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Response to Belfast City Council's Consultation on the Cultural Framework for Belfast 2012-15

August 2012

1. Introduction

NICEM is an independent non-governmental organisation working to promote equality and human rights and to eradicate racism and discrimination in our society. As an umbrella organisation¹ we represent the views and interests of black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.²

Our vision is of a society in which equality and diversity are respected, valued and embraced, that is free from all forms of racism, sectarianism, discrimination and social exclusion, and where human rights are guaranteed.

Our mission is to work to bring about social change through partnership and alliance building, and to achieve equality of outcome and full participation in society.

2. General Comments

In the consultation document, Belfast City Council asks the question “why do culture, arts and heritage matter?” NICEM would like to highlight the significance of culture and the arts in the promotion of equality and good relations. Respect for economic, social and cultural rights has also been recognised in a number of international instruments, which Northern Ireland is legally bound to implement³. In addition, as a designated public authority, Belfast City Council has a legal obligation to promote equality of opportunity and good relations in accordance with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The right of everyone to take part in cultural life should be taken as a point of departure in developing a Cultural Framework for Belfast. According to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, state actors (which includes Belfast City Council as a public authority) are obliged to “recognise, respect and protect minority cultures as an essential component of the identity of the States themselves”.⁴ The Committee has also recognised that minorities have the “right not only to their own identity but also to development in all areas of cultural life”.⁵

¹ Currently we have 28 affiliated BME groups as full members. This composition is representative of the majority of BME communities in Northern Ireland. Many of these organisations operate on an entirely voluntary basis.

² In this document “Black and Minority Ethnic Communities” or “Minority Ethnic Groups” or “Ethnic Minority” has an inclusive meaning to unite all minority communities. It refers to settled ethnic minorities (including Travellers, Roma and Gypsy), settled religious minorities, migrants (EU and non-EU), asylum seekers and refugees and people of other immigration status.

³ UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); UN International Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD); Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) and the European Social Charter.

⁴ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), *General comment No. 21: Right of everyone to take part in cultural life*, UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/21, 21 December 2009, para. 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 33.

Importantly, the Committee also recognises the “right of minorities and of persons belonging to minorities to take part in the cultural life of society, and also to conserve, promote and develop their own culture”.⁶ The Committee has also stated that migrants have the “right to hold cultural, artistic and intercultural events”.⁷

NICEM also welcomes the Council’s plan to develop a cultural diversity strategy as it is necessary to recognise and provide for the wide range of cultures that contribute to the social make-up of the city. Once developed, NICEM encourages the Council to integrate the strategy into the cultural framework. Nevertheless, there are a number of points that NICEM feels can be incorporated into the cultural framework to reflect the cultural diversity in the city of Belfast.

This response will be structured in the form of the questionnaire developed by the Belfast City Council.

3. Consultation Questions

1. Vision and aims

On page 6–7 we outline our vision for culture and arts and key commitments for 2012 to 2015.

1.1 Overall, how satisfied are you with the visions and aims?

very satisfied	satisfied	neutral	not satisfied	very dissatisfied
☐	☐	☐	☐	☒

1.2 Do you have any comments about the visions and aims? Is there anything you would amend or add that you think would enhance them?

The right of everyone to take part in cultural life should be taken as a point of departure in developing a Cultural Framework for Belfast. As referred to above in section 2 (general comments) the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has emphasised that states, and state actors such as the Belfast City Council, are obliged to take positive actions to ensure that ethnic minorities and migrants enjoy the right to cultural life.

The introduction to the Cultural Framework refers to the cultural diversity strategy yet goes on to adopt a very narrow definition of culture, which makes

⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*, para. 34.

no reference to cultural diversity. The recently launched Intercultural Arts Strategy developed by the Arts Council Northern Ireland (ACNI) defines intercultural engagement as “promoting exchanges between different cultural groups within society”. In order to ensure coherence and clarity between these policy documents, the Cultural Framework should, at the very least, explicitly refer to intercultural engagement in its vision and aims. However, in order to comply with it’s section 75 duties in terms of promoting equality of opportunity and good relations, it is recommended that Belfast City Council goes beyond the minimum and develops a new and more inclusive definition of culture which takes into account the wide and diverse range of communities living in Belfast who contribute significantly to the cultural landscape of the city.

2. Themes

On pages 22–5 we outline four themes which we believe are necessary for the delivery of our vision for the city. These are based on our consultation to date as well as research and analysis of needs and gaps in Belfast. The themes will also form the basis of our funding for culture and arts activity.

2.1 Overall, do you agree that the four themes are appropriate for achieving the vision of the Cultural Framework?

strongly
agree

☐

agree

☐

neither agree
nor disagree

☐

disagree

☐

strongly
disagree

☒

2.2 Do you have any comments about the themes and definitions? Is there anything you would change or add that you think would enhance them?

As mentioned above with regard to the vision and aims, the themes do not provide sufficiently for the promotion of equality, good relations and cultural diversity. Given the Belfast City Council’s obligations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and obligations to uphold international standards in respect of cultural rights, it is imperative that equality and human rights are mainstreamed throughout the proposed Cultural Framework. Therefore, NICEM would propose to add a cultural diversity perspective to all themes in order to ensure that this framework is inclusive and allows for all people living in Belfast to actively participate in cultural life.

3. Distinctly Belfast

On page 22, we define what we mean by ‘Distinctly Belfast’ and outline what we believe to be the main priorities and actions under this theme. We considered many different words and phrases and drew on different local sources when

describing this theme. We considered calling it Made in Belfast, Uniquely Belfast or Only in Belfast, but thought that Distinctly Belfast was the best option.

3.1 How satisfied are you with the 'Distinctly Belfast' theme and its definition?

very satisfied	satisfied	neutral	not satisfied	very dissatisfied
☐	☐	☐	☒	☐

3.2 Do you have any comments about the priorities and actions related to this theme? Is there anything you would change or add that you think would enhance this theme?

The 'Distinctly Belfast' theme mentions 'local talent' but does not emphasise that this includes a wide range of ethnic minorities and migrants living in the city who contribute to the rich cultural tapestry of Belfast. It is recommended that the term 'local talent' is removed as this can be interpreted very narrowly to mean the indigenous population and can lead to the exclusion of ethnic minorities and migrants. Instead, it is recommended that more inclusive terms such as "all" or "everyone" should be used.

In addition, the Council should also take account of the European and International artists and organisations that already come to Belfast, many of whom are coming through the festivals, gallery programmes, performance collectives and university initiatives that are not members of Audiences NI or in receipt of ACNI funding or public subsidies. For example the Festival of Fools is a truly international and free street festival that captures fluid and diverse audiences on the streets of City Centre and Cathedral Quarter Belfast over a period of days in May/June each year. Emphasis should be placed on the value of the contributions of those artists and their engagement with artists who are based in Belfast in order to illustrate the benefit in learning from other cultures and how this fusion creates a cultural experience that is "Distinctly Belfast".

4. Inspiring Communities

Many of our stakeholders have already told us that engaging Belfast's communities should be a priority. On page 23, we define what we mean by 'Inspiring Communities' and outline what we believe to be the main priorities and actions under this theme.

4.1 How satisfied are you with the Inspiring Communities theme and its definition?

very satisfied	satisfied	neutral	not satisfied	very dissatisfied
☐	☐	☐	☒	☐

4.2 Do you have any comments about the priorities and actions related to this theme? Is there anything you would change or add that you think would enhance this theme?

With regard to the 'Inspiring Communities' theme, this presents an exciting opportunity for the Council to encourage ethnic minority and migrant communities to participate in public life.

As a positive initiative under this theme, the Council should develop programmes that promote good relations across the diverse communities in Belfast.

5. Attracting Audiences

We think that engaging, retaining and growing audiences is one of the biggest challenges facing the culture and arts sectors. Our arts organisations have already told us that marketing is a key area that needs developed. On page 24, we define what we mean by 'Attracting Audiences' and outline what we believe to be the main priorities and actions under this theme.

5.1 How satisfied are you with the 'Attracting Audiences' theme and its definition?

very satisfied	satisfied	neutral	not satisfied	very dissatisfied
☐	☐	☒	☐	☐

5.2 Do you have any comments about the priorities and actions related to this theme? Is there anything you would change or add that you think would enhance this theme?

No comment

5. Strengthening the Sector

In this challenging economic climate, our arts and cultural organisations are under threat from loss of income. We need to help organisations grow and become more secure so they can deliver the best activity for the city.

On page 25, we define what we mean by 'Strengthening the Sector' and outline what we believe to be the main priorities and actions under this theme.

5.1 How satisfied are you with the Strengthening the Sector theme and its definition?

very satisfied	satisfied	neutral	not satisfied	very dissatisfied
☐	☐	☒	☐	☐

5.2 Do you have any comments about the priorities and actions related to this theme? Is there anything you would change or add that you think would enhance this theme?

No comment

6. Investment

Providing culture, arts and heritage organisations with funding is one of the main ways we propose to achieve our vision. We want to ensure that our funding makes a substantial impact, supporting cultural excellence, improving quality of life and creating wealth.

On pages 27–30, we describe changes we intend to make to our funding schemes and processes.

6.1 Overall, do you agree that the proposed funding schemes will be effective in achieving the vision of the Cultural Framework?

strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
☐	☐	☐	☒	☐

6.2 Do you have any comments about the proposed funding schemes? Is there anything you would change or add that you think would enhance the funding schemes?

Community Festivals funding was reduced to twice a year in 2012 and no explanation was provided as to why this is. This is important given that the variety and extent of the festivals calendar is identified as a strength on page 21. The Framework also notes that Belfast is a City of Festivals, and its Festivals Forum has more than 100 members. It is noted that many festivals in Belfast celebrate the diverse range of cultures in the city, e.g. Belfast Mela, Exponations, Polish Cultural Week, Festival of India etc. and therefore, this makes a strong case for referring to cultural diversity throughout the framework.

On page 28 focus is placed on 'high profile and award winning'. The Council must be careful to make sure that this reference includes the diversity and variety found in artistic communities engaging with Council. Too much focus on impact reduces spotlight on, and potentially image of diversity in, artistic culture in Belfast.

On page 29 the framework makes reference to encouraging organisations to work under theme of 'Distinctly Belfast' and within that there is a strong focus on 'local'. Given the comments made earlier in relation to the use of the term 'local' it is recommended that this term is removed and replaced with a more inclusive terms which reflects the diverse cultural groups in Belfast.

NICEM is concerned about the review of the Community Festivals Fund, particularly since there is not much detail about what form such a review might take and especially given recent cuts as well as expressed desire to award fewer projects more money as part of Big Ideas.

NICEM is also concerned that a focus on high-profile and award-winning could lead to the Framework shaping a culture rather than supporting the diversity that already exists in Belfast.

Therefore, the Council must take proactive steps to promote cultural diversity within the Framework and this would also be reflected in investment.

7. Values

On page 26, we outline the values that underpin the strategy and the way we work. The Council will provide leadership, work in partnership and champion creativity and excellence.

7.1 Do you agree that this is the council's role?

strongly
agree

☐

agree

☐

neither agree
nor disagree

☒

disagree

☐

strongly
disagree

☐

7.2 Do you have any comments about the role of the council? Is there anything you would change or add?

Most importantly, as a designated public authority, Belfast City Council has a positive duty to promote equality of opportunity and good relations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Therefore, NICEM recommends that the Council designates cultural diversity and good relations as a key underpinning value of the Framework.

The Framework must also attempt to work with the differing artistic

communities in order to establish community cohesion and inclusive artistic practices across different artistic communities contributing to the cultural fabric in Belfast.

8. Targets for 2012–15

On page 31, we outline what we hope to achieve by 2015.

8.1 Overall, do you agree that these are appropriate targets for the Cultural Framework for Belfast?

strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
☐	☐	☒	☐	☐

8.2 Do you have any comments about the targets? Is there anything you would change or add that you think would enhance the targets?

In the Distinctly Belfast section, “the support of 4,000 artist contracts per year” is mentioned. NICEM queries whether this means that more artists are being supported by reducing the amount of individual support available. If so, the impact and audience of the project may be reduced.

In addition, there should be targets in relation to cultural diversity, to foster awareness, understanding and appreciation of the wide range of cultures in Belfast.

4. Other comments

In this section, I will highlight three points, which do not fit into any of the consultation questions in the above questionnaire.

Firstly, the reference to St. George’s market as “an invaluable assest for the city” is particularly interesting given the recognised contribution of ethnic minority and migrant communities to the market’s success. Moreover, the market provides a good example of a wide range of cultures coming together and respecting and learning from each other, which is something that should underpin the Framework.⁸

Secondly, AUDIENCES NI has been identified as a 'key partner in the success of this new framework as we work together to attract audiences from the city and further afield', its objective being to develop and diversify audiences. In addition, AUDIENCES NI also only relates to 'ticketed events' and does not include the many

⁸ See Erskine, ‘Market Sells NI Diversity’, BBC News, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4190514.stm.

festivals, events, galleries and community arts organisations that do not operate box offices or are not members of AUDIENCES NI. This is somewhat problematic given that the Framework will rely on AUDIENCES NI as a partner, when it does not reflect the diversity of the arts sector in Belfast or the fluid audiences that engage with their output. AUDIENCES NI does offer a free 'Entry' membership, but only to ACNI client organisations, not accounting for the 'unticketed' or free artistic output that make valuable contributions to the 'dynamic, diverse and unique' culture of Belfast which is referred to on page 6. The success of the Framework must be measured by its ability to support a sustainable and thriving arts sector in Belfast rather than solely based on contributions to the economy in terms of turnover and membership.

In general terms there is a case to be made for launching the Cultural Diversity Strategy and the Cultural Framework together in order to ensure consistency and as a matter of good administration in terms of joined-up thinking. This is particularly relevant in the context of the proposed Framework, which consistently refers to the 'diverse and dynamic' nature of culture in Belfast on the one hand but makes numerous references to 'local talent' on the other hand. In addition, it is essential that the ACNI Intercultural Arts Strategy is referred to and it should be listed in Appendix 3.

5. Contact Information

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Publication of responses

Once the consultation period is over and a decision has been made by council, we will publish the final text on the council's Culture and Arts web page.

Copies of responses to the consultation may be made publicly available. The information they contain may also be published in a summary of responses. If you would like to be informed when this information is published, please tell us:

☒ Yes, I would like to be kept informed about the results of the consultation.

If you do not want your response to be published, you must clearly request that it is to be treated confidentially. Any confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system in e-mail responses will not be treated as such a request.

You should also be aware that there might be circumstances in which we will be required to communicate information to third parties on request in order to comply with our obligations under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004. We will contact you prior to disclosure to seek your views in relation to any Freedom of Information requests received.