists are paid for submitted events, organisations will be required to show how they will pay artists in order to be part of the programme.

Funding and sponsorship

- What an event is and how it is delivered is often guided by its funder(s). For this reason, a value-led approach should be undertaken when it comes to funding the event. This is so funding does not impact on the event negatively, like it did in the past.
- There is a correlation between the amount of corporate sponsorship for CNB and levels of dissatisfaction from sector and audiences. Future corporate relationships need carefully managed and rejected if not in line with the event's priorities.
- In terms of its funding, Culture Night should not be treated like any other festival. As a matter of fact, Culture Night is not a festival and sits outside of festival funding schemes. It is rather a sector development initiative.

Event safety

- As already mentioned above, a curatorial approach is not just about programming but also about managing people flow around a site and ensuring safety. As part of a procurement process, health and safety should be a mandatory tender requirement.
- To manage crowds, we recommend that the scale of the event is expanded across the city instead of focused in Cathedral Quarter. Given the volume of cultural organisations in CQ, it may still prove difficult, but this is nonetheless something that should be explored. This would also allow organisations located outside of the CQ perimeter to take part.
- However, safe events are costly. The sector and audiences alike demanded for security to be more visible in the future. Budget will need to accommodate that. Another solution would be if Belfast City Council already had a contract for event security, it may be most cost-effective to use this existing resource rather than securing a new supplier.

Marketing and communications

- The messaging around the return of Culture Night will be essential to manage expectations. It will need to focus on what the new Culture Night is and what it is not.

- Any communication will have to emphasise that CNB is not what it used to be anymore, how it has now expanded into other parts of the city and encourage people to explore their own neighbourhoods.
- Although Culture Night has been described by many as an ‘audience development tool’, one night of engagement is not enough to deepen relationships with new audiences. For this reason, Culture Night should not be advertised as such.

Growth and evolution of event after 2025

- It is unlikely CNB to ever return to the scale that it was before, unless drastic changes happen in the broader funding environment. The narrative around what growth and success for CNB looks like needs interrogated. Bigger is not always better.
- Belfast City Council should work with the cultural sector to appoint a delivery body for the event and partner with them going forward to ensure buy in from the sector.
- To echo once again the need for the event to return with the cultural sector at its core, it is important for CNB to come back led from the bottom-up instead of top-down. As well as being the instigator of the event’s return, BCC should support the Belfast cultural sector in delivering Culture Night. This does not mean that BCC should support all organisations or artists in a financial way, but it should:
 - Advocate for the sector to remain the central part of Culture Night,
 - Acknowledge the sector’s needs and challenges,
 - Respond to these needs and challenges when possible.