



Paragon Studios
Project Space

Strategic

Plan

2025 – 2030

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Section 1

Introduction: why here, why now?

PS² is changing.

What we do, where we do it, how we do it, and who we do it with will remain largely the same.

We are mid-way through a transition process that brings us from a volunteer-led organisation for 30 years, into a model which has a small team of paid staff. We are, and will remain, artist-led. This is our north star.

The transition process encourages us to sieve our values, purpose, mission and actions through a current lens and establish how we reflect those in our programme, operations and identity (and to which degree of priority) in the next five years.

This document is a touchstone for those activities. It does not function as a set of SMART deliverables or key performance indicators, but as a series of priorities and commitments which should be returned to regularly by those who use it – offering both comfort and challenge – in unprecedented times.



Section 2: Where we've come from



A brief history of PS²

Paragon Studios was formed in 1994 by a group of friends - many recent graduates of Belfast School of Art - who sought to find affordable, longer term studio space. The premises, in Donegall Street, were self-managed on a voluntary basis by this small artist-led studio collective. Then, in 2003, a vacant studio space on the ground floor - visible for passers-by and open to the public - was also used for a few projects by invited artists. This space was named Project Space - which led to the name PS² (Paragon Studios x Project Space).

The idea of a project space was loosely modelled after existing artist run project spaces in Germany called *Produzentengalerie* (producers' galleries) and was intended to give artists a non-commercial space to exhibit their work.

The Project Space was seen as public extension of the private studio spaces to be both a workshop/open studio and showroom/exhibition space. Project Space was intentionally not a white cube gallery, and the programming was keen to engage with the social and built environment in the neighbourhood and to reflect the social reality.

The first projects had a strong focus on creative urban interventions and social interactions - a theme which dominated the early years leading to major outdoor projects.

Since its beginning in 18 Donegall Street - at the heart of the Cathedral Quarter - PS² has been forced to move several times in recent years due to the planned - and broadly debated - regeneration plans for the area:

- to 11 North Street in 2016,
- to be moved out again after 18 months to 71 Royal Avenue
- and again after 18 months in December 2019, to 11 Rosemary Street.

To date, the planned regeneration of the area has not yet started, and the vacated buildings remain unused.



Section 3: Purpose and vision; our values and how we enact them

PS² = Paragon Studios + Project Space

Our Purpose

As our Memorandum of Association states, PS² exists '*to advance the education of the public in the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the visual arts*'.

We do this by addressing two functions/objectives:

- To be a studio provider with affordable, good and long-term studio spaces.
- To be an organiser and initiator of a year-round arts programme in Project Space and/or at outside locations.



Our Vision

As a programme organiser and initiator, PS²'s artistic vision is to connect art with society in an inclusive and participatory way and to a high artistic standard.

As an artist-led organisation, our work centres the producer, the artist: the quality of work; their professional development and the regional/trans-regional arts ecosystem. Equally important, we focus on the audience/visitor/participant as an active and engaged recipient of this work. We are committed to engaging with a broad spectrum of society, specifically aiming to reach traditionally 'non art', or 'hard to reach' audiences.

Our Values

PS² operates and programmes with the belief that the arts can help challenge existing societal values and help to shape new ones. We practice a connectedness to one another, our place and our planet.

Equally, in an equitable society with appropriate material resources, the arts should not be wholly responsible for social renewal, and so we resist instrumentalisation, exploitation, and extractivism.

Within all that we do, we value inclusivity, open-mindedness, and flexibility. We maintain a convening practice that brings people together - artists, residents, collaborators, visitors, and activists amongst others - and facilitate generously.

We create the conditions for risk-taking - organisationally, sectorally, societally - encouraging experimentation, and placing trust in the artists and communities we work with.

Amongst these weightier concerns, our work is playful, irreverent and joyful. We seriously value nonsense.

How we do this...

Studios

We support and develop artists through the provision of nine affordable artists' studio spaces and four workspaces for our annual in-residence programmes for a graduate artist, collective, writer/s, and curator/s.

Exhibitions and events

We provide a welcoming, inclusive space for artist experimentation and public engagement, curating around 14 individual/group projects per year with outstanding artists, selected from proposals or by invitation, encouraging experimentation, risk-taking and playfulness. The projects, associated workshops, or talks in our city-centre Project Space are free for the public.

Residencies

We provide a range of residency opportunities across interrelated disciplines and approaches, with annual, multi-annual and bi-annual intake, including a collective, writers, curator[s], and graduate. We also host shorter Project Space residencies, which respond to specific societal or artistic needs. Each resident receives direct benefits as well as heightened profile and curatorial support.

Artist development

We support artists in their professional and artistic development through longer-term programmes, individual curatorial support, peer learning initiatives and regular meet-ups. Since 2018, we have been the host for prestigious development schemes, including Freelands Artist Programme and Syllabus, in partnership with peer organisations based UK-wide.

Offsite public programmes

We initiate and support community-situated projects that enable the public to enjoy and participate in art and their locale. These offsite projects - in urban, suburban and rural locations - are aimed to be longer term, engaging the public, specifically aiming to reach traditionally 'non art', hard-to-reach audiences. One example is PeasPark, a former interface in North Belfast which we creatively activate.

Advocacy

We advocate for better conditions both within the arts sector and for the people of our region. We uphold a non-hierarchical view of artists and communities: artists are not distinct from the wider community and face similar economic, societal, and environmental barriers.

Networks

We share and signpost generously for all in our community. We maintain and further develop a large network of regional, national, and international arts initiatives and organisations, leading to collaboration on projects, mutual learning, and exchange. PS² is affiliated with several umbrella and sector-support organisations, across the UK and island of Ireland.

ACTIVE VOICE!

SUPPORT
ENSURE
DEVELOP
HOST
MAP
ESTABLISH
SECURE
PREPARE
PROVIDE
INITIATE
DELIVER
CONNECT
ADVOCATE
SHARE
GROW



Strategic priority #1:

Serve artists and enhance the wider creative ecology

What's the goal?

Serve artists and enhance the wider creative ecology

2025



2030

Who benefits?

Our work starts with artists, always. Artists are our primary community, and that is enough. Our other stakeholders benefit from this focus too - audiences, residents, peers, and citizens.

What's the plan?

- Resist narratives and practices that separate artists from broader ideas of community – promote understanding and commonalities, challenge perspectives or preconceptions that ‘other’, propose alternatives to outdated and instrumentalising matrices for evaluation.
- Adopt best practice in contracting and remuneration – don’t just talk about care, confront the material, structural and infrastructural conditions of existing in the arts.
- Provide affordable, solid and long-term studio spaces for artists – grow a stronger studio community, and nurture closer alignment between PS² studio artists, programme and operations.
- Continue to foster new and existing artistic talents and projects – offer space for experimentation, encourage risk-taking at all career stages, provide opportunities that are short/long term, individual/collective, indoor/outdoor, production/engagement, think-y/make-y, and more.
- Enhance communities of practice through creating platforms for interconnected disciplines such as curating, writing, and research.
- Provide a range of formal and informal mechanisms through which artists and related disciplines can develop both their creative practices and career progression.
- Be even more explicit about our belief that diverse audience development begins with representation - for members of the public to see ‘themselves’ represented by artists and other creatives across our programmes is vital.
- Remain committed to diversity and inclusion – design programmes and spaces which support those who experience intersectional barriers to the arts, be actively, loudly and unwaveringly anti-racist, and proactively contribute to campaigns in support of LGBTQIA+, gender, disability, and class equity.
- Highlight the interrelatedness of artists’ work and workspaces – acknowledge the shortfalls, and advocate for greater recognition for, value of, and financial investment in both.

What does it look like?

Use high profile events such as the a-n Assembly to encourage dialogue about the needs of artists, with a view to establishing a new visual arts strategy for Northern Ireland.



Support and advocate for the living and working conditions of artists, particularly those who experience intersectional barriers. Support for projects such as Maker Mall brings visibility to artists who are excluded from other opportunities.

Create the conditions in which artists can take risks, and push their practice in new directions through exhibitions, events and commissioning opportunities, such as those offered by Belfast 2024.



Deliver formal and informal creative and career development programmes for artists, such as Syllabus.



**Strategic priority #2:
Foster active citizenship for community and climate**

What's the goal?

Foster active citizenship for community and climate

2025



2030

Who benefits?

We all do.

What's the plan?

- Continue to take our work offsite – build on the organisation's important legacy of programmes which have focused on the natural and built environment and their impact on communities of place.
- Create opportunities and positions for practitioners to engage with climate change, multi-species perspectives, land use and biodiversity – coordinating with other sites, artists and activists focused on ground-up climate democracy throughout the UK and Ireland.
- Ensure ongoing alignment with Belfast City Council-led climate emergency strategies - maintain a presence on the Green Arts Group, share and re-use materials and equipment.
- Lead by proposing ecologically sound solutions to the buildings crisis currently affecting arts organisations – dig deep, dream of better conditions, challenge the status quo and change the conversation!
- Embed PS²'s Environmental Sustainability Guide across all areas of operations and programmes – assessing our impact and working in ways that are environmentally responsive and responsible.
- Centre social impact methodologies with artists, audiences, communities, and sites - adapt these into matrices for all forthcoming activity.
- Support existing communities and identify people and places with whom we could do more – drawing on our recent experiences of working with schools and community groups, and apply our knowledge of the investment required to run these programmes.
- Establish co-design approaches and long-term relationships as standard – initiate and advocate for durational, meaningful projects.
- Increase collaborations with environmental charities and social enterprises with specific sustainability agendas – prioritise partnerships which build community skills, confidence, pride, agency and resources.
- Host and support community-led activities – aim to both inspire and be inspired.

What does it look like?

Collaborate with other arts organisations to share materials, through, for example, the Green Arts NI group.



Build in the reuse, recycling or replanting of resources used through our work, and financially support the preservation of biodiverse sites such as riverbanks as a result of Belfast 2024.

Continue our long-term work at PeasPark, scaling up PS²'s presence, funds, programming and operations around this vital community resource.



11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



13 CLIMATE ACTION



Directly respond to local and global climate crises, whilst giving recognition to related deprivation domains and the intersections of land use, poverty, food inequality, health, and housing.

Commission and share work that provokes consideration of the environment, such as Ami Clarke's *Meeting the Lough on its own Terms*.

AN UPSIDE DOWN WORLD
WHERE PROFIT COMES
BEFORE PEOPLE
AND LOCAL COMMUNITY



Strategic priority #3:

Create sustainable growth and operational stability

What's the goal?

Create sustainable growth and operational stability

2025



2030

Who benefits?

All our stakeholders – studio artists, programme artists, communities/residents, audiences – as well as staff, board, peer organisations, and funders

What's the plan?

- Secure long-term premises – be bold, and consider breaking new ground [literally and figuratively].
- Utilise everything that Blueprint can teach us - use our participation in Arts & Business NI's transformative programme to build financial resilience, and unlock even greater creative potential.
- Secure core and/or multi-year funding for staff – reduce likelihood of burnout, create opportunities for those experiencing barriers to the arts, pursue accreditation to become a Real Living Wage employer for freelancers, build in space to dream.
- Map the organisation's value and impact – stay on track, demonstrate what we've achieved, celebrate those who shaped us.
- Continue to build the Board – new recruits, governance training, plan in some away days, and form working groups.
- Onboard HR expertise - supporting our transition from volunteer-led to paid position-led.
- Diversify funding sources – become a membership organisation, generate income through editions, build relationships with trusts and foundations, go for the BIG projects [we've done it before and will do it again].
- Be generous with our charitable status - continue to nurture other practitioners and projects to get off the ground.
- Make reasonable and appropriate steps towards growth – nothing too big or too fast, retain our identity, map emerging needs, honour founding aims of collectivity and community.
- Remain connected and holistic in our approaches across operations and strands of programming – don't impose top-heavy institutional narratives, but make sure it makes sense.
- Create better visibility and public presence – exploit the potential of street level activity.
- Shape the working cultures we want to be a part of - remain flexible, accessible, inclusive, playful, informal and enthusiastic.

What does it look like?



Bring knowledge from Arts & Business NI's Blueprint programme to bear in our processes, operations and aspirations.

Programmes such as *PS2 cuts its hair and gets a job*: an ongoing research project into the organisation's history, legacy, value and impact.



Amidst crises in studio provision, propose radical new support structures for artists in the city.

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



Resist increasing levels of precarious employment by creating opportunities and committing to fair pay, particularly for people who experience barriers to the arts.

PS³: the Public Shopfront that increases our visibility and accessibility, with the potential to connect art and society in ways that our building hasn't previously supported.





**Strategic priority #4:
Grow strategic partnership opportunities**

What's the goal?

Grow strategic partnership opportunities

2025



2030

Who benefits?

All our stakeholders – studio artists, programme artists, communities/residents, audiences – as well as staff, board, peer organisations, and the wider arts sector

What's the plan?

- For a small organisation, our networks are substantial, locally and UK-wide– act to initiate projects with partners in those existing networks, e.g. developing exhibition touring opportunities or publications that enhance opportunities and networks for artists.
- Fundraise to include more cross-border collaborations –ensuring that PS² can contribute to the transport of artwork or travel or accommodation for individuals.
- Scale up international networks originally built by Peter Mutschler as Creative Director – explore models for doing things differently that could be replicated or made bespoke for Belfast.
- Initiate strategic partnerships with other sectors around related, civic concerns – e.g. architecture, social policy, health. Explore the introduction of artists-in-residence within other fields of practice.
- PS² hosts visiting artists, curators, development initiatives, membership organisations, and funders all the time, but they always come to us – we cannot do this with our heads down all the time, we need to build in time, capacity and resources which enable us to look up! Include some small travel expenditure (where appropriate) through fundraising rather than relying on staff to self-fund.
- Connect with the *Studio of Sanctuary* initiative – which integrates refugee and asylum-seeking artists into local arts contexts by providing resources and opportunities– with a view to developing capacity at PS². Build on relationships with other *Studio of Sanctuary* organisations: Sample Studios (Cork), Edinburgh Printmakers and The Art House (Wakefield). Align with Belfast City Council's position as a *City of Sanctuary*.
- Locally, maintain productive relationships with organisations such as Belfast School of Art, Outburst Queer Arts Festival, and more – sharing audiences, resources, and communities of practice.
- Maintain excellent relationships with peer organisations around advocacy – continue to collaborate to raise awareness of challenges facing the sector at local authority and government levels. Advocate for and contribute to a new Visual Arts Strategy for Northern Ireland.

What does it look like?

Continue to be the go-to place for visiting organisations and artists, and explore funds that enable PS² to 'go see' too!



Team up with other sectors around related, civic concerns – e.g. architecture, social policy, health. Explore the introduction of artists-in-residence within other fields of practice.

Come together with peer/artist-led organisations to lobby for better conditions.



Build on existing relationships, such as those with a-n Curator Bursary recipients, to create tangible opportunities for artists.

Explore the possibilities for PS² to become a *Studio of Sanctuary* by connecting with other SoS organisations in the UK and Ireland.



Section 5: What people say about us

Far from a vanity exercise, these testimonials offer specific ways for PS² to stay accountable, and remind us of what people value in our work...

PS² is a Belfast city centre rare gem of a space. For emerging and early career artists in particular, the gallery and its staff have an enthusiastic open-door attitude that's so refreshing. Deeply creative in their thinking and practice, they centre equity and access right across their work in a way that feels like a genuine welcome to be part of the city's artistic conversation. **Ruth McCarthy, Director, Outburst Queer Arts Festival**

PS² is, in our opinion, one of the most important spaces in our local arts ecology: it is experimental and generative; willing to take risks, think about what artists really need, and provide the necessary infrastructure. We, in turn, all need spaces and teams like PS²'s to continue to do what they do best - be generous, community-oriented, playful and flexible. **Household**

PS² is a hugely important artist run organisation and is integral to the arts scene in Belfast. The organisation, run by UU graduates, provides much needed studio space for artists, amongst them UU graduates along with established artists and artists early in their careers. PS² have made many exhibiting and mentoring opportunities and awards available to UU graduates ensuring that there is a supportive environment for a new generation of artists starting their careers. **Aisling O'Beirn, Associate Lecturer, Belfast School of Art, Ulster University**

As an artist, PS² gave me the opportunity to go beyond what I have been doing. Whatever I showed them, they were very happy and gave advice. I'm now taking that further and doing more. It has opened my eyes and it's kind of - it's challenging - but it was a good experience. It was very positive with the public, and we received very positive comments. **Anushiya Sundaralingam, commissioned artist, WATER WORKS**

PS² has been incredible in supporting our collective practice from day one, and we are truly grateful for the help/space/time you invested in Soft Fiction Projects. GRMA~grazie mille! **Emily McFarland and Alessia Cargnelli, Soft Fiction Projects. PS² collective in residence, 2022 - present**

PS² has long been an essential advocate for artists and creative culture in Northern Ireland, dedicating years of programming and resources to supporting artistic development and public engagement. Their commitment to fostering new and emerging talent has had a significant and lasting impact on the local arts community. As a fellow arts organisation, Digital Arts Studios has greatly benefited from our strong working relationship with PS². Their support has been instrumental in helping us achieve our objectives of showcasing artists' work and providing valuable opportunities for creative experimentation. While both our organisations are dedicated to nurturing artists by offering spaces to develop new ideas, PS² is invaluable in providing artists with the opportunity to present their work to audiences. **Angela Halliday, Director, Digital Arts Studios**

PS² are a small - but incredible - team, their determination throughout this ambitious project was admirable, they grasped the concept and principles of what we wanted to achieve with Belfast 2024 really well, and it was especially great to see a visual arts organisation working in this way and outside of their business-as-usual/comfort zone which garnered incredible results on many levels. **Erika Clark Creative Programme manager [commissioner], Belfast City Council**

Section 6: Appendices

Clickable list of organisational lists, guides, plans and policies:

- PS² projects 2004 - 2025
- Accessibility and Inclusion Guide
- Diversity and Equality Guide
- Environmental Sustainability Guide
- Marketing and Audience Development Plan
- Safeguarding Policy
- Privacy and GDPR

Image credits:

Page 3: Peter Mutschler: *Ready?*, PeasPark, March 2021, c/o Peter Mutschler.

Page : Joey O’Gorman residency: *Peripheral Visions*, PS² Project Space, July 2024, c/o Catherine Devlin; Jennifer Mehigan: *Creamatorium*, PeasPark, September 2020, c/o Jennifer Mehigan; *WATER WORKS*, St George’s Market, July 2024, c/o Catherine Devlin.

Page 8: PS², North Street, 2016, c/o Mitch Conlon; PS², Royal Avenue, March 2019, c/o Peter Mutschler; PS², Rosemary Street, June 2025, c/o Jane Morrow.

Page 9: Freelands Artist Programme, cohorts three and four, Dublin, 2023, c/o unknown photographer

Page 11: a-n Assembly: *Who cares [about artist visibility, aspirations and support - or the lack thereof - in Northern Ireland]?*, QSS, October 2023, c/o Chad Alexander; Anushiya Sundaralingam: *Constructed Journeys*, Titanic Drawing Office, May 2024, c/o Davy Mahon; Syllabus Gathering, La Roche House, January 2025, c/o Jane Morrow; *Maker Mall*, CastleCourt Shopping Centre, June 2023, c/o Bronagh Lawson.

Page 12: *The Big Lunch*, PeasPark, June 2025, c/o Suzanne Thompson.

Page 14: image c/o Green Arts Group; PeasPark, March 2017, c/o Callie Persic; film still, Ami Clarke: *Meeting the Lough on Its Own Terms*; *WATER WORKS*, Vault Artist Studios, August 2024, c/o Catherine Devlin.

Page 16: film still, PS² roof, June 2025, c/o Marta Dyczkowska.

Page 18: Blueprint cohort 2, East Belfast Network Centre, January 2025, c/o Arts & Business NI and Aaron McCracken; studio, PS², 2022, c/o Hannah Casey Brogan; PS² and PS³, Rosemary Street, June 2025, c/o Jane Morrow; still from video interview with Peter Mutschler: *PS² cuts its hair and gets a job*, October 2024, c/o Paul Moore.

Page 19: a-n Assembly: *Who cares [about artist visibility, aspirations and support - or the lack thereof - in Northern Ireland]?*, QSS, October 2023, c/o Chad Alexander.

Page 21: Collective [Edinburgh] visit to PS², September 2023, c/o Jane Morrow; a-n Curator Bursary visit to Northern Ireland, QSS, May 2024, c/o Jan McCullough; studio representatives attend Committee for Communities briefing, Stormont, February 2025, c/o Emma Drury and Kristi McHenry; *ALINE* networking event, Vault Artist Studios, April 2025, c/o Laura Nelson/Rob Hilken.

Graphic assets by Duncan Ross, used throughout.



Paragon Studios
Project Space

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- Arts & Business NI Blueprint Investment Grant

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PRINCIPAL FUNDER



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