

Department for Communities: Response to the Report of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce

Introduction

This is the response to the report of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce, which was submitted to the Minister for Communities on 16 August 2021.

The Minister is grateful to the Chair, Rotha Johnston, and all the members of the Taskforce for their important work in delivering a thorough, carefully researched report based on extensive engagement with organisations and individuals in the sector, underpinned by a set of recommendations designed to strengthen the sector in the short to medium term. She welcomes the report and accepts its recommendations.

The Taskforce had the following terms of reference:

“The measures proposed should be practical and achievable, where possible starting immediately, deliverable within the short to medium term (up to 18 months) and take account of financial implications. Both the proposals and their delivery should be exercises in co-design.

In particular the Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce is commissioned to propose measures:

- *to support the reopening of heritage sites, theatres, performance venues and relevant public gathering places in line with the Executive’s Pathway Out of Restrictions;*
- *to stimulate culture, arts and heritage activity, re-start the cultural economy and enable the sector to play a central role in rebuilding social and economic life here;*
- *to explore outdoor performance/activity, including at youth, amateur and community level across the summer, autumn and into the longer term, as a means of encouraging participation and building audience confidence as the opening of indoor and outdoor facilities and activities rolls out;*
- *to advise on any short-term actions to support skills retention and to provide opportunity for potential new-entrants embarking on a career in the sectors; and*
- *to identify medium to long term actions which might be considered in the development of a new Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy.”*

The Taskforce was supported by a secretariat provided by the Department for Communities and officials were closely engaged with the work as it progressed, providing briefing and input as requested.

The purpose of this paper is to set out the steps the Department proposes to take in response to the recommendations in the report.

Work on a number of the recommendations is already underway. In particular the Minister has taken action to implement the first recommendation - that further support should be provided to individuals across the arts and creative sector. This is being accomplished through the "Creative Individuals Recovery Programme" which was launched in September by the Arts Council on behalf of the Department.

The Department will continue to apply the Taskforce's findings carefully as part of on-going policy development to support the longer term recovery and revitalisation of the culture, arts and heritage sectors which, as the report highlights, make a critical contribution to the social and economic life of this place and to our collective wellbeing.

In addition to providing its assessment of issues which should be considered in the development of a new Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy, the initial work on which has begun, the Taskforce made recommendations in nine areas as follows:

1. Financial support for individuals
2. Financial support for organisations
3. A roadmap from lockdown to recovery
4. Talent acquisition, retention and development programme
5. Support the health & wellbeing of those working in the culture, arts and heritage sectors
6. Capital investment
7. Commissioning and development fund
8. Strategic culture, arts and heritage partnerships with councils
9. Keeping audiences safe and building confidence.

The Department acknowledges the analysis informing the work and the breadth and depth of the engagement that took place with individuals and organisations throughout the sectors and which has so usefully informed the Taskforce's work and conclusions.

The Minister intends to share the report with Executive colleagues and to seek their support for the next stage of implementation. The work of the Taskforce was enhanced by the involvement of officials from the Departments of Education, Economy and Finance and the cross-cutting nature of some of the recommendations will require that collaborative approach to continue.

The Taskforce included its estimate of the potential cost of each of its recommendations. Cost will be a significant factor in terms of implementation. To date, the Minister has secured £13million in Executive funding to support the COVID-19 response in the broad culture and heritage sectors in 2021/22; this is in additional

to the £38 million provided in 2020/21. Officials will explore the potential to secure further funding for implementation, should it be required.

The Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce recommendations highlight the range and nature of the difficulties faced by the people and organisations operating in these sectors. The level of engagement with, and input from, those with first-hand experience of the short-term impacts of COVID-19 and deep knowledge of the likely longer term legacy challenges which remain to be addressed, make this a sentinel report around which immediate actions and future measures will be built.

Those future measures will be developed in the light of the principles suggested by the Taskforce and what flows from the Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy should have at its heart the imperative to respect and encourage inclusion and diversity and ensure that all members of society have unqualified, equality of access to culture, arts and heritage whether in our cities, towns or townlands.

Department for Communities

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FINDING 1 FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR INDIVIDUALS

Proposals

A grant scheme should be developed to support individuals in the culture, arts and heritage sectors whose livelihoods and practice have been impacted directly by the restrictions put in place as a consequence of COVID-19;

Support for this group is essential and should be provided quickly;

Support should be flexible, accessible and be open to all those who create or assist in the creation or production of work or delivery of activities across the professional, amateur and community sectors;

Detail of the application processes will be determined by the appropriate Executive department and its delivery partners but the planning assumption should be that eligibility will be open to as wide as possible a range of roles across the sectors;

Governance arrangements to be in line with the awarding body's established framework.

Departmental Response The Taskforce reported significant evidence of the severe financial impact that COVID-19 restrictions have had on all aspects of the sector and in particular on large numbers of freelancers working within it.

This recommendation recognises the continuing consequences of the COVID-19 restrictions in terms of impact on the ability to earn an income and the need for the individuals concerned to maintain their skill levels with a view to returning to their creative practice as circumstances allow.

The Taskforce recommended the immediate development of a grant scheme to support individuals in the culture, arts and heritage sectors whose livelihoods and practice have been impacted directly by the restrictions put in place as a consequence of COVID-19.

The evidence to support this recommendation is compelling. The Taskforce consulted widely and examined the conditions in the industry at length including the risks associated with not providing support. The Department accepts the findings of that engagement and research.

The provision of support for individuals was the first recommendation to emerge from the work of the Taskforce. The Minister for Communities has considered and agreed the recommendation.

In response to this recommendation:

The Creative Individuals' Recovery Programme (CIRP) has been co-designed by the Department for Communities and the Arts Council, with the support of the Taskforce and others in the arts and creative sector. Its objective is to support individuals within the creative sector with the costs of reactivating, maintaining and enhancing their creative trade, vocation or profession; supporting them to remain within the creative economy and re-establishing their contribution to the important benefits the creative sectors deliver.

CIRP is being delivered by the Arts Council. It was launched on 16 September and closed to applications on 6 October. Arts Council staff are currently undertaking basic eligibility checks on the applications received. The intention is that following assessment, grants of up to £2,000 will be offered before Christmas.

The University of Atypical (UoA) is delivering a programme to support disabled, D/deaf and Neurodiverse creatives. The UoA programme had terms similar to CIRP.

Work is underway to develop a scheme along similar lines to CIRP for heritage professionals. The proposed scheme will be delivered by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Further details are expected to be available shortly.

FINDING 2 – FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR ORGANISATIONS

Proposals

A grant scheme should be developed to support organisations across the culture, arts and heritage sectors whose operations continue to be adversely impacted by COVID-19 restrictions and required mitigations;

Support would include provision to assist with adaptation of business model requirements to facilitate re-opening;

Detail of the scheme objectives and application processes will be determined by the appropriate Executive department and its delivery partners;

Governance arrangements to be in line with the awarding body's established framework.

Departmental Response The Taskforce report observes that “[O]rganisations, facilities and venues, whether professional or voluntary, are central to the health and operation of the culture, arts and heritage ecosystem by providing the infrastructure around which activities and events are built.”

Based on its assessment, the Taskforce concluded that the position faced by many organisations in 2021/22 was little different from the circumstances in 2020/21 and its judgement was clear that without further significant financial support culture, arts and heritage organisations would remain at serious risk this year and beyond.

The introduction of COVID-19 restrictions led to substantial loss of income from fees, ticket-sales, entry fees, sponsorship and till receipts for many organisations. Reduced capacity and increased costs associated with the need for more staff time, processes or equipment added to the financial impact. Combined, these present a series of challenges for organisations in terms of:

- ongoing loss of income;
- increased accumulated deficits; and
- the need to adapt delivery to meet societies changed and changing needs.

Although the progressive relaxation of limits on the size of gatherings over the period since the Spring has allowed activity to begin to return, this was subject to limits on capacity due to social distancing and the requirement to employ a range of mitigations. Capacity limits have now been relaxed but that has only happened recently and there remain additional costs and important considerations around audience confidence which require a measured approach to relaxation and the maintenance of precautions and mitigations.

On the basis of the evidence provided **the Minister has accepted the Taskforce's recommendation that further support for organisations is required in 2021/22.**

In response to this recommendation:

Significant progress has been made in the design of a new scheme of support for organisations in the arts and heritage sectors. This work is being undertaken with the close involvement of sectoral and delivery partners and the approach takes account of the experience and lessons learned through the operation of funding programmes in the 2020/21 financial year. Details of the new funds are expected to be announced in the coming weeks.

It is anticipated that there will be funding strands relating to the arts and creative sectors and to heritage interests.

The costs of the new programme will be met through the £13m COVID-19 funding package allocated by the Executive to support the culture, arts and heritage sectors in 2021/22.

FINDING 3 – NEED FOR A ROADMAP FROM LOCKDOWN TO RECOVERY

Proposals

When considering relaxations and restrictions, the Executive should provide as much information as possible to the sectors impacted. This “roadmap” should aim for a reopening of arts and cultural venues as soon as possible at full capacity but bearing in mind at all times the importance of maintaining high standards of public safety. Information and guidance on how best to achieve this should be provided as far in advance as possible to take account of the particular long-term planning needs of the culture, arts and heritage sectors and should contain an indicative timetable for planned actions together with an assessment of the factors that will be taken into account when making decisions;

That the approach to future potential relaxations, restrictions and mitigations should include a more open dialogue on the potential nature of measures that might remain in place or be put in place;

A group comprising representatives from both the arts, cultural and heritage sectors and from across government departments should be established at the earliest opportunity to monitor and oversee the implementation of the safe and timely reopening of all arts and cultural spaces.

Departmental Response The Department recognises that the recommendations under this heading reflect the position that was held by many in the arts and heritage sectors (and indeed other sectors) throughout the course of the pandemic, and particularly as society eased out of lockdown.

Recent decisions by the Executive mean that the restrictions that had been in place have now been substantially relaxed. Progress has been possible because of the huge effort of people and organisations here, in respecting the regulations and mitigation measures that were put in place and by the impact of the vaccination programme. However it is important to avoid any sense of complacency and to continue to recognise the challenges and potential threats to progress that remain.

Decisions on the imposition and relaxation of restrictions and on the strategy for managing the pandemic are rightly matters for the Executive and not within the gift of individual Ministers. The Executive did provide a roadmap in the form of “Moving Forward: The Executive’s Pathway Out of Restrictions”. This set out the process for review of the restrictions and outlined the incremental steps that were likely to be applied in the course of relaxation of restrictions.

One positive to come out of the last 19 months has been the development of some new coalitions and the forging of new links and relationships between the sectors and government and within and across the sectors themselves.

The Department recognises and offers its thanks to those across the culture, arts and heritage sectors who played a part in helping officials to better understand the realities of the restrictions for the sectors and in informing the development of the support measures that were put in place.

The Minister acknowledges these recommendations and recognises the Taskforce's position.

In response to these recommendations:

The Department will engage with The Executive Office, to ensure the experience of the culture, arts and heritage sectors is taken into account in any assessment of lessons learned from the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and for consideration in any future review of contingency planning.

The Department will maintain and extend throughout the course of re-opening, recovery and beyond, the engagement across the sectors that was developed in the course of the response to the pandemic.

The improvement of communication into the longer term will be considered in the context of the development of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Strategy. This might include, for example, consideration of a model informed by the aims of the Joint Government and Voluntary Sector Forum.

FINDING 4 - NEED TO BUILD CAPACITY IN THE SECTOR

Proposals

A professional development programme for freelancers and staff delivered by appropriately qualified organisations and umbrella bodies across and beyond the sectors. This might be funded through the Arts Council and National Heritage Lottery Fund, to offer continuous professional development and mentoring.

Specific support should be identified for those establishing or expanding enterprises related to the sectors;

Programmes should be designed to facilitate the uptake of new digital skills, including content creation, production, distribution, digital communications, social media management, data analytics and website marketing.

Apprenticeships to the culture, arts and heritage sectors, with clear pathways to employment, should be developed. Lessons from existing and previous apprenticeship schemes to be drawn upon.

Internships - should be at least 6 to 12 months, offer a living wage and not incur additional spend for host organisations. Existing and previous schemes should be looked at as well as partnerships with schools, colleges and the higher and further education sector.

Explore the potential for BBC Skills Academy in collaboration with Department for the Economy.

Department response

The Taskforce report offers compelling evidence from a range of sources on the potential impact of the pandemic on the recruitment, development and retention of people across the sectors. It also captures the genuine concern that organisations will be unable to attract and retain talent in an environment where the future remains so uncertain.

The range and depth of the contribution that the people and organisations in the culture, arts and heritage sector make to the quality of life here; in a wide range of vital social policy areas and to the economy is already significant but has the potential to grow further.

While there are a number of areas, particularly within the arts sector, where the nature of traditional working practices institutionalise a degree of uncertainty, the Taskforce has made a strong case that the impact of COVID-19 has both amplified and spread that sense of uncertainty. The potential loss of talented individuals from a wide range of roles risks delaying and undermining both recovery in the short term and longer term sustainability.

On the basis of the evidence provided the Minister accepts these recommendations.

In response to these recommendations:

Work has begun to explore the potential for the introduction of a development programme of the nature outlined by the Taskforce and informed by early discussions with sectoral interests. The programme would be tailored to the needs of the sectors rather than a one-size-fits-all approach and, in recognition of the urgency of the need, could be introduced in the course of this financial year.

The Department, working with key sector stakeholders, will give early consideration to the establishment of a project to assess the nature of the development and training needs identified across the sectors as being priorities and which could be considered as part of a flexible, professional development programme – these could include matters such as HR and finance skills, support for new enterprise etc as well as the acquisition of more specialised skills or knowledge. The project will also seek to identify information on existing sources of support and on training opportunities and providers that meet need in this area. This work is expected to bring together Invest NI, Department for the Economy and training providers including the BBC Skills Academy, the Universities and FE colleges with organisations in the sector to identify existing provision, ensure clear signposting to it and agree gaps.

To build on the spirit of cooperation and co-design that has grown in the course of the response to the pandemic, the Department will work with stakeholders to consider and agree a research programme to improve understanding of the current and likely future needs of the sectors, the views and actions of audiences and participants and the impact of COVID-19 on the sectors here. This work provides the opportunity to bring together a working group of researchers, economists and statisticians to consider the development of a shared data suite that might be used to inform decision-making across the sector and support a greater sense of common understanding and common purpose.

Progress on these measures will be determined by the availability of resources and the Department is committed to looking for ways to resource this work through internal resource reallocation and by way of bids under Monitoring arrangements.

While the Taskforce has suggested an estimate of cost associated with this work, approval and funding for individual programmes and initiatives will be subject to established business case requirements.

FINDING FIVE – CONCERNS FOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Proposals

Umbrella organisations and membership associations should be encouraged and supported to offer support services to individuals experiencing stress and poor mental health and wellbeing. This would build on existing work already carried out in the sector and complement wider provision offered by the Department of Health and local trusts.

Working with the Arts Council for Northern Ireland, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency dedicated health and wellbeing programmes should be made available and publicised to all those operating in the culture, arts and heritage sectors.

Department Response: The Taskforce's report refers to findings from a 2018 survey of health and wellbeing in the creative sector which are sobering. Coupled with the impacts of the pandemic on livelihoods and the physical and mental health and wellbeing of those working in that sector, the Taskforce, rightly, highlights its concerns over health and wellbeing in the arts and creative sector in particular.

The Department welcomes the range of schemes already in place among umbrella and support organisations but notes the concerns expressed and the suggestions for an intervention to secure and bolster the provision currently available.

On the basis of the evidence provided the Minister accepts these recommendations.

In response to these recommendations:

The Department will bring the Taskforce findings in respect of the health and wellbeing of those working in the culture, arts and heritage sector to the attention of the Department for Health and the Public Health Agency with the aim of determining what, if any, further support might be necessary or possible through their established provision.

The Department will work with the Arts Council to gather information on the programmes currently supported and to explore a method to gauge the scale of unmet need across the arts and creative sector. As part of this process consideration will be given to establishing a similar exercise in relation to the heritage sector or expanding the terms of the arts programme to accommodate both in a partnership approach. The Department will consider quickly how support might best be provided to address the need identified through this exercise.

FINDING 6 - INVESTMENT IN BUILT HERITAGE AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT RENEWAL

Proposals

Funding is required to support the capital needs of organisations across the sector to meet the investment related to the Covid-19 pandemic;

Support is required for organisations across the sector, from large theatres to small community venues, all of which sustain cultural activity;

Proposals need to include consideration of improved access for people with disabilities;

Support is required for some natural and historic environment locations which have been experiencing significant visitor pressure during and after lockdown. A condition survey report is required to fully assess the capital investment needs of each property.

Departmental Response: The Taskforce highlights the additional capital costs associated with mitigating risks associated with COVID-19 or as a consequence of the restrictions that were put in place. The report acknowledges the wide range of issues that might require a capital investment response. Examples might include a need to undertake work to reconfigure, refurbish or re-fit facilities or to install or replace essential equipment.

It is important to note that the focus of the work of the Taskforce was on reopening and recovery in relation to COVID-19 rather than on broader, longer-standing capital issues, though in some instances the consequences of the restrictions may have exacerbated those pre-existing issues.

The Taskforce offers a series of practical suggestion in terms of the approach to capital investment and renewal and on that basis the Minister accepts these recommendations.

In response to these recommendations:

With support from the Department, the Arts Council has launched a £750,000 health and safety capital programme which has been designed with the Taskforce's recommendation in mind and which specifically highlights COVID-19 related investment. It will support organisations to purchase equipment and/or carry out minor works to their premises to address health and safety issues that has been created due to COVID-19 or have been an outstanding maintenance issue which has rendered the space not fit for purpose. The programme is open to non-arts organisations provided the application has a clear focus on the arts. Subject to demand for the programme and the availability of capital resource, the Department is open to considering a further investment in that scheme in 2021/22.

The Department will work with the Arts Council to consider the scope of a condition survey of the arts estate with a view to commissioning such a study in the course of this financial year, subject to the availability of funding. That survey will inform the development of a new planned maintenance programme that should take account of the scheduled maintenance requirements of those arts facilities funded through the public purse

There is evidence of the longer-term and ongoing decline of the condition of our listed buildings and historic monuments¹. There is a need to update this evidence and to determine what has changed as a result of the pandemic. The Department will consider how to gather data on asset condition during 2022-23, and will bring forward proposals in light of the data.

The Department will in 2021-22 progress work to examine further the nature of any market failure in the funding of repairs to and conservation of heritage assets, the reasons for any market failure and steps that can be taken to address and mitigate any failure. The Department is conscious that many historic assets are owned by private individuals who do not have recourse to funding streams such as those from the National Lottery. There is also evidence that asset owners here do not draw on as wide a range of funding sources as in Great Britain.

The Department has reviewed its Historic Environment Fund, based upon current budgets and aims to co-design a way forward this year and we will use this research to inform future priorities, scope and levels of investment.

We will also continue to work across regeneration, housing and community wealth-building activity to embed heritage assets and their maintenance into its policies on the renewal and revitalisation of places. This will build on initiatives such as the Village Catalyst Pilot and will include a specific strand of work on how investment in heritage assets can underpin and support place-based regeneration. The recommendations will be drawn to the attention of Councils and officials responsible for regeneration activity within the Department.

¹ See section 1.2 NI Heritage Statistics at 31 March 2019 at www.NIheritagedelivers.org

FINDING 7: THE NEED TO CREATE NEW CONTENT

Proposals

The Taskforce proposes a new Commissioning and Development Fund to stimulate original creative content. This commissioning fund could be used to support collaboration and partnerships across arts, culture and heritage to deliver maximum impact for the public;

An ambitious commissioning programme will take time to develop so in the short term, funding is urgently required to support artist and project commissions (direct to artists and via individual arts organisations and consortia) that helps to support local talent and ensure innovative new work is created and presented to audiences;

A digital innovation programme to encourage new ways of delivery to existing and new audiences;

Develop long-term strategic collaborations with North/South and East West cultural organisation to create commissioning funds that will support inclusivity and reconciliation;

Explore funding opportunities to work with partners in the EU and beyond.

Departmental Response: The Department acknowledges with interest the Taskforce proposal for a new Commissioning and Development Fund to stimulate the production of new creative content and to support collaboration and partnerships across arts, culture and heritage including digitally, nationally and internationally.

Such a measure could be a further means of directly supporting creatives and of seeking to encourage the development of new content across a range to disciplines to reinvigorate the sectors

The Minister accepts the principle of the recommendation in this instance and would need to see further detail on its operation.

In response to this recommendation:

Officials will explore with the Arts Council the potential scope and practical operation of a proposed new commissioning and development fund with a view to providing further advice to the Minister by Christmas. That advice will include an assessment of the time-scale implications of the current one-year funding cycle on the commissioning new work.

While the Taskforce has suggested an estimate of cost associated with this work, approval and funding for individual programmes and initiatives will be subject to established business case requirements.

FINDING 8 –STRATEGIC COLLABORATION, COUNCILS AND PLACE-MAKING Proposals

Create a framework of 11 strategic partnerships with local councils to co-design and deliver a coherent and consistent approach to place-making;

These partnerships should involve a range of stakeholders including local community groups and voluntary sector organisations. Consideration should be given to establishing a forum with councils to accelerate this work;

Department for Communities to encourage local councils to utilise existing financial support to aid the reopening of theatres and other indoor performance spaces which and to re-assess and re-imagine their use of outdoor spaces;

Councils are supported to ensure that financial pressures created by Covid-19 do not mean a cut to culture, arts and heritage activity, essential given the important role of culture in the social and economic recovery of citizens across Northern Ireland.

Consider a range of festivals in collaboration with councils and other strategic partners in the autumn of 2021 or spring 2022 to relaunch wider participation in culture, arts and heritage events.

Departmental Response : Given the Minister's responsibilities for local government, housing, urban regeneration and culture, arts & heritage, the recommendations in this section of the report have a particular relevance to her Department.

The Department welcomes the acknowledgement of the critical role local government plays in terms of support for culture, arts and heritage. The Department also welcomes the recognition of the role of culture, arts and heritage in the regeneration of our High Streets and the places where we live.

The range and depth of the common interests and potential mutual benefits make a strong case for embedding closer and cooperative working across all the parties in the broad culture, arts and heritage sector.

The Minister agrees with the principle of these recommendations but notes that in some respects the recommendations go beyond issues directly related to the response to COVID-19.

In response to these recommendations:

It should be noted that there are a number of strategic partnerships and programmes with a focus on place-making already in place, including the High Streets Task Force. The place of culture, arts and heritage in the context of place-making will continue to be an important factor in this work.

The Department will meet with senior council officers to consider the Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce's findings, review existing Culture, Arts and Heritage partnerships and consider the need for creation of new collaborative partnerships in the context of the current work to review high streets and a wider place making agenda.

Officials will meet with the network of council culture, arts and heritage officials to establish an ongoing forum to build on the ad hoc meetings that had begun in the course of the pandemic.

FINDING 9 – AUDIENCE CONFIDENCE

Proposals

Ongoing tracking of the impact of Covid-19 on audience attitudes to culture, arts and heritage events and activities. We also need to understand how the public and audiences continue to engage with arts and culture online;

The development and delivery of a short-term co-ordinated campaign aimed at building public confidence to include information about mitigations in place and reassurances around the 5 key areas;

To support the safe and effective re-opening and ultimately the recovery of the sectors, clear and unambiguous guidance on a range of health and safety measures for event and activity organisers to follow. The guidance should be backed-up by a programme of training, advice and support;

Consideration should be given supporting organisers with meeting increased insurance costs;

A welcome back voucher scheme should be considered on a time limited basis to encourage audiences and to support local community and cultural activities. It should be clarified if the Department for the Economy proposed voucher scheme permits expenditure in the culture, arts and heritage sector.

Departmental Response: The Department agrees with Taskforce's assessment that audience confidence is a key factor to the success of the efforts to re-open the sector and to its financial sustainability.

Survey evidence continues to indicate a degree of reticence among some audiences for a return to indoor venues though this is felt in some settings, and among some age groups, more than others. Work produced by Thrive is particularly helpful on this issue.

The health and safety of staff, participants and audiences at venues and during activities has always been a priority. In the context of the response to COVID-19, restrictions on activity across the sector have been relaxed in a measured fashion and with mitigations in place, to offer an assurance that the safety of individuals is the primary interest of all those involved.

Those mitigations include the sorts of investments in equipment and facilities that are the subject of Finding Six above. Such investments in the safety of facilities provide the foundations on which visitor confidence can be built and audiences encouraged to return in greater numbers

The Minister accepts these recommendations.

In response to these recommendations:

Ongoing tracking of the impact of COVID-19 on audience attitudes to culture, arts and heritage events and activities is important. Attitude assessment is taking place through organisations such as Thrive and the results will inform consideration of the need for further measures to encourage people to return to participation in activities and events

Restrictions had been substantially eased permitting capacity to be increased in indoor venues. Advice to venues has been streamlined and the reduction in the range and number of restrictions has reduced the complexity of advice and guidance. The willingness of producers, promoters and venue owners to apply COVID-19 status checks at events has been an important confidence building measure.

The Department will engage with sector interests and with Tourism NI to explore the potential value of a coordinated confidence building campaign and to determine who might be best placed to develop it.

DCMS has launched a UK-wide reinsurance scheme to support events and production in the event that new restrictions might be imposed that would impact their activity.

The Department for Economy has confirmed that its Spend Local prepaid card can be used to purchase goods and services from any business located in Northern Ireland that accepts card payments. This includes culture, arts and heritage providers and a number of venues and promoters are highlighting this potential through their social media channels.

The Department notes with interest the recommendation that a Welcome Back voucher scheme be considered to support local community and cultural activity. In partnership with the sectors, and taking account of the experience of the Department for the Economy scheme, the Department will undertake an initial assessment of the need for, and potential nature of, a market stimulus initiative specific to the culture, arts and heritage sectors here.

NEXT STEPS

The Department will take action over the coming weeks and months to pursue the recommendations contained in this report and will update its response plan on a regular basis.

Looking to the future, despite all of the formidable challenges presented by the pandemic, the Department is in no doubt that the resilience, creativity and vibrancy of the culture, arts and heritage sectors will prevail. The Department is firmly resolved to maintain the spirit of collaborative work that characterised this Taskforce and to implement the important recommendations that have emerged from it.