



Consultation Response on the DfC Draft Budget 2025–26

Prepared by: ArtsMatterNI (on behalf of the wider arts and cultural sector in Northern Ireland)

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Introduction

ArtsMatterNI is a broad coalition of artists, organisations and cultural advocates. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Department for Communities' (DfC) Draft Budget 2025–26 and to consider it in the context of the *Heritage, Culture and Creativity (HCC) Framework* released in July 2025.

We conducted two open consultation sessions to consider the implications.

While we acknowledge the challenging financial context for all departments and recognise the modest uplift to the overall budget for Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs), this consultation response reflects serious and sustained concerns from across the sector about the long-term viability, policy coherence, and democratic accountability of government support for arts and culture in Northern Ireland.

We particularly wish to reassert the value and continued relevance of the *Delivering Creativity* report from the Ministerial Taskforce, which remains the most well-evidenced, cross-sectoral and forward-looking expression of cultural ambition recently produced in Northern Ireland. While its mention in the HCC Framework is welcome, its substantive recommendations have yet to be reflected in either budgetary decisions or strategic implementation plans.

1. The Budgetary Landscape

The 2025–26 budget offers a flat cash settlement, meaning that while there is no further reduction to existing arts funding, inflationary pressures continue to erode its real-terms value. The stated priority to protect “statutory services” has left non-statutory areas such as the arts once again with no new strategic investment.

Key Context:

- Northern Ireland's arts sector has faced a cumulative 40% decline in real-terms funding since 2011.
- In 2007–08, ACNI's grant-in-aid was £14.1m. Adjusted for inflation, that figure would need to be £22–23m in 2025–26 just to maintain equivalent purchasing power.
- ACNI's actual 2025–26 core grant-in-aid remains at £14.1m — the same cash amount, now stretched over dramatically rising costs.
- A £3.7m uplift to the ALB budget line has been announced — but this includes Libraries NI and National Museums NI, and it is unclear how much (if any) is specifically allocated to the arts.

This flat-cash maintenance is welcome in difficult circumstances but offers no meaningful relief to a sector operating under unprecedented financial pressure.

2. Structural Marginalisation of the Arts

- Culture remains a non-statutory function within DfC. This structural choice continues to leave the sector exposed, vulnerable to political prioritisation and short-term thinking.
 - The interim Programme for Government (PfG), *Doing What Matters Most*, makes no mention of arts or culture, despite their clear contributions to inclusion, wellbeing, education and economic regeneration.
 - The HCC Framework's emphasis on "creativity" risks further diluting specific policy focus on the arts. The terms "art" or "arts" are used sparsely and without corresponding budget commitments or implementation mechanisms.
 - The sector is concerned that the Arts Council's traditional role as an advocate for the arts has been undermined by ministerial direction, including a recent *Letter of Expectations* emphasising control and compliance over development and autonomy.
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3. Department for Communities Budget and EQIA Overview

DfC's 2025–26 Draft Budget totals:

- £940.9 million Resource DEL
- £270 million Capital DEL
- £48.1 million Financial Transactions Capital

Despite these allocations:

- DfC faces a £98.6m (12%) shortfall in Resource DEL and a £161.3m (38%) shortfall in Capital DEL.
- The budget narrative prioritises statutory services; arts and culture are explicitly named as “non-statutory” and thus receive no new investment.

The accompanying Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) identifies that reductions in arts support may disproportionately impact older people, rural dwellers, disabled people and children — yet it proposes no concrete mitigations.

While the uplift to ALBs is welcome, it is unclear if any of this will meaningfully reach core arts organisations or mitigate inflationary erosion.

4. ACNI's Delivery Burden and Structural Pressure

ACNI continues to deliver a comprehensive range of programmes on a standstill budget:

- Annual Funding Programme (AFP) — supporting core operations across the sector
- Support for the Individual Artist Programme (SIAP)
- Strategic and outreach programmes including:
 - Arts and Older People
 - Intercultural arts
 - Disability arts
 - Cross-border and rural engagement

Concerns have been raised over:

- The planned review of ALBs, including ACNI, which risks creating further instability.

- The implementation of a new digital grant aid system, potentially replacing qualitative evaluation with rigid KPI-driven decision-making — risks further detachment from the sector’s artistic values.

5. Community and Organisational Impacts

The implications of flat cash funding are severe:

- Staffing, artist fees, and freelance rates are unable to keep pace with inflation.
- Programmes working with vulnerable communities — including older people, youth, and marginalised groups — are being scaled back or suspended.
- Smaller organisations, particularly those outside major cities, face existential threats.
- The sector’s ability to deliver on public health, education, community cohesion, and economic recovery is now deeply compromised.

6. Comparative Funding Inequity

Northern Ireland’s arts investment continues to trail every other UK and Irish jurisdiction.

Region	Public Arts Investment (per capita)
Northern Ireland	<£6
Scotland	~£15
Wales	~£10–12
Republic of Ireland	£25+

This level of funding makes our sector currently unsustainable. Further competition on philanthropic funding will not mitigate the difficulties. This budget may undermine not only local creative development but regional parity, cultural rights, and shared cross-border objectives under NDNA and PEACE PLUS.

7. Strategic Misalignment

While the HCC Framework offers a new conceptual umbrella, it lacks:

- Specific references to the arts sector's infrastructure or needs
- Resourced actions or delivery timelines
- Any clear alignment with the Delivering Creativity report or the ACNI 10-Year Strategy

By contrast, the Delivering Creativity Taskforce Report:

- Was widely consulted upon
- Proposed realistic, sustainable, cross-departmental approaches
- Reflected the sector's ambition and the public's cultural rights

Its marginal presence in the HCC Framework is very welcome to see but this may be a missed opportunity if the mechanisms and recommendations do not find their way into strategies to yet be produced.

8. Recommendations

To address these structural and strategic deficits, we urge DfC and the Executive to deliver beyond this in-year budget and offer a stabilising reset to the arts:

1. Restore arts funding to at least £22–23 million, in line with inflation-adjusted 2007–08 levels and closer to the ACNI recommended budget to the Communities Committee.
2. Implement multi-annual funding, enabling planning, stability, and sector confidence.
3. Avoid disruptive structural change to ALBs without sector-wide consultation and mitigation.
4. Embed cultural rights and sustainability into the Programme for Government and the HCC strategic process.
5. Adopt Delivering Creativity as the touchstone for the forthcoming arts strategy.
6. Ensure equitable investment, offering the sector ambition to bring Northern Ireland more into line with UK and ROI funding norms.
7. Safeguard and support the sector's strategic and creative autonomy, ensuring that the traditional societal and critical role of the arts is supported and given the opportunity to realise its true ambitions for artists, participants and audiences.

Closing Statement

We recognise the constraints under which the Department for Communities is operating, and we welcome the fact that arts funding has not been cut in cash terms for 2025–26. However, the flatlining of investment, absence of strategic assurance, and lack of resource and implementation pathways presents a significant threat to the sector's ability to survive — let alone thrive.

The arts sector is not seeking special treatment — only fair treatment. It stands ready to contribute meaningfully to Northern Ireland's recovery, social cohesion, and innovation economy. But it needs resources and supportive strategies. As a sector whose optimism is the very bedrock of its creativity and social commitment, the arts welcome assurances of sustainability, but would appreciate sufficient financial support to make that ambition actually happen.

Consultation conducted and compiled by Conor Shields, on behalf of ArtsMatterNI.

Key Reference Documents used in this consultation

- *DfC Draft Budget 2025–26 and EQIA*
- *Heritage, Culture and Creativity Framework* (July 2025)
- *Delivering Creativity: Report of the Ministerial Taskforce*
- *State of the Arts* (Campaign for the Arts, UK)