

Belfast Stories

Ethical Framework

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1. Introduction and Methodology

1.1 What is an ethical framework and why do we need it?

Birmingham Museums Trust framed its recent Citizens Jury initiative as follows:

‘What does Birmingham need and want from its museums, now and in the future; and what should Birmingham Museums Trust do to make these things happen?’

The Ethical Framework is a step on the path of Belfast Stories becoming Belfast Stories. Who are we? What do people need us to do? What are our values and principles? What do we need to do to make these things happen?

The Ethical Framework asks what it means to apply the project’s values in practice, with particular reference to the Story Cycle and Stories Engine: the two concepts that govern the who / what / how of the stories themselves. The Framework starts to establish structured approaches to addressing real issues and to help guide decision-making as the project moves forward.

The Framework is, by its nature, a living document that will continue to evolve. But there is no question that it needs to be in place now, even if we acknowledge that it is, and likely always will be, unfinished. Already, the design development and public consultation phases have raised scenarios that do or will require an ethics-based response (and, in some instances, have helped us understand what this response should be). Part of the process is about being open to change and actively seeking input—understanding that the Ethical Framework only makes sense as a collaborative endeavour.

1.2 Methodology

The first step of developing the Ethical Framework was to review the previous work that has laid out important groundwork and to carry out precedent research (all references are listed in Section 5). While some precedent projects were selected because they represent important standards in the field of cultural heritage (e.g. ICOM’s Code of Ethics), many of them are relevant because they model effective approaches to dealing with difficult, contested or marginalised stories; for these projects, living up to their values has often meant coming up with new ways of working. This is not about innovation for innovation’s sake, but about designing tools and processes with and for users.

The working principles were then developed as part of a back-and-forth creative dialogue between members of the IMP, taking inspiration from the Project Charter, the precedent research and findings from the public consultation. The workshop with members of the Equality Consultative Forum in February 2025 was particularly influential as it asked participants to work through issues relating to story collection.

How would you like to tell your story?

What might make you think twice about giving your story to Belfast Stories?

What might encourage you to give your story?

One of the threads that emerges in the Ethical Framework is that process is as important as outcome. That is, how we build a collection of stories is as important as the stories themselves. This is an ongoing process, that needs to be questioned, tested, improved. We understand that it’s actually by living out our ethical principles that we’ll achieve the ambition for Belfast Stories. We understand that we need to articulate these principles in a way that everyone and anyone joining the project can understand, so that we can achieve our outcomes together.

2. What is Belfast Stories?

2.1 What is Belfast Stories?

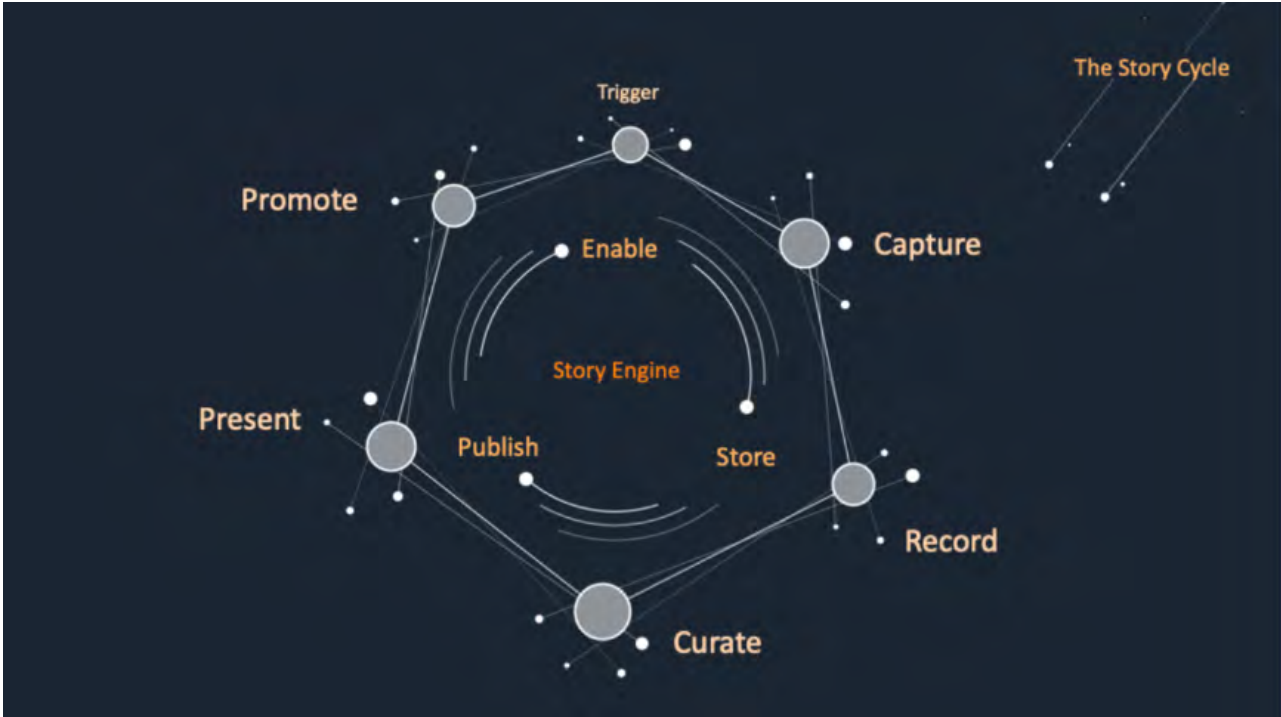
Belfast Stories is an ambitious new attraction for Belfast city centre. Its vision is to offer visitors and locals a way to connect with the stories of the people of Belfast told by the people who call it home. Full of passion, humour, joy and sorrow, Belfast Stories is a new and completely original way to enjoy the life and times of this vibrant, brilliant and complicated city. Some stories will be old, some will be new; all will weave together to create a new perspective on what we think we know about the place we call home.

[from The Journey So Far report, 2023]

The essence of Belfast Stories is the stories themselves. Without the physical building, there could still be Belfast Stories; but without the stories, the project doesn’t exist. Recognising this, Belfast Stories aspires to be a radical facilitator of stories. What does that mean? It means embracing alternative paradigms and challenging institutional approaches to storytelling. It means fostering a power dynamic at the heart of the process that acknowledges that the role of the organisation is explicitly to platform people’s stories—not the authority or the authorial voice of the organisation. It means approaching the task with humanity, humility and humour: designing processes that are built from the ground up, to meet the real needs of real people.

2.2 What is the Story Cycle?

The Story Cycle is the simple idea that behind any encounter with a story (in the visitor attraction, for example) sits a process. This process goes from the initial invitation or trigger for a story, through its collection, processing, presentation and more. Fundamentally, the process works as a cycle: Belfast Stories isn’t finite, it’s always growing. Each story can be the invitation for the next.



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2.3 What is the Stories Engine?

The Stories Engine is what powers Belfast Stories. It is both a philosophy and a practice that positions Belfast Stories as a radical facilitator of storytelling. It will exist in physical form as a series of spaces and resources, but before that, and alongside, it exists as a way of conceptualising and supporting the Story Cycle. In due course, the Stories Engine will include people (programmers, story collectors, curators, collection managers, archivists, teachers / trainers) and facilities (story gathering equipment, storage, workshop / classroom spaces, archive). Like any engine, the Stories Engine needs ongoing input and maintenance.

2.4 What do we value?

The Project Charter (2024) established a set of shared values that govern how we behave to each other as members of the project / professional teams. Having tested these values throughout the RIBA2 design and public consultation phase, we have experienced first-hand how useful the values are in directing behaviours and guiding decisions. We now believe that these values can be applied to all aspects of the project and, specifically, that they are an important foundation for the Ethical Framework.

We believe that our behaviours should reflect our shared values through a commitment to be:

- **Respectful**
of each other, honest in all our dealings with our people and our place
- **Brave**
courageous, confident, assured, emboldened, spirited, hopeful
- **Inclusive**
leaving no one behind, generous, participative, collaborative
- **Creative**
imaginative, visionary, authentic, dynamic
- **Regenerative**
sustainable, resilient, renewing

These values are a useful checklist for the work of the Stories Engine. Everything we set up should be checked in relation to the values, using them to hold ourselves accountable. This is not about imposing impossible expectations on the project. It's about creating generous boundaries that help us define the work we do and how we do it. Faced with choices and pressures, the values should help us to plan and prioritise.

2.5 What does it mean...?

We recognise that other projects may validly define things differently, but—in keeping with our values—we want to be upfront about Belfast Stories' interpretation. These key definitions have all been shaped by the project values, by public consultation and by the project development so far. It should be noted that in almost every instance we are keeping space for people's own interpretation. That said, we also understand that people like to know what we mean when we refer to some of these potentially slippery concepts.

Story: the Story Collection Framework (January 2022) introduced a deliberately broad definition of stories as 'voices, feelings, experiences, memories, and expressions that reveal past, present and future-constructed narratives and form connections with the people.' The Framework also advocated that 'multiple formats be considered to express the richness, dynamism and complexity of the city's stories'. Workshops with the Equality Consultative Forum supported the broad approach to formats and also underlined the fact that people have an instinctive understanding of what makes a story *when that's what they're asked for*. This may seem like a subtle distinction, but how someone frames an experience can change depending on whether they're asked to tell a story or whether they're being interviewed for, say, a piece of historical research. A story may be collected (from individuals as part of a stories network event, say, or from existing collections) or created (working with facilitators and resources at Belfast Stories). Whatever its genesis, every story is equally valued.

2.5 What does it mean...?

Belfast Story: over the course of consultation with the public people have asked, *what is a Belfast story?, do I have to be Belfast born and bred to contribute a story?, what about the stories of people who have left Belfast?* In keeping with the project’s commitment to inclusivity and an overall spirit of generosity, our approach is to be as open as possible. Anyone who feels a connection to Belfast and has what they think of as a Belfast Story is encouraged to participate. This includes visitors to the attraction.

Storyteller: the storyteller is primarily the person contributing the story of their lived experience. The project will present their authentic and unfiltered stories, with the voice of the storyteller ringing out loud and clear. That said, as the project has developed, we realise that a level of curation and facilitation is essential in the gathering, organising and presenting of stories. This means that in some (perhaps many) instances, a story will be a collaboration between the person who lived the experience and a mediator (who may be a curator, an artist or other facilitator). In every instance we will be clear about who was involved in telling the story, without drowning the experience in a process narrative!

First Person: representing someone’s own lived experience, told from their perspective. One of the core concepts for Belfast Stories is the absence of top-down narratives. Emphasising first-person stories helps us to build from the bottom-up. Similarly, although we recognise the power of community identity, we will work to acknowledge and present each storyteller as an individual, not as a representative of a bigger group. Personal experience can include a memory, a retelling, or

a rediscovery of a story. For example, a grandchild remembers their granny telling them a story of their childhood, or an archaeologist tells the story of uncovering evidence of people who lived in Belfast a thousand years ago. In this way, first person doesn’t limit us to living memory but lets us connect back through generations.

True: people are asked to contribute true stories. We acknowledge that storytelling is a fundamentally creative act and that memory is coloured by experience and emotion. Within those parameters, and ensuring that certain key safeguards are in place, we will work on the basis of trust and good faith: we won’t question a person’s truth, nor will we fact check the stories. That said, we reserve the right not to platform certain material and / or to contextualise it. NMNI’s Ethics Policy is a valuable precedent in this regard.

Time and Space: the Interpretive Masterplan (July 2024) moved away from thematic organisation in favour of two universal organising principles, time and space. Every story will be tagged with the time and location where it took place. In some cases this may need to be fluid—for example, people may provide make-believe or subjective times and places. The Interpretive Masterplan also suggested that each story be tagged with an emotion (or multiple emotions) and that tagging with secondary themes could be introduced by curators as useful metadata for the future.

Sliding Scale for Participation: consent, though vital to the story gathering process, is not participation. We don’t just want people to consent to their stories being part of the project; we want them to be actively involved. We want to avoid having storytellers feeling that Belfast Stories may house their

story but is something very removed from their lives: *for tourists, not for me*. But we also understand that people will participate in different ways. Some people will come to the project with a story fully formed. Others would like to participate but need support. Still others are willing for their story to be used by others but will need time before they are comfortable with other forms of involvement (if they ever are). The sliding scale is a way of acknowledging that we are trying to avoid proscribing how people should contribute stories and that at every stage of the Story Cycle we will offer a range of ways of participating.

The idea of the sliding scale of participation links to the idea that there are different ways that your story could be used (or reused) at Belfast Stories. These range from the short-term and ephemeral, to the longer term but still within the boundaries of the site, to use in digital sphere, as part of marketing campaigns, or as merchandise / commercial opportunities. There is also a scenario where stories (within the concept of the Story Cycle) are used as inspiration for a new creative work. As detailed in the Ethical Guidelines section, we will be very clear about these different uses and the rights of storytellers to choose if and how their stories are used.

3. Ethical Guidelines

3.1 Working Principles

The values, the ethical parameters developed for the Story Collection Framework and the precedent research have shaped a set of four working principles. These are a way of distilling multiple ideals for the project into value-based ways of working. The working principles can be understood as the bridge between the values and specific tasks and tools.



3.1 Working Principles

WORKING TRANSPARENTLY



Working transparently is about showing the work, making the process visible. It acknowledges that there are different ways of doing things and, therefore, choices to be made. It is about being honest about those choices and the reasons they were taken—and about actively eliciting comment and critique. It’s about embedding a culture of accountability in the organisation: a willingness to confront problems and talk about them. Transparency helps to establish Belfast Stories as trustworthy, linking to the next principle: working reciprocally.

WORKING RECIPROCALLY



Working reciprocally is fundamentally about trust. It is about working in good faith, about prioritising generosity and porosity, making it clear that this platform belongs to everyone. It’s about valuing each story and the integrity of each storyteller and resisting any idea of sanitising or tidying up stories. It acknowledges that the story gathering process is a two-way relationship that can only work in an environment of trust. It seeks out ways to share resources, learnings and ideas and is known for welcoming and supporting initiatives generated by others (ie Belfast Stories doesn’t always need to be the instigator or get the acclaim). It emphasises the notion of the cycle, as opposed to a finite, fixed journey, so that every output becomes the beginning of something new.

WORKING CAREFULLY



Working carefully is about human-centred ways of working. It’s about learning from trauma-informed practice and developing processes that centre users and their needs. This includes robust safeguarding practices as well as mental health support for everyone involved in the Story Cycle—whether as storytellers, collectors, curators or other. It’s about weaving sustainability and sustainable practices into the Stories Engine, mindful that being careful is also about caring for future generations.

WORKING RESPONSIVELY



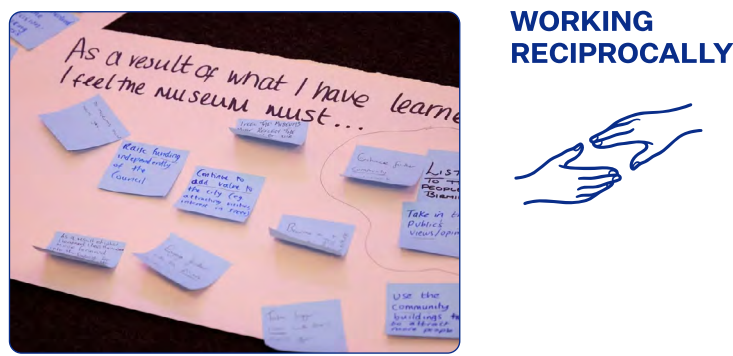
Working responsively means meeting people where they are and listening to what they need. It’s about having a range of flexible formats and ways of working—and acknowledging that there’s always room for new ideas and processes and that many of these will and should come from outside the organisation. It’s about a commitment to learning, change and renewal, encouraging people to consider that what’s right for now, or was right then, might not be right in the future. It’s about the idea that Belfast Stories will always be unfinished.

3.2 Case Studies



Society of American Archivists

The Society of American Archivists’ Code of Ethics (which is used as a benchmark by multiple organisations, including the Oral History Association) is an example of coupling inspiration and practicality. It is notable for the clarity with which it connects a summary of the core work of archivists, to the values of archivists, to the code of ethics for archivists. In this way, the ethics don’t sit in a vacuum; the values inform the ethics, the ethics inform the work—and vice versa. The code emphasises the importance of transparency and accountability: the responsibility to record and share your work is presented as fundamental to the role of the archivist. The other key takeaway from the SAA’s Code of Ethics is that it has clearly been designed to be a useful resource to its members, not a document gathering dust on a shelf. It’s succinct, with an easy-to-follow logic and helpful real-world examples.



Birmingham Museums Trust Citizens Jury

The BMT Citizens Jury initiative was the first of its kind to take place in a UK museum, although others have taken place in Germany. The independently facilitated jury invited randomly selected citizens to take part in a process that honestly questioned the point of the BMT. It’s an example of an organisation listening (to a radical degree) to citizens’ wants and needs and using them to inform its future direction. It commits the Museum Trust to meeting these needs, not a set of outcomes developed in isolation. What comes across clearly in both the report of the BMT Citizens Jury and the sessions carried out for Belfast Stories with the Equality Consultative Forum is how open and generous the citizens are inclined to be ... albeit with an ingrained suspicion of institutional railroading. This speaks to the importance of good faith and trust. People want to trust us ... we need to be worthy of that trust, which means working with people in good faith.



War Childhood Museum

The award-winning War Childhood Museum documents the stories of people who experienced childhood in conflict zones. The project started as a Facebook project to provide a platform for people to share their experiences, and has grown to encompass a physical museum in Sarajevo as well as several satellite projects and a growing collection. Over the course of that transition, the museum has evolved processes to gather and share stories. As the WCM collects first-person testimonies, it has a lot of useful learnings for Belfast Stories. In particular, because the Museum is dealing with traumatic stories and, often, traumatised storytellers, it places great emphasis on trauma-informed practice, care and safeguarding. The Museum is extremely open and public-facing about its process, how and what it collects and what happens to the material. It provides a trained team to facilitate the gathering process and also provides emotional and psychological support for donors and staff.



Decade of Centenaries

In 2011, the National Lottery Heritage Fund worked with the Community Relations Council to develop a set of principles to be used in selecting events to be marked in the Decade of Centenaries 2012-2022. These principles are a useful case study for Belfast Stories because they start with the understanding that heritage (and, by extension, narrative) is a process and adopt a ‘conscious pluralist approach’. The principles promote multiple perspectives over a single viewpoint, emphasise the importance of drawing on expertise and critical analysis and of locating interpretation within a broad historical context. Although the principles were clearly developed to address the interpretation of a particular (and particularly contentious) series of historical events, nonetheless they are an important precedent in how a pluralist approach can work, particularly when multiple perspectives are placed against a shared setting. For the Decade of Centenaries, this was the national and European setting of the time; for Belfast Stories, the ‘time and space’ curatorial framework provides a common thread.

3.3 Ethical Guidelines

The guidelines have been developed by taking core activities from the Story Cycle and Stories Engine and applying the working principles to them. Going into this process, we were particularly mindful that collecting and sharing stories of the Troubles would require careful working through of deeply sensitive issues and a clear set of ethical standards. As we have developed the guidelines, we have come to understand the importance of extending the same ethical standards to all stories and storytellers, regardless of the subject matter.

Invitation

We believe that the first contact between (future) storytellers and Belfast Stories is a significant moment. The invitation to engage needs to be honest and open. Consent can be an ongoing process, but at this point it is important that Belfast Stories communicates clearly the ask, the opportunity and the rights of users. This is also a moment to flag any issues and obtain consent for the initial phase of participation.

WORKING TRANSPARENTLY



- Be clear about the ask and the process
- Be honest about who (else) will be involved
- Be transparent about the project’s finances, governance and the return for the public—particularly where stories are used as part of revenue generating activities (i.e. we’re asking you to contribute your story for free ... what do you get back?)

WORKING RECIPROCALLY



- Welcome input and acknowledge that the story-gathering process is a collaboration
- Emphasise listening and bring a humility to the process—this should be a meeting of equals
- Make it easy for people to understand the different ways stories can be used—and the fact that not all stories will feature in the exhibition
- Make the process of opting-in / out user-friendly: avoid legal or other jargon

WORKING CAREFULLY



- Be informed about any potential issues and about the rights of users
- Design the process with the needs of storytellers in mind—make it as easy as possible for as many people as possible to get involved
- Be ready to adapt the invitation for different people and different contexts

WORKING RESPONSIVELY



- Offer a range of ways of engaging and be open to suggestions
- Make it clear to storytellers that they can change their mind about level of participation during the process—whether that’s about giving limited consent initially and then potentially extending that, consenting to a broad selection of uses and later narrowing the selection, or deciding they want to withdraw from the process entirely.

3.3 Ethical Guidelines

Collection

Story collection can happen in a number of ways. It might be self-led, where a storyteller writes, records or in another way creates their story to contribute to the project. It might be supported by a story collector who provides prompts and guidelines to draw out the story and records it for the storyteller. It might be facilitated by an artist or producer. However it happens, the process is as important as the outcome. Put simply, if people don't find the process to be positive, they won't want to contribute their stories. The following guidelines reflect trauma-informed practice.

WORKING TRANSPARENTLY



- Restate clearly the different ways people can choose to engage and the process of opting in / out
- Make it clear that storytellers are empowered to make choices: decision-making rests with them
- Aim to accept all stories, but make any limitations on what will be accepted clear and be ready to answer questions and help people to find creative workarounds (the most obvious limitations will be in relation to size / format e.g. we won't collect a huge object, but there may also be stories that have to be rejected because they break the law or infringe on somebody's rights.)

WORKING RECIPROCALLY



- Establish an open-door culture for the Stories Engine
- Recognise the privilege that comes with being part of an organisation and that this can create an inequitable power dynamic (e.g. 'experts' vs 'inexpert members of the public')
- Acknowledge and celebrate the authority and expertise of the storytellers: they are the holders of the Belfast Story/ies
- Work to ensure that the people collecting and facilitating stories reflect the diversity of the city, understanding that this is a long-term commitment and will take time to establish trust

WORKING CAREFULLY



- Wherever story collection takes place, invest time and resources in creating a warm, comfortable and safe environment, accessible to all
- Check in with storytellers about consent and their comfort with their chosen level of participation
- Provide easy-to-follow directions to guide people through the story collection process
- Provide emotional and mental health support to participants and collectors / facilitators. Normalise the idea that this is part of the process.

WORKING RESPONSIVELY



- One size doesn't fit all! Tailor collecting methods to the needs of different people and support as many different formats as possible
- Be open to including new and different formats; facilitate digital and physical collecting side by side
- Regularly review processes and facilities for story collection and allocate annual resource for updating / amending them

3.3 Ethical Guidelines

Processing

Once collected, Belfast Stories has a duty of care to the stories it holds. Part of this is how stories are processed: how they're tagged, what metadata is applied to them, how they enter the collection. The Interpretive Masterplan suggested that every story be tagged with time, place and emotion. It also allowed for the inclusion of secondary tags and the possibility of including demographic information, responding to the brief to ensure stories reflect the diversity of the city. Any secondary tagging needs to be approached with a great deal of thought and care, to avoid identity 'straitjackets' being introduced by the back door. At the same time, we recognise that this information could be of use to future researchers and storytellers. The question of how stories are stored with care is addressed in Section 4.

WORKING TRANSPARENTLY



- Document the processing methodology and make it publicly available
- Invite regular reviews of the process, including the choice of tags and other metadata that are used
- Set up an oversight group that includes a range of perspectives, from within and outside heritage / cultural fields

WORKING RECIPROCALLY



- Commit to preserving the authentic meaning of each story and respecting the integrity of the storyteller ... don't impose any post-rationalisation or sanitisation
- Partner with other organisations engaged in this kind of work and share learning and resources
- Consider a generous approach to the idea of ownership: if copyright rests with Belfast Stories, can Belfast Stories adopt a Creative Commons licence to share as much material as possible? (See Section 4: IP and Rights)

WORKING CAREFULLY



- Acknowledge that the custodianship and stewardship of people's stories is a sensitive and important task
- Embed a culture of care for stories in the organisation: every single story and storyteller is valued

WORKING RESPONSIVELY



- Ensure that there is an accessible and responsive interface in place for the public to explore and work with the story collection
- Regularly review processes and facilities and allocate annual resource for updating / amending them

3.3 Ethical Guidelines

Curation

Belfast Stories wants to avoid introducing an institutional ‘we’ that would elide the presence and role of people in the processing, selection and presentation of stories. We will be transparent about the involvement of a curatorial team (and others involved in the Stories Engine), flag their input and share their process. This is never about making team members feel exposed or vulnerable, but about making the work behind the scenes visible. A collective approach to curation helps to cultivate a supportive culture, making it easier to ask and answer difficult questions and to take interesting and brave decisions.

WORKING TRANSPARENTLY



- Be upfront about the role of curators and the Stories Engine and make their inputs part of the experience

WORKING RECIPROCALLY



- Make sure that we don’t inadvertently endow the curators with a position of privilege. This is an important job, but on the same level as the contribution of storytellers. Belfast Stories needs both to thrive.
- Encourage curators to tell their stories so they can experience the Story Cycle from the perspective of storytellers
- Establish collective curatorial decision-making as the norm

WORKING CAREFULLY



- Support curators and empower them to make decisions
- Create a supportive environment that welcomes different perspectives and invites challenge

WORKING RESPONSIVELY



- Take curation out into the city, rather than working behind closed doors
- Regular workshops and with collaborators and partners to discuss curatorial principles and explore new approaches, responding to live issues and opportunities
- Regularly review processes and facilities and allocate annual resource for updating / amending them

3.3 Ethical Guidelines

Presentation

The mark of a good story is that it elicits an emotional response. People (storytellers, staff, visitors) will have emotional responses to the presentation of content, particularly in the paid visitor attraction, and we need to respond with empathy. The presentation will also require curatorial decisions about which stories are included, where they are located, and which stories sit next to each other. There are particular sensitivities relating to stories of conflict, but the reality is that a careful approach needs to be extended to all stories. The issue of having stories representing different perspectives and beliefs and, potentially, very different feelings (joy next to sorrow, for example) has been discussed at length. While we believe that these juxtapositions are part of the identity and the impact of Belfast Stories (in the words of one of the members of the Equality Consultative Forum, ‘that’s what life is like’) we also understand that this could be difficult for many and needs to be approached with awareness and sensitivity.

WORKING TRANSPARENTLY



- Be clear about the decisions that have informed the presentation and the choices made with regard to the selection and co-location of stories, particularly (though not exclusively) with reference to conflict-related stories

WORKING RECIPROCALLY



- Offer storytellers free / discounted access to the exhibition
- Make it easy for storytellers to find their stories in the exhibition
- Set aside times for storytellers and their families to visit the exhibition

WORKING CAREFULLY



- Belfast Stories is committed to not sanitising stories. However, some stories of an explicit or graphic nature may be inappropriate for a general audience. Any such material will be the subject of consultation and we will look for ways of sharing it without compromising the safety of, for example, children and vulnerable people.
- Provide support tools and resources for visitors (e.g. content advisories) and have trained staff in the attraction to welcome, answer questions, help people navigate and provide emotional support
- Provide context for stories, not to either amplify or minimise someone’s story, but to provide background that can help people engage in good faith
- Set aside times for people with specific needs to visit the exhibition (e.g. relaxed slots for neurodivergent visitors)

WORKING RESPONSIVELY



- Design a highly flexible exhibition structure, in line with the commitment to present as many different stories as possible in as many different formats as possible
- Commit to a regular cycle of change in the paid attraction
- Create space for people to respond to the stories

3.3 Ethical Guidelines

Authorship, Collaboration & Acknowledgement

Belfast Stories will attribute authorship to storytellers: even if storytellers choose anonymity, we will respect the voice of the creator and never subsume them within an institutional voice or compromise their integrity. This also extends to naming or otherwise recognising the authorship of curatorial contributions e.g. the person who wrote contextual material for a part of the exhibition. We will be clear where stories have been edited in any way. Recognising that sometimes a story can be a collective effort, we will acknowledge the participation of collaborators. This approach extends from the idea of radical facilitation: the role of the Stories Engine is to facilitate, but never to get in the way of, or obscure, the storytellers and their stories.

WORKING TRANSPARENTLY



- Assign an author/s to each story, even if that author is ‘anonymous’
- Flag the input of curators
- We anticipate that sometimes a story may need to be edited for length. If a story has been edited, this will be communicated in a simple and straightforward way.
- We are committed to not sanitising stories. Where a story raises difficult issues, or contains potentially confusing language or content, we will address this through annotation / contextualisation rather than editing.

WORKING RECIPROCALLY



- Be generous in acknowledging the contribution of storytellers—people should feel ownership and pride in their stories

WORKING CAREFULLY



- Contributing a story means people are putting a piece of themselves out in the world. We need to recognise this vulnerability and ensure that the principle ‘all stories and all storytellers are valued’ is entrenched in the organisation.

WORKING RESPONSIVELY



- Although community identity is important to people, Belfast Stories will emphasise the individuality of each storyteller and will make no assumptions, nor invite assumptions, that any individual speaks for a wider group or community. If a story is created through collaboration and / or as a group effort this will be acknowledged but, again, making it clear that the group speaks for themselves.
- Acknowledgement matters to people. We want to change paradigms about how people’s contributions are recognised and promote the idea that Belfast Stories is a collective creative effort.

3.3 Ethical Guidelines

Communication & Promotion

Communication is a thread that runs through the whole Story Cycle. Good communication is vital at each stage of the process: ensuring storytellers are informed, confident of their rights and options (including the right to change their mind), supported, positive. But communication and promotion also have an important place in making sure that the cycle continues ... both process and stories need to be shared externally in a way that is consistent with the values and ethical principles of the project and encourages people to get involved. Making it obvious that Belfast Stories is open to (and positively thrives on) input and challenge is an ongoing task, not a short-term effort. It needs to become part of the organisation’s culture that every communication that goes out explicitly invites input / engagement in some way.

WORKING TRANSPARENTLY



- Regularly share updates on what’s going on in Belfast Stories and be open about difficulties as well as successes
- Make it easy for people to follow processes and methodologies e.g. by publishing them online, by making it second nature to explain the work ... in a way that’s accessible to the general public

WORKING RECIPROCALLY



- Approach all communication in good faith
- Set up a citizens’ forum that brings people together to test Belfast Stories’ propositions and interrogate its processes and methods

WORKING CAREFULLY



- What we say and how we say it is vital. We can (and should) be funny and real, but never glib, never losing sight of the responsibility of caring for storytellers and their stories.

WORKING RESPONSIVELY



- Remember that we are committed to meeting people where they are and think about this when planning communications and promoting the project
- Use communication and promotion as an opportunity to start a dialogue, create a new story

3.3 Ethical Guidelines

Partnerships

The Stories Audit carried out by Starling Start (May 2023) is an excellent resource in terms of identifying existing story collections / collectors in Belfast and outlining barriers and recommendations in relation to accessing collections and partnership working. The following points are drawn extensively from Starling Start’s report, augmented by follow up discussions during the RIBA 2 design development phase.

WORKING TRANSPARENTLY



- Acknowledge the wealth of storytelling and story collecting organisations across Belfast and their contribution to the ‘story ecosystem’ of the city ... Belfast Stories could not exist without them

WORKING RECIPROCALLY



- The Stories Audit flagged the danger of duplicating existing offerings and advocated cultivating a sense of co-ownership between collection holders
- Before Belfast Stories presents material already in the public realm, the team needs to ask itself honestly: is our presentation going to tell people something new about this, or help people to see it in a new light? Or should we be signposting other collections in the city and sending people to them?
- Work with partner organisations in an open way: share platforms, spaces and resources. Don’t gatekeep!

WORKING CAREFULLY



- Treat all partners, no matter how big or small, as valued collaborators
- Ensure that Belfast Stories standards and policies reflect or exceed best practice—making it as easy as possible to work alongside partner organisations

WORKING RESPONSIVELY



- Existing story collection organisations, while typically open to the idea of partnership working, have limited resources. Belfast Stories needs to add to the overall resource, rather than placing additional demands on existing teams.
- Listen to existing organisations about how Belfast Stories could support them or augment their resources
- Co-design future partnerships on the basis of mutual support and benefit
- Initiate new partnerships to address gaps in the stories and reach people who might not otherwise come forward with their stories.

4. Practical Considerations / Next Steps

4.1 Stories Engine Set Up

The immediate next step is to test the implications of this Ethical Framework with individuals and organisations who are already working with stories and storytelling across the city. Our ambition is to develop a project manifesto that will further illustrate what it means to take our principles and apply them to the day-to-day activities of Belfast Stories. We believe that this testing will hone our principles and processes sufficiently to support the establishment of the first iteration of the Stories Engine in the coming months: that is, a working body explicitly set up to collect, process and store stories. Initially, the work of the Stories Engine will feed into the work of the design teams, with the longer view that the stories gathered will form the nucleus of Belfast Stories’ collection. This ‘incubator’ Stories Engine will also enable us to test and design the next, ‘permanent’ iteration of the Stories Engine, which will need to be in place to collect all of the content required before Belfast Stories opens to the public and on an ongoing basis.

4.2 Collection Management

A collection needs to be stored, cared for, easy to access and use.

The most important point to underline is that by asking for, and accepting, stories, Belfast Stories has an ethical responsibility and duty of care towards those stories and the storytellers who contributed them. This requires the creation of a Collection Management Plan and System that addresses the organisation’s actions at every point along the acquisition-accession-storage-disposal continuum. Collections Management is closely tied to governance, so we suggest that this plan is developed when the governance structure for the project is in place.

Storage

At this point, it seems likely that the collection will comprise stories in both physical and digital form. As a thought experiment, we considered what it would mean if stories were only accepted in digital formats. However, this feels against the principles of the project (trying to be as open and responsive as possible to what ‘story’ is and the format it appears in) and doesn’t mitigate the need for storage, it just changes the infrastructure.

That said, we’ve also applied the values and principles of this Ethical Framework to find creative approaches to storage, which—whether it’s about storing physical assets or data—is space- and resource-hungry and raises flags in relation to sustainability. A full Collection Management Plan should set out the process of deaccessioning and disposal—how long will material be kept, who decides if material should no longer be stored, what happens to the material afterwards etc.

On-site Storage

Although the schedule of accommodation for the building doesn’t include collection storage, we suggest allocating a small area with a controlled environment adjacent to the exhibition space where stories in physical formats can be securely housed prior to being put on or taken off display. This space is important in making change / story rotation easy for staff to manage. Without it, there will be limitations on how often stories can be changed.

There is an option where some degree of data storage is accommodated on-site. By this we mean secure data servers with back ups housed in a controlled environment. We recommend a study into the viability of this be carried out in the next design phase.

Off-site Storage

With regards to physical stories, there are two options worth considering (likely in parallel). One is that physical stories are typically accepted or housed on a temporary basis for display in the visitor attraction. When they are taken off display, they will be returned to the storyteller. This kind of arrangement will require some resource to manage, but can use systems developed by galleries and museums for loans.

The other option is that in an instance where Belfast Stories and a storyteller agree that a physical story should be housed in a collection permanently (ie not returned to the storyteller), that Belfast Stories develops a partnership with a professional repository / collecting body to house the Belfast Stories Collection.

4.2 Collection Management

For off-site data storage, again, we recommend a study into the requirements be carried out in the next design phase. One important decision that needs to be made is the length of time Belfast Stories is prepared to commit to storing digital stories. In perpetuity? Or for a shorter, clearly specified length of time. It’s worth noting that some storytellers might welcome the idea that their story will not be kept forever.

On-site Access

The RIBA2 design reports identify some key story repository points where people can access and explore multiple stories (this is distinct from the ways stories might be presented or encountered across the site). The Mediatheque and Stories Lounge are spaces where people could browse the full database of stories according to their own interest, rather than through curatorial choice.

Off-site Access

An online portal for the Belfast Stories Collection means that people all over the world can access the stories; more, that the stories can become the basis of all kinds of meaningful connections and creative journeys.

We suggest that the portal is based on Mitchell Whitelaw’s concept of the generous interface (2015). Whitelaw’s core finding was that the then standard GLAM model of database + search box is limited and ‘ungenerous’ and doesn’t reveal the richness of a collection or work in a human-centred way. The ‘ungenerous interface’ tends to assume people already know what they’re looking for and doesn’t allow for moments of serendipity.

In Issue 11 of Europeana Tech Insights (2019)¹, David Haskiya summarised four qualities of the generous interface:

- Show first, don’t ask (provide rich overviews without search)
- Provide samples and clues (using collection content)
- Show relationships (between collection features)
- Provide rich primary content (deliver on the promise)

This points towards a space where stories can be browsed, discovered, explored ... but also where new stories or new works can be created, either by bringing stories together or by using stories as the basis for something new. Unlike some of the precedent projects for this approach (Rijksstudio, Smithsonian Open Access), Belfast Stories will have to require consent from every storyteller for their story to a) be accessible online and b) be used in new works. We imagine that a larger number will consent to the first and a smaller to the second, but that this is still worth pursuing.

4.3 Resources

Time and again during the public consultation, participants flagged the importance of people to the success of Belfast Stories. In the Equality Consultative Forum sessions, where we went into the story collection process in more detail, participants agreed that having the ‘right’ person to talk to, to help you, would make all the difference and could be the deciding factor in whether you would contribute a story. So it’s no exaggeration to say that designing the team for the Stories Engine is a make-or-break process for the project.

Living up to the values and principles argues for a team makeup and dynamic that emphasises the collective and builds in change. Having diverse and inclusive teams takes work—although we believe the effort will be rewarded.

Because Belfast Stories is a mix of different functions and facilities, we should seek to learn from a wide range of cultural and other organisations in the city. At the same time, there can be a tendency for new organisations to default to what’s known, what other people are doing, whereas the nature of Belfast Stories may mean creating some systems that are unique to this project.

4.3 Resources

The structure of the Stories Engine team is still in development, but work on the Ethical Framework has flagged some key positions and considerations:

Collectors

- Reflect the diversity of the city (age, race, gender, sexual orientation, physical needs, neurodiversity +++)
- Rotating: bringing in new people regularly
- Compensated for their work and acknowledged as essential to the process—sometimes field collectors are perceived as lower in the hierarchy

Curators

- Reflect the diversity of the city
- Three as minimum to avoid silos
- From different professional backgrounds, bringing in a variety of perspectives and skills
- Work as a collective, with shared responsibility and decision-making
- Welcome secondments and exchanges, from local and international organisations

Creative facilitators

- Reflect the diversity of the city
- Rotating: bringing in new people regularly
- Cultivate partnerships with existing organisations and projects and look at sharing staff
- Include practitioners from all artforms and creative practices

Trauma support / councillors

- Facilitate regular sessions for storytellers, staff and visitors
- Train staff in trauma-informed practice

IP / legal specialist

- Advise on rights and IP issues with the goal of sharing the stories as widely and generously as possible
- Ensure that storytellers and staff feel informed, safe and supported

4.4 IP and Legal Issues

It will be important to get professional advice on Intellectual Property and other legal issues.

The Ethical Framework assumes that the likely scenario will be that Belfast Stories asks storytellers to assign copyright of their stories to the organisation (either for a limited period of time or for the maximum copyright period) while acknowledging the moral rights of the author:

- Right of paternity
- Right of integrity
- Right not to suffer false attribution
- Right to privacy

The organisation needs to understand the different uses of stories and be clear about which rights it is asking storytellers to assign, as well as the implications. In keeping with the values and working principles, we propose that the opportunity for sharing stories via a Creative Commons licence be explored.

The project aspires to be open and generous in relation to accepting stories and to approach the work in good faith. However, working in good faith also means protecting our staff. While we think it will be a rare occurrence, there is a scenario where someone submits a story that may break the law—because it includes obscene material, for example—or that compromises or infringes a third party’s rights. We need to make sure that staff (particularly story collectors) understand what to do and are supported in the event this happens.

It is also important to flag issues around anonymity and disclosure. In 2014, Oral History Network Ireland issued a response to the Belfast Project case that underscored the importance of informed consent:

The Boston College Belfast Project case highlights the fact that no confidentiality agreement or deposit agreement supersedes the law of the state. Participants may be offered closure only within the confines of the law and, as illustrated clearly by this case, the law is subject to change. Participants must be apprised of the possible implications of the information that they are providing in order to make informed decisions about participation, anonymity, closure periods and the type of future access or dissemination that they will allow.

It was interesting to note the observation from the workshop **Dealing with Difficult Pasts: Institutional Abuse**, that *official structures (enquiry reports and organisational archives) only tell part of the story or the story from a particular angle, usually top down*. Given Belfast Stories’ emphasis on bottom-up stories and lived experience, we should consider what it means to approach these and other legal issues from the point of view of individual storytellers. At the very least it should mean devising a thoughtful and accessible explanation of the issues requiring informed consent and making it easy for people to understand what they are (or are not) consenting to.

5. References

References

The Ethical Framework builds on a number of key pieces of work, all of which have helped the project get to where it is now. With every phase we complete, we understand more about who we are and how we want to work. In particular, the ongoing design and public consultation work have moved key aspects of the project from being very theoretical to being much more grounded ... although there remains a lot of work still to come. The design and consultation processes have helped to address some questions, raised new ones but, perhaps most importantly, given us the context to explore more specific scenarios with the public e.g. *how would you like to tell your story? what might make you think twice about giving your story to Belfast Stories?*

The **Story Collection Framework** (Lord, January 2022) articulated the issues and sensitivities around collecting first-person stories and established a set of guiding principles for the project, which in turn informed a set of story gathering pilots. The guiding principles underlined the importance of a people-centred approach and emphasised the need for transparency and honesty in all processes. A direct line can be traced from this work in 2021/2 to the values (Project Charter, June 2024) and working principles used to shape the Ethical Guidelines. The Story Collection Framework also made a series of recommendations for the work going forward, including an initial set of key ethical parameters and potential approaches to governance and collection infrastructure. These recommendations were reviewed, reflected on and have also fed into the development of this Ethical Framework.

Guiding Principles

- Equality and Inclusiveness
- Increased Accessibility
- Pressure Free
- Respect
- People centred

Ethical Parameters

- Authenticity
- Transparency
- Listening
- Methodology
- Stewardship
- Culturally respectful
- Multiple perspectives
- Confidentiality, privacy and data protection
- Access and use
- Copyright

The **Stories Audit** (Starling Start, May 2023) mapped a range of organisations and bodies involved in collecting and provided important insights for partnering and collaborating with existing organisations. The work identified a number of ethical considerations, for example questions of consent and ownership, that have been an ongoing part of discussions that have led to the creation of this Ethical Framework. The audit also provided a very useful matrix of barriers to participation and while the Ethical Framework doesn’t pretend to have solutions to all of them, we recognise that the success of Belfast Stories story gathering initiatives rests on an ongoing determination to address these barriers.

The **Interpretive Masterplan** (Barker Langham & RAA, July 2024) established a curatorial framework for the project and also provided significantly more detail around the visitor experience. With this in place, more definition around the

story gathering process was also possible: taking it from something largely theoretical to something more specific (albeit still at an early stage of development). Building from the people-centred guiding principles described in the Story Collection Framework, the Interpretive Masterplan emphasised the importance of reciprocity—the contract of trust that Belfast Stories needs to establish with every story contributor or potential contributor. In moving away from chronological or subject-based themes in favour of the two overarching organising principles of time and space, the Masterplan also considered this might affect how content would be organised and processed, as well as imagining scenarios in which story gathering could happen.

The **Engagement Plan** (Barker Langham & RAA, July 2024), developed alongside the Interpretive Masterplan, set out a series of approaches for engaging the public with the project. Although these approaches were initially intended to inform engagement in its widest sense (including public consultation), they have also shaped the thinking around the Ethical Framework, bearing in mind that story gathering is an essential part of the project’s engagement with the city. Again, there is a throughline of people-centred processes, with respect, recognition and reflection identified as three essentials for engagement. The Engagement Plan also identified a number of emerging priorities, which have been folded into the development of the Ethical Framework.

- Meeting communities where they are
- Different formats for engaging
- Safeguarding
- Mental health support
- Listening not asking
- Universality
- Continuity

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