



<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Culture Night review and recommendations</b>
<b>Date:</b>	09 <sup>th</sup> April 2025
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development
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**Restricted Reports**

**Is this report restricted?**

**Yes**

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**No**

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**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**

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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**

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**Call-in**

**Is the decision eligible for Call-in?**

**Yes**

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**No**

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1.0	<p><b>Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues</b> The purpose of this report is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Update members on sector engagement and recommendations relating to potential delivery and support models for Culture Night 2025 in Belfast and subsequent iterations.</li> <li>• 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</li> </ul>
2.0	<p><b>Recommendation</b> The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Note the contents of the report and Appendix 1 – “<i>Culture Night Sector Engagement and Roadmap for Delivery</i>”</li> <li>• 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</li> </ul>
3.0	<p><b>Main Report</b></p>
3.1	<p><b>Background</b></p> <p>At the City Growth and Regeneration Committee on 10<sup>th</sup> 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 24<sup>th</sup> 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 <b><u>The Culture Night concept</u></b></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"> <li>• The audience for the event has grown exponentially whilst the volume and quality in the programme have not;</li> <li>• The idea that artists could, would or should give their time for free is no longer a viable delivery model;</li> </ul>

- 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

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.

3.6

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 6<sup>th</sup> 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.

3.7

#### Culture Night in other locations

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.

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.

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>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><b><u>Consultation with the cultural sector, audiences and previous funders</u></b></p> <p>Following approval from SP&amp;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"> <li>• What is the purpose of Culture Night and who owns it</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• How the cultural sector and audiences experienced Culture Night in Belfast and what they want it to become in the future</li> <li>• What past and potential funders' priorities and any likelihood of funding the event in the future</li> </ul>
3.10	<p>To find out the above, they carried out the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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</li> <li>• 1x one-to-one interview with Dublin City Council</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• A survey aimed at the cultural sector, including artists, venues and producers</li> <li>• 3x focus groups with members of the cultural sector in Belfast</li> <li>• 2x focus groups with audiences</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A consultation with past and potential funders, including Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Tourism NI, Arts &amp; Business NI and the city’s Business Improvement Districts</li> </ul> <p>An online survey was administered in February 2025 and 938 responses were collected. This included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 203 sector participants (including venues, artists, producers, libraries, and heritage places who participated in CNB before)</li> <li>• 735 non-participating sector organisations and audiences (people who attended CNB but didn’t participate)</li> </ul> <p>3.11 Key findings from the survey include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 78% of respondents said they want Culture Night to come back, with just 4% saying no and 18% weren’t sure</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• Most people mentioned wanting less alcohol and better crowd management</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.’</li> <li>• A quarter of respondents weren’t able to pay artists involved in their CNB programme</li> <li>• Paying people, logistics, and programme costs were the most challenging aspects for the sector</li> </ul> <p>The full report, which includes qualitative feedback from focus groups and funders, is detailed in appendix one of this report.</p> <p>3.12 <b><u>Key findings and recommendations from the report</u></b></p> <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>3.13 <b><u>Purpose and ideology</u></b></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>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrating the diverse arts, culture and heritage ecosystem in Belfast and its connection with the people of this place - including venues, organisations and individuals.</li> <li>• Giving the opportunity to audiences to visit places and experience culture they may not have encountered before, for free.</li> <li>• Being inclusive and accessible to all, thus welcoming all kinds of audiences, regardless of age, disability, socioeconomic status or community background.</li> </ul>
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"> <li>• Whilst a smaller event is deliverable in 2025, with the timeline available, it should be limited to venue-based events.</li> <li>• Additionally, street-based events should not be included in the programme.</li> <li>• It is essential that the creative sector are the main focus.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>
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"> <li>○ Large-scale event management skills and curation of such events,</li> <li>○ 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.</li> <li>○ Marketing resources appropriate for an event of this scale.</li> <li>○ 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.</li> <li>○ Other aspects mentioned in the long-term recommendations should be taken into consideration as part of the procurement process, when possible to</li> </ul>

	<p>deliver within the short timescale for 2025. These include the event's delivery model, safety and marketing.</p>
3.16	<p><b><u>Long-term recommendations</u></b></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><b><u>Governance</u></b></p> <p>On governance for future events post 2025, the report recommends that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• This newly constituted entity should lead on programming, curation and fundraising.</li> </ul>
3.18	<p><b><u>Delivery model</u></b></p> <p>On delivery, the report recommends that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• Events are located and scheduled appropriately to avoid crowding.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>
3.19	<p><b><u>Funding and sponsorship</u></b></p> <p>The report recommends the following approach to funding and sponsorship of the event:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a value-led approach should be undertaken when it comes to funding the event.</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future corporate relationships need carefully managed and rejected if not in line with the event's priorities.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>
3.20	<p><b><u>Event safety</u></b></p> <p>To ensure future events are safe, the report recommends that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As part of a procurement process, health and safety should be a mandatory tender requirement.</li> <li>• that the scale of the event is expanded across the city instead of focused in Cathedral Quarter.</li> <li>• Sufficient budget will be needed to ensure the security to be more visible as the event grows</li> </ul>
3.21	<p><b><u>Marketing and communications</u></b></p> <p>On messaging and communications relating to the event, the report states that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>
3.22	<p><b><u>Risks and challenges</u></b></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"> <li>• The potential of a lack of suitable responses or suppliers to the public procurement exercise</li> <li>• 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 19<sup>th</sup> September 2025</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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</li> <li>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.</li> </ul>
3.23	<p><b><u>Recommended approach for 2025</u></b></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><b><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></b></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><b><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></b></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>
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Appendices - Documents Attached</b>
	Appendix 1 - Culture Night Sector Engagement and Roadmap for Delivery