

Consultation Response from Community Arts Partnership (CAP)

In response to the DfC Draft Budget 2025–26

August 2025

Community Arts Partnership (CAP) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. As a leading community arts organisation in Northern Ireland, we operate across a wide range of communities of place and interest, with a long-standing commitment to inclusive, participatory, and socially engaged practice.

We conducted two open consultation sessions to consider the implications of the Draft Budget 2025–26 and looked at the newly published Heritage, Culture and Creativity (HCC) Framework for context and guidance.

The voices we heard — from both individuals and organisations working at all scales — confirmed that the sector is at a critical inflection point. The fragility of the community and participatory arts landscape has deepened, and urgent strategic clarity and meaningful investment are required to prevent irreversible damage.

1. Context and Perspective

While we acknowledge the extremely challenging fiscal environment facing the Executive, the flat-cash nature of the DfC budget has left our sector exposed. Community arts organisations, in particular, are experiencing the cumulative pressure of inflation, funding stagnation, and rising community need across the region and within the voluntary and community sector. While the modest uplift to Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs) is welcome in principle, we are concerned that this uplift is neither targeted nor sufficient to address the structural underinvestment affecting our field.

2. What We're Seeing on the Ground

- Programmes that support the most marginalised in our community are becoming unsustainable.
- Budgets to support fees for artists and freelancers cannot keep pace with inflation, making it harder to retain skilled practitioners.
- Small but vital organisations and collectives are operating at or beyond capacity, with little financial resilience.
- Community-led innovation is being stifled due to short-termism and lack of sufficient multi-year funding structures.

3. Policy Disconnects

We are concerned by the continued marginalisation of the arts in policy and strategic frameworks:

- The absence of the term “arts” in Doing What Matters Most and its subsumption into “creativity” in the HCC Framework suggests a dilution of commitment.
- The Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) flags some risks to Section 75 groups but offers no real mitigation.
- The sector’s key strategic achievements — notably Delivering Creativity, a widely supported and well-evidenced report — are referenced in the HCC Framework, but its recommendations are not meaningfully reflected in current budgeting or forward strategy.

4. Arts as a Solution, Not a Cost

Community arts are not a luxury. We provide routes to social inclusion, lifelong learning, trauma recovery, environmental awareness, and civic engagement. We create programmes that dovetail with government objectives right where communities need them, in health, education, peacebuilding, social cohesion and regeneration. And yet we are continually asked to deliver more with budgets struggling to be maintained against inflation, never mind decades of underinvestment.

It is not sustainable to place the burden of social value delivery on a sector without sufficient strategic investment or policy coherence. Nor is it acceptable to see community and participatory arts potentially deprioritised further in favour of a more reductive, centralised or metrics-driven model that risks excluding precisely those voices we aim to uplift.

5. Recommendations from CAP

We call for:

- Reinstatement of real-terms funding parity, with at least £22–23m restored to the arts budget to match 2007–08 levels.
- Ring-fenced investment for participatory and community-led arts, recognising its distinctive value and reach.
- Multi-annual funding frameworks to ensure continuity and strategic development.
- Implementation of Delivering Creativity as the guiding strategic vision for future arts funding and cross-departmental support.
- Recognition of arts within the Programme for Government, not just as “creativity” but as an integral public good.

Closing Reflection

We appreciate that DfC has protected arts funding in cash terms. But that gesture cannot conceal the long-term erosion of sector capacity, or the stark inequality in per capita arts investment compared to our neighbours. The community arts sector in Northern Ireland is not only willing but uniquely placed to support wellbeing, cohesion, and social progress. What we now need is a policy and funding environment that recognises and enables this role.

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