

A REVIEW OF
BELFAST CITY COUNCIL'S
CULTURAL MULTI-ANNUAL
GRANTS PROGRAMME



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Introduction

Belfast City Council's Cultural Multi-annual Grants (CMAG) programme is now in the fourth and final year of its first cycle.

In April 2023 Belfast City Council appointed Smith and Kent consulting to carry out a review of CMAG.

Due to the challenges of the past four years, not least the Covid-19 pandemic which meant that grant recipients were unable to deliver planned activity and outcomes that would contribute to the council's A City Imagining cultural strategy, the review focuses primarily on the grants process including:

1. What worked well for who, how and why
2. What could be built on or done better for who, how and why

Evidence of impact is also considered where available and reasonable.

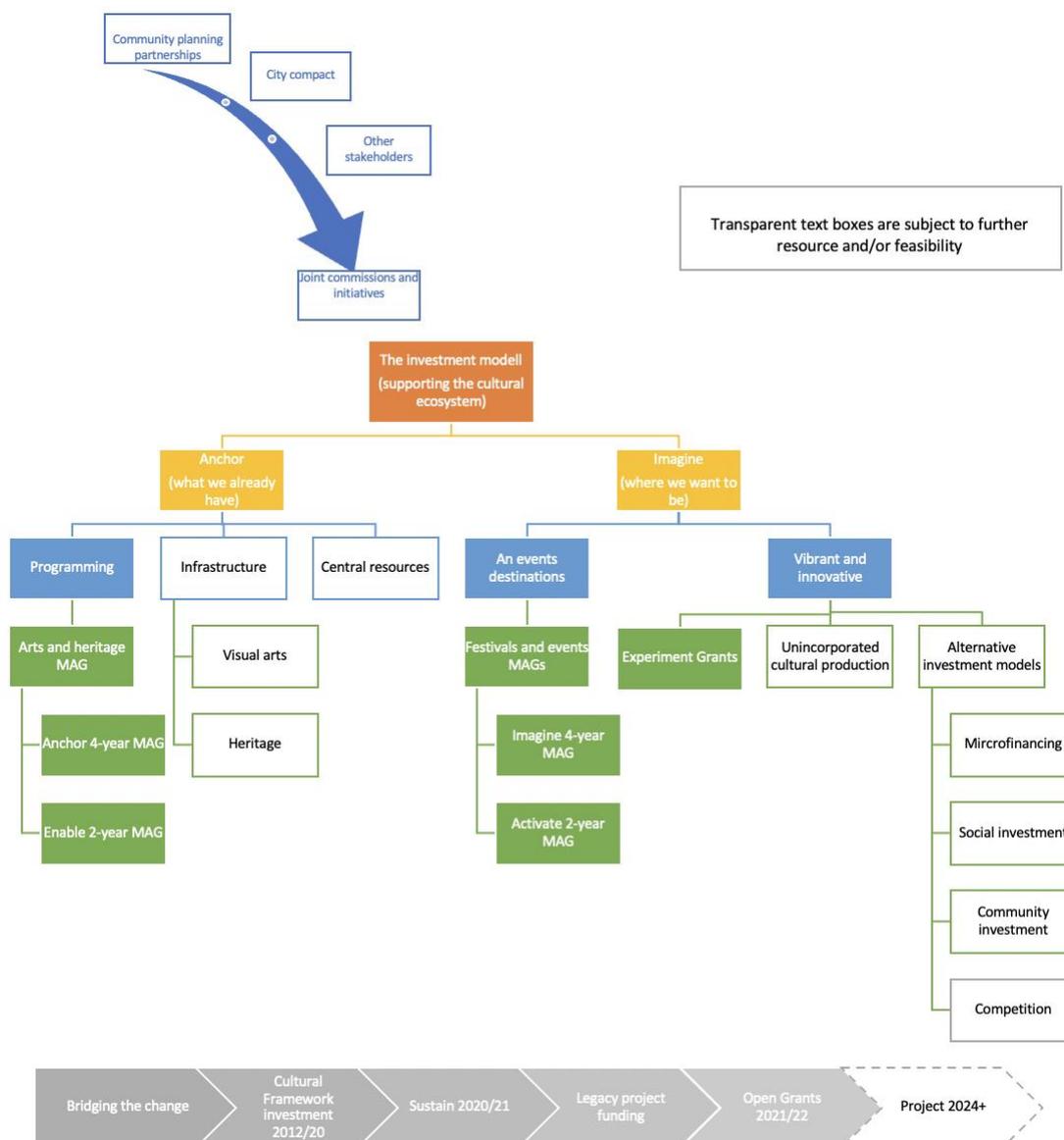
Quotations have been reproduced verbatim.

Background

The Cultural Investment Programme 2020–24

CMAG is one strand of Belfast City Council’s Cultural Investment Programme 2020–24. The purpose of the Investment Model is “to deliver cultural transformation for the city.”

It suggests a range of investment options – long- and short-term; strategic and project – for different beneficiaries – new; existing; growing; unincorporated – and different purposes, which can be broken down in to two broad strands: anchoring what we already have and imagining where we want to be.



Key interdependent strands included:

- phased transition from the previous Core Multi-annual Funding (CMAF) programme
- revisions to project funding to support the transition and lay a foundation for large, longer-term project grants

- new micro-funding and alternative investment in to support strategic gaps and areas of need (such as visual arts, heritage and unincorporated cultural production)
- monitoring and evaluation
- relationship management
- wraparound developmental support

The Investment Programme recommends that each investment strand is “reviewed annually with a minimum focus on financial reconciliation, taking into account delivery across the period, resulting in a decision to continue, discontinue or amend funding”.

A City Imagining 2020–30

The Investment Programme contributes to A City Imagining, the council’s cultural strategy. It states that “evaluation of our existing programme has revealed the need to adapt our one size fits all model” and “a new approach to partnership working [must be] applied to cultural development and investment”. There are also four published investment priorities.

- Anchor: support the cultural infrastructure for a thriving cultural ecosystem
- Activate: empower civic and sectoral engagement, skills and capacity building in order to support inclusive growth
- Experiment: facilitate innovation, catalyst projects and new ideas
- Open: support outward-facing opportunities, including marketing and international cooperation

A City Imagining also aims to establish Belfast as “a unique events destination [with] a Belfast portfolio of festivals and events. This will consist of up to five signature and 12 growth events each year. It will also include continued investment in smaller festivals.” This was based on recommendations from research carried out by Festivals and Events International (FEI). Based on its experience working in other cities and using standard industry classifications, FEI also defined the size and impact of signature and growth festival, including across indicators such as turnover, audience, employment and volunteers and outlined the amount and duration of investment required to support them.

Cultural Multi-annual Grants

Belfast City Council launched its Cultural Multi-annual Grants (CMAG) programme in 2019.

There are two strands of CMAG grants:

1. grants for festivals and events and
2. grants for arts and heritage organisations

There are also two tiers within each grant providing either two- or four-year grants.

The following table summarises the grants that have been made during this cycle. A full list of organisations that received funding is included at appendix 1.

Strand	Tier	Name	Number of grants		Value of grants	
			2019/20– 20/21	2021/22– 22/23	2019/20– 20/21	2021/22– 22/23
Festivals and events	4-year funding for festivals and events	Imagine	4		£635,000	
	2-year funding for festivals and events	Activate	12	15	£480,250	£473,425
Arts and heritage	4-year funding for cultural organisations	Anchor	9		£791,783	
	2-year funding for cultural organisations	Enable	29	27	£566,816	£564,562
Total			96		£3,511,836	

Arts and heritage grants

According to the Investment Programme, “Arts and heritage MAGs are designed to help sustain our existing cultural offer, and in recognition of the current operating environment, they are not required to demonstrate growth.”

Arts and heritage grants are unrestricted, which means that the council does not ask grantees to specify how they will use the funding, as long as it is used responsibly.

Festivals and events grants

The Investment Programme states that “Festivals and events MAGs are designed to develop large events and festivals that will help Belfast become an events destination. Applicants will have to demonstrate how they will grow their audience by the end of the contract period”, up to 10,000 or between 5 (for Activate) and 10 (for Imagine) per cent, whichever is greater.

In addition to arts and heritage activity, festivals and events grants are open to “cultural expression or celebration in the widest sense of culture” such as sports, language and food. This was the first time that the Culture Unit’s multi-annual grants had been open to non-arts and -heritage organisations, and the budget for CMAG was increased by consolidating a number of budgets previously allocated to events and festivals.

Festivals and events grants are restricted as many of the funded organisations also run other festivals, events and programmes of work. This means that organisations must specify how they will spend their funding. However, it can be spent on core costs (attributable to the funded festival or event), and the council allows the grantees to reprofile as required.

Unsuccessful applicants

There were 49 unsuccessful applications for CMAG including 32 for the arts and heritage strand and 17 for festivals and events.

Transition

Transition was an interim funding programme put in place in 2021 to help support organisations that had previously received CMAF funding but who did not make it in to the new CMAG portfolio because they were ineligible to apply or their application was unsuccessful.

There were 11 Transition recipients who received funding alongside support for organisational development provided by an external consultant. Funding totalled £168,000, with grants ranging from £30,000 to £60,000 based on each organisation's CMAF funding deficit capped at council procurement and grant ceilings.

Administration

Belfast City Council grants have been managed and administered centrally by the Central Grants (CGU) since 2011.

The council's Culture and Arts Unit is the budget holder and is also responsible for strategic direction and programme management of CMAG.

Grantees apply for and manage their grants via an online grants portal. The current online grants portal will come to an end on August 2024. Feedback from this review can be used to inform the specification to tender for a new online grants portal. However, in the interim, minimal changes can be made to the system.

Operational context

CMAG grantees received their letters of offer five days before the first Covid-19 lockdown which, according to one grant recipient, "made the original plans obsolete almost immediately". This seriously restricted their ability to deliver planned activities and outcomes. It also damaged the capacity of organisations, for example, through earned income lost, disrupted relationships with audiences, volunteers and other supporters and furloughed staff.

Belfast City Council culture, arts, heritage, events and tourism development functions were also undergoing a significant structural review. In 2019, CMAG was designed and assessed by the Tourism, Culture, Arts and Heritage Unit in partnership with the City Events Unit. In 2021/22, two new units were formed, the Culture and Arts Unit and the Tourism and Events Unit, with management of CMAG retained by the former. Staff from the previous units were redeployed and new staff recruited. No staff members who were involved in the design, initiation or assessment of CMAG are in the Culture and Arts team.

What we did

Feedback from grantees

Organisations that had successfully applied for CMAG were invited to complete an online survey that asked them to reflect on their experience of the application process and administration and management of the grant as well as changes to their organisation over the past four years.

This survey was completed by 34 grantees.

The findings of the survey were then analysed and shared at four workshops. These were attended by 23 participants from 20 grantee organisations. A further 11 grantees took part in one-to-one, semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the workshops and interviews was to dive deeper in to the survey findings and consider what could be done differently in the next round of CMAG. A list of all grantees who participated in workshops or interviews is included at appendix 2.

Feedback from unsuccessful applicants

Organisations that had been unsuccessful applying for CMAG were also asked to complete an online survey. Eight organisations completed the survey, including two Transition recipients, and semi-structured interviews were also carried out with three unsuccessful applicants that were also Transition recipients.

Feedback from Belfast City Council

Smith and Kent carried out semi-structured interviews and focus groups with key Belfast City Council staff including:

- CGU
- the Culture and Arts Unit
- staff from the Tourism, Culture, Arts and Heritage Unit who had been involved in the design or assessment of CMAG
- senior management

Desk research

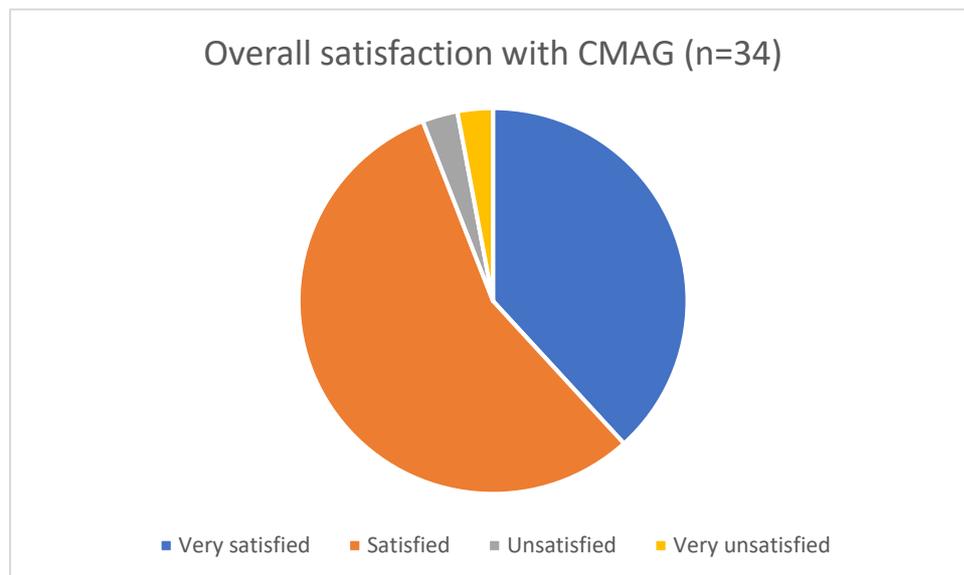
Primary research was supplemented by desk research including but not limited to:

- CMAG guidance notes and application form
- The Cultural Investment Model
- Outline proposal for Transition funding
- CMAG monitoring data
- An internal review of CMAG in 2021
- Draft CMAG evaluation framework
- Draft recommendations for CMAG wraparound support
- A City Imagining cultural strategy

What we learned

Overall satisfaction

According to the survey, 94 per cent of grant recipients were satisfied with CMAG overall, including 38 per cent who were very satisfied. 3 per cent (one organisation) was unsatisfied, and 3 per cent (one organisation) was very unsatisfied.



Levels of satisfaction were also evident in workshops and interviews, with many participants keen to share their appreciation of the council's support.

Overall, festivals and events grant recipients appeared to be more satisfied with CMAG. This may be because arts and heritage grantees were more likely to disagree with the eligibility criteria, particularly when it limited the amount of funding they could apply for, and it is likely there also be a correlation between the amount of funding awarded and satisfaction. (The average Imagine grant was £158,750; the average Anchor was £87,976; Activate, £35,321; and Enable, £20,203.) Unsurprisingly, unsuccessful applicants were also less satisfied.

Within Belfast City Council there was also general satisfaction with CMAG. However, there is also awareness that it is difficult, even unfair to judge its performance at this intersection given the unprecedented environment in which it has operated.

The following sections provide a more detailed overview of the findings across key stages of the grants process.

Main benefits of CMAG

Feedback from grant recipients

"Multi-year funding makes a huge difference to our organisation's ability to plan, develop and react to the unforeseen"

"Moving from project funding to CMAG is not a big increase in grant value but was in terms of application time and reporting."

“Multi annual core funding is always very valuable and we appreciate what we got and the Council's ongoing commitment to multi year funding. It shows trust in the sector and again other funders' could learn.”

Grantees identified the main benefits of CMAG as:

- Unrestricted funds. Many organisations use CMAG as a contribution towards core operating costs, such as staff and rent, that are essential to programme delivery but are difficult to secure through other funding. Even festivals and events recipients tended to refer to the funding as unrestricted as the council permits allocation to core costs. Grantees generally felt that this conveyed Belfast City Council's trust in the sector. This was particularly valued during Covid when the council supported CMAG grantees to rapidly adapt their activities and budgets to better serve their organisation and beneficiaries during a time of crisis.
- Security. Consultees noted that there is no comparable multi-annual fund in NI and even across the UK, only a small number of trusts and foundations provide multi-year grants. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), who is the main funder of most arts organisations, for example, provide annual core funding. CMAG is therefore “the one constant among many different pots” Indeed, some organisations felt that a slight gain in actual funding through CMAG two-year funding was not a substitute for slightly less three- or four-year funding they had benefited from under CMAF (for example, one organisation described a couple of thousand pounds uplift over two years as “bittersweet”).
- Planning. Multi-annual funding increases the relative value of the award by allowing organisations to plan ahead – providing security for staff or enabling them to book artists and events well in advance, for example.
- Reduced administration. Some organisations described how it freed up time and “head space” that would otherwise be spent “scrabbling around” for alternative funding. One organisation reported previously applying for three small grants twice a year; now, two-year CMAG has replaced 12 grants with one.
- Civic endorsement. CMAG was regarded as “a badge of some status”, giving “credibility” and “kudos” – “Our city believes in us, our city backs what we do”.
- Leverage. Other grantees found more time and security allowed them to be “flight of foot to pursue opportunities as they arise” (in that case, including a friends' scheme, corporate sponsorship and US partners). Several grantees found it helped them successfully apply for other funding or actively used CMAG to encourage other funders to “step up”. Imagine grantees in particular appear to have leveraged their status as the city's “signature” events.

CMAG may have been particularly beneficial where their strategic direction aligned with A City Imagining and the ambitions of the fund.

“CMAG funds allowed us to put our strategic ambitions in to action as it allowed us to look over a 4-year period.”

“CMAG has been the icing on a flat cake – we had direction and knew what we wanted – this helped us rise and take it there.”

Imagine festivals and events in particular reported significant development (for example, at least three out of four Imagine festivals expanded their festival duration and reach) despite the extenuating operating environment.

“The strategic development of our festival – without the CMAG investment this would not have happened. It allowed us to grow audiences, develop/employ artists, co-create with citizens, produce innovative audience experiences, experiment during Covid 19, create new partnerships and leverage additional funding.”

Unless funding was used to employ a staff member, other grantees found it more difficult to directly attribute impact to CMAG (as CMAG was “a drop in the ocean” towards their overall programme or funding pot). They were able, however, to identify a myriad of outcomes arising from their overall activity that contribute to the A City Imagining outcomes, in particular A City Belonging.¹

Feedback from Belfast City Council

Belfast City Council’s investment increase from £1.5m per year peak CMAF to £2.5m per year under CMAG. However, CMAG was intended as a “different way” of funding, “greater than the sum of the grants”.

Consultees from Belfast City Council agreed with the benefits identified by grant recipients. Furthermore, they identified:

- A number of organisations received a substantial increase in funding. This included venues and community arts as well as festivals and events.
- A number of organisations that were previously in receipt of short-term project funding, including relatively new organisations, successfully secured CMAG, benefitting from additional security, credibility, leverage and so on.
- “The sector is not static – outcomes and organisations are not static”, and the diversity of organisations funded (in terms of size, nature, length of time established) supported the culture ecosystem in a change from entrenched CMAF and ACNI annual funding portfolios. This was most evident in the festivals and events awards which included, for example, sports and science, and which were more risk aware, assessing “potential as well as quality”.
- Funded organisations became more confident, “It changed how they saw themselves and they flourished”.
- The council trusted its CMAG clients to adapt their programmes to need during the pandemic.
- The council has a “much more coherent narrative” in terms of how and why it invests in cultural organisations.

Council consultees also agreed that Imagine festivals in particular had grown, innovated and increased their reach and reputation.

“It aimed to draw out festivals and events to build them up and grow. There were some surprises in the initial tranche and watching afterwards, the investment seems to have been a catalyst for festivals.”

¹ A City Belonging is about an inclusive city where everyone actively participates in cultural life; A City Challenging is about strengthening residents’ connection to the place they call home; A City Creating is about sector capacity and collaboration; and A City Exploring is about Belfast’s connection to the rest of the world.

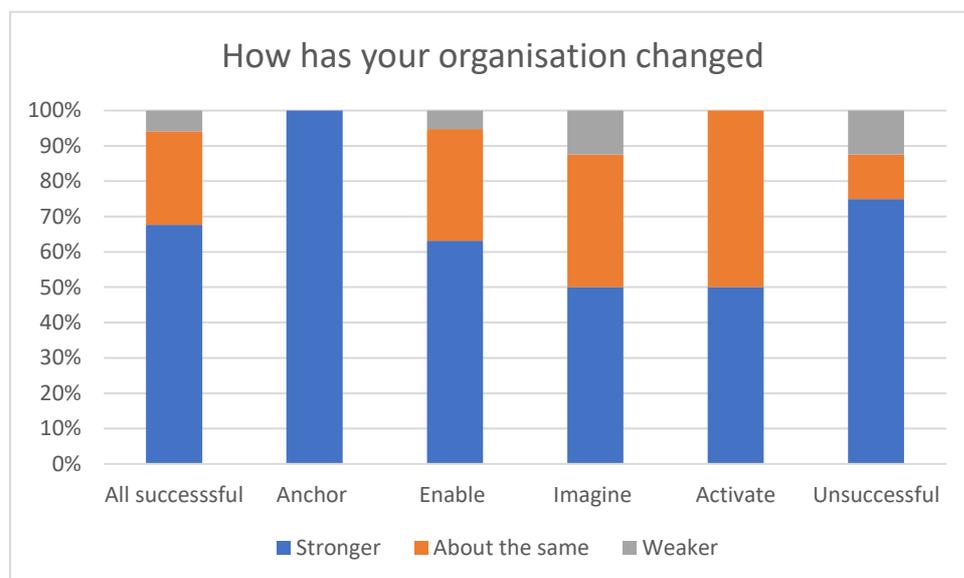
Changes in organisations

In the survey, successful and unsuccessful applicants were asked to consider how their organisation had changed over the past four years.

For most successful applicants, CMAG is a small percentage of their turnover, and while changes cannot be directly attributed to CMAG, it is a contribution to the whole, sometimes exceeding its actual value due to leverage, security and credibility.

“It’s not all to do with CMAG, but it has got something to do with CMAG.”

68 per cent of grantees felt that their organisation had got stronger; 26 per cent felt it was about the same; and 6 per cent (two organisations) felt it was weaker.



Notably, 6 (75 per cent) unsuccessful applicants consider their organisation stronger now; 1 (13 per cent) considers their organisation weaker; and one (13 per cent), about the same. Responses from unsuccessful applicants include organisations that went on to secure 2 Transition grants and 8 other Belfast City Council small grants (Pathfinder, Arts and Heritage Project Fund, Community Festivals Fund) including 1 organisation that got 3 grants and 2 that got 2.

The Covid-19 pandemic was referred to by six organisations. CMAG was referred to only once by a successful applicant that felt a “funding-cut pulled the rug out from under our feet”. Another respondent that felt their organisation is weaker attributed this to escalating operational costs.

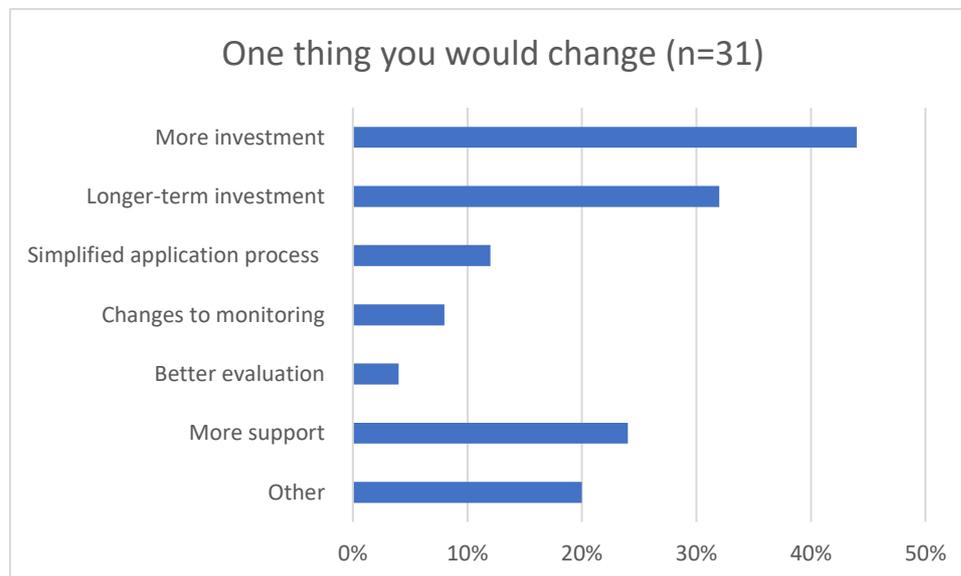
Others attributed their position to changes in funding or turnover (24 per cent) or staff and governance (18 per cent). Four organisations (12 per cent) referred to their programme and its impact. One specifically mentioned Belfast City Council’s Blueprint programme.

“Because we survived the pandemic, didn’t lose staff, furloughed no-one and are making beautiful award winning work and never stopped doing that.”

Key areas for development

Feedback from grant recipients

In the survey, successful applicants were also asked “What one thing would you change about CMAG?”



In general, grantees identified areas to build on, rather than issues to be resolved.

44 per cent wanted more investment, followed by 32 per cent would like longer-term funding.

24 per cent who would like more non-financial support including, for example, sector networking or guidance from their relationship manager.

“it would have been great to feel more connected to the other funded/Anchor organisations. There’s a real opportunity there for a network/sharing of information that BCC well-placed to convene.”

“Other” survey responses included:

- “representation of visual arts in the Anchor grant”
- “When outlining the potential 2-year programme, we are dreaming big, but as additional projects are mentioned in the application, we cannot apply for small BCC grants for these projects as they are not considered “new”.
- “There should be a recognition going forward of the hard work of organisations in the face of these challenges and much was achieved and of the impact that too much change at such a precarious time would have on the sector.”

Feedback from Belfast City Council

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic five days after awards were announced “entirely removed the ambition” of CMAG. The council is conscious of judging a new scheme on atypical years and intends to prepare for a fuller evaluation over the next four years.

Consolidation of budgets through the Investment Programme aimed to contribute to a reduction in the number of grants administered by Belfast City Council overall. The

Investment Programme projected that an average of 47.5 organisations would be funded the CMAG each year based on an annual budget of £2.3m. The actual average number of organisations funded was 54.5 per year (with a budget of £2.5m). By comparison, CMAF funded 56 organisations (with a budget of £1.5m) at its peak. There is some consideration within the council that

“Too many small grants have diluted the impact. Fewer, larger grants to key organisations will have more impact.”

Certainly, while CMAG grantees may have benefited from reduced administration, the Culture and Arts team are concerned that CMAG (alongside a range of other funding) is time consuming and detracts from developmental work.

Developmental work was, however, originally conceived to be integral to, not separate from CMAG.

“the money in itself is not what creates cultural transformation”

“Strategic development needs a relationship outside of the funding transaction.”

Plans to support CMAG grantees with wraparound developmental support were not realised due to “having been in crisis mode for two years” and internal staff and structural changes.²

Another key strand of the Investment Programme was a “root and branch review” of project funding. This was with a view that by 2024, coinciding with a second cycle of CMAG, the council would launch a new, longer-term project grant of scale by

“apply[ing] its learning as a best-practice multi-annual strategic funder to a radical redesign of cultural project grants [...] Having project grants of a similar value and longevity to strategic grants may also redress perceptions that the multi-annual strategic grants are the preferred grant for all cultural organisations, helping to balance supply with demand from within the ecosystem.”

Again, this was delayed due to internal and external pressures and has been identified as a gap.

Guidance notes

The guidance notes provided an overview of the grant scheme and its strategic fit with A City Imagining, the Cultural Investment Model and the Belfast Agenda as well as detailed guidance on how to apply. For example, it describes the section in the application form where applicants have to demonstrate the difference their programme makes as

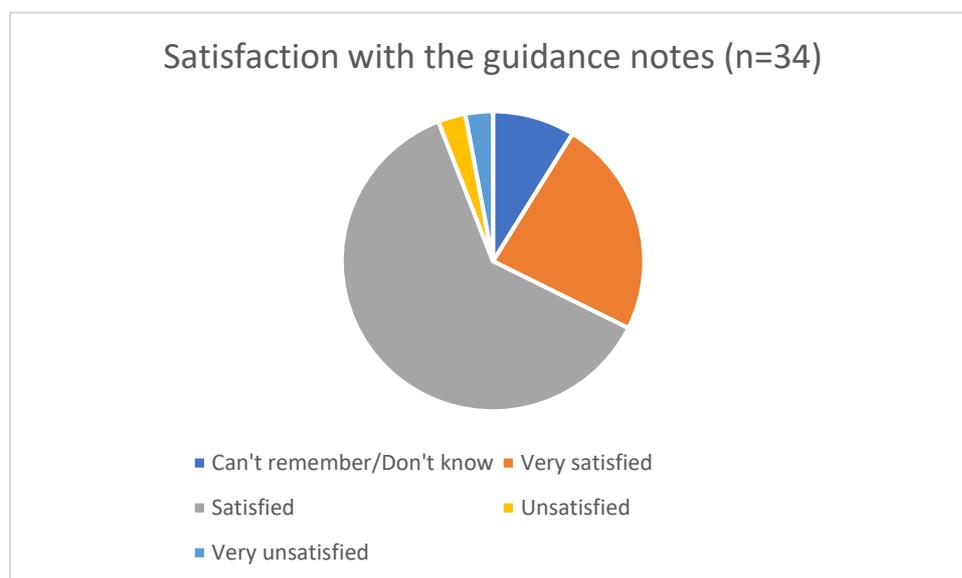
“about the impact your organisation will have on the city, its people, the cultural sector and our place on the world. It is based on the four themes in Belfast’s cultural strategy, A City Imagining.”

A table then summarises how the council anticipates the grants will contribute to each theme.

² Some elements, such as relationship managers, the sector were generally aware of and would generally welcome. Other elements, such as the requirement for Anchor and Imagine grantees to “give back” and “help” Enable and Activate clients are not widely known and may require further socialisation.

Feedback from successful applicants

Among applicants who successfully applied to CMAG, 86 per cent were satisfied with the guidance notes including 1 in 4 (24 per cent) who were very satisfied.



Feedback included that the guidance notes were clear, helpful and comprehensive or concise:

“They helped with interpreting the questions”

“there was clarity of purpose and structure”

“As I remember they were well written and helpful.”

One person was unsatisfied, and one person was very unsatisfied.³ They commented:

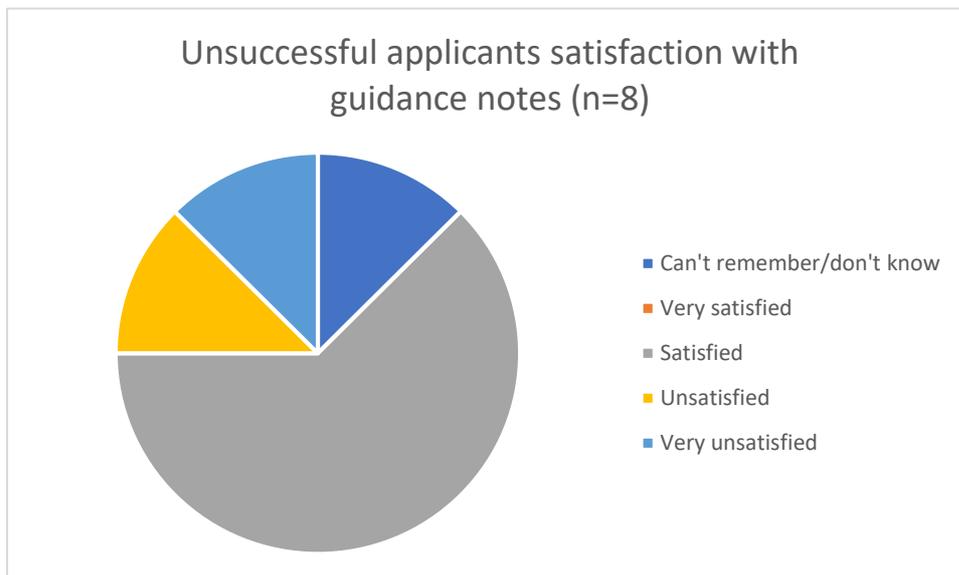
“The notes did not completely reflect the navigation of the form itself”

“The structure of the funding programmes did not make sense in relation to actually delivering the strategy purpose and ambition. The guidelines had elements of unreality, confusion and contradiction including on the principle of additionality: overall the rhetoric was fanciful compared to the actual process in place / results of the process and much of the stated guidance not proportional to the small amount of grant available. There was no consultation on this momentous change and the detail of the process and so the guidelines. There was not adequate engagement by BCC with the sector on the process and its implementation and implications, therefore the guidelines were inevitably distanced from reality and inadequate. There was not adequate engagement by Culture Unit with applicants (our experience) in explaining the process with certainty / clarity. Again: the 'engagement' was confused and contradictory – and ultimately different interpretations were applied to different organisations, resulting in disproportionate benefit and disadvantage.”

³ Throughout the surveys, there were a small number of responses that “can’t remember” or “don’t know”. For some organisations, it has been three and a half years since they engaged with CMAG. There may also have been staff changes which mean the survey respondent was not involved in the application.

Feedback from unsuccessful applicants

Among applicants who applied but were unsuccessful, just under two thirds (63 per cent) were satisfied with the guidance notes. 26 per cent (two organisations) were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied.



Feedback from those who were satisfied included:

"I think it covered everything that was needed to complete the application."

"The ambition of the remake of the funding path was clear but the reality of the decisions made did not match what the guidance notes laid out."

Feedback from those who were unsatisfied included:

"The bottom line is this, guidelines, no matter how helpful you may think they are in regard to the arts are inadequate, are a straight jacket and a poor way of moving forward. There is the preoccupation with numbers [...] there has to be another way!"

"Information from City Council relating to funding is deeply inaccessible, deeply technical, and not user friendly for anyone. It is reflective of the overall application process, which calls for a huge volume of information for very small amounts of money in a technical, uncreative way that in no way supports innovation or imaginative cultural activity."

Strategic alignment

During workshops and interviews, feedback on the guidance notes was positive, similar to the survey findings, and suggestions for improvement were therefore limited. (Discussion about definitions of audience is included in the eligibility criteria section below). However, there was evidence that grantees were not clear on the purpose of CMAG. At one workshop, participants suggested "the council needs to share its ambition. What does it want to achieve through CMAG?"; at another, participants wanted clarity on the aims of the A City Imagining strategy; and several participants referred to the themes as "vague" or "airy fairy". While to an extent such confusion could be the result of the passage of time, during

an internal council feedback session, it was also suggested that strategic alignment could be strengthened in the guidance notes.

There is an ongoing role for relationship managers in promoting key messages around the purpose of CMAG and its two distinct strands. The festivals and events strand, for example, was criticised (particularly by arts and heritage applicants) for prioritising tourism over culture despite A City Imagining explicitly aiming to create “a unique events destination [with] up to five signature [Imagine] and 12 growth [Activate] events each year”. Arts and heritage was also criticised for not helping organisations to grow, which was not the aim of that strand.

Fund names

The four funds, Imagine, Activate, Anchor and Enable, took their names from A City Imagining, and they were intended to reflect the purpose of each strand, streamlined with FEI’s classification of Signature and Growth. However, the names have proved, at best, confusing and difficult to remember, and Enable grantees in particular found it “icky”, “patronising” or even “disabling”.

“Imagine and Activate are dynamic and progressive. Anchor and Enable ‘stay there and we’ll give you a hand’ – there’s no sense of forward momentum.”

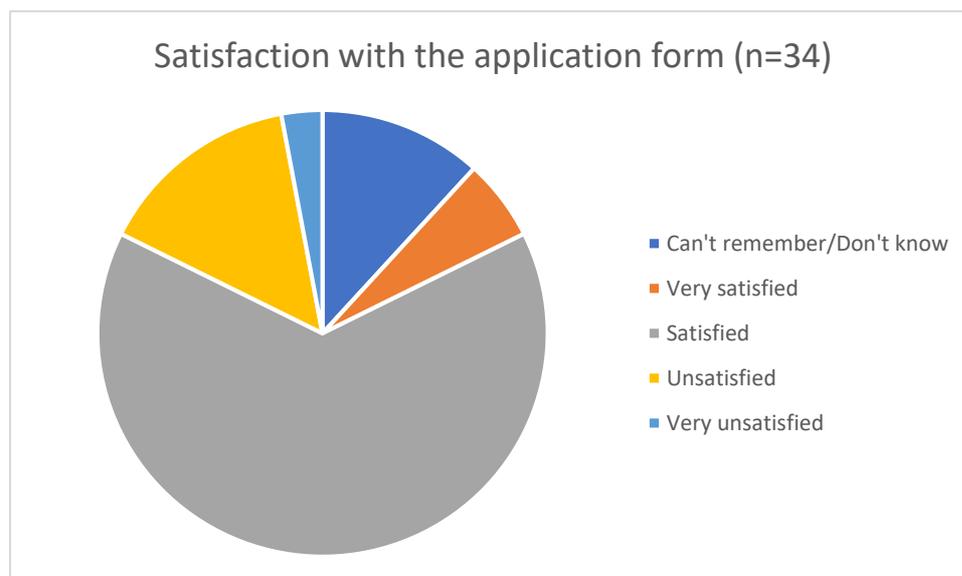
Imagine and Anchor grantees may be more likely to use the name, although some Imagine grantees use the FEI classification of Signature.

Application form

Applications to CMAG are made using an online grants portal. The same portal is used to apply for and manage all other council grants (and, indeed, is used by six other local authorities).

Feedback from successful applicants

Among successful applicants, 72 per cent of survey respondents were satisfied with the application form itself including 6 per cent who were very satisfied.



Respondents reflected that it was clear; straightforward; not repetitive; asked for sufficient detail; and that the online grants portal itself worked well and was user friendly.

“BCC's online system is user friendly and easy to navigate. This made the whole process very straight forward for filling out the form.”

“Wasn't over complicated and word count allowed a decent amount of detail to be included”

“While it was a fairly detailed application, the questions and information that needed to be provided seemed clear and the online form allowed for the information to be submitted as needed.”

One respondent also commented on strategic fit as “it reflected back to what the city needed”.

A number of respondents referred to it as being familiar to other or previous council application forms, which might benefit repeat applicants in particular.

“There was a lot of information required but you would expect it for this level of grants and it was familiar to what the Council usually asks for and the previous multi year funding.”

18 per cent (6 respondents) were unsatisfied, including one respondent who was very unsatisfied. The main criticism was that the level of detail required was not proportionate to the value or length of the grant requested. Indeed, in the survey, those in receipt of Enable funding were most likely to be unsatisfied with the application form (21 per cent compared to 14 per cent across the other strands), and this was echoed by Activate grantees in other engagements, indicating that those who were awarded more money and over a longer period of time were more likely to be satisfied.

“I understand that they had to work for a big range of funding and you would want the detail for the very large grants but maybe for the two year funding it could be scaled so there are fewer questions or attachments”

“Many arts organisations now have experience of at least one non-NI funder and that highlight the lack of trust shown by the council the ‘marking our homework’.”

In other consultation, the application was described (twice) as “a big monster”. Some found the guidance on strategic, business and marketing plans too prescriptive, redoing them “to meet the criteria” when they “already have our own plans that work”.

It was also noted that smaller organisations may be least resourced to deal with complicated applications and therefore also the ones who might benefit most from longer-term funding.

For some the “stressy” experience of the application was actually tied to the value of having unrestricted, multi-year funding and the “fear of getting it wrong”.

It is also likely that those applying in 2019 had a different experience from those applying in 2021 due to the unprecedented operating environment.

“I remember that the level of detail required was very high. To project into the future at that time, especially when Covid and the cost of living crisis were impacting upon

us, as well as uncertainty about the sustainability of other core funding, it was challenging.”

This issue was reiterated at workshops and interviews, and it may be an ongoing issue as organisations continue to try to predict how audiences, box offices and bottom lines will perform against rising costs and reducing public sector budgets.

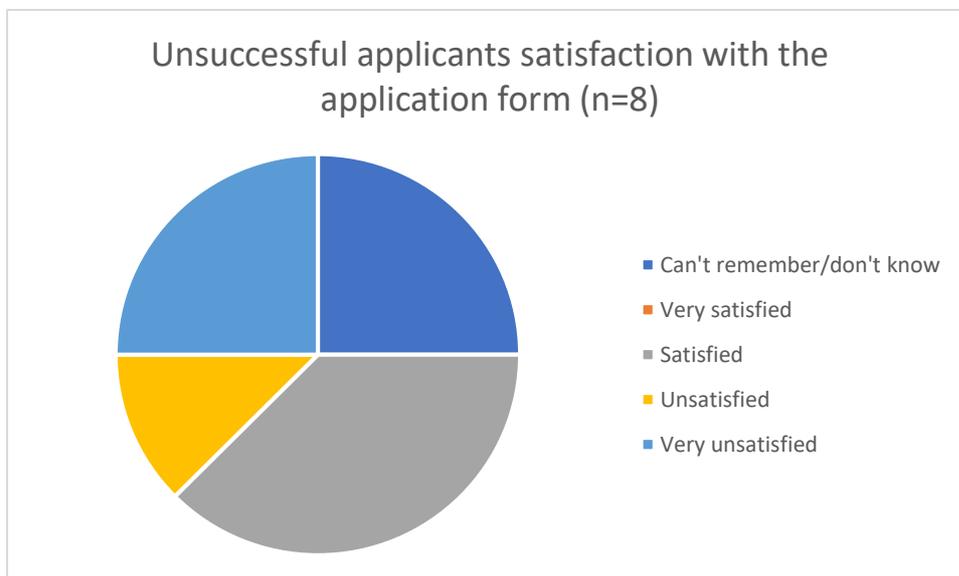
Other unsatisfied survey responses included:

“The questions were overloaded”

“It felt as though we were being shoe-horned into a very specific funding stream that limited our potential for much needed funding”

Feedback from unsuccessful applicants

38 per cent of unsuccessful applicants surveyed were satisfied with the application form and 38 per cent were unsatisfied, including 25 per cent who were very unsatisfied.



Feedback included:

“A LOT of bureaucracy and repetition of answers”

“To much effort is spent in form filling, extremely bureaucratic, frustrating and time consuming.....and for so little return from Council even if a group is successful. If a group engages in a range of complex work then such forms are torture to dill in. Deciding on the worth of an organisation based on a written application especially in terms of this nebulous thing called arts is inadequate.”

Feedback from Belfast City Council

The application form was generally considered appropriate and robust with some consideration that it could be streamlined, particularly for applicants seeking smaller grants.

It was also suggested that the application process should be made more accessible, for example, “interviews for those with ADHD”, similar to the council’s Creative Bursaries and 2024 open call. It is not known whether Section 75 monitoring returns have identified any

differential impact for particular groups at this stage, and proposed changes would benefit from further research, consultation and equality screening.

Only very minor changes, however, can be made to the application form due to the contract with the online grants portal. Changes to the application form will also have ramifications for the online assessment form at the back end.

Eligibility criteria

According to the National Audit Office, funding schemes require balance between, on one hand, encouraging uptake and minimising administrative burdens and, on the other, ensuring that the support is used as intended.

CMAG eligibility criteria was based on:

- input (such as turnover) as an indicator of need for support
- output (such as audience numbers) as an indicator of likely scale of impact
- viability (such as evidence of business planning)

These criteria were agreed with Belfast City Council based on research including:

- analysis of the council's CMAF and other funding inputs and outputs
- benchmarking against other cities and funding
- FEI indicators of "signature" and "growth" festivals and events

The following table summarises the eligibility criteria when the second round of two-year funding opened in 2021. Revisions were made from when the scheme originally opened in 2019 based on the findings of the internal review. These included:

- Activate requirement for a fulltime-equivalent staff member to allow for a staff member "within a partner organisation where there is a clear legal relationship and where a commitment to delivering the festival or event can be demonstrated and measured".
- Enable minimum turnover reduced from £100,000 to £60,000
- Enable minimum volunteer requirements reduced from 12 to 6
- Enable maximum grants available increase from £30,000 to £50,000

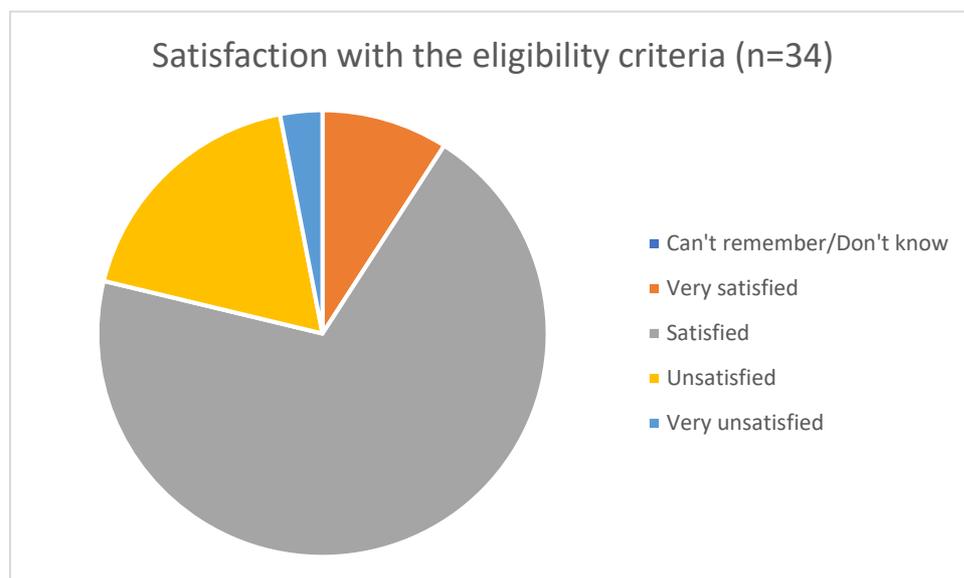
Scheme criteria	Imagine	Activate	Anchor	Enable
Organisation	Cultural		Primary purpose arts or heritage	
Activity type	Festival or event of scale described below	Festival or event of scale described below	Year-round programme not with festival or event of F&E MAG scale	Year-round programme not with festival or event of F&E MAG scale
Turnover	£300k average projected over four years (to 2023/24)	£50k average projected over contract period	£300k actual over last two financial years per annual accounts	£60k average over last two financial years per annual accounts
FTE staff (Section A)	Has or will employ in the first year, 3+	Has or will employ in the first year, 1+. This can be within a partner organisation where there is a clear legal relationship and where a commitment to delivering the festival or event can be demonstrated and measured.	3+	1+
Min. grant	£50,000	£10,000	£30,000	£10,000
Max. grant	£250,000 or 25% of average projected turnover	£50,000 or 25% of average projected turnover	£150,000 or 10% of historic turnover	£50,000 or 25% of historic turnover
Partners	Local, regional, international, media and cross-sectoral	Local and regional	Local, regional, international, media and cross-sectoral	Local and regional
Audience⁴	65,000 by 2023 or projects growth at 10% per year, whichever is greater	10,000 by 2024 or 5% increase per year, whichever is greater	50,000 per year	NA
Audience share	25% from outside Belfast + an out-of-state target	20% from outside Belfast + an out-of-state target	NA	NA
Volunteers⁵	40 per year from 2020/21	12+ per year from 2020/21	20+ per year	6+ per year
Long-term strategy	√	X	√	X
1-yr business plan	√	√	√	√
Marketing plan	Including 2023	1 year	1 year	1 year
DDA compliance	√	√	√	√

⁴ Includes participants, known attendees, estimated attendees and digital attendees

⁵ Includes board members

Feedback from successful applicants

According to the survey, 79 per cent of grantees were satisfied with the eligibility criteria including 9 per cent (3 respondents) who were very satisfied.



Respondents felt that these were “normal”, fair, transparent, reasonable and realistic. One appreciated that it gave them a “push” to finalise plans. Another reflected:

“These limits allowed for organisations to demonstrate that they had the capacity to be able to deliver the scale of activity that would be required”.

There was also recognition that the eligibility criteria were appropriate in signifying that CMAG was not intended as a seed or start-up fund and to indicate that an organisation had the capacity to deliver.

21 per cent were unsatisfied, including one person who was very unsatisfied. This included respondents who felt that the council was prioritising inputs and outputs over outcomes.

“The primary determinant of where an organisation (delivering all year round) was placed in the funding categories was the amount of recent annual income, not the value of what had been delivered, the importance of delivery methodology, proven value for money. This is the worst aspect of unfitness for purpose of the CMAG.”

“There's a discussion to be had about large numbers versus impact and influence.”

“a narrower view that the number of engagements equals impact made breadth of activity (no matter the quality of the interaction) the goal. It glossed over that real impact and legacy can often be found in deeper engagements with slightly fewer people can often lead to greater change in the long term in how someone views the arts or their city.”

During workshops with arts and heritage grantees, eligibility criteria were the most discussed topic and probably the second most vexatious after level of funding. Again, the main concern was that it prioritises outputs over impact. Indeed, there was perception that the council does not assess impact in any other way (under the assessment criteria, up to 33

per cent of marks for festivals and events applicants and 38 per cent of marks for arts and heritage applicants are awarded for quality of impact).

Festivals and events grantees were generally more satisfied with the eligibility criteria. However, there were concerns that continued audience growth was not only not desirable but potentially detrimental to audience experience and, in practice, impossible within a limited market.

Some Activate grantees are currently considering whether the growth targets make the festivals and events strand the right fit for their ambitions and are considering applying instead to Enable. Some Enable organisations also reflected on the dangers of chasing “magic numbers” to secure funding, rather than staying true to their mission and vision.

There was also consideration that the eligibility favoured festivals and events over arts and heritage, even amounting to an “apartheid” that prioritised one-off over sustained provision and deeper impact despite greatest overall investment in arts and heritage (£1,923,161 compared to £1,588,675 in festivals and events).

Audience criterion

There is no audience minimum eligibility criterion for Enable applications, and the minimum for Anchor applications is 50,000. Much of arts and heritage applicants’ discussion of audience targets related to festivals and events criteria, perhaps stemming from the perception that festivals and events had an unfair advantage of being able to request funding based on projection, rather than historical performance. It should, however, be noted, that festivals and events were also required to increase their audience and subject to (in non-Covid times) additional monitoring, restricted funding and financial penalties for underperformance.

Grantees also were unclear as to what counts as an “audience” and wanted this carefully prescribed. Such definitions (including ticketed, non-ticketed, participants and digital audiences) are, in fact, already included in the guidance notes. Those participants who were reminded of this appreciated that these align with ACNI definitions, which means the same figures can be reported to both funders and were cautious that further definitions could mean more counting.

Fairness and transparency was part of the motivation for defining audiences. There was suspicion that some organisations inflated their figures so that they are “a great work of fiction” and several “notorious” (anonymised) examples were provided, including of organisations counting social media impressions.⁶ (A more charitable explanation may be that “The arts sector is a wee bit panicked because they think there is a right and a wrong answer – so they put in crazy numbers that they can’t get and then they are too scared to call and sort it out.”) If used to obtain funding inappropriately, this is, of course, fraud, and can be dealt with in line with the council’s procedure. Festivals and events underperforming in usual times could be subject to financial penalty, while arts and heritage organisations would be dealt with on a “case by case basis”.

Some participants were also concerned that some audiences should be weighted differently, but this tended to differ depending on the nature of grantees’ audiences. For example, some argued that festivals and events audiences tended to only have short-term engagement.

⁶ The guidance notes explicitly state impressions are not audience.

Others contended that ticketed audiences were deliberate: “at least you know they were in the building for that event”.

“you cannot compare theatre audiences with street art or any non ticketed event – its just not fair to do so”

“Street events can't be compared with theatre seats in terms of quality but the impact of street events on accessibility have a huge impact on people who don't have access to theatres. Similar issues occur when establishing the value of workshop programmes in terms of numbers”

There were suggestions that the audience eligibility criteria could be enhanced, for example, with checkboxes to evidence the quality or nature of engagement, which would make it difficult to assess whether an applicant passes or fails the eligibility criteria. Consideration of nature and extent of impact is (as outlined above) also substantially considered in the assessment criteria.

Other criteria

Other grantees who were otherwise satisfied point to the changed operating environment, which might mean that thresholds have decreased, particularly in relation to audience, turnover and staff.

“It has to be recognised that the sector is in a much more difficult place than it was when the original applications went in – e.g., changes in audience behaviour/failure of the NI Executive/cost of living crisis.”

It was noted that engagement, particularly with new beneficiaries, is more difficult post-Covid. However, other groups found they grew their audience online and internationally during the pandemic, and one consultee felt strongly “Covid is over” and “it shouldn’t be used as an excuse” to amend criteria.

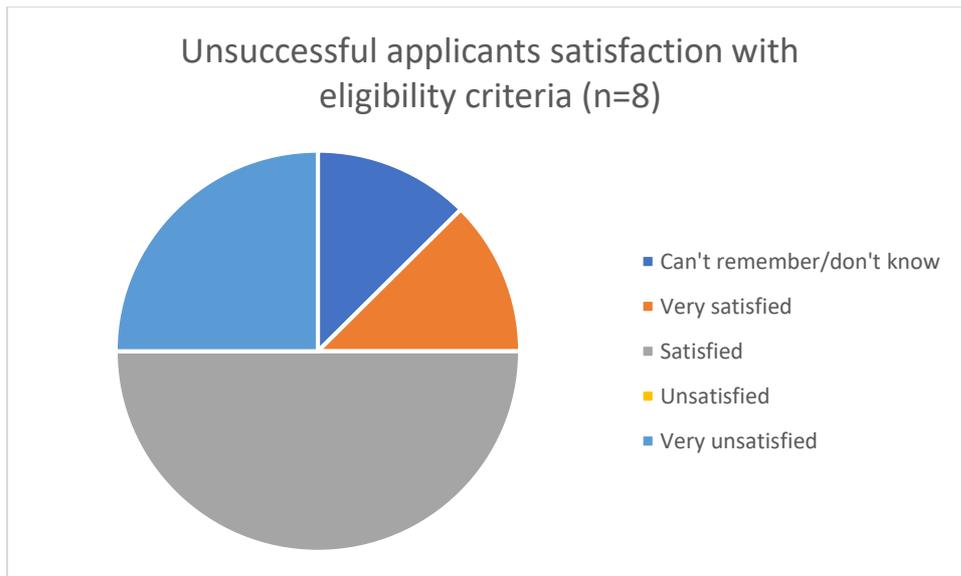
Grantees also questioned why volunteers were included in the eligibility criteria,⁷ noting that the sector has campaigned against pressure to replace paid staff with volunteers.

While most understood the need to have the existence of plans and strategies as part of the eligibility criteria, there was some confusion among a small number of grantees about what time periods these should cover, concerns about the time it takes to develop these and the difficulty of planning in uncertain time.

Feedback from unsuccessful applicants

Nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of unsuccessful applicants were satisfied with the eligibility criteria. A quarter (25 per cent) were very unsatisfied (none were unsatisfied).

⁷ It was based on benchmarks provided by FEI.



Feedback from satisfied organisations considered it to be fair. Other comments included:

“Considering the effort, time and demands they put on an arts group council give a pittance and expect the world. Too much reliance on numbers...mass is thinking with your ass!”

“For such a tiny amount of money, the whole process show a deep distrust of the cultural sector and indicates Council's desire to have a high level of control over the creative process. Projects should and must be allowed to develop creatively rather than specify exact outputs and outcomes before anything has been delivered.”

“It was ok, but wouldn't actually help those the newly made funding system was supposed to support. Like new organisations that will grow Belfast's cultural offering.”

Feedback from Belfast City Council

There was recognition within Belfast City Council that there is a need for eligibility criteria “as a basic assurance they can manage the grant”, and generally the criteria were considered appropriate. There was also recognition that the eligibility criteria are not popular among some of the sector. Discussion on alternative options considered reducing or removing some criteria, especially in response to Covid. A more radical option would be to assess outputs as part of the assessment criteria, which would likely increase administrative burden and may raise applicant expectations with similar results as “a cost–benefit analysis would have to be done at some stage”.

There was some consideration within Belfast City Council that continued growth for festivals and events is untenable and perhaps, undesirable, “breeding a chase of numbers”. However, this remains an ambition of the 2020–30 cultural strategy, and it is presumed that it will culminate when the city’s capacity as an events destination, as defined by FEI, is realised or at the end of A City Imagining.

There was also concern that applicants are “manufacturing audience numbers”, which should be managed through the council’s monitoring, risk management and, if required, fraud procedures.

Consultees also reported that organisations were concerned that they may be penalised for having reserves. Belfast City Council does not currently have a policy on funding organisations with reserves.

Assessment criteria

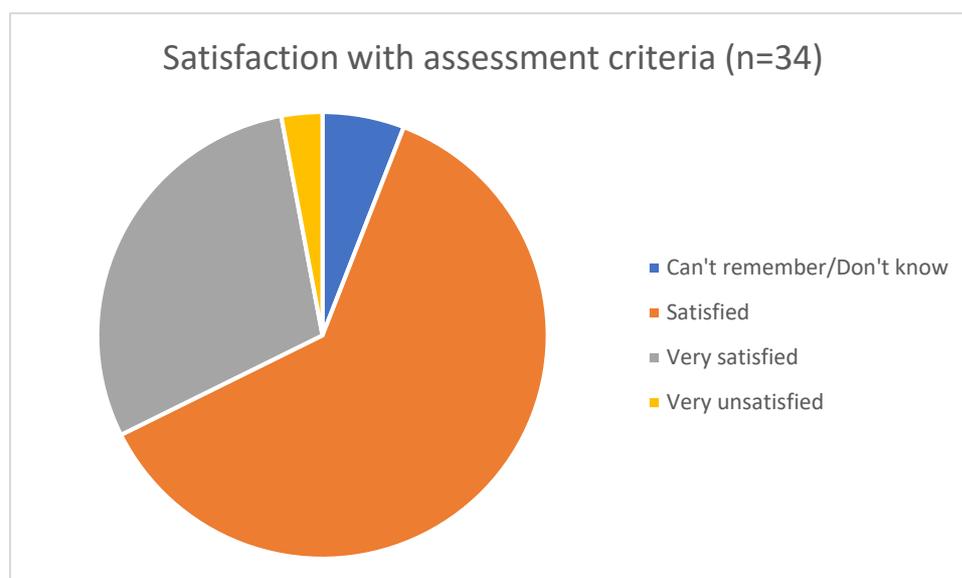
The following assessment criteria is published in CMAG guidance notes.

Quality of programme. This includes vision, content, audience experience and marketing and audience development. It was based on “tried-and-tested” indicators of quality drawn from Manchester Metrics, Liverpool Arts Regeneration Consortium and nef.	30
Impact of activity, including how the activity contributes to the four A City Imagining themes (A City Belonging, A City Challenging, A City Creating and A City Exploring) and how organisations plan to monitor and evaluate that impact.	40
Readiness for investment including planning, financial management, staff, governance and environmental impact.	30

Assessors also have access to guidance for assessing against up to 37 sub-criteria. Grantees do not have access to the full sub-criteria.

Feedback from successful applicants

In the survey, 9 out of 10 respondents (91 per cent) were satisfied with the assessment criteria including 29 per cent who were very satisfied.



Respondents particularly liked the focus on quality and impact; felt that it was fair and transparent; and even suggested that other funders could learn from this approach.

“Good to have significant weight outcome: move us out from a purely ‘delivery’ mindset, to the change we want to see happen as a result.”

“Transparent and impact focused. A lot clearer than other arts funders who are more subjective.”

“It was really useful to have clarity on the scoring in this way”

“logical criteria for effective, impactful arts organisation”

“These are questions which as an organisation we should have answers to.”

“It is pleasing to see so much emphasis on quality. [...] Other funders could follow this”

One person was very dissatisfied.

“assessment was primarily determined by inputs, not the qualities and impacts referred to here. Had these actually been the determining assessment criteria, the process would have been more equitable and more supportive of the Cultural Strategy and the organisations working to deliver on it. Quality of programme and Impact of activity were assessed, it seems, and these were correct criteria – but the result of assessing these was not reflected in the grants awarded because overall the assessment and awarding process did not have a purposeful, joined-up integrity, it was confused by the prioritisation of tourism over Belfast people/artists (for one thing).”

In the workshops, there was some consideration that the quality score should be higher. Participants also would like adaptability and risk management to be included as indicators of readiness for investment (these are considered in the assessment sub-criteria) given the conditions in which they are required to operate (for example, short-term funding, funding decisions made well in to the financial year).

There were also suggestions that (qualitative) track record should be further taken in to account.

“It treats organisations with a longstanding relationship with the council, a longstanding place in the city, as if they have never heard of us.”

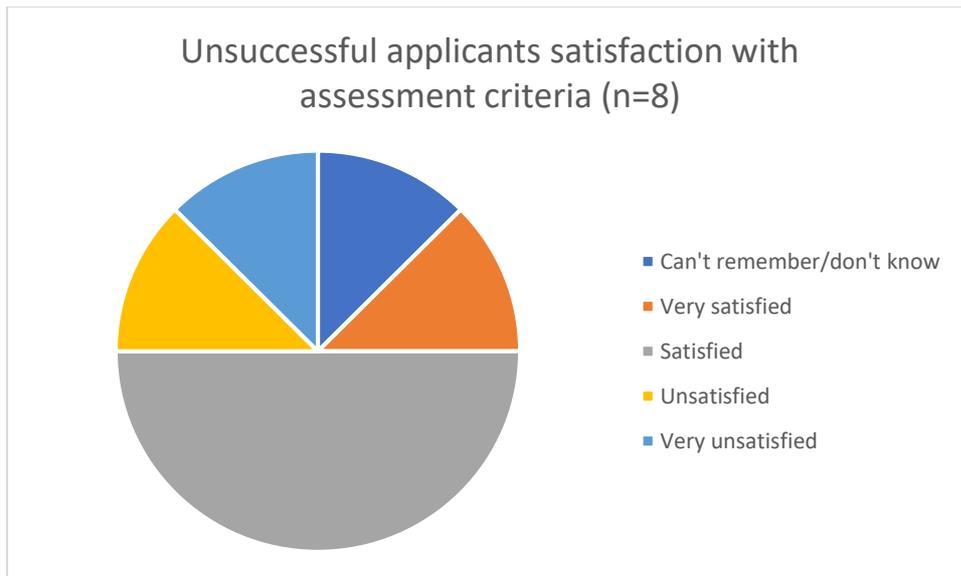
Track record can currently be provided and used alongside other evidence of quality. However, according to the Investment Programme, track record is not otherwise taken in to account in the assessment process as Belfast City Council councillors have stated that newer organisations should not be excluded from strategic grants.

One organisation noted in relation to the environmental sustainability criterion:

“We have [an environmental policy] but festivals can’t not do international travel, and green is not cheap – clean and bio options of everything cost more – but there’s no allowance for this – it costs extra to be good.”

Feedback from unsuccessful applicants

Just under two thirds (63 per cent) of unsuccessful applicants were satisfied and just over a quarter (26 per cent) were unsatisfied with the assessment criteria.



Again, among those satisfied, the assessment criteria was considered fair. One respondent considered

“It all seemed reasonable while it didn't work for us, the organisation has to take some responsibility for that”.

Among those who were unsatisfied, comments included “Assessments are subjective, arts and innovation and outcomes in the arts can't be easily assessed like this”.

Feedback from Belfast City Council

The assessment criteria were generally considered robust, although the themes (A City Belonging, Challenging, Creating and Exploring) were described as “written in poetry, assessed in prose”. One test might be whether the council believes it made the correct funding decisions. One consultee commented, “There is very little [in the CMAG portfolio] I would look at and think, ‘That’s not making a difference’.”

The balance of impact, quality and readiness for investment was also considered appropriate.

“We want to turn the needle for the city and its citizens. We’re not the Arts Council. It’s a fair approach for the council to take.”

“The strategy also made it clear that we are not the Arts Council – it is civic funding. As servants of the city all civic investment must give back to the people of the city.”

There were concerns that “the mechanics of assessment is very difficult”, intensive and time consuming, particularly for a small team, and that a new team could be particularly open to criticism that it lacks knowledge or understanding of the sector.

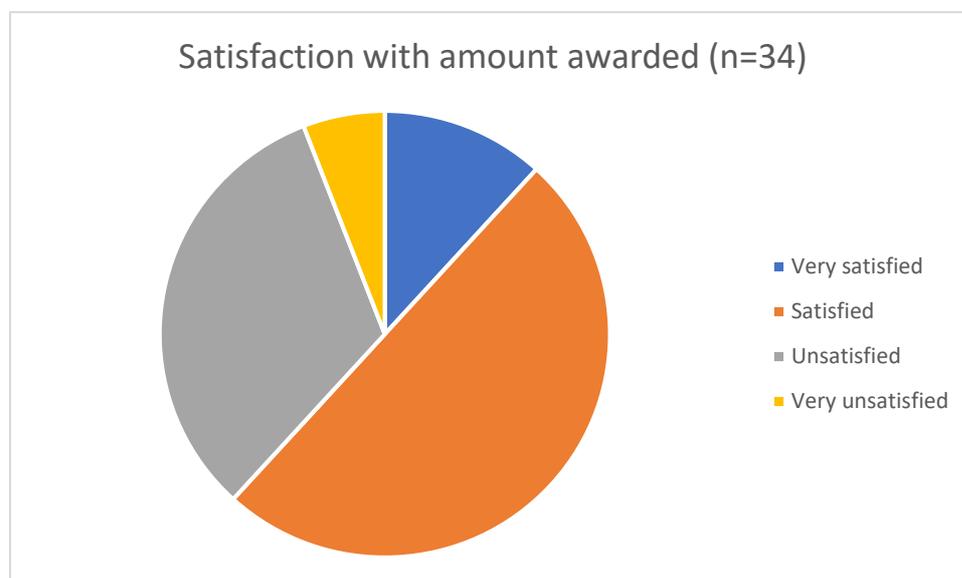
Suggestions for changes included prioritising particular themes, which would require a change in strategic direction. It was also suggested that applicants should be required to quote from supporting documents or refer to particular pages and paragraphs, rather than assessors read all supporting documents “to filter out those with really good documents”. This would put additional burden on applicants, who have asked for a reduced application form, and having robust supporting documentation is a check against organisations that

know what to say in an application form. Nevertheless, reducing the need for some supporting documentation may be a way to streamline the application process without making substantial changes to the online grants portal.

During previous rounds of assessment, assessors benefited from training, which include live testing of the assessment criteria and guidance. There was also external support brought in to carry out assessments. For the Imagine applications, this included a respected, London-based creative producer, which “as someone not from here but who the sector accepts as understanding the context of their art form in Belfast” provided “reassurance and a layer of protection”.

Level of award

62 per cent of those awarded funding were satisfied with the amount they were awarded including 12 per cent who were very satisfied.



Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who were very satisfied tended to refer to a substantial increase in funding, and those who were satisfied tended to refer to having around the amount they requested or at a level that was comparable to or a slight increase on previous awards.

Organisations also reflected that CMAG boosted morale and signalled a change in historic funding trends in keeping with the new strategic direction.

“We had ambitious plans for development of our festival, which was backed by a solid strategic planning process. It was very reassuring to see council bought into our vision. It was also reassuring that the portfolio overall was not based on historical funding allocations and that newer organisations such as ours were given the opportunity to develop”

“Not only was the material difference vital for our ongoing activities/reflected reality, it also boosted staff morale, made us feel more 'credible' as an Anchor organisation, and meant that for monitoring purposes we returned to our application regularly as there was a sense of pride in what we had achieved that we wanted to sustain across the funding period/demonstrate development and long-term thinking.”

Others reflected that the award was appropriate to need.

“We got more than before and almost what we ask for so I think that we were guided to ask for an amount that was realistic.”

“The funding was a substantial step up for us but was necessary to enable the kind of step up in terms of scale of the festival that was being asked of us.”

Some satisfied organisations were also circumspect, reflecting on how the operating environment was also affecting council decisions and budgets.

“while it was not the amount asked for this was very gratefully received when others were cutting funding”

“Understand that it is a competitive market but equally I believe BCC understand that we need to fund some key organisations sufficiently rather than spread funding too thinly to everyones detriment.”

Other grantees were concerned about the need to balance ambition (or simply the desire to for their application to score well) with realism, particularly as inclusion of activities in a CMAG application would mean that they would be ineligible for other Belfast City Council culture funding.

“We put all our soul in to it – all our aspirations – but then when some of those dreams became possibilities, we were not able to look to council for new project funding.”

38 per cent were unsatisfied including 6 per cent (2 respondents) who were very unsatisfied. One organisation described the level of award as “devastating”, continuing:

“This did not deliver on the vaunted ‘move away from Council grants carve-up’ it actually made the situation worse [and] Although our new category is called ‘Enable’, the low level of CMAG awarded was disabling”.

Others felt that:

- their track record was not taken in to account
- the grant didn't reflect either the quality or scale of the work
- the small increase in funding didn't cover inflation
- the award is only a very small percentage of turnover
- there was no allowance made for or additional funding for access requirements
- they would have welcomed feedback on their application
- they did not get the opportunity to revise their programme and targets despite being awarded substantially less than needed to run their programme

“While the amount awarded is a huge contribution to our organisation, we are still struggling to generate enough income to cover the increasing costs of rent and overheads”

Anchor (50 per cent) and Enable (42 per cent) applicants were more likely to be unsatisfied compared to 17 per cent of Imagine applicants and 13 per cent of Activate.

There was also a lot of benchmarking in the responses. Organisations were very aware of how much they were awarded compared to peer art-form organisations or the sector generally. Some considered that particular art forms, specifically visual arts and theatre, did less well, which was attributed to the eligibility criteria prohibiting such art forms being able to apply for the larger grants.

During workshops, consideration of the level and duration of the awards was interdependent. A few organisations would appear to favour the security of longer grants over shorter-term, higher value grants, though higher-value, longer-term grants was the preference overall. And while longer-term funding was generally preferred, there were concerns about “locking in” organisations to “effectively standstill” funding over several years, particularly if an organisation had received substantially less than requested. Proposed solutions included inflation-linking grants, have a mid-point review (for example, in year 2) when the level of funding could be increased or issue “cost of living” grants in exceptional circumstances.⁸

There was also concern that a disappointing result in the first round could create a cycle that would prohibit growth, including ambitions to become an Anchor or Imagine client:

“producing some devastating results and placing organisations on a downwards trajectory that is difficult to recover from for the next four-year grant period”

“Now we can’t afford to make the type of work that would double audiences.”

It was noted that while the council had increased the maximum amount Enable applicants could request in the second round, in reality applicants received a 10 per cent increase on their previous award. One grantee commented

“this new level was not real [...] it was not a real opportunity [It] only reinforces a disingenuous aspect of CMAG that we have experienced in various other ways.”

Others suggested different ways in which applicants could be guided to ask for a realistic amount including:

- Discussion with relationship manager
- Using an average percentage of turnover benchmark⁹
- Using an average grant benchmark¹⁰
- Indication of the number and level of awards the council expects to make¹¹
- Council offers set grants (for example, £10,000, £25,000, £50,000 and so on)
- Applicant does not make a request, rather the council awards based on perceived need and merit

Applicants would also like the opportunity to explain variances in turnover and other indicators or justify exceptional requests, particularly as Covid has affected turnover and audiences.

Overall, consultees felt that there should be more investment through CMAG and, in particular, funding available was insufficient to meet expectations.

⁸ As provided, for example, by Future Screens and Santander.

⁹ This was included in CMAF guidance notes.

¹⁰ This was included in CMAF guidance notes. An average grant was not available for the first round of CMAG.

¹¹ This was included in CMAG guidance notes.

“[There was] A lot of ‘think big’, ‘strategize’, ‘Belfast is amazing’, but then there was the same amount of money. Can’t be raising things up like that.”

“don’t encourage boundless enthusiasm for growth if funding is not the same”

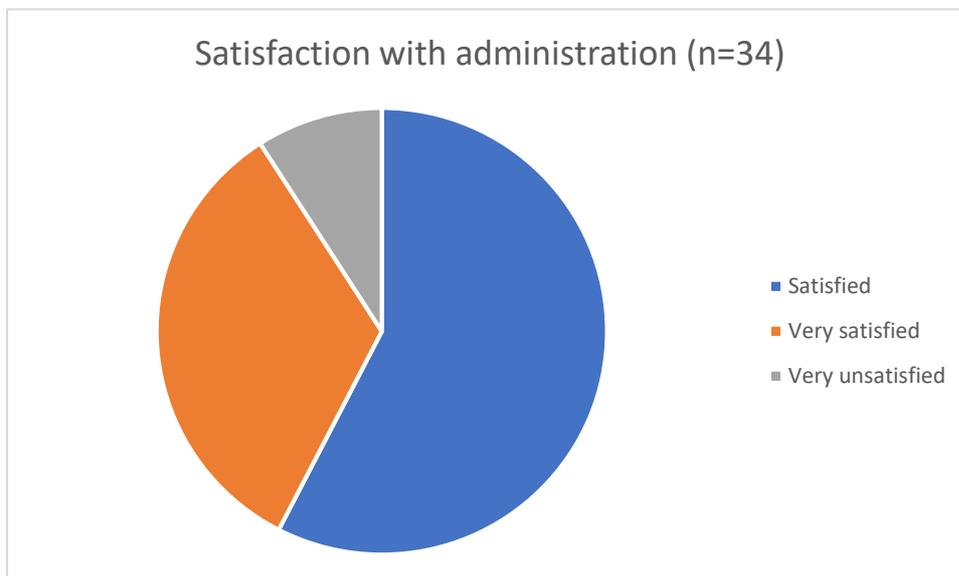
Organisations would also welcome feedback on their applications, particularly if awarded less than requested. Some organisations had requested and got feedback, which was described as useful, but others were unaware that this was an option.

Administration

Project level

In the survey, successful applicants were asked, “How satisfied are you with the administration of your grant, such as when it is paid, how it is monitored and so on?”

Nine out of 10 respondents (91 per cent) were satisfied with the administration including a third (33 per cent) who were very satisfied.



Monitoring was described as “rigorous but not ridiculous” and “allowing funders to keep tabs without being burdensome”. Respondents also felt that payments were made promptly, when expected or when needed. This was particularly valued during the pandemic and among festival and events grantees. One festivals and events grantee reflected that “council were mindful of cash flow concerns when raised particularly as there were pinch points during the festival period”, although some festivals and events appeared to understand that they were tied to a six-monthly drawdown cycle, which was more difficult for reporting and cashflow.¹²

A few organisations, while satisfied overall, would still prefer faster payments. CGU noted that payments could sometimes take up to three months due to a “bottleneck” in the process of getting sign off from the Culture and Arts team but that this should be prioritised in recognition that “this is core funding, and organisations rely on the funding to run”.

¹² Festivals and events grantees can drawdown based on need. Arts and heritage grants follow a six-monthly drawdown cycle.

Arts and heritage grantees may have been more satisfied with administration overall having benefitted from CGU's streamlined process (indeed, one festival reported a seven month delay in payment), and those on a regular cycle of reporting and drawdown "knew in advance when the reports were expected and payments due to be made so could timetable into our Planning".

Grantees also felt that council staff were supportive, again in particular throughout the pandemic or other exceptional circumstances.

"BCC staff are patient and understanding if monitoring deadlines are not met for legitimate reasons."

"We had a sense there was trust between us and the culture team, and they allowed us to get on with the important work."

"The support from staff during 2020 when the challenges from the pandemic were the most severe was greatly appreciated. It was regularly and genuinely committed to supporting its organisations through a very tough time. [...] There was an understanding there of the serious challenges that we faced in being able to delivery anything at all let alone the ambitious plans that we started with."

In turn, CGU reflected that "The sector are professional, very capable – they know what they are doing and are easy to work with".

CGU is proud of the council's reputation as a flexible funder, allowing grantees to reprofile budgets, targets and programmes in response to emerging need and changing circumstance. As is best practice, monitoring forms are now issued at the start of the grant so that organisations know what they have to monitor. However, not all grantees appear to be aware that there is the option to reprofile. Furthermore, the current online grants portal means that targets and budgets that were submitted in application forms automatically populate monitoring forms. This can be particularly frustrating for grantees who were awarded less than requested and subsequently submitted reprofiled targets and budget to the council. They feel they have to repeatedly explain variances, which can make them feel like they are "failing", rather than adapting.

CGU is aware of this and will incorporate the ability to reprofile online in to the specification to tender for the new grants portal. In the meantime, they assure that reprofiles are held "offline" and monitoring is carried out by officers against reprofiles.

Grantees also suggested that monitoring reports could be "softened" by making the language in the monitoring forms "more human" (such as "We appreciate things change ... please provide a wee sentence to explain significant changes").

Overall, most considered monitoring to be "straightforward and not laborious". However, a minority felt that monitoring forms are "time consuming and tricky", particularly reporting on the different categories of beneficiaries, such as volunteers, participants, known and estimated audiences. There was some appreciation that these categories matched with ACNI's reporting requirements and of the "good work" started by Belfast City Council to streamline processes with the arts sector's main funder. Grantees would welcome further

collaboration between funders, although it should also be noted that an increasing number of CMAG grantees are not funded by ACNI.¹³

Other alternatives to monitoring reports suggested were a formal, recorded conversation instead of a form.

At workshops and interviews in particular, participants indicated they would welcome the opportunity to share more qualitative information, such as case studies, anecdotes, quotes and reflections on successes and challenges, in monitoring reports.¹⁴ One consultee described monitoring as

“Disappointingly pedestrian, lots and lots of figures and stats and no capture of impact. A missed opportunity to talk about outcomes internally and externally, locally and internationally.”

However, others stressed that this must be optional, reiterating that they liked the council’s “relatively light-touch” monitoring and already manage extensive monitoring and evaluation demands internally and from other funders.

Three survey respondents (9 per cent) were very unsatisfied with the administration of grants. Two grant recipients reported poor communication and “huge delays” in payments, and the third found

“the monitoring process quite tedious and time consuming, I would much prefer visits to events to truly understand the value of our programming.”

Other festivals and events grantees reported delays in payments during interviews, which may reflect confusion over payment schedules or the anomalous administration during the pandemic.

Programme level

Within the Culture and Arts team, individual officers have a portfolio of CMAG clients. The team is new, with the last officer appointed in April 2023, which has limited their involvement with clients and the programme overall.

At the end of each financial year, there is a financial reconciliation of CMAG. At the end of the 2022/23 financial year, for the first time ever, there were no CMAG accruals as all grantees drew down their funding as planned.

The Investment Programme recommends that grants are “reviewed annually with a minimum focus on financial reconciliation, taking into account delivery across the period, resulting in a decision to continue, discontinue or amend funding”. It further recommends that the council develop an “outcomes-focused [evaluation framework] to ensure that it measures what is meaningful and makes best use of resources, including opportunities to streamline and share data.”

In 2020/21, the council developed a draft evaluation framework. However, this was during Covid and it was considered that “We could not judge CMAG or appear to be assessing the

¹³ Five festivals and events in the first round and six in the second round are not ACNI funded.

¹⁴ Some consultees thought that there was space in the monitoring form to report qualitative information. This may be a throwback to previous CMAF monitoring forms or confusion with other funders’ monitoring reports.

sector on two years of a new scheme that were two atypical years” or “Evaluation at that point would be like kicking a puppy”.

Nevertheless, an annual review is required to adhere to National Audit and Cabinet Office guidance. The sector is also keen that the council is held to account for the performance of their programme as they are held to account in relation to their grant.

“The whole City Imagining strategy was very ambitious. Whether council had capacity internally to deliver is something that they need to question internally.”

“Perhaps they spread things too quickly, rather than taking time and assessing what their impact has been.”

Timing

Applicants felt that the council kept the application open for a reasonable amount of time, although some requested that it was open for “as long as possible”, and some would like earlier funding decisions, particularly those who operate festivals and events near the start of the financial year.

There should also cognisance of other key funding dates. Grantees valued that funding decisions were made in advance of ACNI annual funding. This could mean that applicants were working on the two applications simultaneously, which is a substantial workload, although others suggested that there are benefits, such as having “all the data together” at the same time. The same pros and cons also exist when ACNI and Belfast City Council monitoring cycles coincide.

Consultees also referred to a clash between CMAG and 2024 deadlines.

Developmental support

Wraparound developmental support was a key recommendation in the Investment Programme. It stated that

“Support can take many forms, from training, guidance and other informational support to the tangible provision of goods and services. It can be off-the-shelf or commissioned; sector specific or cross-sectoral with the benefit of cross-pollination; it can build on what already exists and works in the city or can be new and innovative, learning from other cities”.

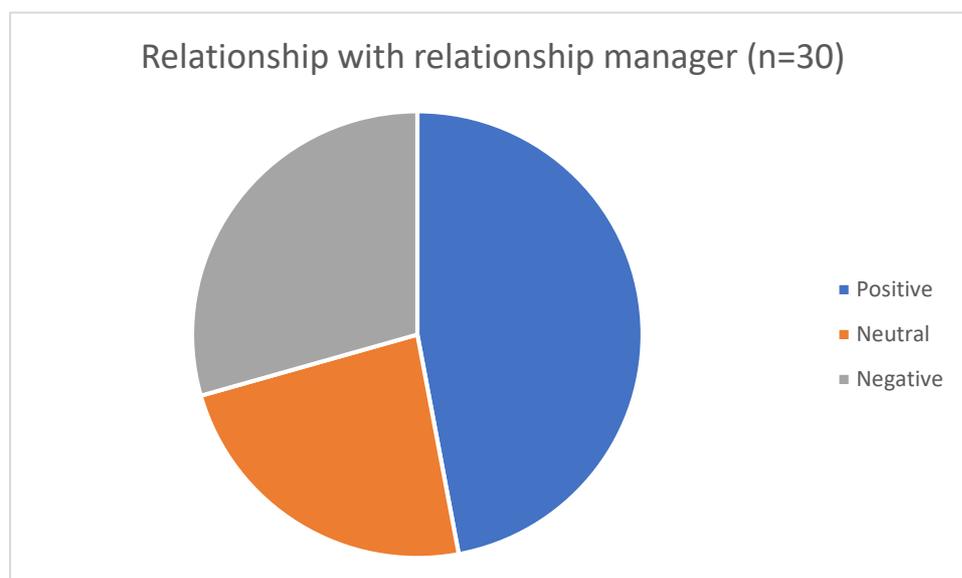
Other potential support needs identified in the Investment Programme included marketing; audience development; digital marketing and audience development; internationalisation; evaluation and impact measurement; reflective practice; innovation; capitalisation; cross-sectoral networking; environmental impact; digital skills; and research and development.

CMAG grantees in particular should benefit from “one-to-one support in the form of and facilitated by their relationship manager.” the Investment Programme continues:

“The relationship should be supportive, built around a shared vision for success, but able to withstand challenge as the relationship manager will continue to be responsible for monitoring performance. The degree and nature of support required will vary depending on the investment strand, amount of investment, perceived risk and needs of the organisation and should be agreed between the relationship manager and organisation at the start of the contract.”

Relationship management

In the survey, successful applicants were also asked to describe their relationship with their relationship manager.



Just under half (47 per cent) gave a positive response, and comments included:

“All officers have been attentive, responsive and interested in the work we have been doing. We would say the relationship has been very good and beneficial for the festival”

“Strong, professional and really valued working relationship”

However, a quarter (24 per cent) gave a neutral response, and just under a third (29 per cent) gave a negative response.

“Since [they have] moved positions, I am not aware of a particular replacement responsible for our client relationship or any monitoring meetings that are important for improving communications between the funder and the client and for the funder to know the extent and impact of the work of the client.”

“Because this has changed, we haven't built much of a relationship and are often not sure who we should be dealing with. There's no real direct relationship beyond having someone to ask questions to if we need information.”

“There have been a lot of changes. Some staff didn't come near us or seemed more about the tourism and I don't feel they got arts. I am not sure who is even there any more.”

During workshops, participants reported their relationship manager changing up to four times or even “every time you sent an email”. This was not a reflection on individual officers, who were singled out for praise, and there was recognition of the extent of change with the council’s culture function.¹⁵ Some felt that the council needed to do more to retain staff or

¹⁵ As at May 2023, current Culture Unit team members have been in place for between just over 18 months and under one month.

at least retain corporate knowledge when staff move on and to communicate changes better.

“Relationships are now depersonalised and no different to any other funder that gives us money and gets reports.”

Organisations were also worried that lack of a relationship would put them at a disadvantage going in to the new round of CMAG.

“We want the council to have a depth of knowledge and understanding of what we do [...] A relationship gives context for interpreting an application – that’s hard if you have an officer who has never been in your premises. You’ll be at a disadvantage. They should know you, not an impression of you.”

Relationships with CGU were, however, considered to be “strong and consistent”, and the sector would like more opportunity to meet them in person and get to know “the human person behind the team, because we get on well and know their names but would walk past them in the street”.

Overall, respondents are looking forward to building relationships in the future. There was particular recognition of the need for a dedicated point of contact within council who could help organisations liaise with other departments or link them in to other projects and initiatives happening across the council. This could include helping organisations unlock opportunities such as Section 76 and developer clauses or capitalise on strategic partnerships with sectoral bodies such as thrive, Arts and Business and the University of Atypical. Imagine clients in particular felt that their plans were disrupted when they were not consulted or informed about delays to the year of culture. It was also noted that council departments do not always work together and sometimes appear to “block each other”. Being able to work across different agendas is, however, vital to supporting the sector’s impact and value.

The importance of forums and networking was discussed across all consultation, and there was some consideration that this could substitute (at least partially) for one-to-one relationship management. There was strong recognition of the value of sub-sectoral collaboration, for example, through the Festivals and Visual Arts forums.

“I think that one thing that is starting to emerge is more collaboration between organisations through the festivals forum particularly in recognising how we can work together to improve the lot of festivals.”

“The Visual Arts Forum is the one strategic thing there is for visual arts”

However, others felt that networking should take place on a cross-sectoral basis to allow “cross-fertilisation”.

Others wanted more collaboration within the CMAG portfolio, which might support council’s plans to require four-year grantees to support other organisations. There was also a perception that “Festivals were given a significant boost but didn’t spread it around”.

A few people queried the need for in-depth relationships, pointing to trusts and foundations that increasingly advise grantees not to make contact. They stressed that the relationship must be of mutual benefit and “not too onerous”. Others suggested that if the council does

not have the resource to invest in relationships, it is best not to raise expectation. A minority also appear to prefer to have solely transactional contact with their funders.

Within Belfast City Council, it was suggested that a regular sectoral meeting or cultural forum or a client newsletter could also support relationships.

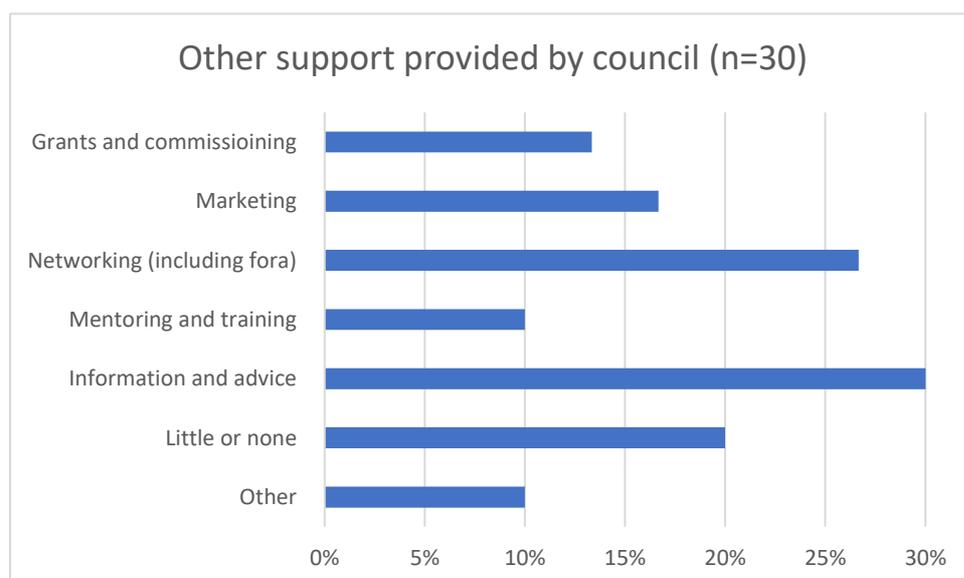
Strong, consistent relationships would help with some misunderstandings that exist about CMAG (from practicalities such as what funding can be spent on, how festivals and events can draw down funding and what other grants CMAG grantees can apply for to understanding of strategic direction and prioritisation), ensuring everyone has the same experience and benefit. Grantees also felt that this would make monitoring and evaluation “more natural” (although from an audit and administration perspective, it is important that a paper trail is maintained).

Both the council and organisations also felt that relationships of mutual trust and understanding would also mean that organisations could be better guided to ask for a realistic amount of funding and that council staff would be better equipped to assess applications and provide feedback.

“A good relationship is vital to guide people about what to cover in their application, to be realistic – ambitious but reasonable – to let people know they can change projects as long as they are not pie in the sky. It is all about trust.”

Other support

Survey respondents were also asked what other support they had received from Belfast City Council. Just under a third (30 per cent) had received information and advice, including from other areas of the council such as economic development, environmental health and capital development. Over a quarter (27 per cent) had been involved in networking, in particular through the Belfast Festivals Forum or Belfast Visual Arts Forum, which were also closely associated with marketing support (17 per cent). However, 1 in 5 (20 per cent) received little or no support.



Other responses included support with accessibility and advocacy.

“it is reassuring to have them as a backbone. I respect the support they give to the arts”

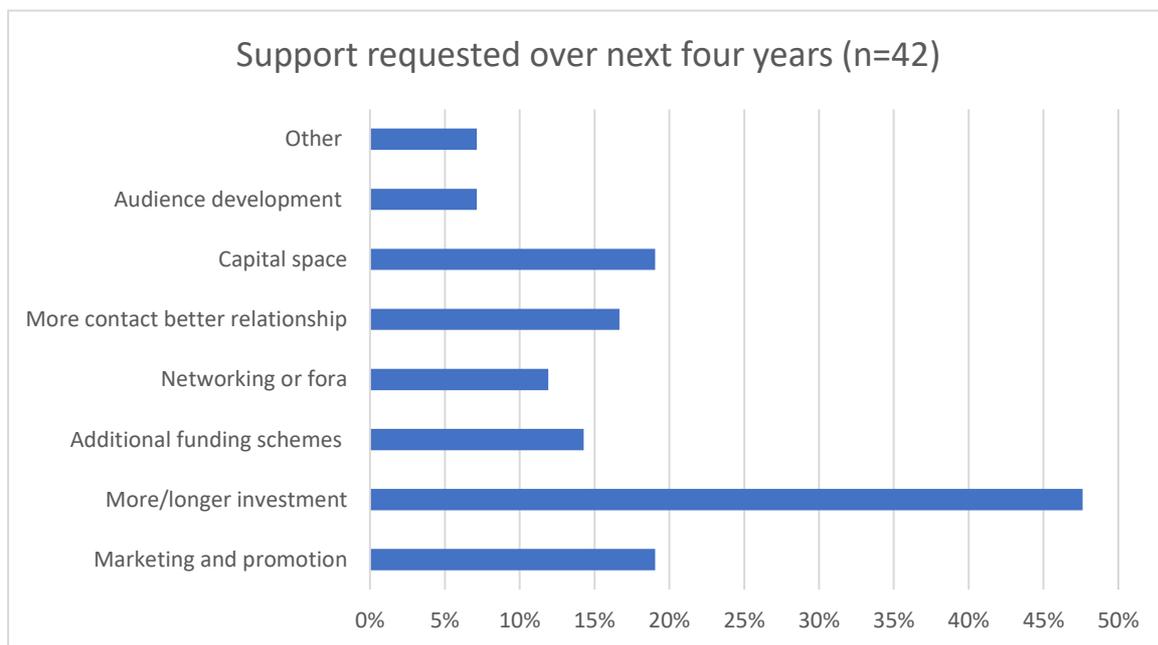
Among those who received little or no support, there was again disappointment that expectations had not been realised.

“Other’ opportunities we were told we would have, at the start of [CMAG] period, have not materialised. Support has markedly reduced from the partner-working operations and relationships that were in place in previous times. The ‘partnership’ with City Council has not been fostered.”

“We were disappointed that there was less of a collaborative relationship with the culture team than we originally expected. it seemed to go back to the traditional funder/client relationship, whereas at the time of application there was promise of more one to one support to develop”

Future support needs

Both successful and unsuccessful applicants were asked in the survey, “How else could the council support you in the next four years?” Unsurprisingly, the most frequent response (48 per cent) was for more or longer-term investment including three- or four-year funding (instead of two). Other responses included support for marketing and promotion (19 per cent) including social media and shared resources (like the Festivals Forum flag fields); support for finding, securing or developing property (19 per cent); and more contact or a better relationship with the council (17 per cent) including staff and councillors.



At one workshop it was described how councillors used to “show up [to events] like showers”. However, this no longer happens, and grantees would welcome the support of staff to help build relationships with councillors, for example, by acting as a liaison for individual organisations or hosting an annual meet and greet.

Grantees would also like Culture and Arts staff to attend more events and activities to get a fuller understanding of what they support. However, they stressed that staff and councillors should also come along to “not just when there is free drink and celebrities” but also

“normal” activities so they would understand “that workshop for 15 people was incredible, that’s what we’re doing for our citizens”.

Within the Culture and Arts team, now it is at full complement and has had some time to bed in, there is a strong desire to experience more events and activities in what they appreciate to be a “strong and diverse arts scene that can hold its own against other comparable cities”.

Transition

While there was resentment in the sector that some unsuccessful applicants were awarded more funding than successful applicants, Belfast City Council considered Transition was an appropriate response to significant strategic change. Some clients had benefited from CMAF core funding for over seven years or even longer via other core multi-annual grants that pre-dated CMAF.

“Transition is a healthy way to manage the change that is needed.”

“It was very healthy and considerate for the council to provide a cushion for those who fell out. But it is important that people do fall out to make changes to pursue the strategy.”

The external developmental support was considered particularly important in helping organisations develop and “ask ‘where next?’” One Transition organisation that took part in this review commented

“The consultant was valuable, they helped me calm down and look at organisational development.”

Funding helped meet programming costs as well as ongoing running costs.

“I know we can’t assume we’ll get a grant, but it did leave a hole especially in terms of outreach – so Transition did help bridge the gap immediately, and I guess it was space for us to get ready for going longer-term without a BCC grant.”

Transition consultees suggested alternative support if CMAG is not attainable.

“We would like to see Transition again – or better would be larger project grants for outreach or engagement if not for the core arts element. CMAG is only small part of our turnover but we really do need to keep up the engagement and outreach piece for the people of Belfast.”

“If organisations cannot get in to CMAG, then could there be some other recognition of standards? A hallmark or some way that even if you cannot get funds, you still get assurance and some mark that you are seen as valuable?”

They would also have welcomed more feedback on their applications.

Two Transition organisations subsequently successfully reapplied for two-year funding in the second round (including one was previously ineligible due to the £100,000 turnover threshold). Two did not reapply. Seven reapplied and were unsuccessful.

Transition recipients also went on to secure other Belfast City Council project grants.

Conclusions and recommendations

There is evidence that Belfast City Council's CMAG programme follows a robust process and is designed to support the council's strategic ambitions as set down in A City Imagining.

In keeping with National Audit Office good practice guidance, there is evidence that:

1. Risk is managed on a spectrum dependent on the type (restricted project and unrestricted grant-in-aid), value and duration of the grant.
2. It is not risk averse but balances the risk to the council and the grantee, in particular in relation to Imagine and Activate grants.
3. It is built on a previous comparator scheme and utilises expertise of those with understanding of the sector and experience of similar grant schemes, including CGU.
4. Uptake of funding was accurately projected, and there is balance, on one hand, between encouraging uptake and minimising administrative burdens and, on the other, ensuring that the support is used as intended, and the council is confident that the funding targets and benefits the right organisations.
5. The sector has been engaged in the review of the scheme after both two and four years, which will influence the next cycle of funding.
6. There is no similar multi-annual strategic fund open to the sector.

However, it has not been possible to robustly evaluate whether CMAG has achieved its aims or the extent to which it contributed to A City Imagining outcomes. This is largely due to extenuating circumstances in the external and internal operating environment which meant neither the council nor the sector could operate as planned.

The following recommendations are intended to further enhance the grant process, impact and evaluation.

Evaluation

A draft evaluation framework was developed by the council in 2021/22. It includes recommendations for performance monitoring and client and programme evaluation, but it was stalled due to the pandemic.

An evaluation process must be implemented to enable evidence to be collected throughout the next four-year cycle. This will enable the council to prove the value of its investment as well as improve its funding practice.

There should also be an annual performance review.

The council should therefore review, revise and implement the framework in consultation with grantees (alongside relevant findings from this report).

There should also be, at least in the interim, the option for grantees to provide narrative feedback in monitoring forms.

Support for applicants

Engagement with the sector during this review indicated that there are misperceptions about CMAG that may have repercussions for applicants. The application process may also be easier for organisations with experience of CMAG or council funding in general.

The council should roll out information sessions and advice clinics. This will also provide an opportunity for the sector to meet CGU and Culture and Arts teams.

Prioritisation of CMAG

There remains a perception that CMAG is “just funding”. On a practical level, staff should be encouraged to block out time for administration that otherwise results in delays for grantees. Staff should also be supported to take on a more developmental role, including training, time to develop relationships and time in lieu to attend funding events and activities.

A dedicated staff member could also be assigned to programme manage CMAG.

Key messaging

There should be clear consistent messaging to ensure that all applicants understand the purpose of the fund. This should also be reviewed in the guidance notes.

There should also be clear and consistent messaging around the administration of the fund. Relationship managers should be a key conduit. There could also be an induction for all or new grantees.

Key messaging should clarify CMAG grantees’ eligibility to apply to other council funding. The council should also consider the interface between 2024 and CMAG and whether 2024 projects and commissions constitute organisations’ core programmes.

Communications should start with the findings of this review including what will and will not be changed as a result and why.

Relationships management

The council should consider the extent to which it is resourced to provide one-to-one relationship management alongside options such as forums, group meetings and newsletters.

Within the scope of resources, relationship managers should develop a bespoke, two-way “relationship contract” with their clients.

The council should also explore options to help organisations build relationships with councillors.

Volunteer eligibility criteria

The council should consider removing this requirement. Instead, it should ensure that it is satisfied that volunteering is considered within the assessment criteria as an indicator of A City Belonging, Challenging or Creating.

Eligibility criteria for arts and heritage applicants

Arts and heritage eligibility criteria including audience and turnover are based on historic baselines. Covid will have created peaks and troughs, and recent baselines are no longer

robust. It is therefore recommended that arts and heritage organisations are allowed to base their application on projections (as per festivals and events applicants) with the caveat that historic performance will be used to assess whether projections are realistic (and potentially level of award; see Level of award recommendation below).

Applicants may need additional space within the application form to explain variances or exceptions.

(While the historic baselines were unpopular among the sector, this recommendation is made on the basis of the pandemic, not popularity.)

Audience eligibility criteria

The council should analyse recent monitoring returns to consider whether audience eligibility criteria are still appropriate.

Staff employment criteria

The following criteria should apply as an indication of capacity and need. Any exceptions should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

Imagine	Activate	Anchor	Enable
Has or will employ in the first year, 3+	Has or will employ in the first year, 1+	3+	1+

Level of award

To manage expectations, the council should agree in advance whether applicants can expect a significant change in funding or should request an incremental increase or standstill and communicate this to applicants. In so doing, it should consider the desirability of awarding fewer organisations larger grants.

The council should also consider telling applicants the average value of grants made in the first round, and the number and value of grants it intends to make in the second cycle.

The council should consider the feasibility of inflation-linked or mid-term increases for four-year grantees.

Duration of funding

Most CMAG grantees got *de facto* four-year funding. The council should consider awarding all grants on a four-year basis subject to developing a longer-term project fund of scale that could support new and emerging organisations. This would reduce administrative burden on both applicants and the council.

Names

The council should change the names of the funds. The preferred option appears to be to refer to them by their descriptors (four-year arts and heritage, two-year festivals and events and so on).

Timing

The council should notify the sector of when it intends to open and close the grant as far in advance as possible.

Application form

The application form should be reviewed to identify any questions or attachments (such as board minutes) that could be removed or made only applicable to four-year applicants. While this would benefit both applicants and assessors, it should be noted that any changes to the application form will need to be carried through to the assessment form at the back end, which may result in more significant changes than tolerable within the current portal contract.

Assessment process

The council should consider providing applicants with more detail on the assessment process and criteria.

The council should use external subject matter expertise to assess at least Imagine applications.

The council should provide new assessors with training and consider bringing in external support from assessors with experience of similar schemes.

Feedback

Feedback to applicants is available on request. The council should consider offering it to all applicants, resources allowing.

Transition

The council should consider how it will support any existing Imagine or Anchor client that applies unsuccessfully in the second cycle. However, it is not recommended that the council provides a formal scheme such as Transition. Rather, given the variance in Anchor awards in particular, this should be done on a case-by-case basis.

Developmental support

The council should revisit and resource plans for wraparound developmental support for CMAG clients.

It should include support to help clients with accessibility and environmental sustainability.

Online grants portal

Feedback from grantees in relation to online reprofiling should be used to inform the specification to tender for the new online grants portal.

Administration

The administration of all grants should be migrated back to CGU. The process should include reconciliation of all financial and monitoring records.

Project funding

The council should review existing project funding with a view to introducing a longer-term project fund of scale that would reduce pressure on CMAG and help support a diverse ecosystem.

Equality

It is not known whether Section 75 monitoring returns have identified any differential impact for particular groups applying for funding. The council should carry out additional research and an equality screening to identify particular barriers and potential mitigations.

Appendix 1: CMAG grant recipients

Imagine

Arts Ekta

Féile An Phobail

Science Festivals NI

Young At Art

Anchor

Belfast Community Circus School Limited

Crescent Arts Centre

Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich

Lyric Theatre

Oh Yeah Music Centre

The Black Box Trust

The Duncairn

The MAC

Ulster Orchestra Society

Activate 2020/21–21/22

Belfast Film Festival

Belfast International Arts Festival

Belfast Photo Festival

Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival

Cinemagic International Film and
Television Festival

Docs Ireland

EastSide Arts

Féile An Phobail

Festival Of Fools

Outburst Arts Festival

The Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival

The Odyssey Trust

Enable 2020/21–21/22

An Droichead

Beat Carnival

Belfast Exposed

Bruiser Theatre Company

Community Arts Partnership

Cumann Cultúrtha Mhic Reachtain

DU Dance

Dumbworld

Golden Thread Gallery

Green Shoot Productions

Kabosh

Kids In Control

Linen Hall Library

Maiden Voyage

Moving On Music

New Lodge Arts

Northern Ireland Opera

Open Arts

Photo Works North/Source Magazine

Prime Cut Productions

Queen's Film Theatre

Replay Theatre Company

Strand Arts Centre

Streetwise Community Circus

Nerve Belfast

Tinderbox Theatre Company

Ulster Architectural Heritage Society

WheelWorks

YouthAction Northern Ireland

Activate 22/23–23/24

Belfast City Marathon
Belfast Film Festival
Belfast International Arts Festival
Belfast Photo Festival
Belfast Summer School Of Traditional Music
Cinemagic International Film and Television Festival
Docs Ireland
EastSide Arts
Féile An Phobail
Festival Of Fools
Imagine Belfast
Out to Lunch
Outburst Arts Festival
The Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival
The Odyssey Trust

Enable 22/23–23/24

An Droichead
Beat Carnival
Belfast Exposed

Bruiser Theatre Company
Community Arts Partnership
Cumann Cultúrtha Mhic Reachtain
DU Dance
Dumbworld
Fighting Words Northern Ireland
Golden Thread Gallery
Kabosh
Kids In Control
Linen Hall Library
Maiden Voyage
Moving On Music
Open Arts
Photo Works North/Source Magazine
Prime Cut Productions
Queen's Film Theatre
Replay Theatre Company
Strand Arts Centre
Streetwise Community Circus
Terra Nova Productions
Nerve Belfast
University Of Atypical
WheelWorks
YouthAction Northern Ireland

Appendix 2: Organisations that participated in workshops or interviews

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to share their expertise and experience including those organisations that took part anonymously in the surveys.

ArtsEkta	Maiden Dance
Belfast Exposed	Moving on Music
Belfast International Arts Festival	NI Science Festival
Belfast Photo Festival	Oh Yeah
Circusful	Prime Cut
Cumann Cultúrtha Mhic Reachtain	Queen's Film Theatre
Docs Ireland	Replay
EastSide Arts	Strand Arts Centre
Festival of Fools	Streetwise Circus
Fighting Words	Terra Nova
Golden Thread Gallery	The Beat
Grand Opera House	The Crescent Arts Centre
Imagine	The MAC
Kabosh	Ulster Orchestra
Kids in Control	University of Atypical
Linen Hall Library	Young at Art