



Public  
Consultation  
2024–25

# What you told us

**BELFAST**  
**STORIES**

Between November 2024 and March 2025, we opened the doors to conversation and asked you to help shape Belfast Stories. Thousands of you shared your thoughts, hopes, and ideas—and here's what you told us.

## What is Belfast Stories?

Belfast Stories is a landmark development for the city situated on the 5,000 square metre site where North Street and Royal Avenue meet.

It incorporates and preserves the iconic Art Deco building that was formerly the Bank of Ireland.



1. It will be a beautiful new **public space** for the people of Belfast to explore their heritage, enjoy their shared sense of community and gather for special events, meetings, walks, food and drinks in a uniquely inspiring environment.
2. It will be a new **visitor attraction** that clearly communicates the spirit of the city – its past, its present and its future, enhancing the city's reputation nationally and internationally and growing our tourism industry.
3. It will be a **creative hub** where writers, musicians, artists and film makers can meet, learn and collaborate, enabling people of all ages and from diverse backgrounds to become involved in one of the fastest developing sectors of the economy.

# Who's behind it?



**Belfast Stories was announced in December 2021 and is the flagship project in the tourism and regeneration strand of the Belfast Region City Deal programme of investment.**

**Delivered by Belfast City Council with support from partners, Belfast Stories aims to attract both tourists and locals while helping to regenerate the city and surrounding areas.**



## How has it evolved?

Engagement around the concept of Belfast Stories has been ongoing since 2015 when a strategy for the future of the city centre was published.

- In 2017 plans emerged to co-locate a film centre, a major tourism attraction, digital skills hub and a cultural centre.
- Plans for Belfast Stories were included and consulted on as part of A City Imagining, Belfast's 10-year Cultural Strategy and Make Yourself at Home, A Vision for the Future of Tourism.
- In preparation for the Belfast Region City Deal bid, Belfast Stories engaged over 50 stakeholder organisations at over 160 meetings and presentations.
- Between August and November 2022, a 14-week public consultation was carried out on the outline plans for Belfast Stories and its first Equality Impact Assessment. This public consultation focused on gathering ideas and evidence to help shape the project brief that set out its ambition to be welcoming, accessible and reflective of the diversity of the city's stories.
- Between 19 November 2024 and 9 March 2025, Belfast City Council carried out a second consultation on Belfast Stories and its accompanying equality impact assessment (EQIA).

# What we did

## The second public consultation on Belfast Stories ran for 16 weeks between 19 November 2024 and 9 March 2025.

The purpose of the consultation was to:

- Continue to promote the project, raise awareness and gain buy-in
- Make sure that Belfast Stories is for everyone including equality impact assessment and rural needs impact assessment
- Gain feedback on current design thinking and plans for the next phase of the project
- Use the findings to inform the next phase of the project

The consultation presented and tested:

- The overarching concept
- The facilities mix
- The visitor experience

Consultation was themed around five project ambitions:

1. Be somewhere that Belfast people are proud of (something new)
2. Regenerate our city centre and support our city's development
3. Provide open outdoor space, accessible to all (courtyard/roof)
4. Provide facilities, activities, events, programming (creative hub)
5. Be a trusted storyteller – gathering and presenting stories



## Key actions included:

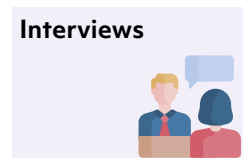
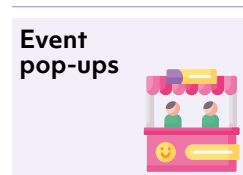
- An online consultation hub was created on Belfast City Council's Your Say platform.
- The council's Equality Scheme people were notified of the public consultation and draft EQIA and invited to comment.
- The Belfast Stories equality consultative forum was established, comprising 16 experts by experience met.
- A programme of in person events and activities was delivered.

# Consultation methodology

The project ambitions formed the discussion points and questions used at all in person consultation activities.

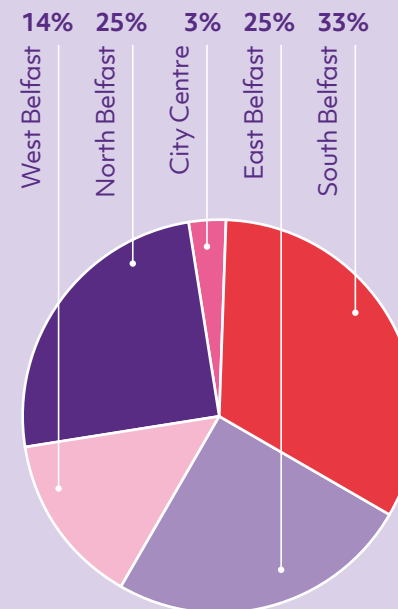
The questions were designed to be flexible so they could also be adapted and used in different settings depending on what ambitions different audiences were most interested in.

This included in:



## Who we asked

By location:



Stakeholder groups:

**Geographic communities** including Shankill, South Belfast, East Belfast, West Belfast, North Belfast, city centre and neighbouring communities

**Political representatives**

**Belfast City Council staff**

**General public**

**Culture and heritage stakeholders**

**Artists, arts organisations and people working or interested in the arts**

**Section 75 groups (including LGBTQIA+, Young people, older people, people with a disability)**

**Stakeholders in the tourism, food and beverage and local businesses**

**Language organisations and representatives**

**Parents and carers**

**People from Muslim, Chinese, Polish and Roma community backgrounds and migrant workers**

**Voluntary and community organisations**

**Information was available in a range of formats:**

Easy Read  
British Sign Language  
Irish Sign Language  
HTML online  
Irish language



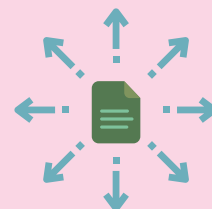
**4,900**

**Welcomed to Consultation Hub**



**514**

**Responses to the online survey**



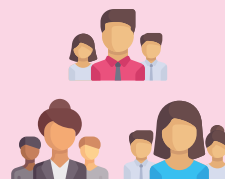
**2,500+**

**Documents distributed city-wide**



**102**

**In-person consultation sessions**



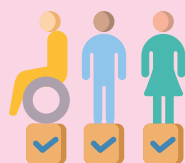
**1,014**

**In-person participants across stakeholder groups**



**4,000+**

**In-person participants reached**



**97**

**Responses to Draft Equality Impact Assessment**



**272**

**Downloaded consultation documents**



**38**

**Media outlets used**



**5,000+**

**People reached through social posts**



# Would you visit Belfast Stories?



**84%**  
of people agreed  
that they would visit  
Belfast Stories.

**57%**  
said they would  
'definitely' visit.

**27%**  
said they would  
'probably' visit.

Stronger levels of support were found during face-to-face engagements where the vast majority were keen or very keen to visit. The remainder were largely unsure, wanting to understand more about Belfast Stories or because it was too far in the future to think about.

## You said...

### Reasons to visit:

- **History & culture**  
Great to see and hear stories that go beyond expected narratives of Belfast such as the Troubles and the Titanic.
- **Storytelling**  
A core part of Belfast's identity and a rich tradition of oral history, literature and film that can bridge communities and capture diverse voices and narratives.
- **Arts & creativity**  
Live performances, storytelling nights, spoken word events, film screenings and more.
- **Pride in Belfast**  
People felt motivated to support the project out of civic pride and a desire to showcase their city.
- **Free & easy**  
Great to be able to use free public space in the city centre for tourists and locals alike.

### Reasons not to visit:

- **Not sure what it is**  
Some people required further detail on the project to understand its relevance and value and know if it was something for them.
- **Just for tourists**  
Some thought it would be focused on tourists alone.
- **Could be biased**  
Some worried about potential political or cultural bias.



# Would you recommend Belfast Stories to others?

**82%**  
of people asked were likely to recommend Belfast Stories to a friend visiting Belfast.



**“I would actually love to volunteer.”**

## Proud of Belfast

One of the ambitions for Belfast Stories is that it will be somewhere of which people are proud. People communicated a deep personal connection to Belfast and a desire to share its stories with visitors.

These feelings of pride were qualified with a desire that any representation of the city's stories, history and culture is positive and forward looking while being respectful of the past but most importantly, it needs to be authentic.

**“This project will bring people together and make us proud of where we come from.”**

## Family friendly

Another ambition for Belfast Stories is that it is somewhere people can go for a family stroll in the outdoors.

People felt that there is currently very limited child-friendly, public or green space in Belfast city centre. Belfast Stories was seen a welcome addition to city centre facilities.

The roof garden in particular was welcomed and considered unique for Belfast and the region, and something people were more likely to find in other European cities.

## Facilities mix

**People broadly welcomed the facilities mix with particularly strong support for the roof garden and courtyard.**

**“It’s about time we had something like this. I’m really looking forward to visiting!”**





# Building design

## Architecture

There was virtually universal support for preserving the former Bank of Ireland building, which is an iconic and much-loved part of the city's heritage.

There were many comments about the building not appearing too cold or clinical and needing to be warm and welcoming. It was also noted that the building should be excellent in terms of its design.

People felt strongly that the open design of the building made it welcoming and accessible. They particularly liked that they could see into and through the building so that they would know what to expect inside.

This was particularly appreciated by people who might have additional reasons to feel unwelcome or unsafe such as young people, people from minoritized ethnic groups and women.

Some responses cautioned against a design that would feel cold, unwelcoming or sterile and felt that the current design signalled that it was a government building – where the public is generally not welcome.

Others felt there should be greater continuity between the outside and the inside and clear what to expect from a visit.



## Entrances & Frontage

There was strong support for the four entrances so that people would feel invited from all directions. This could also increase its usage by increasing the likelihood that people would “stumble across” its thresholds. People also liked that the entrances were wide and step-free.

The greening of the streetscape was strongly welcomed. Greenery and nature can make people feel more relaxed and space look more appealing.

People also felt that they would be encouraged by seeing other people meeting, gathering and enjoying themselves to ensure that the building isn't seen as insular, rather as warm and welcoming.



## Things to note

- **Gates and doors, even unlocked, even transparent, can still be a barrier.**
- **The entrance should be light and bright is important to sign language users and people with vision impairment.**
- **A small number of people expected a primary entrance on Royal Avenue.**

# Experience

## Orientation

It was felt that any potential confusion around multiple entrances could be mitigated by good signage, which was also generally identified as creating a sense of welcome.

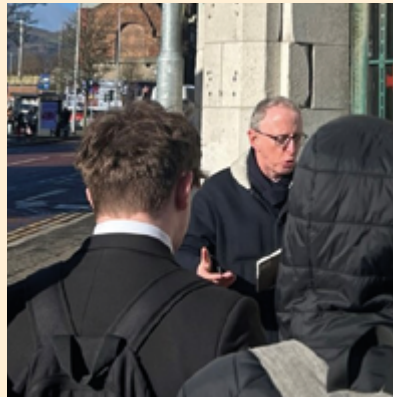
This is particularly important given the size of the site, which most people were (pleasantly) surprised to understand is significantly larger than the Bank of Ireland building.

It was also noted that signage should be in different languages, different formats including sign language and Braille, at an appropriate height and in an appropriate design and should be supported by adequate levels of helpful staff.

## Staff

Staff were considered to be the main source of welcome and that their role should be to engage and interact with people, even accompanying visitors on their journey through the building, rather than simply signposting.

People emphasised the need for them to be friendly and well trained – including in supporting children and adults with additional requirements – with sign language interpretation being available provided by local interpreters in “our local language”.



## Accessibility

People emphasised that best practice or universal access should be designed into the built fabric of Belfast Stories at this stage, rather than added after.

People also emphasised that access should be embedded in Belfast Stories' operation, including the provision of equipment to support people with limited mobility or sensory sensitivities.

The training, knowledge and skills of staff will be critical to ensuring quality of experience for all who visit.

A number of groups offered to test or snag Belfast Stories prior to its opening.

Others may be willing to continue to be involved in a steering, governance or critical friend role.

## Public Space

The provision of free, quality, city centre public space appears to be the key attractor for residents and the open-air courtyard, and the roof-top garden were very strongly welcomed.

People liked that these spaces would connect people to nature through planting and views of the hills and create a place of tranquillity or sanctuary in the city centre.

Most people encouraged the use of local planting telling Belfast's nature story while supporting biodiversity and bioactivity.

There was strong support for community gardening whereby the green areas would be looked after by volunteers and visitors and local restaurants could use produce, similar to the 'meanwhile use' gardens currently on site.

# Experience

## The Courtyard

Similar to the frontage, it was felt that seeing into the courtyard and seeing people having fun there would feel welcoming.

People also expressed a desire for the courtyard to be further greened, blending the indoors and outdoors to create a welcoming sense of urban tranquillity.

As with the roof garden, there were some concerns about shelter from wind and rain. It was also suggested there could be a children's play area there.

## Food

People were generally excited by the potential food offer and engaged by the idea of food stories being told across the building. Food and drink were considered a strong attractor, and good cafes and restaurants would help create a good social ambiance.

A variety of food offers would also support families, which also need to cater to different tastes. Many different people said it needed to be affordable and perhaps being able to bring your own food makes a visit more affordable still and more practical for people with restrictive diets.



## Things to note

- Reverberations and reflections of hard and shiny surfaces can be difficult for older people, people with hearing loss, guide dogs and people with vision impairment who can use echolocation to aid navigation.
- Complex patterns and designs should be avoided as they can confuse and distract
- Suggested additional provision included a sensory garden, play facilities for children, a range of food offerings to suit people with dietary restrictions or to celebrate the diversity of Belfast's communities, and inclusive cafés.
- The inclusion of Irish language should be considered at the earliest stages of the design process and feel integrated into the overall experience.



# Creativity



## Arts and cultural activity

There was widespread enthusiasm from people for the wide range of arts and cultural activity envisaged for Belfast Stories.

People seemed to understand that it represents an opportunity for more and more accessible cultural activity that is inclusive, multigenerational and family-friendly.

### Performance

- Live music including classical, experimental, trad and contemporary, from intimate gigs to large-scale concerts
- Theatre, including one-man shows and immersive performances
- Spoken word events including storytelling, comedy and poetry

### Screenings

- Screenings of local and independent films

### Special Events

- Special events including themed events, seasonal activities, outdoor screenings, festivals and pop-ups
- Collaborative festivals, events and activities partnering with existing providers
- Culturally diverse activity including food and language



### Education & Outreach

- Educational activity such as talks, lectures and discussions on social and historical topics
- Outreach activities and events including story gathering
- Practical workshops where people could express their own stories, for example, through craft, creative writing, painting, animation or coding
- Intergenerational activity
- Cross-community activity
- Family-friendly and child-focused activities such as a dedicated kid zone with storytelling, interactive exhibits and workshops



# Creativity



## Creative Hub

The creative hub was also welcomed by people as a much-needed space that could be used by artists, creatives, freelancers, students, start-ups, small businesses, community organisations and arts organisations.

People felt it could include:

### Spaces

- A creative tech lab supporting, for example, editing, podcasting, coding, animation and VR
- Libraries of local publications, art books, materials, resources and equipment
- A reading room and quiet zones
- Flexible spaces for events, exhibitions, rehearsals and performances
- Drop-in and bookable workshop spaces for learning and meetings
- Artist studios for short, medium and long-term rental

### Resources

- Free WiFi
- Computers
- Charging points
- Good lighting
- Comfortable seating



# Visitor experience

**People were generally enthusiastic about the visitor experience provided it is engaging and well balanced with a wide range of stories.**

**People felt that they would both enjoy and learn from the experience and that visitors would feel similar.**

One person, reflecting on the storytelling that currently takes place throughout the city, loved that it would be a “permanent home for true stories”. Others felt that it shouldn’t be at the expense for further support for decentralised activity.

The concept design for how stories might be organised by time and space was positively received by people.

Feedback showed that third person narratives and history beyond living memory needs to be incorporated and developed further.

Majority of people either supported or accepted that conflict or Troubles related stories should be included.



Looking at these stories through a social prism where everyday stories are made remarkable was strongly supported.

Minority and minoritized communities in particular tended to like the idea that they and their stories would not be labelled, put into boxes or added to the edges. Rather, their stories would be integrated with others as a core part of the narrative, past, present and future.

Indeed, there was a general preference to experience the stories and lives of ordinary people, the “unsung heroes” and “everyday workers and families who built this city” rather than well-known celebrities, politicians or industrialists, although there was a desire to highlight lesser-known figures (particularly from the fields of music, sport, comedy, showbusiness and

industry). Where there was interest in famous people, it was usually in previously untold aspects of their personal, rather than public lives.

People expected stories to be told in a wide variety of ways appreciating that these would appeal to the preferences and needs of a diverse audience. Authenticity was felt to be essential to both enjoyment of the experience and trust in the story collection process.

People stressed that stories should not be sanitised, prioritising “unfiltered, sometimes challenging perspectives” over “polished narratives”. Generally, it was felt that language should be retained as told (including, for example, in sign or Irish).



# Story gathering

3 out of 5 people asked said they would happily share their stories (and many more when the interaction was face-to-face). In fact, a common response was, "You'll find it hard to shut me up!"

## But, what if...

People were clear about what they expected from the process:

- **Clarity** – simple and direct guidance on how it all works and how stories will be edited, interpreted and presented.
  - **Respect** – confidence that stories will be safeguarded and respected.
  - **Warmth** – a comfortable environment, a pleasant human conversation and maybe even a cup of tea!
  - **Pride** – a sense of satisfaction that their stories will be part of a greater good that will benefit Belfast.
- **Trust** – people need to be sure that Belfast Stories won't misuse their content in any way that misinterprets or twists it for any unstated commercial or political end.
  - **Anonymity** – people want to feel confident that their anonymity will be protected and that they won't be opened up to ridicule or incrimination in any way.
  - **Confidence** – people want to feel sure that their story is relevant and worth telling, particularly if they weren't born in Belfast or have just arrived.
  - **Inclusivity** – people worried that their story would not be welcomed if it differed from traditional and 'normal' narratives.

People did have some concerns about telling their stories so there needs to be:

# Regenerating the city centre

## Suggestions to help share the potential benefits of Belfast Stories included:

- **Engagement** – local and knowledgeable staff could encourage visitors to explore other parts of the city and follow up the locations of stories they like and connect with local communities.
- **Information** – excellent interpretation within Belfast Stories, explaining what visitors are looking at and how it complements other Belfast attractions such as museums and archives.
- **Connection** – easy ways to use Belfast Stories as a jumping off point for other experiences such as walking tours, restaurants, hotels, photo opportunities and experiences.
- **Diversity** – inclusion of stories from diverse communities within Belfast to ensure that visitors and participants have the chance to empathise with as wide a range of experiences as possible.



What we heard	What we will do
Many of you told us that you felt the concept designs had the potential to deliver an inclusive and welcoming building. However, you were worried that this could be lost as designs develop.	<p>We are committed to an ongoing process of review of the architectural and experience plans to maximise the sense of welcome and inclusion, particularly in relation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The four entrances</b></li> <li>• <b>Signage and way finding</b></li> <li>• <b>Public space</b></li> <li>• <b>Accessibility</b></li> </ul>
Some of you felt that the building was insular or inward looking and it could do more to connect with the surrounding streets.	<p>Sustained engagement with the Equality Consultative Forum during RIBA stages and all S75 groups through an agreed long-term engagement plan.</p>
Some of you expressed concerns that the city centre wouldn't be ready to welcome Belfast Stories and that further consideration needed to be given to the infrastructure and development required to fully maximise the regeneration potential.	<p>We are committed to working closely with teams within Belfast City Council and across the city to ensure that Belfast Stories can deliver for the people of Belfast. We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage with Translink, city council departments and government to design transport and travel solutions including accessible parking and sustainable transport options.</li> <li>• Engage with public and private stakeholders to maximise regeneration and reduce concerns around blight, safety and anti-social behaviour.</li> </ul>

What we heard	What we will do
<p><b>You provided us with specific feedback in relation to the draft concept designs.</b></p> <p><b>We can't change the design based on every individual comment, but we've looked at common areas and have agreed to consider these in the next iteration of the design.</b></p>	<p>We've been working with our designs teams and will be doing further design on work on a number of areas including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring the Bank of Ireland building is both sensitively restored and fully integrated into the visitor experience. Part of preserving the built heritage is to make it as active and accessible as possible.</li> <li>• Resolving the tension between the desire for a bold architectural statement and the need for the building to feel approachable and in context for the area.</li> <li>• Further consideration of the courtyard – use, weather protection, informal zones that feel safe and sociable.</li> <li>• Further consideration of the rooftop terrace/garden in relation to accessibility, public views, green space and gathering areas that are free to use.</li> <li>• Further considerations for an experience that is intuitive, layered, and multisensory, with moments of intensity and moments of calm.</li> <li>• Further consideration regarding the creative hub and the uses for creation and not just consumption. Requirement for flexible and hands on workshop spaces.</li> <li>• Consideration of how stories can be rendered throughout the building.</li> </ul>



## What we heard

**Some of you felt that the idea of Belfast Stories was focussed more on visitors, and you were concerned that local people wouldn't feel welcome or connected.**

## What we will do

We recognise that how we engage and communicate with the city now will impact how people feel about Belfast Stories when it opens in 2030. We will therefore develop sustained programmes of engagement and review all our marketing and communications including:

- Agree and promote key messages in plain, accessible and augmented formats.
- Develop clear strategy for how Irish language will be integrated into the experience.
- Consider the multi-lingual options for story gathering and visitor servicing.
- Focused programme of engagement with all S75 groups during future RIBA stages to ensure integrated representation in the design of the building, experience and stories development.
- Develop initiatives to address feelings of 'exclusion' from the protestant and broader unionist communities.
- Further equality screening in 2026 as part of planning consultation.

## What we heard

**Many of you welcomed the progress that has been made since 2022 on how we propose to tell stories.**

**However, some of you continue to have concerns that storytelling will be partisan, binary or represent a narrow perspective of Belfast.**

## What we will do

- Acceleration of the ethical framework
- Development of a story gathering programme and curatorial guidelines that considers:
  - Priorities for further engagement such as older people.
  - An agreed approach to co-authorship, diverse representation, ongoing gathering of lived stories.
  - Testing of story gathering processes and tools with people who are less likely to come forward.





# Get in touch

## Online Hub

<https://yoursay.belfastcity.gov.uk/belfast-stories>

## Social Media

Facebook @belfaststories

Instagram @belfast\_stories

## Website

[www.belfastcity.gov.uk/belfaststories](http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/belfaststories)

If you are interested in hosting an event or would like us to attend a group that you are involved with, please contact the Belfast Stories team on:

**028 9032 0202**

[belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk)

**BELFAST  
STORIES**