



<b>Subject:</b>	<b><u>A City Imagining Investment Programme: Cultural multi-annual grants</u></b>
<b>Date:</b>	04 June 2025
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Chris McCreery – Cultural Development Manager

**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**

☐

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**

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**No**

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<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues</b>
1.1	<p>The purpose of this report is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Update Members on the investment programme that supports the cultural strategy, <i>A City Imagining 2020-2030</i>.</li> <li>– Seek approval for the opening of the cultural multi-annual two-year scheme in August 2025 for funding from 1 April 2026 – 31 March 2028.</li> </ul>
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	<p>It is recommended that Members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Note the contents of this report and agree to open cultural multi-annual grants in August 2025 for Arts and Heritage organisations and Events and Festivals for funding from 1 April 2026 and 31 March 2028 subject to final recommendations being agreed by Committee in February 2026.</li> </ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main report</b>
3.1	<p><b>Background to Cultural multi-annual grants (CMAG)</b></p> <p>At a meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee on 28 August 2019, a new ten-year cultural strategy for Belfast, <i>A City Imagining</i>, was agreed. As part of this strategy a new investment approach was approved including phased implementation of new funding programmes. Similar to the Belfast Agenda, the recommended investment model for culture proposed a new partnership approach to supporting the cultural sector, with the aim of sustaining and developing accessible cultural activity and infrastructure across Belfast. This investment is central to creating positive cultural, social and economic impacts for the city, delivering on our overall targets for the period, positioning Belfast as a regional driver, and creating the conditions for long-term transformation.</p>
3.2	<p>As included in the strategy, the aims of the cultural investment model are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- support the cultural life of the city by enabling citizens to be active, dynamic and creative agents of change</li> <li>- invest in the cultural and creative sectors skills development and capacity for production and innovation</li> <li>- position Belfast as an international testing ground for new approaches to cultural engagement, development and placemaking</li> <li>- establish Belfast as a cultural destination.</li> </ul>

3.3	<p>The first phased implementation of the cultural investment model commenced with the opening of a competitive funding programme for cultural multi-annual grants for the period April 2020 to March 2024. It was agreed that these multi-annual grants would cover two main areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Arts and heritage organisations, which have a year-round programme of cultural activity (<i>Anchor</i> four-year grants and <i>Enable</i> two-year grants)</li> <li>- Festivals and events organisations, which have a festival or event with an audience of 65,000 or more (<i>Imagine</i> four-year grants), or an audience of 10,000 or more (<i>Activate</i> two-year grants) by end of grant period.</li> </ul>
3.4	<p>These two strands of funding, Arts and Heritage and Festivals and Events, each with two tiers of investment available (two-year and four-year) replaced previous core multi-annual funding for arts and heritage and previous one-off funding agreements to events and festivals awarded on an annual basis via the Committee process.</p>
3.5	<p>The Arts and Heritage strand of funding is similar to and replaced the established core multi annual funding first implemented in 2013. It was designed to sustain our existing cultural offer covering both programmes and infrastructure. The Festivals and Events strand of funding was a new element and was designed to develop large events and festivals that will help Belfast become a year-round events destination. Furthermore it created a transparent and open process in line with the arts and heritage funding process.</p>
3.6	<p><b>Plans and process for launch of Cultural multi-annual funding</b></p> <p>In advance of the new financial year in April 2026, it is planned to launch CMAG in August 2025 with approval of awards and contracts by March 2026. A summary of this timeline is included below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open call for application submissions - August 2025</li> <li>• Information sessions for applicants - August 2025</li> <li>• Submission deadline for application – October 2025</li> <li>• Eligibility check, scoring, officer assessment and independent assessment – Oct to Jan 2026</li> <li>• Committee Approval of awards - February 2026</li> <li>• Council Ratification approval of awards – March 2026</li> </ul>

3.7	<p>Similar to other grants, Cultural Multi-Annual Grants will be advertised widely. This will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information and application details emailed directly to a GDPR compliant mailing list representing over 370 organisations from across the cultural and creative sectors.</li> <li>• Information shared with sectoral networks, websites and socials including the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Community Arts Partnership.</li> <li>• Promotion through Council communication channels</li> <li>• Three information sessions and one-to-one meetings held in advance of the deadline.</li> </ul>
3.8	<p><u>Criteria for Decision making</u></p> <p>Assessments will be made, and scoring applied under three key areas of criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Quality of programme: this includes their vision, content, audience experience and marketing and audience development.</li> <li>- Impact of activity: this includes how the programme contributes to the four strategic themes (A City Belonging, A City Challenging, A City Creating and A City Exploring) and how they will monitor and evaluate that impact.</li> <li>- Readiness for investment: this includes planning, financial management, staff, governance, and environmental impact.</li> </ul> <p>Assessments will be made only based on information supplied by the applicant within their submission. This will include the application form and supporting documentation such as business plans and strategies.</p>
3.9	<p><u>Principles of the Assessment Process</u></p> <p>Applications are received and eligibility checked by the Central Grants Unit before being passed to officers for scoring. Officers undertake a thorough assessment of all eligible applications. Applications and assessments are discussed and agreed at an internal moderation panel. An independent assessment panel co-ordinated by Central Grants Unit and chaired by a Senior Managers is then convened. The role of this assessment panel is 'to ensure that the scoring of applications has been undertaken in an appropriate fashion and to provide verification or validation of sampled applications and the overall process'.</p>

3.10	<p><u>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</u></p> <p>There are currently no financial implications to this report. Funding relating to Cultural Multi Annual Grants will be met from the recurrent budget for Cultural Development subject to Committee approval and confirmation of departmental budgets for 2026-27. Payments and costs won't be incurred until the new financial year.</p>
3.11	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>The cultural strategy, A City Imagining 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>