



BUILDING BACK BETTER

A Vision for Culture Sector Recovery
in Nova Scotia

2021



“We want the province to be
IMAGINATIVE, resourceful,
creative, and
COLLABORATIVE.”



As the province prepares post-COVID-19 recovery strategies, investment in the culture sector must be an essential part of those plans.

Investing in the culture sector is investing in Nova Scotia's economic recovery. We want more than to 'get back to normal.' This pandemic has presented an unprecedented opportunity to reposition and prioritize the culture sector as having an integral role in the province. Recovery efforts writ large should therefore include a distinct culture lens. In alignment with the provincial development strategies as outlined in the One Nova Scotia report, harnessing the vitality of the creative and cultural sector and its enormous potential will make Nova Scotia a better place to live, work, and visit, it will advance the well-being of all Nova Scotians, it will attract new investment and new business, and - of course - it will allow pathways for culture to continue making significant contributions to the economy.

Over the course of two months, the Creative Nova Scotia Leadership Council and Arts Nova Scotia undertook a series of consultation sessions with stakeholders representing a broad cross-section of the culture sector throughout the province in order to gather feedback on upcoming recovery efforts. These conversations focused on the challenges they faced over the course of the pandemic and asked what changes they consider central to revitalizing the economic and creative heart of the culture sector. Close to 200 stakeholders participated in these sessions – both virtually and through an email survey. Based on our conversations and the analysis of the data we collected throughout, six major themes emerged.

FUNDING

1 OPERATIONAL FUNDING FOR CULTURE ORGANISATIONS NEEDS TO BE INCREASED.

Operational support to cultural organisations is a central pillar upon which we can build a brighter future for our sector and the province as a whole. Core funding is part of the fabric that weaves the culture sector together. It enables innovative creative and cultural organizations to leverage similar support from other levels of government. It promotes professional development, enables effective collaboration, and demonstrates a commitment to fostering the next generation of cultural leaders, while generating a level of economic activity that far outstrips the initial investment it represents.

Despite inflation, rising infrastructure costs, emerging urgent priorities, and the pressing demands posed by a global pandemic, operational funding has not been increased in more than 20 years. This presents a multi-layered barrier to progress for the sector, preventing organisations from developing forward-thinking models of sustainability, addressing prescient issues around equity, diversity, and inclusion, and undertaking meaningful strategic planning and succession planning for the cultural industries. We cannot expect organisations to simply reallocate existing funds in order to meet these challenges. Increasing core funding acts as a catalyst through which many of these issues can be addressed while also serving to grow the sector and the province's overall cultural capacity.

Many stakeholders we spoke with also stressed the limitations of the year-to-year model through which most of this funding is delivered. Expanding to a multi-year approach – a 3 to 5 year cycle, for example - provides organisations with the stability and confidence necessary to engage in multi-year planning that emphasizes growth, creativity, better partnerships, and enhancement of quality of life for sector professionals and, indeed, for all Nova Scotians.

GAPS, INEQUITIES, AND SUSTAINABILITY

2 USE EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION (EDI) AS A LENS THROUGH WHICH WE CHOOSE TO INVIGORATE THE SECTOR.

Across the sector, there is a strong desire to be more inclusive of all Nova Scotian cultures and voices. First and foremost, this means creating more opportunities for marginalized communities and ensuring their participation is grounded in authenticity. Directly funding EDI initiatives, creating more robust mentorship programs, and prioritizing the development of these communities in the cultural space will help reorient the sector and create spaces where previously marginalized communities can define their own strategies for inclusion and real participation, helping to undo decades of complex harm and build bridges to new, citizen-driven modes of community harmony. A financial influx from government would help advance and expedite this crucial priority and demonstrate the need for closer collaborations between government and communities.

This lens must also focus on overall accessibility within the sector. Who has access to provincial programs? How is that access facilitated? How can we engage communities and ask what it is they truly need to be heard and seen? How can we get more people to the table? How can we build them up to get here?

The pandemic demonstrated that significant work must be done to find, train, and mobilize the next generation of leaders within the culture sector. All too often, we consistently rely on the same people, the same volunteer base, and the same core group of professionals to guide the ship. Many stakeholders expressed that not having adequate staffing or interim leadership available to alleviate some of the stress during the pandemic took a significant toll on their mental health, energy, and overall well-being. Organisations - from the most successful to the fledgling start-ups - require support to facilitate succession planning that ensures the viability of the sector for decades to come.

“The sector plays a big role in the wellbeing of Nova Scotians but is not really being acknowledged.”

Quite simply, we need more people, we need to do more to show young people that a career in the culture sector is possible, we need to create and illuminate pathways for young graduates considering a career in the sector, and we need to educate the province at large why support for culture is so important. As storytellers, we need to enhance our ability – through resources, funding and supports – to tell our stories to Nova Scotians and Canadians alike.

3 FOCUS ON THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE SECTOR, NOT ONE-TIME FUNDING.

COVID-19 put a significant strain on human resources throughout the culture sector. Many organisations sacrificed their day-to-day duties to pursue emergency funds that allowed them to simply keep the doors open. Often, these emergency funds were one-time-only offerings meaning that cultural organisations and artists spent more time on survival than on sustainability.

“The stress and pressure on the staff and artists - the human impact - has been extreme.”

Access to emergency funding often also required the creation of a new project or program within these already struggling organisations. Digital-first initiatives, for example, ran counter to sustainability efforts by asking culture sector employees to create brand new projects in order to access one-time only funds. While this allowed that injection of money to filter out to artists, cultural workers, and the community, it ultimately put a significant amount of pressure on these employees in the middle of a crisis. This shift in focus decreased overall capacity to focus on long-term sustainability in favour of what many in the sector deemed ‘make-work projects.’ Recovery efforts cannot be hinged on one-time offers. Increasing core operational funding and creating new programs focused on a longer-term vision for the sector would help to advance growth of the cultural industries in a meaningful way while also promoting sustainability.

4 THE LANGUAGE OF ‘INNOVATION’ AND ‘EXPORT’ ARE PERCEIVED AS BARRIERS TO GROWTH.

The sector concerns about single-project funding also extended to the language on which those programs are often hinged. Many stakeholders told us that requiring new projects to be presented through a lens of ‘innovation’ stifles sustainability and impedes long-term growth, particularly in a time where they are simply trying to survive.

As the province moves toward recovery, it is a prime opportunity to recognize that the cultural industries are – by their very nature – innovative. This is a sector that is continually coming up with new ways of looking at the world and developing exciting ways to engage Nova Scotians and to tell our stories. There is a tremendous opportunity to engage the culture sector as leaders in this field and to refocus how their expertise can be harnessed in ways to promote and invigorate government priorities across departments.

“There is a lot of potential for the province to invest in Nova Scotia creatively for a global audience.”

‘Export’ initiatives must also be refocused to concentrate on the growth of the whole sector. More must be done to help stakeholders at all levels achieve this status. Recovery strategies, therefore, need to foster more creation, more artist development, and more opportunities for emerging cultural producers at a grassroots level so that when we get to a point where we are once again able to focus on export and export missions, Nova Scotia has a much bigger pool of offerings. This approach must be a continual focus moving forward, ensuring that a comparable investment in developing the sectoral infrastructure is balanced with investment aimed at building up the export capacity of the creative and cultural industries.

THE PIVOT TO DIGITAL

5 MORE SUPPORT IS NEEDED TO INCREASE AND ASSESS DIGITAL CAPACITY THROUGHOUT THE SECTOR.

While the ‘pivot to digital’ was adapted by many in the culture sector throughout the pandemic, this strategy did not work for everyone. Artists and organisations in rural communities, for example, did not have equitable access to high speed internet that allowed them to participate in this revised marketplace.

“I had to tape my set at home, drive to the local school, and upload my performance from the parking lot because my internet is so bad.”

Digital performances or offerings simply weren’t possible for some. Theatres, for example, understood that virtual productions would pale in comparison to live events. We cannot assume that digital is the answer to, or the future of, everything for the culture sector.

For those who did opt to participate in this new digital landscape, many found themselves having to learn a brand new skillset, buying new equipment to create high quality content, and spending time applying for digital-specific one-time-only project funding. In fact, many stakeholders said that through the process of virtual adaptation “a new kind of discipline has emerged.” Many also believe that the future of the sector will be a hybrid future, blending live performance with digital offerings. Government must be prepared to invest in this future.

In doing so, however, it is imperative to develop responsible assessment tools to measure the success of virtual offerings. We must be weary of making funding for digital initiatives contingent only on metrics gathered from major tech platforms. Again, the culture sector is primed to play a key leadership role in developing avenues and ideas to help ensure that ‘success’ in this process of digital transformation isn’t simply numbers-based. Whether through a lens of inclusive economic growth, qualitative assessments linked to quality of life indicators, or engaging with the understanding that culture offers innumerable intangible benefits to people across the province and beyond, the sector can not only help recast digital-focused initiatives in the future, but also be crucial to shaping their focus and priorities.

WELL-BEING OF THE SECTOR

6 INSTITUTE MEASURES TO REBUILD THE VITALITY OF THE SECTOR AND REPOSITION CULTURE AS A PRIMARY ECONOMIC DRIVER FOR RECOVERY.

A prevailing, worrying concern across the culture sector is that, when recovery happens, the workforce will not be there to match the demand. This is particularly true in the live sector where technicians (stage managers, sound engineers, lighting designers, stage carpenters, etc.) fell through the cracks of federal and provincial support systems. Many fear that a large part of this pool of highly specialized talent who are crucial to the day-to-day activities of the sector will not return. They expect a generation gap to emerge and envision an uphill climb to train newcomers to the field. A similar gap is expected to be felt in volunteerism. Throughout our consultations, both scenarios were described as “emergency situations.”

Broadly, much needs to be done to encourage a younger generation to participate in the culture sector at all levels. Increased arts education in schools, mentorship programs, pathways to accessible support, and a louder voice championing the viability of culture on the whole were all identified by stakeholders as ways to make this happen.

Government also has a key role to play in choosing to put culture front and center in its recovery efforts. In the short-term, live events, performing arts, and cultural activities will be key drivers in attracting visitors to the province and in encouraging Nova Scotians to spend money here at home. The amount allocated for tourism and marketing to stimulate the economy during this recovery period should therefore be matched with investment in the culture sector.

“It’s big, and bold, and it’s going to cost money.”

However, to make sure this is successful, culture sector investment must also include measures to help rebuild public confidence. Marketing tools, communications strategies, and awareness campaigns will need to tell prospective audiences how their safety will be addressed. Moreover, the province will need to help presenters, artists, and organisations prepare for this through funding for COVID-related infrastructure upgrades that ensure public safety moving forward, providing avenues to fund additional staff (on site COVID safety facilitators), and being willing to insure/underwrite the risk of holding events.

In the long-term, increased investment across the sector also fosters the potential to increase our capacity of cultural offerings overall, making Nova Scotia an even more appealing place not only to visitors, but also to prospective new businesses, emerging professionals, international students, and more.

While direct support for the cultural sector and the cultural industries is paramount, a large number of stakeholders also expressed their desire for government to move towards broader, socially-focused initiatives as a way to alleviate some of the pressures this sector faces. Working with an interdepartmental approach to establish universal basic income, increase social assistance and mental health services, create more robust sick leave programs, and commit to affordable housing would not only benefit the culture sector, but indeed the province as a whole.

CONCLUSION

This engagement with the creative-cultural community represents a substantive and grounded addition to our collective strategies to revitalize and relaunch a sector that can contribute real-world efforts to see Nova Scotia become a national leader in inclusive, innovative, and diverse economic growth. The broad and deep nature of the consultations means that buy-in is already in place - recovery efforts rooted in these recommendations will be widely supported, welcomed and championed by the creative-cultural community.

The sector has clearly signaled to us that it is ready to play a central role in the economic and cultural development of the province. Building upon existing policy foundations such as the Culture Action Plan, and now grounded in a broadly agreed upon engagement, the sector has spoken with a unified voice and is eager to play a part in 'building back, building better' so that all Nova Scotians can celebrate a new story of inclusion, creativity, people-centric growth, and economic development. We have always been a province of storytellers, and now as we emerge from the difficulties of a global pandemic, we are ready to help lead the province in crafting a new story – one that includes all voices, all communities.

