

# **Mind the gap...**

**The value of culture, arts and heritage in realising a high-quality, innovative and inclusive education system in Northern Ireland.**

**Submission by the Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy Taskforce to the Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland**

**March 2023**

## Introduction

Later in 2023, the Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland will bring forward final recommendations for reform. This follows an interim report<sup>1</sup> which highlighted principles and themes placing the needs of the learner at the centre of excellent education at every level.

The Panel's work is *“an opportunity to agree a vision for what a high-quality, innovative and inclusive education system will look like in the middle of the 21st century and how partners might work together to realise that vision – ensuring that education in Northern Ireland is internationally recognised as excellent”*<sup>2</sup>. Its final report will tackle immediate challenges but also a timescale exceeding 20 years to set a direction of travel for the longer term. In these concluding months of its work, the Panel will *“assess information gathered, fill gaps where necessary, and finalise options for reform”*<sup>3</sup>.

**It is at this key juncture that the recently convened Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy Taskforce submits this paper. This aims to reinforce the impact of these sectors on education and learners today and their potential to help realise a high-quality, innovative and inclusive education system.**

References to these sectors give a collective sense of an ecosystem of organisations, venues, festivals, programmes, projects, artists, staff, freelancers, businesses and volunteers working in, across and with multiple art forms, languages, heritage and cultural expressions. It includes museums, libraries, archives, creative industries as well as historic places, buildings and monuments. This is not an exhaustive listing nor nuanced picture, but it indicates collective reach, impact and further potential.

### **Ubiquitous but seemingly on the fringe**

This phrase was a heading in the ‘Way Forward’<sup>4</sup> document published by the Department for Communities (DfC) in October 2022 to initiate development of a Culture, Arts and Heritage strategy for the region. These are innovative sectors with practitioners, places and organisations organically embedded within communities across this region. They help individuals, people and localities to thrive. **However, this phrase highlights insufficient recognition and support, a gap, across government and other decision-makers on the value of culture, arts and heritage as key enablers of equality, inclusion and social and economic change.**

The Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy Taskforce is now a focal point to help address this gap. It is supporting development of a regional strategy to enable and embed a shift in how these sectors are more fully recognised, harnessed and supported. This includes their key role enhancing outcomes for learners of all ages and backgrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Excellent education for all: Interim Report of Independent Review ([www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk](http://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk))

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Culture, Arts and Heritage – A Way Forward ([www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/culture-arts-and-heritage-way-forward](http://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/culture-arts-and-heritage-way-forward))

## **A considered intervention**

It is difficult to succinctly summarise the diverse delivery, extensive reach and value of the culture, arts and heritage sectors to education and learners. This paper is neither a bibliography of research nor sufficient descriptor. The Taskforce is acutely cognizant of the closing stages of the Panel's work and therefore presents a considered intervention, addressing key issues identified in the Panel's Interim Report, with the primary goal of elevating the perhaps previously unseen, or insufficiently reinforced, relevance of these sectors to the ambition of the Independent Review. Representatives from the Taskforce can also meet with Panel should that be helpful.

This might help the Panel identify or strengthen connective threads already running through previously submitted evidence from other education and community stakeholders. The Taskforce is confident that examples of good practice, and calls for creativity and innovative ways to engage and equip learners at every stage of life, will resonate with the contribution and potential of culture, arts and heritage.

## **Excellent Education and Education System**

The Panel's interim report set out core principles on '*Excellent Education*' to help develop individuals, learners and citizens; and on an '*Excellent Education System*' to bring benefits to individuals, society and the economy. The Panel stated that a model needs to "*inspire learners to be ambitious and capable, with a lifelong love of learning*"; supporting individuals to become "*ethical and informed*" and "*confident; morally aware; emotionally and socially skilled*". A model needs to "*promote community cohesion, respecting the culture, identity, language and values of learners, families and communities*" and "*cultivate critical thinking, resilience, adaptability and the ability to thrive in times of change*"<sup>5</sup>.

The culture, arts and heritage sectors are a key component and catalyst of such a model. They provide experiences, insights and approaches which let people explore and connect different concepts; navigate and interpret complexity; and communicate to understand and to be understood. They connect the classroom to community; curriculum subjects to lived and vibrant experience; the learner to further pathways across the education system, as well as to community, family-based, intergenerational and multicultural learning opportunities. They inject and embed imaginative approaches which can tackle the 'lack of creativity' cited<sup>6</sup> by learners and education professionals as among the biggest weaknesses of the current education system.

Excellent education nurtures the inherent creativity of the individual of any age. Organisations, practitioners and resources across the culture, arts and heritage sectors help to enable this in the classroom and beyond. Many existing partnerships across educational and community settings help to inspire, equip and develop successful and committed learners of all ages.

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<sup>5</sup> Excellent education for all: Interim Report of Independent Review

<sup>6</sup> [www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/key-documents/survey-analysis](http://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/key-documents/survey-analysis)

## Supporting the curriculum and further education

Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are being considered by the Panel, and in this regard the Taskforce advocates an education system that embraces creative teaching practices across all subjects, in addition to teaching and promoting subjects that are fundamentally about the arts and humanities, such as but not limited to art and design, languages, drama, music and history, within and across the curriculum at every level. This complements and enhances the highly publicised STEM<sup>7</sup> agenda by inclusion of the arts in support of STEAM<sup>8</sup>. This infusion of creativity, from the earliest experiences of learning and education, will inspire and help young people to be successful and committed learners. It provides foundation for the role of further education in *“preparing learners to contribute to the economy and wider society”* and *“delivery of vocational education and professional and technical courses that meet the needs of employers”*<sup>9</sup>.

This is advantageous to key economic growth areas in Northern Ireland such as the creatives industries<sup>10</sup> but also to the innovation skills, multi-disciplinary approaches and ways of working needed across the economy. The velocity of change across all industrial areas and wider society over the next decade and beyond will hinder attempts to predict work roles which might exist over the longer-term. However, the creative skills, critical thinking, problem-solving and social, cultural and emotional understandings supported by the arts provide young people with the capacity and resilience to be adaptive and to thrive in change. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) noted the positive impact of arts education on the three subsets of skills defined as ‘skills for innovation’: *“technical skills, including in some non-arts subjects; skills in thinking and creativity; and behavioural and social skills (or character)”*.<sup>11</sup>

## Supporting the education workforce

A diverse range of curriculum resources have been developed by many organisations across these sectors. These are utilised widely but support for learners and teaching professionals goes much further. Access to libraries, museums and arts and cultural venues, events, festivals and heritage sites and buildings extends and enhances transformative learning opportunities. They are often the spark which ignites passion for learning. Such access and experiences are facilitated by skilled sectoral staff and practitioners, working in partnership with education and learning providers across institutions and in community settings. They also deliver training and continuing professional development opportunities which equip and empower teaching professionals and enhance learning in the classroom. This supports the Panel’s view

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<sup>7</sup> Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM)

<sup>8</sup> Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics (STEAM)

<sup>9</sup> Excellent education for all: Interim Report of Independent Review

<sup>10</sup> 10X Economy - an economic vision for a decade of innovation ([www.economy-ni.gov.uk](http://www.economy-ni.gov.uk))

<sup>11</sup> [www.oecd.org/education/cei/arts.htm](http://www.oecd.org/education/cei/arts.htm)

that “all educators must be able to rely on an expert and responsive support services, including good quality, career long professional development”<sup>12</sup>.

### **Tackling disadvantage and underachievement**

The Panel acknowledges that enhancing the life chances of those from disadvantaged backgrounds is a major challenge. There is recognition within the Interim Report of a unique opportunity to improve future learning, with all children standing to benefit, but with impact on children from disadvantaged families potentially being transformative.

Many interventions on these issues already include partnerships with the culture, arts and heritage sectors and are specifically targeted to areas and groups with a history of disadvantage and deprivation. These approaches harness the sectors’ innovative and inspirational features and capabilities, and the learning continuation and progression opportunities they provide beyond the classroom and into family and community-based settings.

This also supports key priorities of the final report and action plan of the Department of Education (DE) Expert panel – A Fair Start. This includes championing emotional health and wellbeing; ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of the curriculum; promoting a whole community approach to education; maximizing boys’ potential; driving forward Teachers’ Professional Learning; and ensuring interdepartmental collaboration and delivery. Actions arising from the Fair Start report include development of a ‘Reducing Educational Disadvantage’ programme. Success will require authentic partnership between schools and communities. The extensive and diverse range of culture, arts and heritage organisations embedded within, and part of communities can provide the place-based authenticity, reach and innovative means to catalyse and support a community-driven educational agenda, and for it flourish.

### **Supporting emotional health and wellbeing**

This will also support approaches to improving wellbeing and resilience. The Panel acknowledges concerns about mental health and wellbeing and states “*there is a need for greater consistency in the delivery of these approaches and the role of pastoral care*”<sup>13</sup>. The Northern Ireland Mental Health strategy (2021-2031)<sup>14</sup> opens with a poem by a participant on a Community Wellbeing programme. A footnote adds the author’s assertion that this artform provided the means to “*express myself, explain to myself and teach myself*”<sup>15</sup>. Other case-studies within the strategy demonstrate the impact of the arts in both therapy and prevention. Effective mental health services will involve moving “*from silos to systems*”<sup>16</sup> and integrating community-based organisations and innovative approaches. This reinforces the value of better recognising and harnessing

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<sup>12</sup> Excellent education for all: Interim Report of Independent Review

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> [www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/mental-health-strategy-2021-2031](http://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/mental-health-strategy-2021-2031)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> [www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-summary-paper-regional-mhs.pdf](http://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-summary-paper-regional-mhs.pdf)

the contribution and role of the culture, arts and heritage sectors in promoting mental health and working with schools to support pupils, families and communities.

### **Promoting inclusion and community cohesion**

The Taskforce advocates harnessing culture, arts and heritage to support learners in fulfilling their potential. This also protects the rights of children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)<sup>17</sup> sets out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of every child. Articles 29-31 require provision of education which enables children to take part in cultural and artistic activities; and to enjoy their own culture and to respect the cultures of others. The UNCRC and other international charters and frameworks enshrine cultural rights and activities in education, and this further demonstrates the role of the culture, arts and heritage sectors as a key component of an education system which protects these rights.

This also helps with navigating a legacy of conflict and division, and with promoting equality and inclusion of minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. Groups, sites and practitioners across the culture, arts and heritage sectors support pupils and learners of all ages with inter-cultural experiences, and in exploring the past and the social, economic, cultural and political influences and complexities which shape who we are today. They provide creative and inspirational learning opportunities which help to communicate historical facts and their implications, and an understanding that different perceptions and interpretations exist. Organisations, venues, places and projects across the culture, arts and heritage sectors deepen understanding of our shared history and promote an inclusive and accepting society today<sup>18</sup>.

Nesta, the UK innovation foundation, states that *“we’re going to need fresh perspectives, new ideas, powerful collaborations and a collective sense of hope and optimism to help tackle incredibly complex social challenges. We can’t achieve these goals alone. The arts have a unique ability to drive social change, highlight inequality, stimulate empathy and shift attitudes”*.<sup>19</sup>

### **Structures and Institutional governance**

Collaboration and coordinated delivery are essential. The Panel is looking at structures and institutional governance to ensure *“efficient and effective use of resources”*<sup>20</sup>. A model of excellent education in Northern Ireland will be supported by recognising and better harnessing the culture, arts and heritage ecosystem as an important and catalytic component of our education system.

The Review’s interim report concluded that the key government interface and responsibility for education is primarily shared by DE and the Department for the

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<sup>17</sup> [www.education-ni.gov.uk/united-nations-convention-rights-child](http://www.education-ni.gov.uk/united-nations-convention-rights-child)

<sup>18</sup> Decade of Centenaries – principles for remembering: [www.community-relations.org.uk/decade-centenaries](http://www.community-relations.org.uk/decade-centenaries)

<sup>19</sup> [www.nesta.org.uk/blog/art-inspiring-change](http://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/art-inspiring-change)

<sup>20</sup> Excellent education for all: Interim Report of Independent Review

Economy (DfE) – although close cooperation with other departments is considered essential by the Panel. This ‘whole of government’ approach is a recognised priority in the development a Culture, Arts and Heritage strategy for the region. The breadth and depth of culture, arts and heritage across this region is indicated, to a degree, by the number and range of Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) and advisory groups overseen by the Department for Communities (DfC). These include:

- Armagh Observatory and Planetarium
- Arts Council of Northern Ireland
- Foras na Gaeilge
- Historic Buildings Council
- Historical Monuments Council
- Libraries NI
- Ministerial Advisory Group on Architecture and the Built Environment
- Northern Ireland Museums Council
- National Museums Northern Ireland
- Ulster-Scots Agency

DfC also supports Northern Ireland Screen, the film and television development agency sponsored by DfE, in delivering educational and cultural programmes, including the Digital Film Archive and funding for Northern Ireland’s three Creative Learning Centres which deliver skills development programmes for teachers and young people. The Department also provides support to Linen Hall Library. The Historic Environment Division within DfC records, protects, conserves and promotes Northern Ireland’s historic environment. A portfolio of State Care Monuments and archaeological sites includes historic landmarks which provide the destination of many learning experiences and school trips such as at Carrickfergus and Dunluce Castles. The Historic Environment Record of Northern Ireland (HERoNI) contains information on more than 50,000 heritage assets. Similarly incorporated within DfC, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) identifies and preserves records of historical, social and cultural importance and makes them available for the information, education and enjoyment of the public.

All these organisations can provide further details and specific examples of the educational and learning interventions they provide directly or through the groups and programmes they fund. **It is important to note that there are other groups, programmes, venues and places not currently supported by these NDPBs or DfC. This wider range of culture, arts and heritage practitioners, organisations, programmes, projects and community assets also inspire learning, change lives and help people and communities to thrive.**

However, the Independent Review has specifically looked at structures and institutional governance and its interim report stated that *“looking at the system as a whole can encourage development of a coherent vision where the totality is greater*

*than its constituent parts*<sup>21</sup>. Recognising the relevance of these NDPBs and wider departmental responsibilities highlights that a government enabled infrastructure already helps to underpin a culture, arts and heritage ecosystem in Northern Ireland. The Taskforce believes this ecosystem is currently insufficiently recognised nor resourced. But its existence indicates how institutional alignments and collaborations can be better supported and coordinated to harness and maximise the impact of these sectors as constituent partners and enablers of an excellent education system.

### **Next steps**

The Panel is moving to final recommendations and assessing information gathered and *“filling gaps where necessary”*<sup>22</sup>. The Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy Taskforce believes these sectors are a key component of an excellent education system. Better recognising, harnessing and supporting this role will help realise the Review’s vision of a high-quality, innovative and inclusive education system.

As noted, this submission is a high level and considered intervention at a key juncture. It aims to elevate the visibility, relevance and value of these sectors to the ambition of the Independent Review. Further information, research and cases-studies can be provided to the Panel. Representatives of the Taskforce can also meet with the Panel, and this opportunity will be gratefully received and expedited should that be of assistance.

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<sup>21</sup> Excellent education for all: Interim Report of Independent Review

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.