

Towards A New Vision For Cultural Heritage In Northern Ireland

A Messy Conference

Seamus Heaney

Homeplace 10 . 04 . 19





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Introduction And Background

This document represents a summary of the conference held in Seamus Heaney Homeplace on the 10th April 2019. The conference was jointly organised by a group of organisations who have come together to pursue a vision for cultural heritage for Northern Ireland, which has place-making, people and communities at its heart. The Group comprises Tourism NI, Department for Communities, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and Creative Europe Desk UK - British Council Northern Ireland.

The starting point for the conference was an initial workshop on 15th February 2019 with a range of cross sectoral stakeholders and operators in the culture, tourism and heritage sectors. The purpose of this was to open up a discussion on some learnings to date, pioneering projects, good practice here and elsewhere and to discuss ideas around a wider conference in April 2019.

The April 2019 conference was framed around the emerging discussion at this meeting but with a clear ask from the group not be closed or prescriptive about the agenda. It was felt that there was lots of evidence of partnership working, examples of co-design and generally good practice in Northern Ireland and that it was important to share knowledge of this and to open up the conversations.

This document uses the term cultural heritage throughout and in doing so refers to our cultural heritage past, present and evolving, for visitors and residents alike.

There was a lot of conversation around the importance of bravery, having freedom and some shared principles around this - this culminated in an idea around establishing a *Messy Manifesto*.

A Messy Manifesto

Messy storytelling

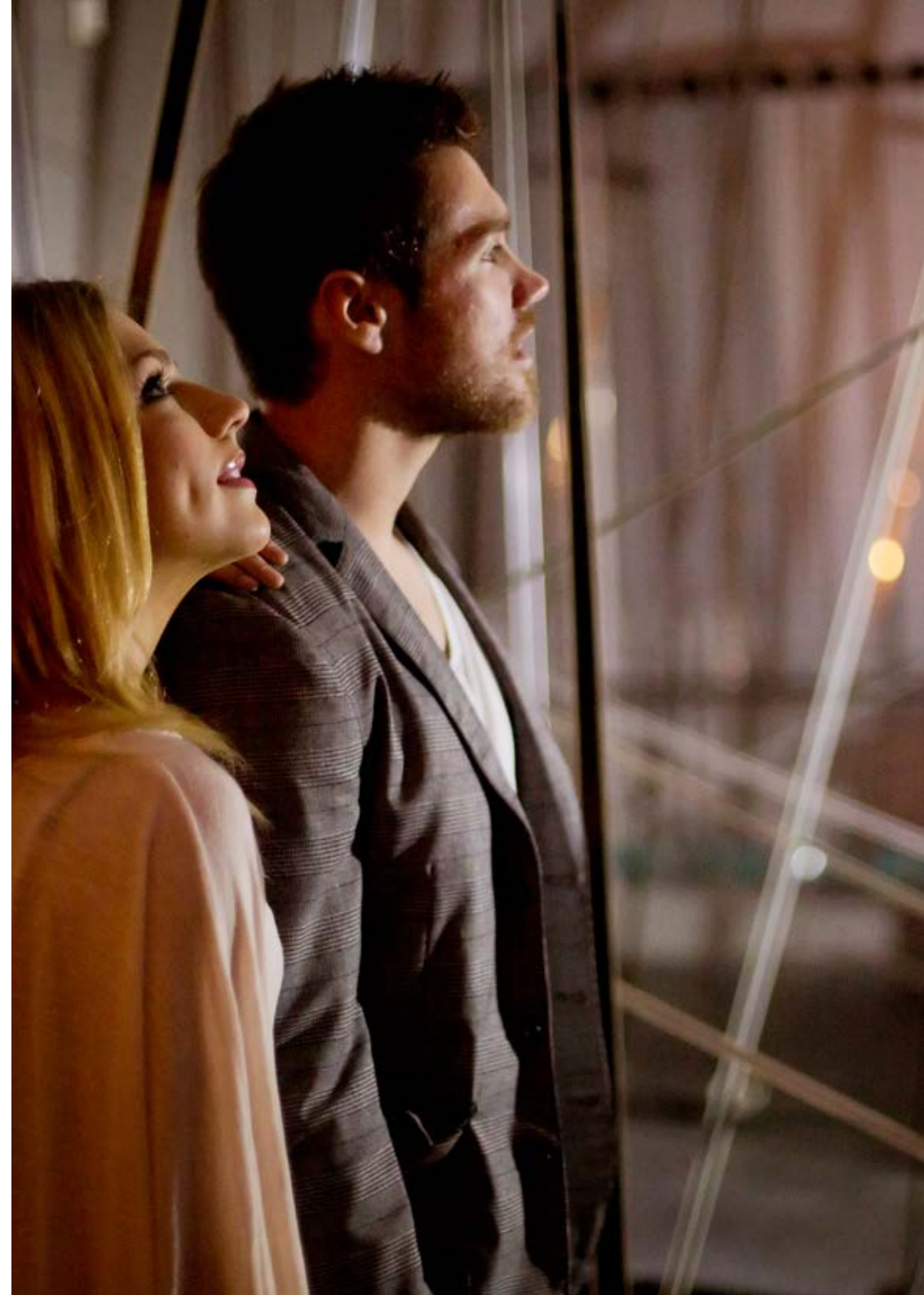
1. Let's create the conditions for our narrative (...to flow - plural complex).
2. Let's connect (people with place with visitors...with stories).
3. Let's embrace the artist (value the role of the artists, writer, designer etc.).
4. Let's engage openly (let everyone know what you're up to - new opportunities and partners).

Messy in partnership

1. Let's work to shared values in different ways (plurality).
2. Let's co-design (make shared thinking and working the norm, can all be mentor and mentee).
3. Let's get out of the way (create the environment for grassroots to use their power).
4. Let's hear all voices equally (big, little, new, old, institutional, individual; and, even when no funding 'on the table', don't stay in your silo / sector).
5. Let's be activists (a collective movement for change, not a sector).

Messy in practice

1. Let's (re)think big (our operating and investment models).
2. Let's understand our place (...for those who live there and those who visit).
3. Let's be inspired (not just impart our inspiration and wisdom on others).
4. Let's get it wrong (idea, partner, develop, pilot, test, learn, go again).
5. Let's get chunky (do things in credible, cumulative, impactful ways).
6. Let's measure in new ways (that work for our audiences / communities over time, share, but set the bar high, maintain momentum).



A Vision For Cultural Heritage In Northern Ireland Conference

Seamus Heaney Homeplace | Wed 10.04.19

- 09.30 Registration, networking and light refreshments
- 10.00 Welcome and introductions,
William Crawley, Event host
- 10.05 Cultural Heritage Leadership Group Introduction,
Paul Mullan, National Lottery Heritage Fund
- 10.10 Place Making and Creativity,
Declan Hayden, Dublin City Council
- 10.25 In conversation across the sectors
- 11.00 Tea / coffee and networking
- 11:25 Heaney HomePlace,
Brian McCormick
- 11.35 Tropical Ravine,
Cailín Lynn
- 11.45 Workshop sessions,
Andrew Palmer, Creative Tourist
- 12.30 Feedback and conclusions
- 13.00 Lunch and networking
- 13.45 Tour of Seamus Heaney HomePlace





Summary of Discussion

The conference sought to showcase the variety of interesting partnerships, projects, good practice and learnings with a series of speakers. And thereafter to open up the debate by inviting participants to:

1. Respond to some questions on a **vision for cultural heritage in NI:**

What would excellence look like?

What do we need to make it possible?

What / where are the quick wins?

2. Garner feedback on ideas emerging in the initial workshop which might **allow cultural heritage in NI to be secure, grow and flourish.**

Let's re-think big (our operating and investing models)

Let's understand our place (for those who live there and visit)

Let's be inspired (not just impart our inspiration and wisdom)

Let's get it wrong (idea, partner, develop, pilot, test, go again)

Let's get chunky (credible, cumulative, impactful ways)

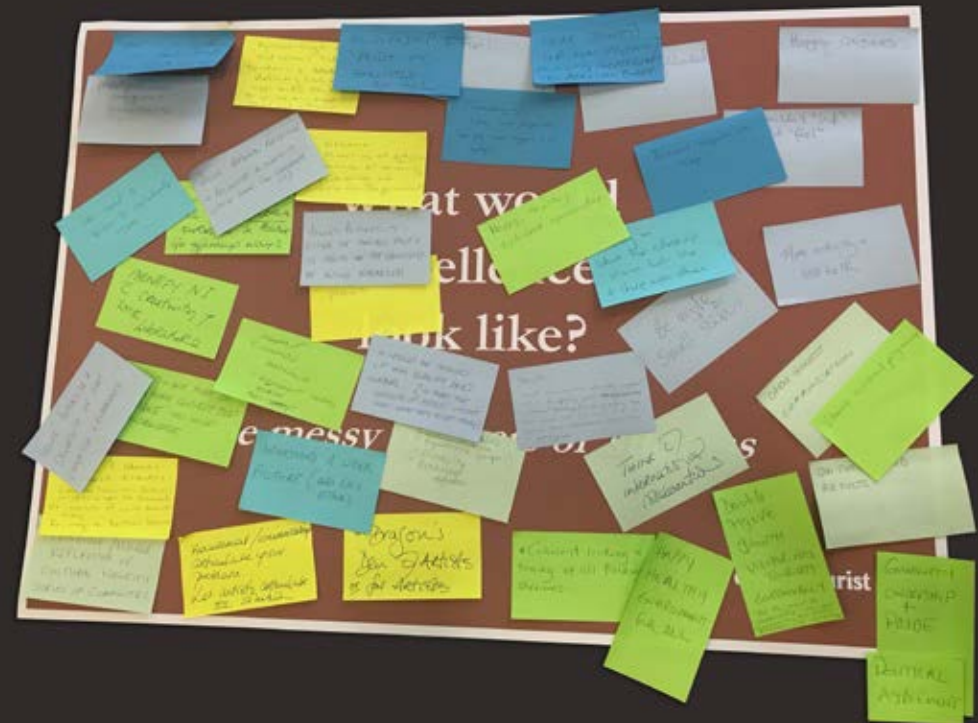
Let's measure in new ways (for audiences and communities).

3. Collect any other **thoughts on transformational change.**

A Vision For Cultural Heritage In Northern Ireland

What would excellence look like?
The messy markers of success

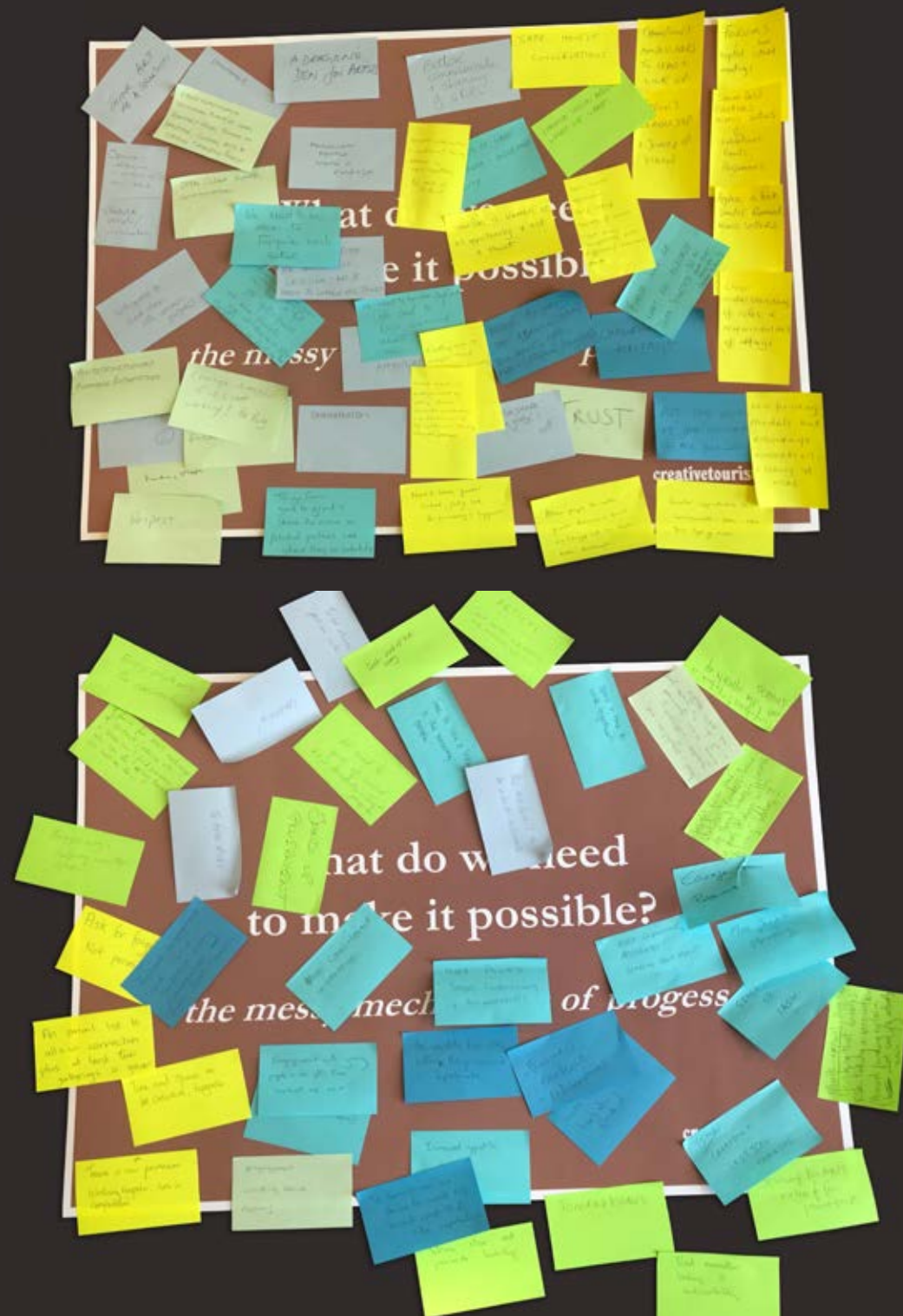
"Redefine excellence in our terms" comment	
Leading	Be led by visitor engagement - strategy, energy, widening audience base
	Define a completely new vision for how "we" do public / civic service
	Agree a common approach / framework to enable different / new ideas to emerge
	Update transparent in-house strategic policy setting, partnership / funding arrangements etc., joined up across the sector
	Coherent connections across funding landscape - timelines and thematics
	Capitalise on clustering of new projects, e.g. capital, festivals etc.
Target	Collaborate as internationally as the stories we tell
	Heritage storytelling - cement as a local-international talking point for NI
Time & Space	Build in freedom to take risks / fail (reflection, creativity, collaboration, sharing, piloting, agile steps building momentum...)
	Commission / programme including using a 'Dragon's Den' of / for artists model, to enable artists to articulate solutions
	Ensure that we celebrate more - authenticity / quality - locally to nationally
Insight	Engage and value new viewpoints and skills, e.g. artists, activists
	Identify and directly connect and direct visitors to / from heritage into arts and music
Share	Engage outside our immediate sector, networks and hierarchies
	Start with civic engagement / pride - heritage, people, stories, artists, landscape - localism
	Support arts / artists that are more closely tied to place



What do we need to make it possible? The messy mechanisms of progress

"Put the audience at the centre of everything you do" comment

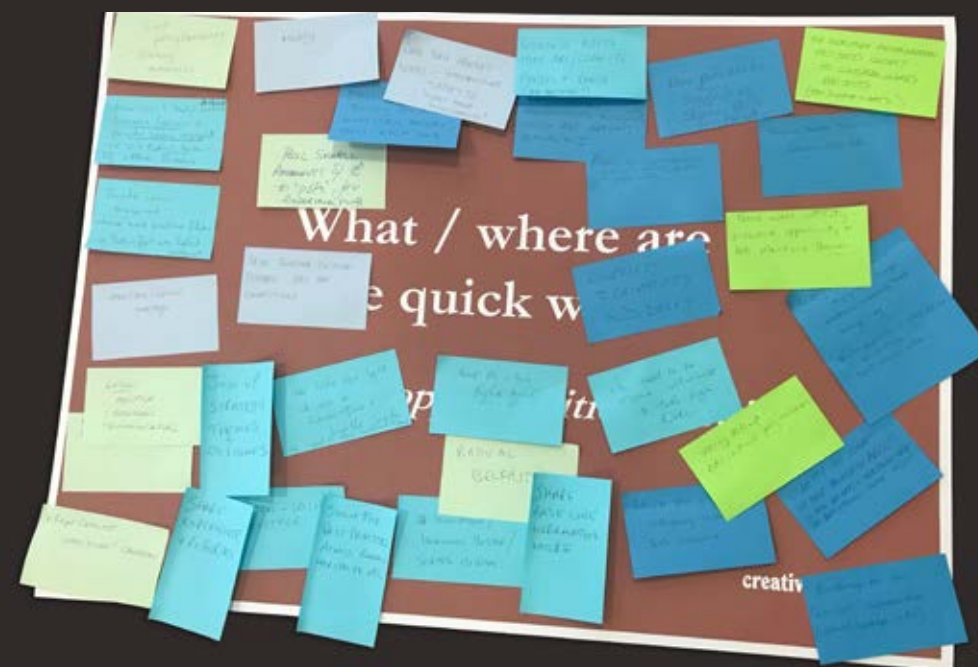
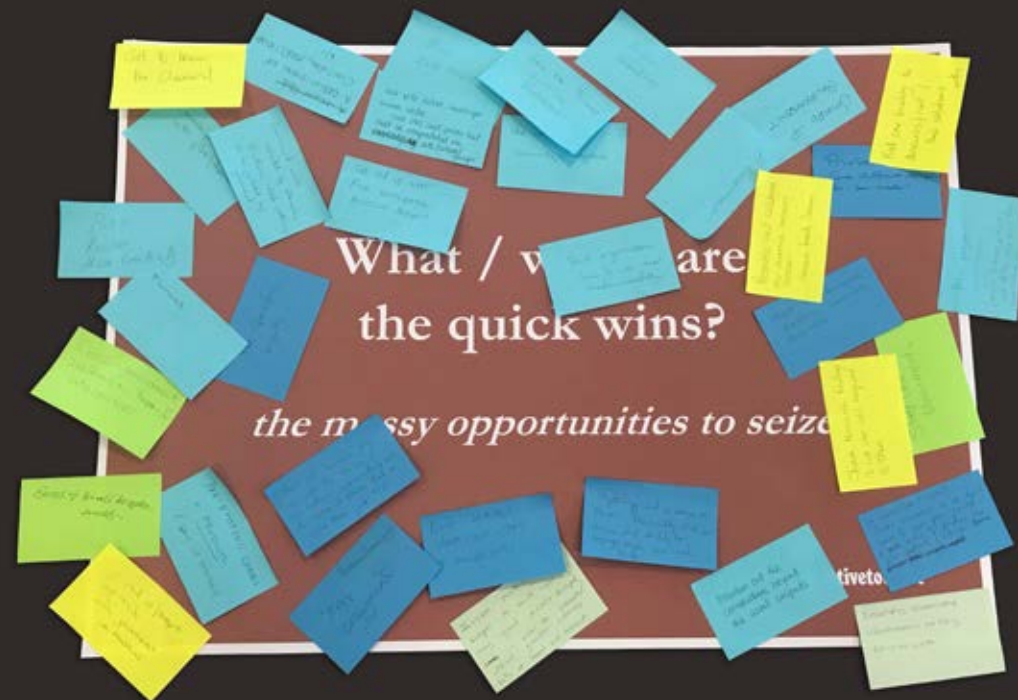
Leading	See the manifesto hardwired into funding model
	Joined up leaders(hip), budgets, funding streams, planning cycles
	Move beyond the local authority administrative boundaries
	Advocacy from the lead agencies, e.g. ACNI, NLHF, DfC
	Be bold: risk taking, innovation, flexibility, new ways to measure
	Get champions / advocates leading from the front, starting locally
	Enable projects to pivot, expand, cancel, mothball at midpoints
	Be committed, passionate, enabling
	Release new / diverse ambassadors to lead, champion, link up
Target	Engagement specifically with young people as a sector
	TV and film opportunities
	Harness our own stories to create NI-based event
Time & Space	For creativity and critical, risk-taking thinking and innovation
	To engage with / listen to the 'missing' people / communities
	From funding, management and monitoring models
Insight	Clear, creative and aligned measures of success as a sector
	Share the vision so others can adopt it, add to it, evolve it
	Reveal the great heritage (stories) and show their diverse relevance
	Demonstrate how / where tourism is an opportunity, not a threat
Share	Collaborate at local, national, island of Ireland and international level
	Better, open comms (live, online), share best practice across sectors / disciplines
	Working groups that work
	Multi-disciplinary approaches (and planning authorities)
	Ideas openly, with common purpose
	Knowledge and opinion in a safe, nurturing, non-judgmental way



What / where are the quick wins?

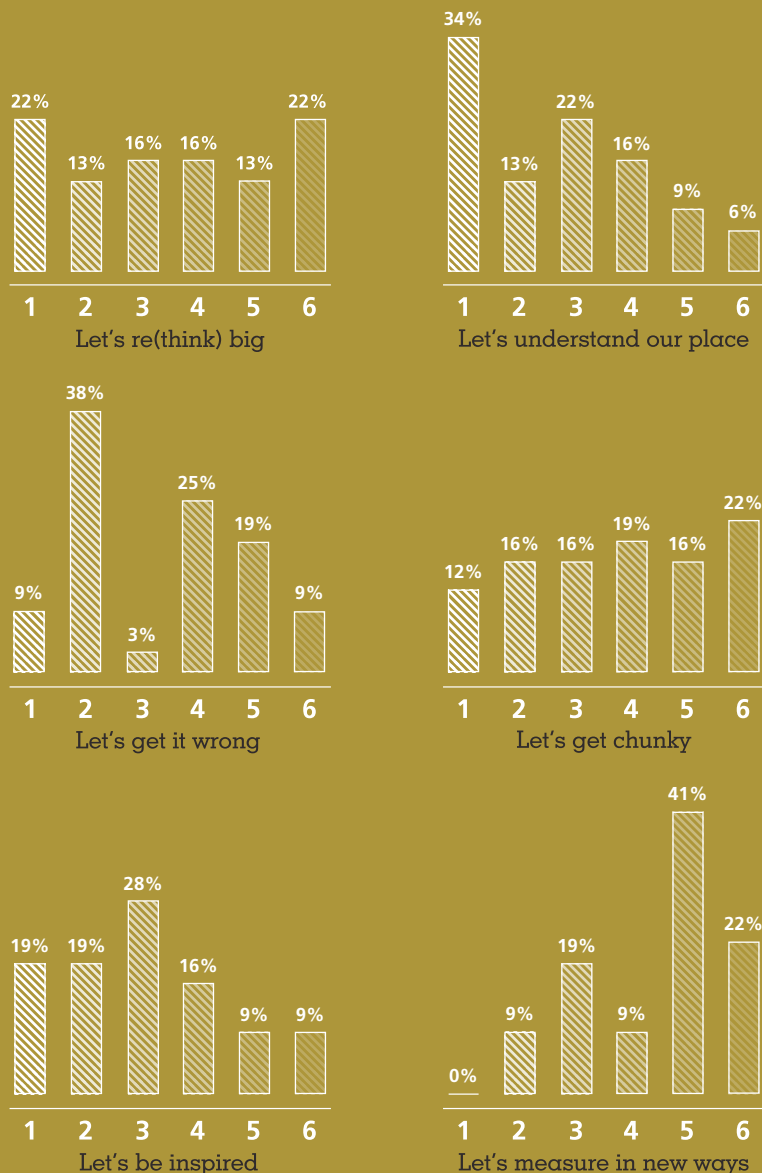
The messy opportunities to seize

"Think big, then think bigger again" comment	
Leading	Engage with all our staff
	Build the links between state care sites and museums
	Enable government assets to be leveraged by others in partnership
	Encourage pilot projects and don't just reward successes
	Articulate a dynamic, flexible definition for cultural heritage in NI, whilst building on the emerging 'experience NI' brand
	Localism is key: people, stories, communities
	Create the platforms and processes to encourage confidence in being ambitious
Target	Focusing (increased) marketing budgets to build upon great projects to connect with / attract UK, international audiences
	A series of small, bespoke events to tell more collective, connected stories and tap into these 'elevating offers'
	Developing interactive interpretation at key tourism sites
	Better routes to finding contacts, advice, potential partners etc.
	Tapping into and enhance existing local / community festivals
	Removal of VAT from heritage building restoration projects
	Doing more place / site-specific work
	Injecting more creativity into the public realm
	Linking more with nature and landscape (and environmental sector)
	Sites and spaces that could be interpreted via arts and culture groups / artists
	Projects like Radical Belfast, Ingenious Ulster and build on them; and assets like maritime / coastal heritage
	Spotting the connecting threads, like linen, conflict and creativity
	Enable space for heritage regeneration projects to connect more closely to arts and culture projects
Time & Space	Brainstorm together, broadening out the conversations beyond the usual suspects as part of product development
Insight	Bring our mythology and a sense of place to life
	Share baseline information more
	Focus on long-term market needs - infrastructure, appetite, what makes us sustainable
Share	Successes - we don't have to learn from scratch, and we need to let our strengths shine
	Teach organisations how to use social media successfully
	Create buddy scheme to explore ideas, solve problems with
	Engage the private sector - share best practice and ideas, e.g. Dublin Port and Belfast Harbour
	Pool small funds into 'innovation pots' for experimentation



Help Cultural Heritage In NI To Be Secure, Grow And Flourish

Could you rank these 6 possible elements in order of how important you feel they are in helping cultural heritage in Northern Ireland to be secure, grow and flourish?



Most important ◀ █ █ █ █ █ █ ▶ Least important
(They're all important)



LET'S RE(THINK) BIG
LET'S UNDERSTAND OUR PLACE
LET'S BE INSPIRED
LET'S GET IT WRONG
LET'S GET CHUNKY
LET'S MEASURE IN NEW WAYS

The preference for Let's understand our place should be placed in context. As a survey exercise, this was an arbitrary choice of preference, but was nevertheless an interesting indicator of where collective priorities are. Each option has value of course, and none should be passed over in favour of another. But within this exercise 'let's understand our place' was a clear favourite. This speaks the desire to tell the collective narrative of Northern

Ireland with more clarity, honesty, freshness and dynamism. It speaks to an ambition, even an impatience, to be able to share these stories – for local communities and visitors. It is encouraging to see that a heritage sector group focused in on storytelling above all – which in this context encompasses telling the stories and creating and shaping them as well. In other words, interpretation and product development.

Thoughts On Transformational Change

Any other thoughts on achieving transformational change?

Keep talking, keep listening to each other	Forgive ourselves and move on confidently into a shared future
Show leadership, cooperation, and deliver. Walk your talk!	Tell the story of what cultural heritage is, in a different way
Get local authority CEOs and Leaders on board	Let's make some things happen!
Learn from the grassroots / small-scale - great collaborators, storytellers	Messiness of the people, by the people, for the people!
Remember: the next big thing is lots of little things	Talk to 'others'... still the same faces and same narrative... go to them first
Break existing patterns to free up aspiration / ambition	Move fast on small projects
Get on with it; stop talking about it	Get community to own heritage in: business; schools, supermarkets... programme it!
Get citizens involved	Reach out beyond the usual suspects
Keep the momentum going!	Think big: multi-year thinking; evaluate to build expertise and share across sectors
Create a place that I want to live, work and enjoy	Be generous, share time, ideas and resources
Educate - heritage in schools inc. nursery and primary	Simplify the message @ culture and heritage is for everyone
Have honest conversations	Give ourselves the freedom to get things wrong - do things differently
Think global, act local	Think beyond short-term product while authentic place / history gets lost
Engagement. Partnership. Creativity	A&B NI can mobilise private sector in this vision: partnership and transformation
Be realistic, but not to constrain our imagination	Too much emphasis on trying to keep everyone happy - will never be brave that way
Be place-makers not place-takers (egos)	

Emerging Observations

There is lots of aspiration, occasional frustration, and some nice buzzwords and catchy lines (which suggests that this debate is well rehearsed), but less on the inspiration to actually 'act'.

The case studies on the day gave a number of route maps, so perhaps the commonalities of achieving impact (e.g. original partnerships, clear support from funders to innovate and test new ideas etc.) should be formally encouraged.

Everybody wants change, and action, but the historical 'muscle memory' of letting the existing lead agencies set the agenda may only change when those same agencies change the model from the top.

There needs to be clear options, proposal ideas and channels to help people get messy.

There was a strong desire to "understand our place" and much about bringing our stories to life. An opportunity to look to good practice and enable these stories to be told.

Can the sector be invited to seek new partners, funds, ideas etc. through a practical network / forum / process?



Why And What Next?

Why are we doing this?

Northern Ireland's heritage sector is moving forward (just as lots of other parts of the competitive landscape of the UK). There are new partnerships emerging that are really delivering; innovation through new ways of thinking and working; and communities are becoming more central to the discussions and actions exploring how the value of heritage can be felt by as many people as possible, both resident and visitor.

A new proposition for a heritage-rich place will help to define the offer for visitors, alongside national strategies and programmes dedicated to increasing engagement across local communities. The European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 was an interesting and productive test-bed for new ideas and partnerships. There were some good initiatives, often pilots, and now we need to push on. So we are asking some big questions - like how we can collectively 'move the dial' in terms of understanding how people engage with culture and heritage. In doing so, we're also trying not to adopt any old assumptions about how to do things, strategically and in delivery. If we can benefit from new thinking, culture change and genuine challenge in how the cultural heritage sector operates, then that is fine.

Why get messy

This manifesto talks about being messy. Sounds fun, but what does that mean exactly, in the real world in practice? Well, the real world is messy for starters. The sector has to navigate an insecure funding and political landscape, adjusting to continual societal, technological and environmental change. In this context it would be easy to retrench to tried and tested policies, programmes and practice that organisations have used to survive, sustain and even on occasion thrive.

What next?

However, best practice and good policy developments (including some great work across NI) is showing that a transformational approach to how we work together is the way forward, and that fixed models may not always be the best route. Inspiration, leadership and achievement can be top down, bottom up and cross-sector - ideally all at once. So now it starts to be messy - but it is in these new spaces where the innovation will come from and tomorrow's best practice. We want to create the environment where these conversations and collaborations can thrive, and then let them happen (not dictate or control them).

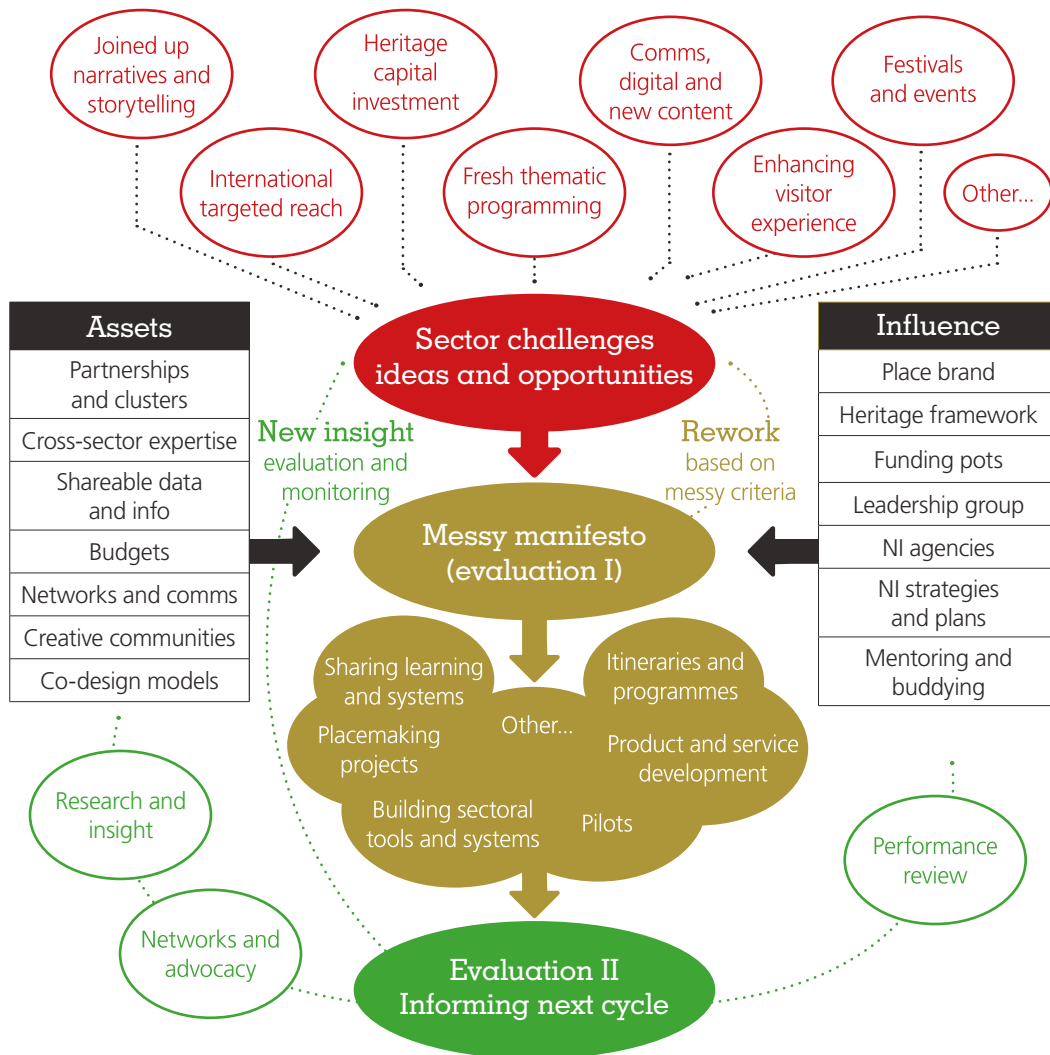
So, messy?

Yes, messy is good.



A Complex Ecology, But A Navigable One

The opportunity for cumulative, collective impact is present, as is the collective will. The chart below is a partial illustration of this landscape, and one that key ideas, challenges and opportunities could be channelled through, e.g. 'how can this heritage asset contribute to the national place brand through its next phase of product development, using a co-design ethos?'. Use the messy manifesto to filter ideas and proposals.



Next Steps

This is not an action plan! There is work required to create the environment to act, innovate and encourage more (there is some already) transformational change. It will not all happen at once.

However, based on the emerging observations it is clear that creating the environment for change will require some new catalysts that encourage a broader base to engage and to engage in more innovative ways.

There was a desire for some leadership and the organisations who coordinated this conference have agreed to take the following initial steps (2020) to create the environment for change:

- Keep the channels of communication open through shared learnings. Put in place a central repository /communications framework to capture key messages, good practice and new ideas.

- There was a keen desire to understand our place and some specific requests around better storytelling and releasing the stories. Develop a multi-faceted programme to coordinate some good practice and share resources to support bringing stories to life in an engaging way. This work needs to bring in some key partners across the cultural heritage sector where this is already a core competency.

- Establish a new fund (learning from good practice and lessons from the past) to catalyse some early action (launch mid 2020). The new ask is that there is co-design in development thereof and sufficient investment in pre application and award planning.



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