

Strategic review of Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize

Final report and recommendations



Researched and presented by Fourth Pillar



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1. Introduction

"There are high hopes for what music can do in NI and big ideas on how to make it happen."
- Charlotte Dryden, CEO, Oh Yeah Music Centre

In April 2024, following a competitive tender process, Belfast City Council appointed Fourth Pillar to undertake a strategic review of the *Sound of Belfast* festival and the *NI Music Prize*. These flagship events are cornerstones of Belfast's music calendar and hold immense cultural and economic significance for Northern Ireland (NI).

This review builds upon the Council's earlier initiatives to support the city's music sector, most notably its *Music Matters* strategy. Developed by Fourth Pillar in collaboration with Morgan Young Consulting and ScoreDrawMusic, *Music Matters* outlines a comprehensive roadmap to nurture talent, embed music into the fabric of Belfast, and enhance access to musical opportunities across the city. Its publication in November 2021, followed by Belfast's designation as a UNESCO City of Music, marked a pivotal moment for the city's cultural community.

Recognising the potential of Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize to deliver on these strategic objectives, the Council commissioned this review to explore how its support and investment can maximise the impact of these events. The aim of this project is not merely to assess the strengths and challenges of these two important events, but to provide forward-looking recommendations that can help maximise their potential and which align with the Council's cultural vision and UNESCO commitments.

To inform the review's findings, Fourth Pillar conducted an extensive consultation with over 30 key stakeholders. Feedback was sought from local industry representatives as well as artists from various genres and from the organisers of some of the UK and Ireland's leading conferences and awards.

Derived from the insights collated, a series of actionable recommendations are proposed that reflect the value and potential of these much-loved events.

The Council has a clear commitment to placing culture and creativity at the heart of Belfast's development. In line with this, the review aims to ensure that Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize continue to thrive as catalysts for local talent, cultural vibrancy and economic growth, while reinforcing Belfast's standing as a UNESCO City of Music.

2. Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize: the story so far

"The NI Music Prize is a masterclass in organisation; the event outclasses most other industry events in the UK. – Beverly Whitrick, Music Venue Trust

To provide meaningful recommendations for the development of Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize, it is essential to first understand their origins, purpose and evolution. Although the NI Music Prize takes place within the overarching programme of Sound of Belfast, this report considers them as two separate events.

a. About Sound of Belfast

Sound of Belfast began its journey in 2011 as *Belfast Music Week*, an initiative launched by Belfast City Council to coincide with the city hosting the MTV European Music Awards. The Council initially committed to delivering the festival for three years. When this period ended in 2014, the Oh Yeah Music Centre assumed leadership of the citywide festival, recognising its potential as a catalyst for developing the local music sector and ensuring its continuity and growth for the benefit of both Belfast and NI.

Having celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2024, Sound of Belfast has grown into a ten day celebration of musical talent, powered by passion, expertise, and collaboration. The festival is embraced by the local music community, from venues and artists to audiences and local retail and hospitality – all of whom contribute to and benefit from its ecosystem. Its impact resonates across Belfast - North, South, East, West – and beyond, bringing people together in a way that only music can.

Full details on Sound of Belfast 2024 can be viewed via its dedicated website: soundofbelfast.com

b. About the NI Music Prize

The NI Music Prize stands as Northern Ireland's largest annual music event under one roof and the region's only dedicated music awards show. Hosted at the iconic Ulster Hall as part of the Sound of Belfast festival, it brings together 1,000 music fans, media, artists and industry professionals each year to celebrate the rich talent of NI's music scene.

The Prize has expanded over the years to feature seven award categories: Album of The Year, Single of The Year, Live Act of The Year, Video of The Year, BBC Radio Ulster ATL Introducing Award (emerging talent), Outstanding Contribution to Music and the Oh Yeah Legend Award. Recipients of the prestigious Legend Award have included artists and groups from NI such as Paul Brady, Henry McCullough, Ash, The Divine Comedy, Therapy?, Terri Hooley, Snow Patrol and Eric Bell.

The significance of the NI Music Prize extends far beyond the local scene. Nationally and internationally, it highlights the diversity and inclusivity of NI's music landscape, showcasing its broad and eclectic talent to the world. Its growing reputation has inspired other regional awards across the UK and Ireland, firmly placing NI music on the cultural map.

Its growing success has helped to attract a diverse range of respected sponsors and partners including YouTube Music, Shine Promotions, PPL, IMRO, PRS For Music, the Rio Ferdinand Foundation, Destination CQ, Bushmills Irish Whiskey, Arts Council NI, Help Musicians, Tourism NI, Invest NI and BBC Northern Ireland.

For more information on the NI Music Prize, visit nimusicprize.com

c. About the Oh Yeah Music Centre

The Oh Yeah Music Centre, founded in 2007 by a group of music advocates, including Gary Lightbody (Snow Patrol) and Stuart Bailie (author and broadcaster), is the driving force behind Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize. Named after one of Ash's iconic songs, Oh Yeah is a Belfast-based music charity rooted in the belief that music can be a catalyst for positive change in NI.

Based in Belfast's Cathedral Quarter, it supports, develops and celebrates NI music. It combines the verve of the music industry with a programme of social value and has welcomed more than one million people through its doors since opening. In 2024, it became the first NI venue to win the coveted *Music Week Grassroots Venue: Spirit of the Scene* award. It also played a pivotal role in securing Belfast's UNESCO City of Music designation, with its CEO, Charlotte Dryden, appointed as Chair of the Belfast Music Steering Group which led the charge on securing the prestigious international accolade.

In addition to hosting Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize, Oh Yeah's small and dedicated team – supported by part time staff, freelancers and volunteers – manages the following:

- A 300 capacity music venue, NI music exhibition and bus tour
- Talent development and artist showcasing activities
- Youth outreach and skills development programmes
- Music projects for older people
- Facilities including office rentals, a recording studio, performance and rehearsal spaces, and meeting rooms
- Partnerships and advocacy for NI's music sector

Oh Yeah continues to be a cornerstone of NI's music community, combining passion and expertise to amplify its cultural and social impact. Recognising the significant and extensive work undertaken by Oh Yeah, the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Councillor Micky Murray, selected the organisation as one of his four official charities for 2024/25.

To read more about the Oh Yeah Music Centre, visit ohyeahbelfast.com

3. Our approach to the brief

Between June and November 2024, the Fourth Pillar team met with a diverse range of stakeholders (see Appendix 1), including local artists from a variety of genres, industry representatives, and organisers of leading music conferences and awards across the UK and Ireland.

These meetings, each lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, were held both virtually and in person. A member of the Fourth Pillar team travelled to Output Belfast to host additional meetings. We ensured a broad representation of perspectives, considering diversity in genre, ethnicity, and gender.

Additionally, we engaged with the Oh Yeah Music Centre, as the organiser of these two events, and held a two hour workshop with the Belfast Region Music Board to gain further insights into the strategic priorities for these events.

Our aim was to develop a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities for advancing these events and helping them achieve their full potential with additional support from Belfast City Council.

The feedback, which has informed the key areas identified for development and recommendations, is outlined in the following sections.

4. Feedback from local music industry stakeholders

This section presents feedback gathered from local music professionals in Belfast regarding Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize. The overall sentiment is one of deep appreciation and enthusiasm for both events, with strong support for their continued growth and success. Many see these events as vital to the city's music scene and culture, and there is a shared desire to see them flourish.

A major recurring theme that stood out from the feedback is the crucial role Belfast City Council can play in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the two events, particularly through multi-annual funding. This support is seen as essential to providing the stability required to help each one reach its full potential and further cement Belfast's position as a hub for music and creativity.

Key takeaways

- **Financial support: Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize return significant value to Belfast and Northern Ireland, despite being underfunded and under-resourced**

There is strong agreement across this community that both Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize are underfunded and under-resourced. This has been heightened by the increased cost of doing business as well as NI-wide cuts to the Arts sector's funding in recent years.

Industry stakeholders want to see the Oh Yeah team enabled and empowered to deliver the event year on year through a multi-annual funding commitment, giving security and stability. Rather than the same funding conversations taking place every year, which creates uncertainty and is a drain on resources, the frequency of these funding reviews should be reduced to once every three years to allow for planning and growth.

The organisational team behind these large scale events comprises 4 full time staff (including the CEO and Director of Operations), 5 part time staff, 10 contractors and up to 15 volunteers, with Oh Yeah's core staff managing curation, logistics, venue coordination, in house production, marketing, sponsorships and more - on top of their daily responsibilities.

Despite their dedication, minimal funding results in heavy reliance on goodwill to sustain the ambitious citywide programme. Sector professionals recognise the festival's significant demands on such a small and committed team. The team is to be commended for all it does.

A strategic partnership with Belfast City Council, with financial and in-kind benefits, will allow Oh Yeah to grow its team, curate with confidence and plan for the future.

- **Artist support: through a combination of career development and financial rewards for artists, Sound of Belfast / NI Music Prize could help artists smash the glass ceiling and drive breakthrough success for local talent**

Sound of Belfast is an excellent platform for showcasing local talent, while – as also noted by artists later in the review – an NI Music Prize nomination is a badge that artists wear with pride. Nominated acts benefit from social media promotion and a reception on the evening of the awards show. Prize winners receive media attention and often benefit from increased bookings, health and wellness support, and access to funding.

Feedback from the Belfast Region Music Board and industry stakeholders demonstrates an appetite for enhancing this wraparound artist support at both Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize. This could take the form of a meet and greet during the Sound of Belfast for all nominated acts or the opportunity to meet industry professionals / journalists who can open more doors for artists, as well as larger financial rewards for Prize winners and other career development opportunities to help artists build a sustainable career in music.

The Council's support for this type of activity would deliver on the Strategy's core theme of "placing artists at the heart" of its commitments to music.

- **Marketing: the NI Music Prize is one of the region's best kept secrets – we should be shouting about it from the rooftops**

The NI Music Prize has been described as the "jewel in the crown" of Sound of Belfast. It is an incredible resource for music in the city and a veritable stage for showcasing burgeoning talent in this small – but musically renowned – part of the world. However, underresourcing forces the organising team to focus on event delivery over promotion.

The NI Music Prize should be a front page story for local media and resonate beyond the industry. Feedback highlighted the need for a dedicated marketing and communications professional / agency to develop an overarching strategy, with artist outreach and engagement at its core, supporting emerging acts and leveraging success stories from local names such as Hannah Peel, Snow Patrol, Bicep, Foy Vance, Jordan Adetunji and Bronagh Gallagher to raise its profile. High-profile artists advocating for the Prize and Sound of Belfast, equipped with promotional toolkits, could attract greater attention and increase ticket sales.

There is significant potential for the Council to help the Prize build even more muscle and attract more attention from both the music industry and the general public. The Council's

existing machinery of marketing and communications can play an important role in this, in addition to any financial support it can provide to ensure these fantastic flagship music events can be accessed, enjoyed and attended by new audiences.

- **Partnerships and sponsorships: an “all hands on deck” approach to promoting music in Belfast in November would benefit the local economy and wider society**

Each year, Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize attract music fans, tourists and industry stakeholders to the City, many experiencing the city’s vibrant music, culture and hospitality for the first time. Beyond live music, delegates can engage in topical discussions about music and attend educational workshops to develop a career in this exciting business.

The potential to expand on this impact is huge. A collaborative effort involving the Council and its partners – such as Visit Belfast, Tourism NI, Tourism Ireland, UNESCO Cities Network and Belfast’s Sister Cities (e.g. Nashville) – could develop a dedicated music tourism campaign in the autumn (if not all year round).

To aid with the funding and reduce reliance on public funding and ticket sales, the event must also attract more top tier sponsors. The Council can play a role in introducing Oh Yeah to new sponsors from within its business community. Music is an attractive space for employers to step into and the Council can be an important gateway to introducing Oh Yeah to these entities.

5. Feedback from the local artist community

A critical part of this review has been speaking to the local artist community to understand its experience of Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize. This feedback has helped to shape our recommendations on how investment and backing from Belfast City Council could help the event organisers to enhance and build on the measures and initiatives already in place to support career development for creatives. The artists we spoke to included previous winners and nominees of the NI Music Prize, as well as the wider artist community.

Artist feedback demonstrated the strong sense of community fostered by the event as well as the importance of being acknowledged and celebrated by your peers. With artists in NI often feeling “disconnected”, the Prize provides an opportunity to be part of a broader network. It was described as “genuinely special” to win the Prize and it was noted that the Prize does a great job of celebrating NI music and being broadly representative.

The accolade of winning or being nominated is an asset for artists’ bios or promotional materials (such as press releases), helping to elevate a performer to a new level in the eyes of the press or industry stakeholders. The artists we spoke to said that being part of the Prize was incredible; it is gratifying, the sense of community is strong, and it is an accolade that strengthens an artist’s CV.

Key takeaways

- **The Prize as a “pathway”: a request for more wraparound artist support**

Some of those we spoke to explained that whilst it was an incredible experience, being associated with the Prize did not always help to materially progress their career. It was felt that this could be influenced by more wraparound support for those who are nominated or win an award.

For example, the facilitation of industry connections with record labels, broadcasters, digital music services, festival bookers, live agents and industry bodies – not just in Belfast but, importantly, across Ireland, the UK and internationally. This kind of outward facing approach could propel artists to the next stage in their careers beyond Belfast's borders. It was suggested Belfast City Council use Sound of Belfast as an opportunity to host a Music Summit, bringing together professionals and creatives from across the industry to focus on career development, learning and networking.

Reintroducing a streaming partner, like the previous collaboration with YouTube, could further amplify the NI Music Prize's impact. Beyond streaming, partners have the potential to offer career advice to artists and help build meaningful business connections with those based outside NI. Additionally, dedicated funding for travel and accommodation would enable Oh Yeah to invite senior industry representatives as well as UK / international journalists to Belfast, fostering valuable networking opportunities for local talent.

- **Connections and collaborations: facilitating artistic innovation within the community**

Despite the relatively small size of the NI music community, interviewees said it can be isolating and lonely to be an artist in this part of the world. Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize already provide a moment in the calendar for the sector to come together, fostering connections and collaborations for attendees.

On this theme, it was suggested that multiple nominees could perform together at the Prize, providing an opportunity for a bespoke collaboration and giving more nominees the chance to perform to a large audience.

Building upon this, it was suggested by artists, echoing the industry interviewees, that a specific event be organised for all nominees to come together to meet one another. This would provide a more structured opportunity for networking and relationship building.

- **Embracing diversity: recognising and reflecting the strength of the NI music community**

Northern Ireland has a thriving music community. General feedback highlights the positive strides in diversifying Sound of Belfast and NI Music Prize to reflect this, with 2024 involving and showcasing broader representation than ever before across the festival's events, panels, awards nominations and performances. It was noted how passionate and dedicated the Oh Yeah team is to openness, inclusivity and to supporting underrepresented communities, both in professional and personal capacities.

It was said repeatedly that the Prize should not and cannot be "all things to all people" and that it must continue to focus on showcasing the very best in NI music. However, there is a desire to further deepen the commitment of these events to inclusivity, ensuring that more voices, genres and communities feel represented and celebrated.

Feedback stated that more could be done to keep engaging with musicians making music in genres like Soul, Hip Hop, Rap, and RnB as well as those across other ethnicities in NI, showcasing the incredible diaspora who make up the musical fabric of the region. This includes those from the Indian, African and Asian music communities, to ensure the events reflect the growing demographics of the region.

Genre diversity was also a topic of feedback, with electronic music being singled out for its relative absence. The electronic music scene has long been a strength of the NI music scene, with brands like Shine, AVA and Emerge demonstrating its popularity. Despite this, feedback highlights that the genre remains relatively underrepresented in both the Sound of Belfast programme and the NI Music Prize.

Suggestions to address this include introducing a new category for electronic music, which would elevate its status and place it alongside more traditional forms of music. Alternatively, hosting an afterparty / rave as part of the Prize could provide a dynamic platform to showcase electronic artists. It was also suggested that, if not already in place, an experienced representative from the community could join the voting panel for the Album Prize category, giving the scene a seat at the table for the event.

It is hoped that greater marketing, audience engagement and outreach will help to engage and attract the interest of diverse communities and genres. It was also suggested that curators (drawn from leaders within diverse communities) be appointed, empowered and funded to deliver significant elements of the Sound of Belfast programme. These events, supported by Sound of Belfast's existing infrastructure of venues, would provide an outlet for talent development and musical discovery, bringing new music to new audiences and ensuring diversity is core to these flagship events.

- **Spread the word: more marketing is a must!**

The Prize continues to receive strong and positive press coverage; however, feedback stated that this tends to focus too heavily on the recipient of the Legend Award, who is an established and usually high profile / household name from the local music industry, as opposed to newer talent, who would benefit from increased promotion.

Both artists and industry professionals have expressed a clear consensus: there is significant untapped potential to elevate the marketing and communications of Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize. By enhancing these efforts, the events could reach a wider audience of music fans across NI, sell more tickets, attract sponsors and raise their profile nationally and internationally. Inviting and hosting journalists at the Prize is one key recommendation to address this.

There is also a desire for more artist promotion as part of the marketing strategy, with social media playing a central role. Suggestions include introducing a red carpet on the night of the Prize, launching a dedicated marketing campaign for the voting stage of the Prize, and increasing targeted investment into both B2B and B2C advertising.

This is one area where Belfast City Council is well positioned to make a real difference relatively easily. Council can leverage its in-house resources, offer advertising inventory across the city and facilitate connections with potential sponsors. Allocating ringfenced funding would enable Oh Yeah to appoint a dedicated marketing agency that can design and drive an integrated campaign across social media, radio and TV, and print (trades, national and international).

6. Learning from leading events across the UK and Ireland

As part of this review, Fourth Pillar met with founders and representatives of some of the UK and Ireland's leading conferences and events, namely **The Choice Music Prize**, **The MOBOs** and **The Great Escape**.

These deep dives provided an opportunity to understand how similar events are resourced, delivered and evaluated and how they have developed over time to become anchor events in the music industry calendar, garnering national and international attention for their respective communities. Our findings feed into the recommendations at the end of this report.

a) The RTÉ Choice Music Prize (Dublin)

Founded in 2005, the RTÉ Choice Music Prize is an annual award celebrating the best album by a band or solo artist from the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland. For bands, the majority of members must be Irish born. The Prize was created to encourage, highlight, and promote excellence in Irish music and its mission is to showcase the growth and vibrancy of Ireland's music scene at that specific moment in time.

The RTÉ Choice Music Prize is judged solely on artistic merit, without consideration for commercial factors such as sales, streams, or airplay. Awards presented on the night include Irish Album of the Year, Song of the Year, Artist of the Year, Breakthrough Artist, and Classic Album. However, the highlight of the event is a live showcase, where the ten nominees for Album of the Year each perform three songs.

In terms of media partners and sponsors, RTÉ became the main sponsor in 2016, providing additional support with social media, design assets, radio airplay, and promotion. The partnership includes a one-hour TV highlights package and live radio broadcast, making RTÉ's involvement integral to the award's visibility, success and its artist-focused approach.

The Prize has a set calendar for its media announcements; in January, the shortlist is revealed, with RTÉ drip-feeding the album nominations daily, whilst February sees the announcement of the Conversations conference, which happens alongside the Prize and provides an opportunity for aspiring talent and industry professionals to come together for career development, learning and networking. Between January and March, a number of other announcements are promoted on RTÉ, ensuring consistency and frequency in the Prize's promotional efforts.

Thanks to RTÉ's support, the Prize has become a must-see event in the Irish music calendar, generating a buzz that elevates all artists involved. It's not just about winning, though the winner has been awarded a €10,000 prize since its inaugural year; being nominated is an achievement in itself, with all album nominees gathering backstage together just before the winner is announced on the night.

In terms of resourcing, the Prize is run by a small core team, with freelancers and contractors engaged to deliver the production and to ramp up marketing and social media activity at key moments in the promotional calendar. Revenues are generated via ticket sales, sponsorships and partnerships. Culture Ireland also provides EUR €1,000 per album nominee to be used towards travel expenses to attend and perform at the event.

Key takeaways

- **Clear purpose:** The Prize has clarity of purpose by focusing primarily on the Album Award as the main event, delivering for audiences on cultural relevance and musical excellence.
- **Strategic marketing:** An engaged media partner across traditional and digital media (including a one hour televised package) combined with a defined marketing calendar further the reach of the Prize to national audiences.
- **Artist costs:** The provision of funding to cover travel costs enables all Album nominees to attend, whilst a €10,000 award is considered a meaningful prize for the winner.

b. The MOBOs (various locations across the UK)

The MOBO organisation supports Black talent across the industry, adapting to the ever-shifting music landscape, fuelling the Black talent pipeline and celebrating the achievements of those who have become household names, from Stormzy and Dave to Central Cee and RAYE.

Its flagship event, The MOBOs, champions music of Black origin in multiple genres including hip hop, grime, UK Drill, R&B, soul, reggae, jazz, gospel, and African music. Established in 1996 by Kanya King and Andy Ruffell, The MOBOs have become a cultural cornerstone, promoting the evolution and success of Black music.

Behind this hugely successful and popular event is a small core team which, like many others in the music landscape, face significant challenges, from limited resources to changing consumer tastes and trends. With no public monies, the funding of the event relies on ticket sales, sponsorships and partnerships. As such, multi-year funding agreements have become essential for its long-term success, providing the financial stability needed to host a live awards show broadcast on national TV and sustain an international marketing campaign.

Whilst the event and the organisation strive to promote new talent, this goal is balanced by celebrating those who are representing music of Black origin on the global stage. Both emerging and established names co-exist on the bill, with high profile acts often acting as ambassadors for the MOBOs' globally renowned brand. Worn as a badge of honour, the accolade of winning an award is promoted via a dedicated PR campaign that reaches national and international audiences via broadcast, radio and social media platforms.

Partnerships, like the long-standing one with the BBC, are invaluable for producing exclusive content and engaging audiences, whilst the MOBOs' partnerships with the likes of Help Musicians and Marshall are a critical way of supporting artists at the early stages of their career through access to equipment, studio time and mentoring.

Key takeaways

- **Financing:** Multi-annual funding commitments are essential to the event's stability and success.
- **Strategic use of big name acts:** The event maximises the use of established artists; this approach attracts new audiences, inspires emerging talent, helps to sell tickets and provides ambassadorial roles for successful stars within the community.

- **Partnerships mean prizes:** Partnerships with third parties such as Help Musicians and Marshall provide additional wraparound support for emerging and developing artists in a tough financial climate.

c. The Great Escape (Brighton)

The Great Escape Festival is a four-day music event held in Brighton every May, operated by MAMA Festivals. Since its launch in 2006, it has become a premier showcase for emerging talent across various genres. With around 500 bands performing at 30 venues, it offers fans the chance to discover new music in intimate settings before these acts hit the main stages of major festivals.

Attracting a strong music industry presence, The Great Escape hosts a four-day conference with over 4,000 delegates. The conference features panels, debates, keynotes, and valuable networking opportunities, making it a must-attend event for industry professionals.

The Great Escape is run by two full-time staff, with support from a Marketing Manager, a central Finance Team, and a team of designers and freelancers, many of whom work on other events run by MAMA Festivals.

Artist development is a key driver of both the conference and the showcases, with many learning and networking opportunities for emerging talent. All performing artists receive a wristband to attend showcases and a delegate pass for the conference.

Crucial international collaborations, like those with export offices, facilitate festival exchanges, while local partnerships with universities help attract next generation talent. The Great Escape has 100 stage “hosts”, all of which take the lead on proposing talent to perform, with the final selection being agreed with The Great Escape’s booking team.

With 25 media partners, ranging from national press to music trades, media coverage boosts visibility, drives industry attendance, and amplifies exposure for emerging artists through association with the festival. Media partners do not pay for the opportunity; rather, they provide platforms for artist exposure and promotion, lend credibility to the event and raise awareness of The Great Escape with national and international audiences.

The event does not receive public funding; however, it does work closely with the Arts Council England on different projects. There is no public money in the P&L; the event is fully commercialised (in part by charging partners to showcase) and relies on sponsorships and ticket sales to generate revenue.

Key takeaways

- **Support of a parent company** – while many events are run in-house by small teams, The Great Escape benefits from the support of its parent company for core operations (e.g. finance), with personnel able to focus more on creative delivery and programming.
- **Reaching international artists and audiences** – partnerships with Export Offices and other international bodies help The Great Escape to attract new talent, attendees and funders.
- **Quid pro quo with media** – The Great Escape has an extensive number of media partners who do not pay to attend but return the favour by writing about the event

and adding to the buzz around its programming. This takes its media coverage to a national and international level.

7. Recommendations

"Sound of Belfast can help Belfast City Council to deliver on its music strategy. It's one of the only resources that properly shines a light on what we do here." - Member, Belfast Region Music Board

This review highlights the crucial role that Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize play in delivering Belfast City Council's music strategy. However, these events have the potential to do even more with consistent and strategic support.

To facilitate discussions for Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize in 2025 and beyond, it is helpful to have an overview of the events' engagement and impact in 2024.

a) Sound of Belfast / NI Music Prize 2024

2024 saw the Sound of Belfast reach new heights, engaging and reaching more people than ever before. Thanks to new events and partnerships, the festival showcased more than 200 artists across 90 events held in 43 venues and spaces throughout the city. Notable new partnerships included the PRS Foundation Talent Development Network annual conference and *Output Belfast*, Ireland's largest one-day music conference. The expanded programme engaged an audience of 56,500 - an increase of 80% compared to 2023 with average audiences of between 9,000 to 10,000. This growth was driven in part by a Sound of Belfast concert during Belfast's Christmas lights switch on, demonstrating the potential for larger partnerships in the run up to the festival.

Of the 56,000 people who attended, there was a strong local presence – 88% of attendees were from Belfast, 8% from elsewhere in Northern Ireland and 4% visiting from outside the region.

The full event programme for Sound of Belfast, including the NI Music Prize, attracted a predominantly young audience, with nearly half (47%) of attendees aged 18–24, indicating strong resonance with Gen Z. A further 33% were aged 25–34, showing meaningful engagement from younger millennials. Together, these two groups accounted for 80% of total attendees, suggesting the event's content, branding and marketing successfully appealed to a digitally native and culturally engaged demographic. Attendance tapered off with age, with only 13% aged 35–44 and just 7% aged 45 and above, underscoring a potential opportunity to broaden intergenerational appeal in future editions.

The gender breakdown included 42% female, 55% male and 3% identifying as other. The audience also included groups often underrepresented in cultural participation: 12% were older people aged 65 and above, 6% identified as LGBTQ+, 6% were newcomers or from ethnic minority backgrounds, 10% were from deprived neighbourhoods and 5% were unemployed. Additionally, 4% of attendees identified as disabled. These figures reflect the event's inclusive reach across age groups, backgrounds, and communities.

b) Looking ahead

A clear theme from stakeholder feedback was the urgent need for multi-annual funding to ensure the sustainability, growth and development of these flagship events. **This supports**

our primary recommendation: that Belfast City Council commit £65,000 per annum over a three-year period to fund Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize. In addition, the Council may be able to offer further in-kind support, such as providing its owned assets, e.g. the Ulster Hall, at a reduced hire rate or free of charge.

This level of funding is essential in the face of rising delivery costs and would also enable the Oh Yeah Music Centre to act on key feedback gathered during this review. In recent years, the Council has provided funding to help deliver the NI Music Prize.

In 2023, the £30,000 funding from Belfast City Council was used exclusively to support the NI Music Prize. In 2024, this funding increased to £45,000 and was allocated across **both** Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize for the first time. The additional £15,000 enabled Oh Yeah to strengthen its marketing efforts (£5,000) and cover the rising costs of travel and accommodation for visiting industry professionals (£10,000), which were significantly higher than the previous year. This uplift played a key role in enhancing the overall visibility and impact of both events.

This additional support from Belfast City Council came at a time when the cost of delivering high-quality music events started to rise significantly:

- The hire fee for the Ulster Hall increased by 35%, from £2,000 to £3,030 plus VAT.
- Sound engineering and production fees rose by 30%.
- Hotel rates more than doubled, increasing from £70 per night to between £165 and £250.
- Production costs grew from £5,000 to £7,000, despite longstanding supplier relationships that keep costs below market value.
- Audiovisual services increased from £1,500 to £4,000.
- Flights, especially last-minute guest bookings, rose by 25–35%.
- Venue staff costs continued to rise in line with real living wage recommendations.
- Marketing costs are now approximately £20,000, including PR, branding, social media and advertising.
- Photographer fees have increased from £1,500 to £5,000; videography costs have doubled from £2,500 to £5,000.

In addition to its support for the NI Music Prize, the Oh Yeah Music Centre receives £56,000 per year through the Council's Cultural Multi-Annual Grants (CMAG) programme, which helps cover core staff salaries at Oh Yeah for its year round programme of cultural and socially impactful initiatives, outlined earlier in Section 2 of this report (page 5). This funding is not allocated to any event, curator, producer or programme costs for Sound of Belfast or the NI Music Prize.

A multi-annual commitment from the Council of £65,000 per year would enable the Oh Yeah Music Centre to plan ahead, strengthen delivery and focus on long-term goals rather than short-term survival. It would also increase the events' credibility with sponsors and partners, allow for better resource allocation and provide resilience against unforeseen costs.

This recommendation aligns with two priorities in the Council's music strategy:

- Priority 3: Open up the Belfast music sector by creating opportunities for music creatives to connect and collaborate with their peers locally, nationally and internationally.

- Priority 5: Increase the financial assistance available to freelancers, organisations and businesses whose primary role is to enable, support and develop creators.

To maximise the impact of this funding, we recommend that the Council and Oh Yeah explore ringfencing a portion of the £65,000 budget to respond to feedback captured during this review. As such, the report outlines below a set of practical recommendations that can be used as a framework for joint discussion, decision-making and eventual spend.

Ultimately, multi-annual investment will help transition Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize from successful annual events into sustainable, city-defining cultural assets for the enjoyment of all.

Recommendation 1: Expand the team and hire new skills

Description	<p>As Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize expand, the increased activity brings with it the need to resource the ambition.</p> <p>Additional headcount will be required to execute the agreed deliverables, be that in marketing, artist development, event production or partnerships (particularly in revenue generating / fundraising activities).</p> <p>Oh Yeah needs to be enabled and empowered to grow the event and build on its success to date, taking its biggest year in 2024 to new heights in 2025 and beyond.</p> <p><i>Funding will help to hire a new staff member / consultant to implement new initiatives.</i></p>
Music strategy priority being met	<p>Priority 5: Increase the financial assistance available to freelancers, organisations and businesses whose primary role is to enable, support and develop creators.</p> <p>Priority 8: Work with stakeholders to drive forward the creation of funded opportunities to engage and support the future generation of creative freelancers, cultural leaders and music business entrepreneurs.</p>

Recommendation 2: Offer more wraparound artist support

Description	<p>Oh Yeah has an existing talent development programme that has supported the careers of hundreds of emerging artists in recent years.</p> <p>Additional funding from the Council will support the development of new opportunities, collaborations and connections specifically for nominees and winners of the NI Music Prize.</p> <p>Alongside the wraparound support provided by Oh Yeah, both Belfast City Council and Oh Yeah should take this opportunity to direct musicians to existing resources, such as the opportunities and</p>
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	<p>directories being made available on the Music Connections website as well as the Council's own initiatives related to its UNESCO City of Music investment.</p> <p><i>This funding could be used to cover the costs of travel and accommodation for industry guests / journalists at Sound of Belfast; provide an increased Prize fund for winners to align with the Prize Funds at the Scottish Album of the Year Award (£20,000) or The Choice Music Prize (€10,000); host a new networking event for NI Music Prize nominees during Sound of Belfast or a speed dating event between Prize nominees and industry experts to develop artists' understanding of and network within the music business.</i></p>
Music strategy priority being met	<p>Priority 2: Explore and develop professional development opportunities to educate and equip music creators with the critical knowledge, contacts and tools for building a sustainable career within the sector.</p> <p>Priority 3: Open up the Belfast music sector by creating opportunities for music creatives to connect and collaborate with their peers locally, nationally and internationally.</p>

Recommendation 3: Hire more marketing expertise

Description	<p>The need for bigger and bolder marketing of these events is evident. However, as it stands, Oh Yeah does not have the bandwidth or budget to scale its efforts up in this regard.</p> <p>Additional funding from the Council will allow for the appointment of dedicated marketing expertise to promote the events, not just to different communities in Belfast but across NI, Ireland, the UK and further afield.</p> <p>There is a real opportunity to create a buzz about local music and local venues, whilst also celebrating Belfast's UNESCO City of Music status and the important role music plays in our past, present and future.</p> <p><i>This funding could be used to facilitate the appointment of a marketing agency / consultant to drive ticket sales, raise the profile of the events and the artists taking part, and attract footfall to the city in November.</i></p>
Music strategy priority being met	<p>Priority 13: Give the people of Belfast greater ownership over and involvement in music activities and events across the City.</p> <p>Priority 14: Through improved and enhanced strategic communications, make it easier for locals and visitors to find out about the music events and activities taking place across Belfast.</p>

Recommendation 4: Contract curators to engage and deliver events to promote underrepresented musicians and musical communities

Description	<p>As outlined in the report, Sound of Belfast is open to all residents across the city, regardless of sex, race, disability or any other protected characteristic. In recent years, there has been a concerted effort to engage with and celebrate music and musicians from a diverse array of genres and ethnic backgrounds.</p> <p>To further enhance this initiative, we recommend that additional funding be allocated to support the appointment of dedicated curators. These curators would be instrumental in building upon the existing framework, ensuring that Sound of Belfast and the Prize not only reach but actively engage with underrepresented communities.</p> <p>By investing in these curatorial roles, Sound of Belfast can strengthen its commitment to diversity and inclusion, ultimately enriching the cultural tapestry of the city and ensuring that all voices are heard and celebrated.</p> <p><i>This funding would facilitate the hiring of curators to engage underrepresented communities and develop, deliver and promote the events as part of Sound of Belfast</i></p>
Music strategy priority being met	<p>Priority 4: In partnership with local communities, design and implement a series of initiatives to ensure music is inclusive, accessible and open to everyone in our city.</p>

Recommendation 5: Broaden the events' network of partners

Description	<p>Sound of Belfast 2024 enjoyed more partnerships than ever, expanding its reach and increasing its local impact. There is significant potential to build on this with the Council's support.</p> <p>The Council's network could see the involvement of its twinned Music City, Nashville, or one or more of its fellow UNESCO Cities of Music. Equally, by working together and inviting the involvement of Tourism NI, Visit Belfast or other strategic partners, the Council can support Oh Yeah in its mission to make Belfast a real music destination for visitors.</p> <p>The Council could also help Oh Yeah to strengthen and deepen its relationships with existing partners. Working together, there is an opportunity – for example – to pitch a TV highlights package to the BBC, focusing on elevating Belfast as a great music city and showcasing the talent being developed on these shores.</p> <p><i>This recommendation does not require Council expenditure. This in-kind support would facilitate greater promotion of Sound of Belfast by Council's strategic partners; the invitation of more international delegates to attend Sound of Belfast or bands to perform international</i></p>
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	<i>showcases by a fellow UNESCO City of Music. It would also see the Council and Oh Yeah come together to jointly pitch to the BBC for a TV highlights package of the NI Music Prize to bring the event to a wider audience.</i>
Music strategy priority being met	Priority 16: Partner with tourism bodies, Sister Cities and the UNESCO Creative Cities Network to promote Belfast, and Northern Ireland, as a must-visit destination for any music lover.

8. Next steps

This report is designed to support a conversation between Belfast City Council and the Oh Yeah Music Centre, with advice from the Belfast Region Music Board, about how any extra funding should be used. Decisions should reflect the priorities of the Belfast Music Strategy, the needs of the local music sector, and the ability of the Oh Yeah team to deliver results while managing rising costs.

The report will lead to two key outcomes:

1. An agreed funding amount over a set period.
2. A clear list of goals that this funding will help achieve.

9. Conclusion

It is abundantly clear that the City's artists, its industry executives and all those who experience Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize, view these events as treasured assets.

There is a real desire to see them develop further, building on the success and learnings of the last ten years to generate more opportunities for musicians and those who work hard to help them achieve success.

But this cannot be done on a shoestring. It takes sustained investment, a long term vision and a belief in the power of music to build communities, enliven cities and strengthen local economies.

As a UNESCO City of Music, with a commitment to placing artists at its heart and nurturing the sector, Belfast City Council is the right strategic partner to ensure that Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize fulfil their potential in the future.

Fourth Pillar has greatly enjoyed conducting this review on behalf of Belfast City Council and would like to thank all those who gave of their time so willingly and views so freely.

Appendix1 : List of individuals consulted

James Ayo	Hot Box Entertainment
Graham Best	PRS for Music
Mick Bonnar	Moving On Music
Siobhan Brown	Musician / Soultrane Festival
Brian Coney	Musician / Music Connections / Editor
Paul Connolly	Musician / Songwriter / Workshop facilitator
Joe Dougan	Shine / Belsonic
Charlotte Dryden	Oh Yeah Music Centre
Mark Gordon	Output Belfast
Joel Harkin	Musician / Songwriter
Charlene Hegarty	Oh Yeah Music Centre / Artist Manager
Kanya King	MOBOs
Ciaran Lavery	Musician / Songwriter
Ben Magee	New Champion Management
Davy Matchett	Third Bar
Sarah McBriar	AVA
Mark McCambridge	Musician / Songwriter
Chris McCreery	Belfast City Council
Glenn Millar	Marching bands / Made to Parade podcast
Andrew Moore	Harbour Music Society
Cheylene Murphy	Musician / Songwriter
Maurane Ramon	Thrive
Dave Reid	Choice Music Prize
Joe Ricketts	Nxgen Music Group
Abbie Triggs	On Music
Nathalie Von Rotz	The Great Escape

Five additional individuals contributed to the report but requested to remain anonymous. Efforts were also made to arrange meetings with individuals from two other conference or awards organisations in Scotland (Scottish Album of the Year award / Wide Days) and Berlin (Pop-Kultur) respectively, as well as representatives from different music genres. However, some were unavailable at the time while others did not respond.