

A City Imagining

This cultural strategy was written in 2019, before the Coronavirus pandemic. The impact of the pandemic has affected some of the plans, particularly those around the celebration of culture which was planned for 2023. Belfast's celebration of culture will now take place during 2024. Contact us with any queries, culture@belfastcity.gov.uk

- [Belfast's cultural statement](#)
- [Chapter 1: The story so far](#)
- [Chapter 2: A city belonging](#)
- [Chapter 3: A city challenging](#)
- [Chapter 4: A city creating](#)
- [Chapter 5: A city exploring](#)
- [Chapter 6: Lift off](#)
- [Chapter 7: A city connecting](#)
- [Chapter 8: A city investing](#)

Belfast's cultural statement

Culture is a complicated word. Not everyone agrees with what it means. For some people it's art; For some people it's sport. For some people it's the buildings around us, the music we enjoy, the food we eat or the languages we use to communicate with each other.

We have decided that we don't want to define what culture means too closely because we know what it feels like to be defined. And definitions have held us back for too long.

For years some of us have felt the need to protect ourselves by turning inside and guarding our sense of belonging. But that was then and this is now.

We now know that we have gained much wisdom through the extreme experiences of living in our city. We are proud of the place we call home and our doors are open.

We understand that culture is everything; it's the way we live our lives; it's our place in the world and how we express that place in the world. We recognise that the freedom to choose who we are and how we shape our city is up to us.

We can see that our future is there for the imagining and that we must do this together. It will take great courage, some patience and a lot of creativity but imagination is a gift and action a responsibility.

We know we are a work in progress. We believe that Belfast is a city imagining.

Chapter 1: The story so far

The long view

Shouldered by hills and both challenged and sustained by waterways, Belfast has been characterised by forces of endurance and determination since ancient times. Archaeologists have documented at least 9,000 years of human settlement in the mountains and high ground around modern-day Belfast. The importance of geography – both its tests and opportunities – has been evident through the long and compelling story of the city's development. Fast forward to 21st century Belfast and the landscape has become a cityscape, moulded by a new ebb and flow, by the tides of people living in, sharing and coming to visit the remarkable place that we call home.

New perspectives

In 2017, Belfast took the decision to enter a bidding process for the designation of European Capital of Culture. In October of the same year, the European Commission decided to halt the process, ending the competitive nature of the bid. Rather than being the end of a journey, the civic momentum gained through 16,000 one-to-one conversations threw open a challenge – the challenge to recognise the transformative power that culture, art and creativity have to spark a new relationship with ourselves as individuals, communities and as a city.

This 10-year cultural strategy is the result of an intensive, experimental and richly rewarding engagement process. Throughout the process, we've listened to and acknowledged the complex challenges and divisions which you've told us have blunted the city's creativity and relationship to 'culture.' Belfast's cultural statement is a synthesis of your voices and an indication of the direction in which you feel the city needs to travel in relation to culture.

This strategy is a consolidation of the foundation, commitments and achievements of several preceding strategies and frameworks and commits the city to facilitating a new integrated phase of culture-led progress and development, with the individual at the heart of this process.

We acknowledge that there is much work to be done to develop a cultural ecosystem which is both anchored and adaptable to change. The strategy does not constitute a blueprint, but rather supports a philosophy of enablement with a view to creating a fluid, permeable place which values creativity and an 'anything is possible' attitude. This will also involve respecting the richness and diversity of our different cultural identities. Releasing Belfast's full creative potential is an exciting work in progress. Belfast is a city imagining.

- Conversations
- People
- Creators
- Artists
- Places
- Events

Vision for 2035

Belfast will be a city:

- where everyone fulfils their potential
- where everyone benefits from a thriving and prosperous economy
- where everyone experiences good health and well being
- that is welcoming, safe, fair and inclusive for all
- that is vibrant, attractive, connected and environmentally sustainable

Belfast Agenda

Created by a strong civic partnership led by Belfast City Council, the Belfast Agenda is our city's first community plan. It sets a vision for 2035 that imagines a culturally vibrant city. Our cultural strategy sets out a series of priorities that have the potential to contribute significantly to all five outcomes of the Belfast Agenda.

Building on the community planning process, we believe that this cultural strategy will be transformational. It acknowledges that change requires ambition, long-term commitment and a sustainable and adaptable approach. We believe that change is happening. This is our opportunity to embed cultural policy across wider city development. Our issues are complex and long standing but creativity and resilience are in the very fabric of our city and our people. A city imagining can be the catalyst for the urgency and agency required to encourage innovation, new connected thinking and greater collaboration.

100 resilient cities

Belfast has joined a global organisation called 100 Resilient Cities. Belfast is focused on strengthening the fabric of the city, reducing our vulnerability to shocks and increasing our capacity to adapt and respond to systemic stresses. Culture is at the heart of this work.

A resilient city is a culturally vibrant city. One which values culture and its role. Ensuring the city can tackle intractable problems and adapt to future challenges. Our culture gives us strength - our culture makes us resilient.

Placemaking

Our approach to cultural development has been evolving since the publication of our first dedicated cultural strategy in 2003.

We recognise the limitations of previous approaches, in particular, an over-emphasis on linear and transactional relationships. At times there has been a disconnect between recognising the benefits and understanding the value of culture. However, successive cultural strategies have helped to lay a strong foundation for what we will now take forward as a new lateral and integrated approach to cultural development and placemaking.

Placemaking is a people-centred approach to delivering a local and shared vision. People shape places. Culturally vibrant cities are places where people negotiate collective senses of belonging and where the private sphere connects to the public.

In recent years, there is an increased understanding of the role of councils in shaping great places. Local government is ideally positioned when it comes to placemaking, with an ability to connect with and bring together a diverse range of people. It is in this role that Belfast City Council must show leadership. However, equally important is our role in stepping back to facilitate and strengthen other networks that in turn support cultural lives and creative environments.

Cultural 21

Cities and regions from across the world first approved Agenda 21 for Culture in 2004. In the years since, many more local governments have aligned their policies to the actions set out in what has now become known as Culture 21. This international agenda systematically addresses the relationship between culture, citizenship and sustainability through nine commitments.

Long standing global approaches to sustainable city development have recognised the importance of social, ecological and economic factors and the interconnections between each of these three pillars. In the 21st century, there has been an increased awareness of the need to understand and value a fourth pillar. This is what Culture 21 refers to as the cultural dimension. In doing so cities not only recognise the important relationship that culture has with the three other pillars but also the need to protect the integrity of a clear cultural agenda by applying a cultural lens to all areas of local policy making.

Belfast has already committed to joining the Culture 21 Pilot Cities programme. Participation in this programme creates an opportunity for the city to be part of an international community. It also provides us with the support and guidance to take forward a number of specific actions that will respond to the local context as we embark on a process of truly embedding culture at the heart of our wider city agenda.

Cultural 21 commitments

- Cultural Rights
- Heritage, Culture and Creativity
- Culture and Education
- Culture and Environment
- Culture and Economy
- Culture, Equality and Social Inclusion
- Culture, Urban Planning and Public Space
- Culture, Information and Knowledge
- Governance of Culture

Chapter 2: A city belonging

Active participation

Cultural belonging can be defined as an individual's feelings in relation to their sense of identity, their relationship to other people around them

and their sense of place. Agenda 21 for Culture states that cultural rights guarantee the ability of everyone to identify with one or several cultural communities and to adapt this choice throughout their life. The exercise of cultural rights is essential for the development of a sustainable city. This also includes respect and understanding for the cultural rights of others. We believe that arts and creative practices can foster the confidence to imagine new and diverse senses of belonging in Belfast.

Priorities

Priorities under this theme will support citizens to be active agents of change and co-creators of cultural activity. In this context when we refer to citizens we include all those people who make up our city – residents, non-residents and visitors.

Priority 1

Developing a people focussed approach to cultural development by facilitating citizen and sector participation in setting priorities, decision-making and in the evaluation of cultural policies.

Priority 2

Building the creative capacity of our citizens and cultural sector to allow people to express their own cultural identities and respect and learn about other cultures.

Priority 3

Protecting, promoting and using cultural heritage in all its dimensions, both tangible and intangible including the plurality of the city's cultural narratives.

Priority 4

Enabling a sense of belonging and sense of place through cultural participation to help encourage a strong civic identity that people can share and celebrate.

Imagine an inclusive city where everyone actively participates in cultural life

The outcomes of the Belfast Agenda focus on improving the quality of life for the individual. A City Belonging responds to this by supporting cultural participation as a critical part of active participation in civic society. Complex and long standing issues such as life inequalities require a multidimensional response and we believe that creativity has a significant role in the ongoing transformation of Belfast.

To help take forward this theme, we will engage creative facilitators, citizens and our cultural partners in a co-design process that will reach into all areas of Belfast. This will involve getting into the extraordinary ordinary spaces of people's lives – living rooms, shopping centres, bus stops, taxi cabs and classrooms.

It is in working this way that our collective city can hear new voices and people are encouraged to open up about challenging questions of belonging. Cultural vibrancy emanates from creators, participants, volunteers and audiences. This can drive new forms of citizenship that in turn support our aspiration of being a resilient city that leaves no-one behind.

For many people the city already has a thriving cultural scene including high quality sporting facilities and excellent examples of natural and built heritage. However, a vision of cultural inclusivity must push out to connect to all dimensions of cultural life including engagement, programming, accessibility, participation, audiences, volunteering and employment.

To support these active forms of participation and co-creation we must better understand the existing obstacles to citizens' access and engagement in cultural life. We must also support and strengthen those organisations devoted to culture and value the important contribution they make to the life of our city.

Chapter 3: A city challenging

Diversity

Globalisation and migration have increased diversity in cities across the world. Different dimensions of diversity intersect in multiple ways between individuals and communities. One of the city's challenges is to create the conditions whereby Belfast's open spaces and cultural venues offer opportunities for diverse encounters across and beyond different cultures, lifestyles and attitudes.

Priorities

Priorities under this theme will aspire to cultivate creative environments for dynamic co-creation and synergy in our placemaking.

Priority 5

Embedding cultural impact in city development and local placemaking.

Priority 6

Investing in connected, resilient and sustainable infrastructure of quality cultural spaces across the city. This will also include digital spaces.

Priority 7

Supporting high quality cultural events and activities that are accessible, diverse and inclusive.

Priority 8

Transforming under-used public spaces into vibrant and diverse cultural destinations.

Imagine a diverse city with vibrant public and cultural spaces

The Belfast Agenda recognises the city's abundance of open space including parks, playing fields, greenways as well as the River Lagan and Belfast Hills. These spaces are complemented by our historic and contemporary cultural venues including our museums, theatres and galleries. The challenge is to ensure the purpose and use of these places reflect the diversity of our city.

Across Europe and beyond, citizens are questioning the ownership and use of public space. As populations increase and places change, real innovation is required in creating shared locations for recreation, leisure and sport. There is an opportunity to activate and repurpose derelict, neglected or underused space in imaginative ways. We will create contexts, which will enable intercultural exchanges to flourish in the public realm. This will also support interests, hobbies, personal creativity and connections between new and diverse communities of interest.

Cultural vibrancy will be essential to ensuring we meet our ambitious target to significantly increase the number of people living in the city centre. It will also be crucial to the sustainable evolution of our ever changing high streets and the many neighbourhoods that make up the city as a whole.

The approach must acknowledge the need for people to experience urban diversity in the places we meet and in how we use public space. Cultural impact should be inherent in our placemaking to ensure that we deliver a distinctive vision for Belfast. The design of our public spaces must be authentic to the way we live our lives but with one eye to the future. How we programme and animate these spaces will allow us to imagine new meanings.

It is the relationship between an individual's sense of belonging and a sense of place that we create a collective experience of Belfast as our home.

Chapter 4: A city creating

New approaches

A culturally vibrant city must take risks. The citizens of Belfast have indicated that they are ready to challenge traditional mind-sets and take a culture-led leap into the future. Cultural, arts and heritage organisations have a key role to play as creative leaders, innovators and challengers.

Priorities

Priorities under this theme will facilitate and explore new ways of working, taking more risks and helping artists to have more autonomy to engage with citizens in new and creative ways.

Priority 9

Increasing the autonomy of the creative sectors to explore and shape the city's evolving, rich and multiple cultural narratives.

Priority 10

Supporting cultural excellence, cultural planning and cultural entrepreneurialism by providing support for artistic innovation and improved networking.

Priority 11

Investing in a stronger and more sustainable cultural sector by supporting established and new creative practitioners to work beyond boundaries. This will create the environment where risks can be taken across a broader range of activities, sectors and disciplines.

Priority 12

Empowering the innovative capacity of the creative economy to connect technology and society.

Imagine a city where creativity pushes boundaries

The Belfast Agenda sets out an ambitious vision for a city that is energised, vibrant and connected. The opportunity for this transformation is considerable, however, the challenges are significant. Each of these descriptors – energised, vibrant and connected – speak to specific cultural values. It is in this space that our artists and cultural players can lead in imagining this transformed city.

If we recognise the role of our cultural partners as collaborators and innovators, we should not approach the relationship with predetermined demands and precast solutions. The principle of reciprocity involves an open dialogue on the contribution of culture and creativity to all aspects of life in the city.

The first step in this process is to develop new forms of relationship that move beyond that of funder and recipient. Recognising the professionalism of the creative and cultural sectors and their ability to adapt is critical. In turn, cultural organisations must rise to the challenge of effectively articulating their own value proposition in order to increase mutual understanding of their contribution to the city.

The outcomes of the Belfast Agenda are clear. The aspiration is to be a culturally vibrant city. The success of this is dependent on the real experiences of the people who live, work and visit. Council has a clear role in facilitating the networks and building the capacity and skills to deliver on the cultural dimension of this Agenda. There is an opportunity to establish Belfast as an international testing ground for new approaches to cultural engagement and development and to imagine new ways of living in our city. Belfast has always been a city of innovation and experimentation. A city creating supports the next evolution of this story.

Chapter 5: A city exploring

Our place in the world

The depth and breadth of existing partnerships and networks between cultural players (including educational, sports, community and voluntary) is already evident. The positive impact of these connections has ripple effects across many sectors at a city and regional level as well as securing Belfast's place within the global creative economy. Belfast will facilitate, support and maintain city, regional and international networks and collaborative partnerships on a range of levels, from the individual artist to established cultural institutions.

Priorities

Priorities under this theme will sustain, strengthen and develop the city's cultural ecosystem.

Priority 13

Strengthening our city, regional and international cultural networks.

Priority 14

Growing our sustainable cultural tourism product through a creative approach that respects the city's heritage and communities.

Priority 15

Encouraging environmental responsibility and resilience by understanding and adapting cultural behaviours.

Priority 16

Increasing the contribution of both public and private cultural sectors to inclusive economic growth.

Imagine a city confident of our place in the world

This strategy seeks to sustain cultural activity and increase cultural impact by building capacity at a citizen, sector and city level. Critical to this will be the development of stronger regional cultural networks (formal and informal connections and opportunities supported by local authorities) that will allow for deeper collaboration and partnership working between Belfast and other areas.

Equally important is our ability to connect out across the world. This model already exists in other sectors and illustrates the local and international opportunities that comes from strong networks. Critical to this model of a global and resilient city is active participation at an international level. Our creative and cultural sectors are ideally placed to be global ambassadors for the city.

The connection between the local and the global is important. Belfast's tourism industry is driven by a 21st century international trend where visitors seek authentic, local and cultural experiences. In many ways, this is the contemporary articulation of an age-old phenomenon. That people connect with people. That tourism by its very nature is cultural. A city exploring also recognises that as well as major infrastructure, marketing and investment the success of the visitor economy will be defined by storytelling.

Our citizens, neighbourhoods and local communities are at the core of telling these stories. This in turn shapes places. This theme will support the development of cultural tourism across the city through a long-term commitment to local placemaking.

Many of the civic conversations that have supported the development of this strategy have revealed the increasing importance of environmental responsibility to the lives of the people in the city. There is undoubtedly an uncertainty as to how to proceed at an individual and collective city level yet this is a critical dimension to understanding and strengthening our place in the world. Cultural behaviours are one of the dominant factors in localised responses to environmental sustainability. We believe that this strategy can support a dialogue that increases our understanding and as a result, our ability to adapt these behaviours to better protect our city and global ecology.

Chapter 6: Lift off

Bidding for the designation of European Capital of Culture has been a tremendous catalyst for doing things differently. Despite the end of this competition, we have decided that we must build on the momentum generated during the bidding process and push Belfast to realise its full potential as a destination city where people want to live, work and visit. We are following through with plans to make 2023 a celebratory year co-created by local people for themselves and visitors to enjoy.

During 2023 we will launch a year-long programme of immersive cultural activity on a scale that Belfast has never seen before. So much more than a festival, Belfast 2023 will be a landmark in the delivery of the cultural ambition set out in A city imagining and a call to action for our next generation of cultural leaders.

By 2023 we also aspire to have achieved the designation of UNESCO City of Music for Belfast, to have embedded a new approach to festival and events in the city, and to be well on our way towards opening our new cultural attraction in the city centre. The priorities of this strategy, including a visioning tourism narrative for the city, will facilitate the creativity, capacity building and energy that is required in the lead up to this celebration and beyond. It is hoped the impact of the year will be a change that is felt at a personal level and borne out in the collective action of the city.

At home in 2023

Twenty twenty three will be a designated celebration of culture. Crowdsourced through thousands of conversations with citizens, our concept for the year is At home.

Home in the 21st century is a complex, changing and dynamic concept. From the conversations that we have had, we understand that what it means to be 'At home' can be as much about a feeling or a sense of belonging as it can be about a specific place or bricks and mortar. Our year will celebrate and challenge what it means to be at home in our city. This will involve the most ambitious public engagement programme Belfast has ever undertaken. The results will be far reaching launching an international programme that will attract visitors from across the world truly establishing Belfast as a city of culture. Our vision for the year is to create a legacy of better understanding our identity, our relationships with each other and our place in the world.

The Plan

The artistic programme for the year will be structured around six flagship projects. Four of these projects will build on existing signature events in the city with a further two being special commissions for the year. The rationale for this is to support the long-term transformation of established cultural events as well as recognising a unique opportunity to commission new work of scale and international relevance.

The proposed approach is committed to investing in our cultural sector to produce adventurous, challenging, innovative and risk-taking work. The programme will also include a series of further commissions ranging in content, style, scale and purpose. This could include individual artists through to international collaborations.

The programme will support the strategic priorities set out in this ten year strategy including:

- long-term capacity building

- networking and educational projects
- volunteering programme artists in residence
- arts management audience development
- civic engagement international cooperation support

Our year is designed to create a collective moment for the city. The programme does not have a final destination. If the purpose of this wider strategy is cultural transformation then the legacy of 2023 is that in activating a new sense of place we can find new senses of belonging.

Artists

Volunteers

Citizens

Visitors

Flagship events

Cultural events

Fringe events

The roadmap

City events have an important role within the wider cultural offer of Belfast. Events can tell stories, connect people and present new perspectives on our place.

The cultural, social and economic impacts of events cut across all areas of the Belfast Agenda. The decision to bid for the European Capital of Culture indicated that there is a desire to enhance the quality and ambition of the cultural offer in Belfast through closer partnerships within the city, across the region and internationally. We are starting from a strong position. However, from this foundation we must commit to a long-term and strategic approach to events that supports the wider ambitions of this strategy. Despite the richness of Belfast's cultural offer and a number of significant successes in recent years, the city has not yet established itself as an events destination. What the city has demonstrated is the potential to be different, authentic and distinctly Belfast. Events can challenge and articulate a city's diverse identity and personality. Public engagement must underpin our city's new approach to developing events and festivals. Successful cities of culture have shown that investment in homegrown talent has long-term and measurable impacts.

Events should:

- encourage cultural curiosity to foster a more accessible, optimistic and celebratory city
- contribute to placemaking by using public spaces in innovative ways to shape identity, regenerate the city and tell new stories
- support inclusive growth by driving talent and skills development within the local workforce as well as indicators of economic spend
- inspire civic pride and volunteer engagement

Our aim is to develop 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. City partners will work together to bid to secure a major event once every five years. Our approach will also consider the potential for a series of homegrown events such as a celebration of culture in 2023, to deliver the same level of impact as an external international event. Investment in major events should consider connection to the city's cultural narrative and longterm contribution to infrastructure as well as any short-term economic impact.

We recognise that this is an ambitious approach. We are confident that by working together we can make Belfast a unique events destination.

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Looking out

Belfast's Destination Hub (the Hub) will be a landmark signature experience in the heart of the city centre that speaks to the essence of this vibrant place. This will be achieved through an innovative cluster of existing and new developments.

Supported by the Belfast Region City Deal, the core element of the Hub will be the Belfast Story. This major cultural attraction will invite visitors to explore the many stories of the city and its people through an immersive, multi-gallery experience. The galleries will draw on the full range of interpretative techniques, using a combination of multi-media technologies, selected objects and creative responses to reveal the histories,

personal secrets and fascinating facts about Belfast.

The concept is under development, but it is envisaged that it will take a thematic approach to story telling. For example, the attraction will immerse visitors in the city's music, arts, sports and love of a good yarn; it will connect them with the city's innovators and tell them about its tribes and heroes; it will take them inside the challenging stories of the more recent troubled past. Visitors will leave with real insights into Belfast, and with a rich sense of the city and its people. The Hub is a working title.

The experience will comprise the new developments of the Belfast Story, a film centre and a largescale exhibition space creating a place where locals meet and Belfast connects with its visitors.

Connecting outwards to the city and beyond

The ethos for the Hub is to connect Belfast's current cultural offer to create an integrated, comprehensive and unforgettable city experience. The Hub will encourage visitors to experience existing venues and explore wider areas by creating synergies with cultural partners across the city. The impact of the Hub will be far reaching. It will naturally have direct impact on the city centre by bringing a new dynamic to the area. It will also provide a cultural beacon for the city, an anchor for the wider Belfast experience and an area of orientation for visitors into Northern Ireland.

People and place

The opportunity for the people of Belfast to be involved in shaping and renewing the stories of the city is at the heart of this project. This will be an experience that is truly of the place with the power to evolve our city narratives past, present and future.

Listening in

Belfast has a unique relationship with music across many genres. It reflects the clang of our industrial past, the ferment of political events and the expressions of youth - both frustrated and hopeful. Belfast has a legacy of showbands, heavy rock and a pub culture that thrives on traditional music. Our musical heritage stretches from classical to street music. Belfast is known internationally for having a rich and diverse musical history but it also has a promising future that arises from its recent revival as a genuinely global city.

Music is recognised as a distinctive aspect of Belfast's cultural profile with audience research indicating high levels of engagement locally as well as strong linkages to the city's international profile. Engagement with citizens during and after the European Capital of Culture bid also indicated that there is support for strengthening the role that music has in helping to make Belfast a culturally vibrant place to live, work and visit. In March 2018 as a result of the coalescence of many conversations which were happening in the city at the same time, council backed a proposal for the city and its partners to make an application for the endorsement of UNESCO City of Music status.

The UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) aims to strengthen cooperation with and among cities that have recognised creativity as a strategic factor of sustainable development with regard to social, cultural, economic and environmental aspects. Member cities come from diverse regions and work towards a common mission: placing creativity and cultural industries at the core of their urban development plans to make their cities safe, resilient, inclusive and sustainable.

For Belfast, the possibility of the designation is much more than just getting a title, it's the opportunity to open a new era of collaboration between the city, citizens and music communities. There must be a place at the table for everyone, from the grassroots smaller venues and their audiences through to breakthrough international artists. The process for bidding will be regarded as an experiment in partnership building and engagement in order to achieve the far-reaching impact that music can have on the lives of everyone in Belfast.

While Belfast has enjoyed a relative growth in tourism over recent years, it's time for the city to push the development of cultural tourism on to the next level. Titanic Belfast has been an enormous success and an indicator of the potential for tourism as a driver for economic growth. In order to encourage visitors to stay longer and explore more areas of the city, including our unique neighbourhoods, we must broaden and deepen the wealth of the city's current cultural offer. We have been working with partners to develop an outward facing city narrative and positioning framework for Belfast which will help the city to progress with a strategic and connected approach to product development.

Obviously Belfast

We are a city that confounds expectations. A city that's like no other. For a capital city we're small ... compact. Our heart is big. Our spirit strong. Our energy palpable. Our character stout. Our humour dark. And the craic is mighty.

We're a great city that welcomes you with open arms - and we're ready to tell our stories to the world. For visitors there's the unforgettable experience of being in a city in transition - an edgy city that's on the move. Colourful, complicated, messy ... and magnificent. Because Belfast is a city that's rich in so many ways. Richly storied: an early coastal settlement named Béal Feirste, enfolded by hills, rivers and loughs, this is a place with a long and complex history, a tapestry of narratives, and now a new story in the making.

Richly ornate: this industrial powerhouse of the 19th and early 20th centuries has lavish facades and gorgeous interiors – not just the grand civic buildings but its pubs and cafés and hotels. And rich in culture, talent and creativity: with our history of making things, our extraordinary street art, our live music scene, our sporting legends and our unique dialect that helps give this city its different sound. Belfast’s long been home to creators who dare to dream – industrial designers and innovators, technicians and craftspeople, as well as artists, writers and poets, music and film-makers.

There are other giants in Belfast too – the world famous story of the Titanic and the towering new edifice that marks its creation, the sleeping giant’s silhouette on the ever-present Belfast hills that encircle the city, the huge yellow dockside cranes Samson and Goliath which dominate the skyline, the Peace Walls that open your eyes to the recent troubled past. In one trip you can experience a cultural city, a vibrant evening city, a maritime river city, a university city, a foodie city and a historic city. Belfast’s story is all around you – it’s written (quite literally) in the paving stones and on the walls. And after a day or two here – walking the street, hearing the stories, listening to the voices – you start to make the connections. You start to unlock the past. You start to understand the banter. You start to feel like you belong.

Tourism’s still relatively new here, and the people go out of our way to make you feel welcome. There’s a generosity to strangers that can take the visitor by surprise ... but it shouldn’t: it’s part of who we are.

So ... Belfast is ready. Are you?

The themes

To truly connect with our visitors and ultimately grow market share, we need to ensure that our visitors truly connect with Belfast’s people, culture, places and heritage. To help give focus to the challenge of creating unique destination experiences, we have identified the following four themes from our tourism narrative. These themes will help to shape the development of Belfast experiences which are immersive and engaging.

Tell me more (A city of stories)

Most cities claim their people are the best, however we truly believe that it’s our incredible people who give character and charm to Belfast. A city where people love to talk, to tell and share stories, to banter and make the visitor feel like they belong – that’s Belfast. Conversations are nourished as much by wonderful food as they are flavoured by local voices. You might have heard one story about Belfast but you certainly haven’t heard them all.

Hidden depths (A maritime city)

It has been said that the people of Belfast walk on water. Beneath the streets, the Farset and Blackstaff rivers determined the shape of the city that grew up around them. Waterways, rivers, loughs and shores have shaped the culture and character of Belfast since ancient times; they have provided inspiration for our poets and opportunity for the city’s industrialists and visionaries. The city’s dockland now hosts the iconic Titanic Belfast which pays homage to the Olympic-class liners built in Harland and Wolff by the White Star Line. This is one chapter in a settlement story of tidal currents and crossings.

Not what it seems (A city of contrasts)

Belfast has an intriguing and complex history stretching back thousands of years. Contrasts and endurance are etched into the character of the place. This is evident topographically from the high ground of the hills to the depths of the waterways; creatively from the spontaneous expression of street art to the considered curation of our museums and socially through the compelling stories of our recent past. Intrigue and curiosity are part of the fabric of our place.

Homespun (Made in Belfast)

Creativity combined with hard work and ambition can be traced through the city’s industrial heritage and beyond, from rope-making to ship building, whiskey distilling to the local expertise of the mill workers in the linen mills. Belfast also abounds with unique cultural venues and experiences which are testimony to a city steeped in creativity and innovation. From quirky cinemas to established theatres, from incredible visual arts to a music scene that will leave the city ringing in your ears, Belfast has the edge.

Chapter 7: A city connecting

New ways of working are required to grow and sustain cities in the 21st century. Belfast is a small city in terms of population but it has had a powerful impact on the world. To conserve this impact, we must develop new ways of partnership working and of making these partnerships one of the most recognisable assets of this place. To achieve this, Belfast is advocating a governance model based on the need to nurture lateral relationships and permeable networks which thrive on people-power and advocate an outward-looking approach.

It is also acknowledged technology has revolutionised the nature of how and why we connect. To keep ahead of the curve, Belfast must meaningfully engage with the untapped potential that digital connectivity brings for people, starting at the level of the individual through to how this affects the city's position as a global player.

Our approach to governance

In presenting a long view of cultural transformation we must consider the critical role of governance in supporting the delivery of strategic priorities. Our proposed approach will be shaped by a number of commitments that have been strongly influenced by Agenda 21 for Culture and the Core Cities' Cultural Enquiry.

This strategy has been driven by thousands of conversations. Success will be defined by our willingness and capacity as a city to turn these conversations into action and to take shared responsibility for delivering a vision for culture in Belfast.

Agenda 21 for Culture

Local governments must be able to take on different roles as leaders, financial supporters, facilitators and, sometimes, just as observers. They must also accept overall responsibility for creating an enabling environment for sustainable development and cultural participation.

Our commitments

- To facilitate participative forums to discuss cultural policies
- To engage with public sector, private sector, cultural sector and citizens in the ongoing development of cultural policies
- To actively co-ordinate a joined up city approach to cultural development including at different levels of government
- To undertake and respect cultural planning at citywide and neighbourhood level
- To take into consideration the cultural dimension of crosscutting council policies

Through participation in the Culture 21 Pilot Cities programme Belfast City Council will identify key actions to support these commitments.

Imagine a collaborative city with a shared vision for culture

The model

The Cultural Enquiry produced for the Core Cities network recommends an adaptable model called a City Compact for how governance can support the delivery of a local vision for culture. The purpose of this City Compact model is to build capacity and maximise the investment required to deliver this shared vision.

Belfast City Council is committed to taking forward a City Compact and to working with our partners to deliver the strategic priorities set out in this Strategy. The purpose of this model is also to support a more joined up approach to investment in culture across both the public and private sectors. This will include those partners working in a range of areas including health and well-being, education, regeneration and business.

The next phase will be to reach agreement with all of our partners on how we take forward this Compact including the co-design of implementation plans to fulfil these commitments.

Cultural enquiry: City compact

Purpose: to co-create and co-deliver a holistic vision for culture in cities

The Compact will support collective, co-ordinated action to grow and sustain the cultural ecosystem. This will involve aligning activity and funding, and leveraging additional human, financial and property resources, in support of an agreed local purpose. The Compact will be the primary vehicle for discussion between local partners and with government about how best to deploy culture for the city. Each city's Compact will have a distinctive purpose, according to need and opportunity.

Further detail on the City Compact Model will be included in the implementation plans.

Chapter 8: A city investing

Realising Belfast's ambition to become a culturally vibrant city requires public investment in our creative and cultural lives. This investment should recognise the intrinsic value of culture in our city. The Belfast Agenda also recognises culture and creativity as essential to delivering better health and well-being for our citizens as well as providing a platform for access and inclusive growth. Cultural projects can and should

present compelling investment propositions to a wide range of public and private investors.

Projects such as the European Capital of Culture bid have shown what can be achieved when a city pulls together to support culture as a driving force for social and economic benefit. As the economies that underpin the success of our cities is changing, we must develop dynamic, diverse and innovative investment models in order to sustain the far-reaching impact that cultural activities have on all of our lives. In short, we must inject some much valued creativity into our investment approach if we are serious about our commitment to nurturing cultural vibrancy in our place.

Developing an investment programme

We are committed to delivering a cultural investment programme for the city. The purpose of this programme is to support the delivery of strategic priorities as set out in this document. These in turn will contribute to achieving the outcomes of the Belfast Agenda.

This investment approach takes the long view required to deliver transformation for the city. It recognises that the first priority must be to invest in a healthy cultural ecosystem. This is essential if we are to realise the wider social benefits and economic dividends that we know cities of culture can deliver. We recognise the importance of public investment in culture. However, we also accept the reality that cities must develop new ways of raising finance as well as new types of cultural investment beyond traditional grant models. It is in this area that a new role for council emerges. Belfast City Council will take a lead role in developing public-private forms of investment working with partners to leverage new investment into the city. As we develop the investment programme all associated funding schemes will be subject to detailed published assessment criteria.

The aims of the cultural investment programme will be to:

- support the cultural life of the city by enabling our citizens to be active, dynamic and creative agents of change
- invest in our cultural and creative sectors to develop the skills and capacity for production and innovation
- position Belfast as an international testing ground for new approaches to cultural engagement, development and placemaking
- establish Belfast as a cultural destination

Our investment priorities

We are proposing to design a number of investment strands to support arts, heritage and events. These strands will be developed around the following four priorities.

Anchor

This investment priority will support the cultural infrastructure necessary for a thriving cultural ecosystem.

Activate

This investment priority will empower civic and sectoral engagement, skills and capacity building in order to support inclusive growth.

Experiment

This investment priority will facilitate innovation, catalyst projects and new ideas.

Open

This investment priority will support outwardfacing opportunities including marketing and international co-operation.

Our investment approach

The Belfast Agenda has helped establish a new approach to partnership working. This must also be applied to cultural development and investment in the city across a range of public and private partners.

Belfast City Council will continue to offer multiannual grants recognising the importance of this type of funding in order to sustain accessible cultural activity and infrastructure. However, evaluation of our existing programme has revealed the need to adapt our one size fits all model. A new multi-annual programme will be designed to better support the diversity of our cultural organisations.

A city ready for future challenges must also support innovation and experimentation. A new approach to project grants will consider opportunities for catalyst funding.

Importantly we are also committed to moving beyond grants-based models to explore new forms of investment. The recent Cultural Enquiry

published by the Core Cities network of the UK has presented a number of recommendations that merit serious consideration of how they might be applied in the local context. This includes the potential of establishing a tourism levy that would act as a tax on overnight visitors into the city and would be directly reinvested in local cultural development. These recommendations include more effective use of cultural assets as well as new ways of investing in culture through greater collaboration between the private and public sectors.

Others cities also offer alternative forms of finance including asset transfers and social financing. Such models require further investigation into whether they could be applied in Belfast and how council might support the cultural sector to become investment ready. The long view supported by these strategic priorities requires us to plan for the future including consideration for further capital investment in cultural infrastructure.

Our commitment

The principle of being investment ready is also one that applies to Belfast City Council. The ambitions set out in this strategy require organisational development to ensure that we can develop the resources, skills and capacity to deliver.

What happens next?

Engagement on this strategy began in 2017 when we asked our citizens what it meant to feel 'At home' in Belfast. From what started as a number of small conversations has swelled to a movement for challenge, change and cultural transformation in our city, in short new ways of imagining Belfast. We hope that this Cultural Strategy will be the beginning of a new way of working and engaging with culture in Belfast. This is only the start. The strategy will be supported by implementation plans that are designed to set out in detail the level of commitment, resource and partnership working required to deliver A City Imagining. Your ongoing feedback will help us shape the plans and initiatives that support this strategy - to look out for opportunities to continue to engage with us, go to [Culture](#).

We asked the people of the city to tell us what culture means. This is our Belfast chorus:



It's a layer of meaning in the bricks and mortar of the city, made by the way we live. It's our rituals and traditions, shared across generations, it's impact and legacy, the bedrock for how we live. It belongs to all of us, it's anything that's important, a learnt expression of life, and how society expresses itself. It's banter in a local chippy, an asset that should be shared, not owned.

It's something we all create collectively that encompasses everything about us, the identity of the people, all striving for beautiful together. It's a collective way of thinking that we all express uniquely, fragments of society all glued together to tell our story. It's having a vision to motivate change, being proud and expressing yourself, turning emotion into action, giving life meaning and making things better.

It's who we are and where we're from, it's everything that affects us, from the habits of our lives, to the way of the world. It doesn't always work, and sometimes it divides us, but it's always striving, always challenging us to come together. It's a barometer of where society is at that goes beyond aesthetics, a way of thinking that's both personal and collective. It's a tone to identify with that creates harmonies across the city. It's in us. It's in everything we do. It's how we live our lives.



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Site navigation

[News](#)

[Events](#)

[Bins, boxes and collections](#)

[Jobs and training](#)

[Parks and open spaces](#)

[Business and investment](#)

[Licences and permits](#)

[Community](#)

[Building Control](#)

[Contact us](#)

Social media channels



Housing

- Privacy
- Cookies
- Accessibility statement
- Terms and conditions
- Freedom of Information requests
- Modern Slavery Act

A-Z of services

- Copyright
- Disclaimer
- GDPR
- Open and linked data
- Site Map
- Complaints, comments and compliments