



Subject:	Music Strategy and UNESCO City of Music update
Date:	4 June 2025
Reporting Officer:	Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Chris McCreery, Culture 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

<input type="checkbox"/>
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Call-in

Yes

☒

No

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Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	
1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues
1.1	The purpose of this report is to update members on the work relating to the UNESCO City of Music designation and seek approval of the 25/26 workplan related to the music strategy.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the contents of this report and the progress made against areas of the music strategy, “Music Matters: A Roadmap for Belfast” • Agree the actions for 2025/26 as set out in the report and in Appendix 1 including budget implications to be met from existing departmental budgets
3.0	Main Report
3.1	<p>At a meeting of City Growth and Regeneration Committee in December 2022, members agreed the “Music Matters: A Roadmap for Belfast”. Mirroring A City Imagining cultural strategy the music strategy has four strategic themes, each having four strategic priorities. There are a number of actions and recommendations for each priority addressing various areas of need across the music sector, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme 1: Place artists at the heart - Recognising the value of creators • Theme 2: Nurture the sector - Strengthening the structures to support those who guide and invest in creators • Theme 3: Ignite the live experience - Liberating the live music sector as a major catalyst for cultural and economic growth • Theme 4: Unlock the unifying power of UNESCO – Connecting Belfast internationally
3.2	Detail on the substantive progress against each of these initiatives in 2024/25 is detailed in Appendix 3.
3.3	<p>The rest of this paper speaks to workplan proposals for 2025/26</p> <p><u>The Belfast Music Board</u></p> <p>The Music Strategy recommended establishing a Belfast Region Music Board to oversee the roadmap's implementation. Appointed in April 2023, the board comprises 22 members from diverse backgrounds and has co designed initiatives under the core themes of the strategy.</p> <p><u>Theme 1 - Placing Artists at the Heart</u></p>
3.4	A range of programmes under this theme are recommended. Highlights include the continuation of:

3.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Output Belfast - Delivered as a key event within the City of Music programme, the conference is due to take place on 25th September, features a full programme of panels, workshops and conferences, followed by an evening showcase of live music for free to the public. • Micro Bursaries scheme - This programme provides up to £1,000 to individual musicians, to assist with costs incurred within their artform. In 2023 and 2024, this programme was delivered in Collaboration with Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, through enhancing their existing bursary programme to include a music micro-bursary. 38 musicians have received support to date • Gradam Ceoil bursary scheme - Running since 2021, the Gradam Ceoil Bursary Scheme is a series of three annual awards awarded to young (18–25-year-old) traditional musicians in Belfast, in partnership with Duncairn Arts Centre, Red Shoe productions and TG4. • Health and wellbeing - In 2023/24, officials have worked on a range of partnerships with key organisations such as the Music Leaders Network to co-design practical wellbeing events and initiatives focusing on the physical and mental health of music creators. This has manifested as a number of practical schemes, including a pilot programme with NI Alternatives entitled “Fit to March” which launched in September 2024. • Music Industry sessions - In 2024/25, officials delivered 6 industry free industry sessions for musicians. Proposed events thus far include focuses on women in sound design, managing your vocal health, radio plugging and tour booking. The UNESCO City of Music Hannover have agreed to partner with BCC on these sessions, supplying industry experts from their city for relevant topics.
3.6	<p>A new initiative under this years planning would be to introduce Teenage Kicks: Youth Music Programme</p> <p>The music strategy includes several key commitments aimed at engaging young people in the local music scene. Notably, commitment 1.7 focuses on “ensuring that music activities are accessible in safe spaces for all ages,” while commitment 4.4 seeks to “amplify and encourage the influence of young people within the music sector.” Furthermore, the UNESCO Creative Cities network has embraced the principle of “Bringing youth to the table for the next decade” as a core commitment during the UNESCO 2024 Annual General Meeting.</p>

	<p>To fulfil these commitments, we propose the development of a pilot youth music program specifically designed for individuals under 18. This initiative aims to boost attendance and raise awareness of music events among young people in the city. By hosting concerts across a variety of venues, we will showcase the diversity of Belfast's music scene and cultivate a vibrant community of young audiences. Additionally, the program will foster sector engagement through the introduction of micro-grants (up to £2,000) available to promoters, venues, and festivals, enabling them to organize high-quality music events tailored for under-18s in Belfast.</p>
3.7	<p>NI Music Prize/Sound of Belfast</p> <p>At the City Growth and Regeneration Committee meeting on September 13, 2023, members agreed to support an independent review of the NI Music Prize and Sound of Belfast. Assessing alignment with the music strategy and potential for a long-term strategic partnership, with associated resources. It involved consultations with peers and benchmarking against similar events nationally and internationally, resulting in a series of recommendations that form a roadmap for development. The findings of this review are detailed in Appendix 2 of this report</p>
3.8	<p>The Northern Ireland Music Prize honours and celebrates the best of new, established, and emerging Northern Irish music, serving as a key event for Belfast and its UNESCO City of Music status. Organized annually by the Oh Yeah Music Centre, the awards night takes place at the Ulster Hall during the Sound of Belfast Festival, reflecting similar efforts in other regions of the UK and Ireland.</p>
3.9	<p>It is a significant milestone for Belfast, acting as a regional driver for the music industry in Northern Ireland. Belfast City Council is the primary funder of both the NI Music Prize and the Sound of Belfast programme. In 2023, the £30,000 funding from Belfast City Council was allocated to support the NI Music Prize, increasing to £45,000 in 2024, marking the first time it was shared between both Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize. The additional £15,000 allowed Oh Yeah to enhance its marketing efforts (£5,000) and cover rising travel and accommodation costs for visiting industry professionals (£10,000), which had significantly increased compared to the previous year. Funding acted as a lever for broader partnerships and investments, including Arts Council NI, BBC, PPL, PRS for Music, Arts & Business, Musicians' Union, Help Musicians, Rio Ferdinand Foundation, PRS Foundation, and others, contribute to this initiative.</p>
3.10	<p>The report recommends that:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belfast City Council support the NI Music Prize and Sound of Belfast through a multi-year agreement, enabling organisers to plan effectively, strengthen delivery, and focus on long-term goals. • Funding be increased to enhance, scale, and strengthen the activities delivered at Sound of Belfast, including the NI Music Prize. • Dedicated marketing and communications campaign to champion artists, promote the events, and engage new audiences with Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize.
3.11	<p>Based on the recommendations from this report and consultation with the Music Board, it is proposed to enter into a three-year multi-year agreement covering the event from 2025 to 2028. While the review suggests an investment of £65,000 per annum, it is important to consider the financial pressures on the music development budget across various themes. Therefore, it is recommended to allocate £55,000 annually to the NI Music Prize and Sound of Belfast, ensuring we can support these initiatives while addressing the broader funding needs across the music sector.</p>
3.12	<p><u>Theme two – Nurture the sector</u></p> <p>A range of initiatives are proposed within this theme with highlights including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sounds Atypical Scheme - The Sounds Atypical Music Grant scheme provides funding for d/Deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent musicians to create accessible music events in various performance spaces across Belfast. This initiative was developed in collaboration with the University of Atypical for Arts and Disability (UofA), a disabled-led organization dedicated to arts and disability. • Music Business Accelerator Programme - partnering with colleagues in Economic Development to develop a Music Business Accelerator Programme tailored to the spectrum of needs within the music industry
3.13	<p><u>Theme 3 - Igniting the Live Experience</u></p> <p>A range of programmes are recommended for 2024/25, highlights including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Partnership with Music Venue Trust - The Music Venue Trust is a UK wide charity which acts to protect, secure and improve Grassroots Music Venues. The organisation has been a key partner during both the formation of the Music Strategy and at implementation stage. • Greening the Sector - we have partnered with Native Events on the creation of a Sustainability Toolkit for the music industry. We have completed Stage One where a

	steering group was formed and a sustainability survey was sent out to the sector to identify needs and priorities.
3.14	<p><u>Theme 4 – Unlocking the unifying power of UNESCO</u></p> <p>Theme 4 of the Music Strategy aims to provide more opportunities for embedding music in all corners and communities of the city and also seeks to position the Belfast City of Music brand on the international stage as a gateway to visitors and investors.</p>
3.15	<p>As part of Belfast’s application and status as a City of Music, member cities are committed to “<i>work internationally with the UNESCO Cities Network to deliver shared music, skills and learning opportunities.</i>”. Between 2023 - 2025, support has been provided for local music creators and industry to undertake international exchanges with other UNESCO Cities of Music such as Kansas City, USA, Hannover, Germany, Brno, Czech Republic, and London, Ontario Canada. In addition, a partnership with the Belfast International Arts Festival has provided a platform for a special UNESCO day each year featuring acts from other UNESCO cities at the Festival. It is proposed to continue this partnership with the Belfast International Arts Festival through hosting a UNESCO City of Music day in November 2025, featuring musicians from Daegu, Korea.</p>
3.16	<p>As well as collaboration between cities, UNESCO Member cities are also expected to take part in official UNESCO events, including the annual UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) conference and UNESCO Music subnetwork meetings. The UCCN Annual Conference, a key component of the Network, offers all member cities a unique platform for dialogue and cooperation which has led to the establishment of long-term, impactful international partnerships and initiatives. Attendance at this AGM is a mandatory requirement for creative cities and officials from the Culture Development team will attend this two-day event scheduled on 24th and 25th June at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, France.</p>
3.17	<p>UNESCO monitoring and evaluation</p> <p>It is important to note that 2025 will mark four years since Belfast was awarded the title of UNESCO City of Music. As part of this year, Belfast City Council has to complete and submit its Membership Monitoring Report highlighting each Creative Cities’ contribution to UCCN’s implementation. This report is mandatory for member cities every four years and will require a detailed analysis of progress against commitments in the music strategy alongside a plan and</p>

<p>3.18</p> <p>3.19</p>	<p>budget for the following four years. Officials are actively working on this report which is due for submission in July 2025.</p> <p><u>Finance and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>There are no new financial implications. The activities outlined in this report will be resourced from the 2025/26 budget from existing departmental budgets allocated to music development for the Culture and Tourism section of the Economic Development division of the Place and Economy.</p> <p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>The cultural strategy, <i>A City Imagining</i> and the Music Matters Music Strategy have both 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>
<p>4.0</p>	<p>Appendices</p>
	<p>Appendix 1 - Music Workplan 2025-26</p> <p>Appendix 2 - Strategic review of Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize</p> <p>Appendix 3 – Update on progress against 2024/25 Music Workplan</p>