

Response from the Minority Ethnic Arts Forum to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's Cultural Awareness Strategy

1. The Minority Ethnic Arts Forum

1.1 The last decade has seen a major change in the cultural make up of Northern Ireland, resulting in an increasingly diverse society. Involvement in the arts and opportunities for cultural expression are an important part of an inclusive society. Recognising this, an informal group of concerned individuals and organisations began meeting to see if they could find a way to support this. It was agreed that a formal group was needed and the Minority Ethnic Arts Forum (MEAF) was born.

The group is made up of those working or interested in this area, and aims to provide a voice and support for artists from minority ethnic backgrounds and arts organisations working with minority ethnic arts or minority ethnic communities.

1.2 Since MEAF's formation, the group has organised a number of events and begun lobbying for minority ethnic arts. Over the coming years, MEAF will actively lobby for minority ethnic arts in Northern Ireland and work to establish further support mechanisms for those working in the field. MEAF will also work to influence policy as and when appropriate.

1.3 MEAF's vision is for:

a society in which arts is diverse, inclusive and vibrant

1.4 The mission is:

to enhance creative opportunities for artists from minority ethnic communities

2. Consultation on the cultural awareness strategy

2.1 MEAF welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's (DCAL) Cultural Awareness Strategy. MEAF welcomes the fact that agreements flowing from the Good Friday Agreement are being implemented and delivered.

2.2 MEAF welcomes the fact that local languages and dialects, in particular Irish and Ulster Scots, are being promoted and protected by DCAL and that British and Irish sign languages will also be supported.

2.3 MEAF believes linguistic awareness is very important for cultural identity and believes that minority languages need to be protected, nurtured and supported by governments. The development, profile and everyday use of the Welsh language show the way in which a language can develop with robust support at government, cultural, education, social, business and economic levels. As a community arts organisation, MEAF recognises that both Irish and Ulster Scots provide cultural expression to many people living in the region and that they are used in a wide variety of contexts including community arts.

2.5 MEAF supports the Irish language, Ulster Scots and British and Irish sign languages and all efforts to develop them. MEAF supports the cultural heritage and traditions of the region.

3. Concerns about the cultural awareness strategy

3.1 MEAF is concerned about the length of the consultation period. Eight weeks is not enough time to respond to such a major strategy which will unlock considerable funding. MEAF also feels that there is not enough public awareness and information about this consultation. MEAF found out about it through the Community Relations Council, not DCAL.

3.1 MEAF is concerned that a strategy has been developed by DCAL which is extremely narrow in remit. MEAF is also concerned that other minority languages used on a daily basis within the region will not be supported by this strategy. MEAF believes that people from almost 120 nations are living and working in the region. This cultural richness and diversity is completely missing from the strategy.

3.2 MEAF asks DCAL if it is rejecting the notion of a vibrant, cosmopolitan, dynamic multi cultural Northern Ireland. This strategy promotes a mono culture – one culture based on two conflicting tribes. It does not hold out any hope for an evolved, inclusive society which welcomes and embraces people from different cultural, political and religious backgrounds.

3.3 MEAF asks DCAL what the process was for developing this strategy. Who has inputted at this point to such crucial policy?

3.4 MEAF is concerned at the use of the word indigenous throughout the document and asks for a definition of this term. Does it refer only to Caucasian people living and working in the region who identify strongly with a nationalist or unionist political or cultural identity? As it stands, it excludes people from incoming communities, or those who don't otherwise identify with the two traditions specified. Does it include, e.g. people from the Chinese community who were raised in Northern Ireland, but do not belong to the nationalist or republican community?

3.5 In terms of the key objectives of the strategy: to

- “Build tolerance, understanding and respect for the indigenous cultural traditions in Northern Ireland
- Address legacy issues arising from 30 years of conflict; and
- Contribute to a shared and better future”

MEAF is concerned that this strategy will locate post conflict work too firmly in the nationalist and unionist communities at the expense of a diverse wider society. As it stands, it excludes people from incoming communities from any discussion on the conflict. In addition, MEAF believes that the current objectives will not address historic tensions.

3.6 MEAF is not clear if the projects which will be selected will be existing or new projects and seeks clarification on that.

3.7 MEAF feels that funding only two projects is too narrow and this needs to be broadened to have a positive impact on as wide a range of groups as possible. This should include groups beyond those specified in the draft cultural awareness strategy.

3.8 In the event that only two groups are funded through this strategy, MEAF believes funding should be awarded according to need, demand and number of speakers rather than a 50/50 split. MEAF believes a 50/50 split would not reflect prominence, usage, need and demand for particular local languages or dialects.

3.9 The strategy does not say what the indicative budget is for this programme. MEAF asks that this is published as part of the consultation.

3.10 The draft strategy states that:

“DCAL has concluded that the proposals put forward in this paper do not require a full Equality Impact Assessment. It is the Department’s view that the proposals would not have an adverse impact on any of the section 75 equality categories and altering the proposals would not result in better community relations.”

MEAF argues that this does, in fact, breach Section 75 legislation as minority ethnic groups are not covered or referred to. MEAF does not believe that this strategy will lead to good relations locally. It excludes people from minority ethnic backgrounds from cultural awareness policy and subsequent funding streams.

3.11 MEAF asks DCAL to explain how this strategy will comply with key policy being drafted by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister – the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI). CSI will be cross departmental and all policy and government departments will have to comply with it and show how they are helping to deliver it. MEAF believes that the proposed cultural awareness strategy contravenes the CSI draft strategy.

3.12 MEAF believes this strategy contravenes the work of other major programmes such as Re-imagining Communities which focuses on broadening cultural awareness past one community with two conflicting tribes.

4. Conclusion

4.1 MEAF would welcome the opportunity to present to those developing the cultural awareness strategy about the organisation and about what MEAF believes are important points for a cultural awareness strategy.

4.2 MEAF believes this strategy is an ideal opportunity to raise awareness about new communities living and working in Northern Ireland and to direct resources towards them. To locate this policy solely within the unionist and nationalist communities feels like a retrograde step.

4.2 MEAF recommends that this strategy has a broader remit than the two main communities identified.