

## Guidance Notes

### Belfast Stories Community Grants

**Focus on: supporting communities to develop a stories-based approach to cultural participation.**

These guidance notes include information on the following:

1. [Introduction to Belfast Stories and why we are offering this support](#)
2. [Who can apply for these grants and what's on offer](#)
3. [Preparing and submitting your application](#)
4. [How we will make our decision](#)

Please read these guidance notes before you complete your application form. We would encourage you to attend one of our information sessions:

When	Where
Wednesday 25 <sup>th</sup> February at 10:00	Duncairn Arts Centre, BT14 6BP
Wednesday 25 <sup>th</sup> February at 14:00	Spectrum Centre, BT13 3AB
Thursday 26 <sup>th</sup> February at 10:00	An Cultúrlann, BT12 6AH
Thursday 26 <sup>th</sup> February at 14:00	Eastside Visitor Centre, BT4 1HH
Wednesday 4 <sup>th</sup> March at 10:00	Crescent Arts Centre, BT7 1NH
Thursday 5 <sup>th</sup> March at 10:00	Online
Tuesday 10 <sup>th</sup> March at 11:00	2 Royal Avenue, BT1 1DA

To register for any of the information sessions please email us at [belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk). Officers will also be available for short one-to-one meetings following each session.

Your application should be sent by email to [belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk) and must be received by us no later than **4.00pm on Tuesday 14 April 2026**. Applications received after this time will be ineligible.

**Applications should be made on the form provided, however, if you require alternative formats of the form or these guidance notes please get in touch with us.**

## 1. Introduction to Belfast Stories and why we are offering this support

### What is Belfast Stories?

Belfast Stories is a flagship project in the Belfast Region City Deal programme of investment. Located in the heart of Belfast City Centre, on the edge of the historic Cathedral Quarter, the development of the 5,000sqm site where North Street meets Royal Avenue will include the restoration of the Art Deco former of Bank of Ireland heritage building.

Belfast Stories brings together three threads in a single location – a public space, visitor attraction and creative hub.

**A public space** – a place for everyone to gather, helping us to express our unique identities and share them with others.

**A visitor attraction** – which clearly communicates the spirit of the city – its past, its present and its future.

**A creative hub** – where writers, musicians, artists and filmmakers can meet to create and collaborate.

### What might be in Belfast Stories?

The design of the Belfast Stories building goes hand-in-hand with developing the experiences inside it.

Plans include:

- Two main outdoor public spaces made up of a central covered courtyard at ground level and a rooftop garden. Indoor public spaces are also included at every level in the building.
- A main visitor exhibition made up of four interconnected spaces or galleries.
- Three cinema auditoria and a multi-media studio where locally produced work and international content will be showcased to reflect the importance of the screen industries to the success of the city – past, present and future.
- A creative hub that will provide a range of spaces to support an ever-developing programme of activities through which we gather and share stories. We call this our story engine. It will be a place to meet, learn, collaborate and provide opportunities for participants from every part of our Belfast communities and beyond to get involved.
- A café on the ground floor and rooftop bar both celebrating our food and drink stories by showcasing local produce and the people behind it.

Further information on Belfast Stories is available online at [www.belfastcity.gov.uk/belfaststories](http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/belfaststories)

### What is culture?

In 2020, Belfast City Council published a ten-year cultural strategy, *A City Imagining*.

This strategy recognises the importance of accepting a broad definition of culture:

“Culture is a complicated word and 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 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. We believe that Belfast is a city imagining.”

### **Why are we offering this support?**

At the heart of this ambitious project is a love for Belfast, its people and their stories. As well as the stories that could be told across the Belfast Stories site, the project has always recognised that it has a responsibility to create opportunities for stories to be discovered, retold or imagined and for skills to be developed, retained and supported across the city.

Strengthening the capacity of our citizens to express their cultural identities is an important part of the vision for Belfast Stories and supports the priorities set out in Belfast’s cultural strategy, with a shared ambition to help facilitate citizen-led change. It is hoped that the programme overall will help individuals and communities explore cultural identities through story-based initiatives that can also encourage participation from different and diverse voices. The programme aims to increase the visibility of cultural activity across the city and support expressions of cultural identity and local heritage.

## **2. Who can apply for these grants and what’s on offer?**

### **Who can apply (eligibility criteria)**

To be eligible to apply for a Belfast Stories Community Grant, applicants must:

- be based within the Belfast City Council area and be a not for profit, existing, registered community group or cultural organisation that has been actively operating for at least the last 3 months at the date of application.
- be able to provide bank statements in the name of their organisation and for the sole purpose of the organisation.

### **We do not fund organisations that are:**

- not formally constituted, in other words, they do not have a Governing Document - constitution or memorandum and articles of association.
- not operating on a not-for-profit basis or able to share out profits (as set out in their constitution or memorandum and articles of association) as we cannot support commercial projects or projects that could be carried out commercially.
- not prepared to share learning from their project with us and other relevant groups.
- local authorities or public sector organisations.
- schools, except where there is a clear need demonstrated that the project being funded will serve the community and this need is not being met by another organisation. Please contact us before applying for funding if you fall into this category.
- We are unlikely to fund an organisation that is in poor financial health or cannot show effective financial controls.

### **We do not fund projects that:**

- have no significant benefit to the Belfast City Council area
- provide no potential benefit to the public, either in the short or long term
- could be carried out on a commercial basis

- have already taken place or are already underway at the time of the assessment
- duplicate what already exists
- are charity or fundraising events or activities
- are of a party-political nature
- promote a particular religion
- are against Belfast City Council policy. For example, we do not allow balloon or Chinese lantern releases as they are against our environmental policy

**We cannot cover costs relating to:**

- any spend that has already taken place
- any spend where the applicant, or a person having a controlling interest in the applicant organisation, will have a personal financial benefit
- costs that are not auditable (e.g. cash payments)
- debt or retrospective costs
- purchase of any equipment that does not meet environmental or licensing standards
- professional fees or costs associated with completing applications
- overheads allocated or apportioned at rates more than for any similar work you carry out
- costs which are not clearly linked to the project
- costs that are poor value for money
- goods or services purchased outside of procurement guidelines
- costs that are already covered by other funding or income sources
- costs related to private or unfunded pensions
- amounts for gifts and donations, including vouchers
- money for buying flags and bunting , alcohol, prizes, or trophies

**Types of grants available**

There are two types of grants available to cover up to 100% of costs to the maximum levels indicated.

Grant Type	Details of grant and support	What it is for	Grants available
<b>Small grants for story-based cultural heritage project.</b>	Up to £10k grant funding per project plus access to a skills bank including: One-to-one training and mentoring to build cultural, personal and organisational capacity.	This grant is to support a cultural heritage project and is an investment in both an organisation and individuals within it.  The organisation will be supported to explore cultural identity and expression as a community of place, practice or interest through a story-based initiative.  The grant can be used for project management, engagement activities, project planning and delivery.  In addition to the grant funding, a nominated individual(s) within the	10

		organisation will be given an opportunity to develop skills according to their needs.	
<b>Project Grant for story-based creative project.</b>	Up to £30k per organisation plus access to a skills bank.	As above, however, projects under this strand are required to also include a creative partnership between a community-based organisation and a culture/arts organisation or individual artist/ collective of artists. A lead partner must be identified for the purposes of acting as the grant recipient.  Projects are expected to explore cultural identity and expression through a story-based initiative that also includes a creative response or output.	5

The purpose of both grants is to invest in organisations and individuals interested in exploring story-based practice to experiment with ways to express their creativity, heritage, culture and identity.

This is a competitive process, with a maximum of 15 grants available in total and applications will be scored and assessed against criteria as set out below.

These two grants will open and close at the same time. Grants are open to not-for-profit community groups and cultural organisations which have been formally constituted and have a bank account in their name. Applications from collaborating groups are welcome but there must be a lead applicant responsible for managing the grant.

The small grants will be available in two tranches of funding with up to 60% of available funding allocated in this first tranche. 40% of available funding will be ringfenced and held back for a second tranche of funding to be opened in September 2026.

### 3. Preparing and submitting your application

The support provided through this programme includes three different strands. Your application must provide the information we require to make a decision on whether we can offer you grant funding. The other strands of support will be discussed and agreed following an award of funding being made.

Type of support	Benefits
1. Grant funding	A small grant for a cultural heritage project: up to £10,000 towards planning and delivering a project or event which can take place up to March 2027.  <b>OR</b> A creative project grant: up to £30,000 towards project management, engagement, planning, commissioning and delivering a creative project up to March 2027. The project must be co-designed to include community participants and artists.

2. Training, support and mentoring	<p>One to one support and mentoring will be given to all those offered a grant, to help make their project and outcomes better. This will be tailored to fit the needs of the organisation and the project. Successful applicants will work with the Belfast Stories team to agreed a learning and development plan that will be supported through a skill bank.</p> <p>Those who apply and who are not successful will also be able to access post-application support (full debrief on why they were not successful, and option of follow up training or mentoring in relation to story-based projects).</p>
3. Group learning – Stories Network	Grant recipients will be invited to take part in group / peer learning sessions through a Stories Network. Opportunities will also be provided for study visits and shared learning exchanges.

### What type of project can I apply for?

We recognise that the projects will be co-created and process driven, and support will be offered to successful applicants to plan and deliver projects, so proposals do not have to be highly developed at the time of application. However, all proposals outlined should focus on celebrating **place and people** and respond to the criteria. For both grants, collaborative projects across groups are welcome as long as there is one main applicant organisation.

There is no preconception about the activity that these grants will cover however all projects are expected to be story-based initiatives. This is because whilst we want to support people to tell stories we also 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. Culture also includes one's beliefs, customs and other aspects that are acquired as a member of society. We're keen to support proposals that allows people to explore and challenge stories -past, present or future – including opportunities to present different and diverse voices.

### How does the fund work?

- there is one application process for the two schemes
- both schemes will operate a quality threshold of 65%. This means that you will only be considered for funding if you meet the eligibility criteria and your application scores 65% or more against the quality criteria.
- although you can apply for both grants, organisations can only receive one grant unless the scheme is under-subscribed once all assessment criteria has been applied. In this scenario a maximum of two grants will be awarded to any organisation.
- the total grant amount can make up 100% of the total cost of the project.
- applicants cannot start the project until they receive their letter of offer. Activity prior to date of the letter of offer will not be eligible for support.
- there is an appeals process in place for specific circumstances.
- we offer a detailed debrief and option of follow up to all unsuccessful applicants.

**Please note that, if after the deadline:**

1. the declaration page is not signed (please note that a scanned digital signature is satisfactory), or
2. there is verification missing and evidence of eligibility cannot otherwise be found via other means,

The applicant may be contacted via [belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk) and given 2 working days from date of that email, to supply related and specified information back to us within a reply email. No other clarification will be sought on other areas of the application form, and no further information may be received by us after the deadline, except in relation to proof of eligibility requirements on our request.

The dates for the scheme are shown below.

Applications open	Closing date	Notice to applicants with our decision	Proposed activity begins	Proposed Activity ends
19 February 2026	4pm Tuesday 14 April 2026	Week beginning 11 May 2026	Activity can commence from 1 June 2026	All activity to be completed by March 2027

#### 4. How we will make our decision

Your application and supporting documents must be submitted to Belfast City Council via email to [belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk) before the deadline at 4pm Tuesday 14 April 2026. Incomplete applications will not be accepted. Every application received will be assessed to ensure:

- That the applicant is eligible to apply
- That the proposal meets the criteria and supports the programme objectives
- That the proposed expenditure is eligible

#### Criteria for making our decision

If your organisation has met all of the eligibility criteria, we will use the following criteria to score your application. These criteria have been developed to support the ambition for Belfast Stories to:

- support a stories-based approach to cultural participation and to create a legacy from Belfast Stories beyond the physical building.
- build and retain the skills and infrastructure in communities to collect, preserve and tell their stories.
- increase the visibility of cultural activity across the city and support positive expressions of cultural identity, diversity and heritage.

Criteria	What we need to know
<b>1. Encouraging cultural expression, collaboration, and a sense of place.</b> Weighting 20%	<b>Who –</b> Tell us about the community in which the project will happen. What group or groups will create this project? How will local people be involved in your project design? How will you ensure local participation in the project?

<p><b>2. Responding to need and creating opportunities for participation.</b> Weighting 25%</p>	<p><b>Why –</b> Why does your local community need this project? How will your local community benefit – personally / individually and as a group?</p> <p>Describe the impact that taking part could have on people. Tell us approximate numbers of people who will benefit.</p>
<p><b>3. Demonstrating creativity and originality.</b> Weighting 20%</p>	<p><b>What –</b> Describe your project in terms of what you think it will include and how it will embed opportunities for stories telling, sharing or gathering.</p> <p>Please note that a project plan will be required and should be included with your application.</p> <p><b>Creative Project Grants Additional Information</b> You must submit a separate project plan.</p> <p>You'll also be asked to tell us about the artists that will be involved. Why have they been selected? What engagement has already taken place between the artists and proposed participant groups?</p>
<p><b>4. Delivering personal and community impact.</b> Weighting 25%</p>	<p><b>Legacy –</b> How will you tell the story of your project? How will others get to hear about it?</p> <p>Will your activity have life beyond the project? Tell us about how your project may keep going, and encourage local people to be creative, work together and continue to explore ways of sharing stories.</p> <p><b>Creative Project Grants Additional Information</b> If you are applying for a Creative Project Grant, you must provide an Engagement Plan.</p>
<p><b>5. Budget</b> Weighting 10%</p>	<p><b>What do you propose spending the funding on?</b> Please note that for those applying for small or project grants a detailed breakdown of costs will be required that supports deliverability of proposed activity and offers value for money.</p>

**Additional Information Required for Creative Project Grant (up to £30k)**

To ensure a streamlined and effective process, the two schemes will follow the same format however the level of detail and adherence to criteria will be greater for the Creative Project Grants. In addition, the Creative Project Grant applicants will be required to supply:

- Separate Project Plan to cover design, development and evaluation phases. This should also demonstrate how you have the necessary skills and experience to deliver the proposed project.
- Engagement Plan to cover overall approach, who you will engage with and how you will engage them including how you will co-design the creative project to bring together artists and participants.

### **How your application will be assessed**

Your application and supporting documents must be submitted to Belfast City Council via email to [belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:belfaststories@belfastcity.gov.uk) before the deadline at 4pm on Tuesday 14 April 2026. Incomplete applications will not be accepted. Every application received will be assessed to ensure:

- That the applicant is eligible to apply
- That the proposal meets the criteria and supports the programme ambitions
- That the proposed expenditure is eligible

### **What happens now**

We hope you have found these guidance notes helpful, however, if any of the information is unclear or if you have any questions please get in touch with us as soon as possible or register for one of the information sessions.