

Response on behalf of Culture Aberdeen to the draft National Cultural Strategy

This is the response to the Scottish Government's consultation by Culture Aberdeen. Culture Aberdeen is the network of cultural organisations in Aberdeen which has developed a new cultural strategy for the city and is now responsible for its implementation. This response was developed through a workshop open to all members of the network, the drafted response was circulated to all members for comment.

Culture Aberdeen welcomes this opportunity to participate in this consultation. Many of the organisations who are members of the network participated in an open meeting held in Aberdeen during last year. We have welcomed the opportunity for engagement in the process that has led to the development of this draft strategy. Culture Aberdeen is broadly supportive and in agreement with the direction and contents of the draft strategy. Consequently, our comments are made in the spirit of further improving the current draft.

One central theme of our response is to recognise the importance that Scotland's third city plays in hosting and producing significant cultural output. As such one central theme of our response is that there should be room within the national strategy to recognise the importance of regional cultural identity and provision. We would happily welcome further opportunities to extend our articulation of these ideas if they are helpful in the process of finalising the cultural strategy for the nation.

What is your view of the vision as set out?

The two most significant omissions within the draft strategy relate to the vision and/or ambitions. They are:

1. **The intrinsic value of culture.** Whilst this is acknowledged throughout the strategy and is certainly implicit within the strategy map that culture as an intrinsic value in itself we feel that this could and should be made more explicit within the vision statements. There is a danger as currently expressed that culture could be seen as a function solely in the service of other areas of public policy. Equally the current strategy avoids the use of the term "the arts". We feel that if cultural activity is to be valued for its intrinsic value then this term is appropriate to use with more pride within the strategy. We feel that there is an opportunity to recast the third vision statement to make more explicit reference to the intrinsic value of culture which should perhaps be articulated as the first such statement.
2. **The duality of the national and region.** The current vision statements say little about the nature of Scottish identity and culture. A national strategy should rightly have more to say regarding what Scottish culture is, particularly if in relation to the vision statement that wishes culture to be open to the world. In a clearer articulation of Scottish culture we should like there to be a recognition of the strong regional elements of that identity and culture. A national strategy should perhaps recognise this more explicitly and seek ways which regional identities and cultures can be promoted and supported. This is a theme to which we will return in the remainder of this response. In developing our cultural strategy for Aberdeen we have been mindful of the need to root our strategy in the people and place where we are based. In the case of Aberdeen this means the distinctive dialect of the region, the nature of its people, our long history of trade based on the natural products of the land and sea which has created connections with other countries. We believe that this has made our strategy more durable and supported by other parties across the city.

Our belief is that with these two dimensions clearly articulated within the vision statements then the cultural strategy will truly be bold and ambitious.

What is your view of the ambitions, aims and actions laid out in the strategy?

From our discussions we have a number of ideas and suggestions regarding the ambitions, aims and actions laid out in the strategy. Overall we feel that many of the actions could be more specific in their focus although recognise that this is always a tension the formulation a strategy and an action plan.

- Without further information we are ambivalent to the idea of a **cultural leadership post** within Government. Where such a position to exist the leadership which is exerted must be credible across the whole of Scotland. As such we care and consideration should be given to the location of such a position. As a city we would be delighted to host the post within Aberdeen. In this regard if the regional and local identities which make up a Scottish culture are to be fully embraced and reflected in our national strategy then we need to consider the location of our cultural infrastructure. As such we believe that Scotland's third city should rightly host part of Creative Scotland as well as one of the national companies. One of the issues the national cultural strategy should address is the opportunities and the critical mass to enable retention of cultural practitioners within all regions in Scotland.
- It might be suggested that there is **not enough concerning the role of educational provision** within the strategy. In order to properly flourish and to realise the transformative power of culture then the importance of engagement by young people must be more explicit recognised within the strategy and public policy. There is no much evidence to suggest that the development of the new Curriculum for Excellence has created less opportunity for creative and artistic expression within Schools. It is our contention that this needs serious attention. The future of the whole economy of Scotland will require creative individuals and therefore artistic expression might be expected to play a greater role within the curriculum. Our concerns can be evidenced by the continuing decline in music provision and education within Schools and by local authorities within Scotland. This has increasingly left music education to private providers increasingly only accessible to the middle classes or to a handful of projects often targeted on particularly neighbourhoods.
- Within the strategy there is perhaps **too much emphasis on digital activity**. We feel that these elements of the strategy should be carefully reviewed to consider whether the actions are more properly about access and extending it than they are about digital production. It is important to bear in mind that Scotland is a desperate nation and that whilst digital production is one way of extending access it is only one way to do so. Very frequently the transformative power of culture requires proximity and physical presence.
- One area we remain concerned about is how we support cultural organisations to **collectively sell and market contemporary Scottish culture to the wider world**. It is our contention that too frequently Scotland relies upon a pastiche of its heritage and identity which neither represents Scottish history nor culture particularly comprehensive. This lack of articulation and expression of contemporary Scottish culture across the world is in stark contrast to other small nations across the world.

Please provide details of any examples of good work and best practice from Scotland or internationally, that you think could be included within the final strategy? We are interested in a range of different approaches?

There are a number of examples that we should like to highlight:

- **The approach taken to the development of the cultural strategy for Aberdeen.** This is the only strategy in any one of Scotland's 32 local authority areas where the council has been an equal party to the development and implementation of the cultural strategy. Which is shared and owned across the cultural organisations active within the city. Work to implement the significant plans of our strategy is taken forward by these organisations working collaboratively in partnership. We feel that this model has much to commend itself in terms of activity to implement a national strategy to ensure the widest engagement across Scotland and allows for the regional identities of Scotland to be fully recognised within activity.

- In terms of ambition in **articulating regional provision** we have noted that over a decade ago the British Film Institute articulated an ambition that every major city in the UK should have an arthouse cinema. We note whilst this has been achieved in Scotland, it has not across the whole of the UK. Irrespective of its achievement or not, it represents a clear ambition which articulates a concept of minimum regional cultural provision which could be extended to other art forms within the national strategy.
- Our strategy contains a commitment to explore the concept of cultural entitlement (an idea common in many Scandinavian countries) for those that live in Aberdeen. Building on the idea expressed above, we feel that this is a valuable idea for the Scottish Government to consider a **concept of a cultural baseline of provision** within first its seven cities and thereafter within regions and localities. In the first instance this would express what we felt as a nation each of cities ought to have. This would include for example a theatre, a production company, a contemporary arts centre, an arthouse cinema but in other respects challenges our notions regarding cultural provision – what would the baseline for cultural education be? should each city have a resident ensemble? This is a conversation which we would commend as having much value for the whole of Scotland.
- One means of evaluating cultural activity and provision is the **Culture 21 programme** developed by United Cities and Local Governments. The principles of the Culture 21 charter articulate the importance of culture for enriching lives, developing citizenship and improving sustainable development. This includes a range of indicators and means of evaluating which there may be some merit in adopting or adapting within a Scottish context nationally and locally.

What can you or your organisation do to support the vision, aims, ambitions and actions of the strategy?

Culture Aberdeen has a strategy for culture in Aberdeen which has five aims:

1. Releasing our creativity;
2. Becoming Scotland's creative laboratory;
3. Making all the city a stage;
4. Connecting us to the world; and
5. Shaping our future.

We see a significant overlap in this aims and the actions we have articulated under each of these aims. Within these aims one of our most pressing concerns are the actions that will ensure there is sufficient critical mass to retain and attract talent in Aberdeen. If we are to accept cultural provision that allows for regional provision and identity then it is critical that sufficient opportunities exist within all regions of Scotland for the creation and production of cultural activity. This is an area where we feel a co-ordinated national approach would be beneficial. It lies behind actions in our strategy to develop living and working spaces, to create a national centre in a given art form, and to make a UNESCO Creative Cities bid. It equally lies behind some of the suggestions we make in this response regarding the location of the cultural leadership post, the relocation of a national company and part (or all) of Creative Scotland to what is Scotland's third city.

What do you think success for the strategy will look like?

Throughout this response one of our central themes has been the articulation of a Scottish culture and identity that is the sum total of regions of Scotland recognising and respecting their distinctive identity and voice. Our ambition is that this plurality of identities and their contemporary expression might be more familiar both within Scotland and the wider world.

What is your view of the proposed approach to monitoring and evaluating the strategy set out in section 5?

We believe that if ideas around articulating a regional cultural provision are articulated there are opportunities to consider developing metrics which measure the pattern of provision and its change over time across the whole of Scotland. The collaborative approach adopted by the Agenda 21 process (highlighted above) may provide opportunities to engage a wider range of organisations and practitioners across the whole of Scotland.

Further information from: Dr Duncan Cockburn, Chair of Culture Aberdeen, c/o Robert Gordon University, Garthdee House, Garthdee Road, Aberdeen AB10 7QB (duncan.cockburn@rgu.ac.uk)