

Culture Night Belfast

Strategic Review Summary (2020-2021)

Introduction and Background

Cultural consultancy Pinwheel was commissioned in September 2020 by Belfast City Council and Cathedral Quarter trust to carry out a Strategic Review and Three-year Development Plan for Culture Night Belfast (hereafter CNB). The work aligns with the ambitions of Belfast's ten-year Cultural Strategy *A City Imagining* to develop a strong partnership-based approach to events and festivals in the city, including the strategic potential of developing a large-scale city-centre cultural event.

At the time the work was commissioned it was never imagined that the impact and implications of Covid lockdown would still be so profound and debilitating for such a long time. Naturally as national and global events have developed, the scope of the brief and the timescale for delivery shifted in order to try and remain most useful with the continuing need to be flexible with any horizon scanning and future planning.

An Interim Paper was delivered in March 2021 which provided an overview strategic review and, critically, presented three options for the future development of CNB. This was followed by two workshop sessions where the options were outlined and participants were asked to contribute to the discussion of the options with a view to settling on a broad consensus for the preferred direction of travel. The first workshop was with a broad range of stakeholders and the second with the Cathedral Quarter Trust Board.

The Case for Change

Culture Night Belfast was an extremely well attended, much-appreciated and, to some extent, iconic city event. However, put simply, the existing model for Culture Night has become problematic. Over time, the event has evolved organically and now the structure and model is not fit for purpose. The audience for the event has grown exponentially whilst the volume and quality in the programme have not; the idea that artists could, would or should give their time for free no longer sits comfortably; the audience's relationship with the event has changed so that family audiences feel pushed out and unsafe whilst a large-scale drinking culture has grown up around the event; cultural organisations are inconsistent in their view of the benefit of taking part. Critically there is confusion over what the purpose of the event is and where the responsibility for it effectively achieving that purpose lies.

Whilst all of the stakeholders consulted talked positively about the event and were keen to retain something of the core of it, everybody was clear that it needed to adapt and change. Views of what should change, and how, differed, but nobody said that the event should continue along exactly the same lines. There was also a strong sense of support for journey the CQT is on to address this.

From the consultations and strategic review phase, the key issues which were raised can be summarised as follows:

1. Clarity on Purpose of the Event
2. Quality and volume of the programme
3. Relationship with, and financial support of, artists
4. Relationship with cultural organisations
5. Atmosphere and anti-social behaviour
6. Staffing levels and retention of expertise
- 7.

This list will undoubtedly not come as a surprise, as it closely echoes the findings of a review carried out in 2018. To quote:

“The review also identified some challenges and opportunities for potential development. The main challenges that were identified were:

- *Diminution of quality arts and culture in programme*
- *Lack of clarity and artistic vision in the programme*
- *Increased scale and scope of the event vs resources*
- *Perception of increased commercialization Increased numbers attending the event*
- *Underage and on-street drinking*
- *Anti-social behaviour*
- *Environmental impact”*

Some steps were taken to address these issues in 2019, the last full-scale edition of the event, primarily with the introduction of Culture Day, geared more towards families, on the Saturday. Whilst many people welcomed this and acknowledged the success of Culture Day, there were a number of issues which made this an imperfect solution, such as the fact that it spread already thin resources over a longer timeframe. However, a more profound concern with this approach, is that it essentially moved the families, who are not the problem. One of the primary functions of a festival is to disrupt the way a place is used for a limited time: roads become for pedestrians instead of cars, parks and squares become stages, people who would not usually use the city at that time feel welcome. It is an essential feature of Culture Night that it changes the way Cathedral Quarter is encountered on that night and it changes the people who would be there, welcoming in the families. In addition, moving the family audience into the following day could actually exacerbate the Friday night atmosphere by removing one of the things which actually can help to modify people's anti-social behaviour.

Whilst the introduction of Culture Day was a success in giving back to the audience some of the feeling of earlier Culture Nights, some of the issues highlighted above still remained. Cathedral Quarter Trust recognised this in the development of the Culture Night Belfast Strategic Development Plan 2020-2024 (SDP). The SDP very effectively outlined the challenges being faced. The vision, mission and principles outlined were solid and the approaches to adapting the event over time interesting. Coronavirus took hold shortly after the SDP was completed and the event was forced to move online.

Vision, Mission and Principles

The vision, purpose and values for CNB were set out by CQT in the SDP. As mentioned above, one of the issues which became apparent in the consultation was that there was not a shared understanding of the “why” and “how” of the event, which must come before the “what”.

The consultants felt these previously stated vision, purpose and values were strong and there was a need to create a shared understanding of them amongst all stakeholders and to commit to a direction of travel which will best fulfil them.

CNB Vision

‘Ambitious, diverse and dynamic, ‘Culture Night...Belfast’ will transform the unique landscape of our city into a creative ‘canvas’; bringing cultural excellence, innovation and a sense of wonder to our audiences; showcasing Belfast internationally as a city for artistic leadership and inviting the world to experience our vibrant creativity and distinctive character.’

CNB Mission

‘We will build on Culture Night’s previous legacy to develop an ambitious, high quality, annual cultural celebration that is free, open to everyone and that significantly and positively

contributes to our local cultural ecology, our economy, our society and our reputation.'

The development of Culture Night...Belfast over the next four years will be centred around a set of core principles. These integrate our creative ambition, learnings, research and ideas into the current and developing strategic context within which Culture Night...Belfast will be delivered:

- *We want to bring the streets, places, spaces and stories of our city to life through culture in all its multi-faceted forms.*
- *We want to contribute to the delivery of our city's cultural strategy and to Belfast's global reputation as a cultural destination.*
- *We want to invite more citizens and visitors alike to experience and enjoy Belfast's unique cultural offering.*
- *We want our audiences to have an amazing, wonderful, inspirational, sustainable and safe cultural experience.*
- *We want to inspire, excite and unite people and communities through culture.*
- *We want to create a unique event that is Belfast in Identity but Global in ambition.*
- *We want to connect our city and our cultural creatives locally, nationally and internationally through collaboration, networking and cultural exchange.*

Which Direction?

Part of the issue at the heart of the case for change was that Culture Night Belfast operated neither as a standard format Culture Night / White Night / Late Shows type event, nor as a standard format city-based multi artform event.

For the standard model for Culture Nights / White Nights the emphasis is very much on the city-wide cultural venues and organisations extending their opening hours and inviting people to participate in a different way to usual, changing the dynamic and, therefore, potentially changing the audience they engage with long-term. To operate successfully it relies on a collective sense of ownership and responsibility from the cultural venues and organisations of the city and a clear sense of the benefit of taking part. Culture Night Belfast does not have this consistent relationship with the cultural organisations and venues, there is a lack of clarity over where responsibility should lie for resourcing the content and there are completely opposing views from different organisations on whether there is a clear benefit to taking part or not. There is confusion over whether organisations should build this into their annual programme and, therefore, their annual budgets, and a surprising lack of organisations feeling that this is actually a great opportunity to platform their best work to a huge and very different audience.

Over time, Culture Night Belfast morphed into more of a multi-artform event, run across a specific area of a city with some focus on outdoor arts, reclaiming the streets and celebrating a specific quarter of the city for its unique heritage culture and atmosphere. However, the event did not fit the standard model for this kind of festival either as the budget for the content of the cultural programme was far too small and there was little proactive curation of the programme, which is an historic feature of the open-programming approach. All of these aspects made it difficult to achieve the stated aims of excellence and support for the cultural sector.

Summary of Options Review paper (March 2021)

The Options Review Interim Paper started by presenting the Case for Change for CNB, summarising the findings from extensive consultation with stakeholders, literature review and comparator event review. There was a broad consensus that the existing model for CNB had become problematic and the structure

was no longer fit-for-purpose. It recognised that while some measures had been put in place to address the issues, these had proven insufficient and a bolder move was required.

The paper then examined the Vision, Mission and Principles which Cathedral Quarter Trust had set out in its own Strategic Development Plan in 2019 and concluded that these were strong and appropriate, but that the issues lay in creating a shared ownership and understanding of them amongst all stakeholders and in committing to the direction of travel which would best serve those underlying core tenets.

The paper set out the two possible pathways for a Future CNB as - to paraphrase one of the stakeholders consulted – “do you evolve or do you go back?”.

Pathway 1 – within which two possible options were proposed - was about evolution, committing to the vision, mission and principles stated in the Strategic Development Plan and building a new format and model better suited to delivering against that. It was about allowing CNB to fully embrace the direction it had already started to travel unencumbered by past norms.

Option 1 was a proposal for CNB to become an outdoor cross artform event, celebratory and inclusive, animating the Cathedral Quarter with a focus on high-quality outdoor arts and site-specific projects as well as exciting partnership projects with the cultural venues and organisations. Critically it would be about delivering a really excellent cultural event for the large audience which turns out for CNB.

In many ways this was not dissimilar to the direction of travel CQT had set out in its own Strategic Development Plan for CNB, produced as part of the process for applying for Core multi-annual grant funding from Belfast City Council. The main differences were in the approach to creative development of the programme and the resourcing required to deliver this against the standards which were being espoused. The other primary difference was in advocating an immediate shift to a new model on relaunch rather than a gradual change over a number of years.

The paper also offered, as a footnote, an Option 1B within this same pathway of evolution. This would allow CNB an alternative which would still fit all of the principles, but could be delivered within a smaller budget, effectively to commit to one amazing and high-quality commission/presentation each year, rather than a wide-ranging programme.

Option 2 was about reviving CNB, keeping the basic format but adapting the content and addressing the tone, both of which had become problematic. To be successful this would require radically resetting the relationships with the cultural organisations so that CNB could return to feeling like a collectively owned and delivered event. Pinwheel’s firm recommendation was to pursue Option 1 and/or Option 1B.

Decision by the CQT Board and Stakeholders

Following robust discussion, the decision of the CQT board and stakeholders was also to pursue Option 1/1B.

It was not initially a consensus decision, but it was the majority preference. There was some resistance to such radical change or evolution, with some participants wanting to retain elements of previous incarnations of CNB. However, it became clear in discussion that these elements were not all compatible and it was important to allow a fresh version of CNB to “breathe” within a clearly defined remit, rather than still trying to cover too many confused and potentially conflicting purposes.

Previous Strategic Plans

It is worth noting that part of this work included reviewing the previous reports and plans created by Cathedral Quarter Trust in c. 2019, including:

- CQT Business Plan 2019
- Culture Night Belfast Strategic Development Plan 2020-2024

These documents contain a lot of sound work which stands up to review, particularly in terms of staffing structures, understanding of the fundraising challenge and the approach to budgeting.