

**NEEDS ANALYSIS**

**REVENUE-FUNDED INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONAL THEATRE COMPANIES**

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## **1. Executive Summary**

### **1.1 Terms of Reference**

- The Needs Analysis will identify the individual outputs and outcomes of all revenue funded independent companies over two financial years
- It will identify total income from specific funding bodies, sponsorship, fees, box office, other
- It will investigate and report the expressed needs of the sector individually and corporately
- A series of recommendations will be drawn up to address needs. The recommendations are not singly for the Arts Council as it is envisaged that if agreed by Council, the document will be in the public domain.

### **1.2 Introduction**

The companies that form the subject of this review are: Aisling Ghear, Belfast Theatre Company, Big Telly Theatre Company, Centre Stage, Dubbeljoint Productions, Kabosh Productions, Prime Cut Productions, Replay Productions, Ridiculusmus, Tinderbox Theatre Company. All the companies are based in Belfast with the exception of Big Telly, which is based in Portstewart, and each has demonstrated a commitment to touring in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In the current year the companies collectively account for £467,500 of voted funds/revenue, which is 25.94% of the drama and dance budget, and 5.93% of the Arts Council's overall budget (excluding Lottery). The drama and dance budget is 22.86% of the Arts Council's overall budget.

This group of companies forms one vital component of Northern Ireland's theatre sector. Other crucial elements in the overall mix would include the producing theatres, receiving venues, festivals promoting local and visiting theatre, visiting companies, new companies, the amateur theatre movement, community theatre, youth drama, accredited drama training at higher education level, the individual practitioners or talent base of actors, designers, directors, composers, technicians, and administrators, and of course theatre audiences – existing and potential. It is difficult for any element of the sector to function in isolation from the other component parts. Weaknesses and gaps in particular areas can impact on the overall health of theatre in Northern Ireland and can limit effect in terms of diversity and audience development. Roles and responsibilities of different players can be affected in both a positive and negative way. There are particular challenges and limitations in examining one element of the sector in isolation.

### **1.3 The Framework – Related Research**

To date there has been no holistic research commissioned which focuses specifically on the development of the theatre sector in the north. There is, however, a wide range of research that is relevant to different aspects of the sector's growth and development. The publications most relevant to the development of the independent theatre sector are: '*The Creative Imperative*' which explores mechanisms for supporting the individual artists; the '*Touring Theatre Review*', which addresses the position of touring theatre in Northern Ireland; the '*Southwood Review of Performing Arts Spaces and Venues*', a briefing paper examining audiences, product, funding, and facilities in relation to the performing arts in Belfast; and the '*Creative Industries Research*', an ongoing research project which will influence the

development of policy and strategy with regard to the development of the creative industries in Northern Ireland.

There has been sectoral research carried out recently in England, with the recently published *'National Policy for Theatre in England'*, and in Scotland which has conducted a feasibility study into the establishment of a national theatre organisation for Scotland. In 1995 the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon commissioned a major research project *'Views of Theatre in Ireland'*.

#### **1.4 The Framework – Strategic Context**

The Arts Council and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) have both recently published new strategy documents. The Arts Council's key priorities are: increasing opportunities for creative participation in the arts; developing new audiences for the arts; extending opportunities for artists to develop their work and practice; strengthening the capacity of arts organisations to delivery quality experiences of the arts. The Northern Ireland Assembly is committed to the concept of *'Unlocking Creativity'* which places particular emphasis on the development of creative education and the creative industries as fundamental to the knowledge-based economy of Northern Ireland. DCAL's strategic plan, launched in 2000, has five main strategic goals: to increase participation in culture, arts and leisure through enhancing access to, and the quality of, facilities and services; to promote and celebrate cultural diversity and individual creativity; to contribute to a positive image of Northern Ireland at home and abroad; to preserve and make available our cultural and information resources, and make them available to the widest possible audience; to lever resources to maximise positive social and economic impact.

The strategies of both the Arts Council and DCAL, through the Northern Ireland Assembly, are underpinned by a commitment to Targeting Social Need: New TSN. The Good Friday Agreement commits Government to sharpening its focus on addressing disadvantage and New TSN Action Plans have been devised by the various Departments and related agencies to ensure that efforts and resources are directed more effectively on areas, groups and individuals in greatest need, irrespective of community background. Social need is linked to the concept of social exclusion which is defined as resulting from the impact on individuals or areas of a combination of problems, such as unemployment, lack of skills, low incomes, poor housing, ill health, crime and family problems, the combined effect of which is to put them at risk of being excluded from what would generally be considered as normal life.

The Arts Council, The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and Belfast City Council are all represented on the Board of 'Imagine Belfast', the organisation established to develop Belfast's bid for European Capital of Culture 2008. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has indicated that the successful city will need to have clearly defined objectives and the professional mechanisms to deliver them. It will require local commitment to and participation in the event and clear potential to promote diverse and exciting cultural opportunities to the widest range of people. The DCMS seeks evidence of imagination, innovation and creativity in both planning and delivery of the year-long event, including ways in which to involve other European countries and to communicate the event on an international platform. Applicants are required to demonstrate how the Award will be used to develop and add to cultural assets, whether building something new on a traditional base, or creating something completely new.

## **1.5 Current Funding Environment**

The main sources of income for the independent professional theatre sector are the Arts Council (revenue and Lottery funds), Belfast City Council, ticket sales and performance fees. Companies have also accessed a wide range of trust funds and community-related grant sources on a project basis. A small number have had success in acquiring commercial sponsorship on a regular basis.

The Arts Council's revenue allocations to the companies range from £10,000 to £109,500. In the current year the companies collectively account for £467,500, which is 25.94% of the drama and dance budget, and 5.93% of the Arts Council's overall budget (excluding Lottery). The drama and dance budget is 22.86% of the Arts Council's overall budget. Three companies received increases in the current financial year. The others have mainly been on standstill funding for a number of years.

The companies are increasingly taking advantage of Lottery funding opportunities and have received support from the New Work, Capital, Access, and Audience Development programmes. In 1999/2000 the revenue-funded companies received a total of £248,403 from Lottery (including an allocation over 3 years to Replay) and in 2000/01 the sector accounted for £163,950 of Lottery funds. In first three months of the current financial year Lottery had already allocated £144,753 between two companies. Lottery funds require organisations to demonstrate 'additionality' and cannot therefore be used to support core costs.

In the current financial year Belfast City Council contributed £73,918 to the independent professional theatre sector through its Annual Funding for the Arts measure – this represents 7.39% of Belfast City Council's current arts budget of £1,000,000. However, Belfast City Council has agreed in principle to reduce its Annual Funding budget for 2002/03 to £600,000 (from c.£700,000).

Additional resources of over £3,900,000 were introduced by Government into the arts and cultural sector in the current financial year. These resources were earmarked for specific initiatives and schemes including community arts development, the European Capital of Culture bid and Creative Industries research and development. The recent focus of additional resources demonstrates Government's commitment to New TSN objectives, which includes a focus on addressing the problems of unemployment and employability through training, job placements and other aspects of social economy provision and education for those most at risk of becoming the next generation of unemployed.

Voted funds to the independent professional theatre sector have technically increased by £202,500 since 1999/2000. However, this increase has not had the impact that it might have had as most of the additional resources were used to replace the Cultural Traditions funding from which Big Telly and Replay had previously been supported and was not new money as such. The sector has therefore in reality had an increase of £64,000 of additional revenue money since 1999/00. The companies exist in a climate of broadly standstill revenue funding and increased specialised project funds.

## **1.6 The Sector – Key Characteristics and Outputs**

The companies that form the subject of this review and their revenue allocations in 2001/02 are: Aisling Ghear (£50,000), Belfast Theatre Company (£10,000), Big Telly Theatre Company (£55,500), Centre Stage (£20,000), Dubbeljoint Productions (£42,500), Kabosh (£40,000), Prime Cut Productions (£60,000), Replay Productions (£109,500), Ridiculusmus

(£10,000), Tinderbox Theatre Company (£70,000). All the companies are based in Belfast with the exception of Big Telly, which is based in Portstewart, and each has demonstrated a commitment to touring in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Three companies have toured outside Ireland in the last two three years.

In the current year the companies collectively account for £467,500 which is 25.94% of the drama and dance budget, and 5.93% of the Arts Council's overall budget (excluding Lottery). The drama and dance budget is 22.86% of the Arts Council's overall budget.

In 1999/2000 the Arts Council contributed £657,723 to the ten companies in revenue, Lottery and North/South touring funds – statistics from 8 of the companies show a total turnover of £911,140. In 2000/2001 the Arts Council contributed £638,064 across the ten companies in revenue, Lottery and North/South touring – statistics from 8 of the companies show a total turnover of £1,120,263. Eight of the companies collectively raised income of £¾ Million over 2 years in addition to Arts Council funds.

The sector is a significant provider of employment opportunities for individual artists – primarily actors, directors, designers, stage management and technicians. Collectively they provide around 2,000 employment weeks for theatre practitioners each year. This is the equivalent of 40 full-time jobs, including core personnel.

The companies engaged with total audiences (including active participants) of around 80,000 each year.

In terms of identity, most of the companies have a distinct role at an artistic level: Tinderbox and DubbelJoint concentrate on the development of new writing by Irish writers; Prime Cut on the production of contemporary texts by national and international writers; Centre Stage on the production of classic Ulster plays (although since the closure of the Arts Theatre it has not had sufficient funds to produce large scale work); Kabosh and Big Telly on the development of physical and visual theatre; Ridiculusmus specialises in the production of comic theatre. Aisling Ghear, DubbelJoint and Replay all have distinct target markets - Aisling Ghear produces for the Irish language community, DubbelJoint concentrates its work in west Belfast, and Replay specialises in theatre-in-education and work with young people with special needs. Increasingly more companies are producing new writing due in part to the funding from Lottery's New Works scheme. With the exception of Replay, the companies have virtually no information with regard to their audience profile, so it is not possible to gauge the extent to which there might be overlap in audiences.

In terms of audience development, many of the companies provide workshops and training in theatre skills with the assistance of Lottery funding: Aisling Ghear has established a three-year youth drama programme; Replay is completing a three-year programme of work for young people with special needs; Prime Cut has appointed an Audience Development Manager and is piloting various test drive schemes; Tinderbox implements a programme of workshops for young people linked to at least one of its main productions each year; DubbelJoint plays in community centres in areas where there is little access to theatre and has been involved in training amateur practitioners; Kabosh has an ongoing programme of work with students and has organised a number of theatre and circus skills training events; Big Telly had the highest annual figure in 2000/01 for active participation accounting for 4,716 out of a total of 8,546 beneficiaries, through an extensive, regional workshop programme throughout the year.

All the companies, with the exception of DubbelJoint, play primarily small-scale auditoriums (less than 300 seats) and all tour to some degree both in Northern Ireland and the

Republic of Ireland. All the companies have benefited from the North/South Touring Scheme, enabling them to extend their touring cross border. Touring within Northern Ireland is limited as there are a relatively small number of purpose-built theatre spaces in Northern Ireland due to population size, and most of these venues are only able to sustain one performance of productions by the independent theatre sector (unless the work is a 'recognisable' classic).

The Arts Council's revenue allocations to the sector range from £10,000 to £109,500 and outputs vary accordingly. In 1999/2000, the average cost of maintaining an office space with related administrative overheads for full-time operation (excluding core staff costs) was £12,377. Four of the companies (Belfast Theatre Company, Centre Stage, DubbelJoint, Ridiculusmus) do not currently have a full-time paid post. Companies on £55,500 and over manage to maintain at least two full-time post equivalents. Kabosh (£40,000) has one full-time post at minimum wage level (£14,000) and a part-time Artistic Director. Tinderbox currently has three personnel working full-time in the office (although the third post of Administrative Assistant cannot be funded through revenue and is pieced together through a series of short-term contracts). Prime Cut has recently acquired a third full-time fixed term post courtesy of Lottery funding for audience development. Replay sustains two full-time and one part-time posts. Paid administrative and Artistic Director posts range in salary from £14,000 - £20,000. Core staffing levels have not risen in any of the companies, with the exception of Prime Cut for the reasons detailed above.

With regard to corporate activity, the main forum for debate, discussion, information exchange and training is the Theatre Producers Group, established in 1996. Its membership includes producing companies and venues. There is also the recently established Independent Professional Theatre Lobby which represents 'a cross-section of professionals living and working in Northern Ireland who have a strong commitment to the survival of high quality indigenous Professional Theatre'. Its membership includes interested individuals and some of the revenue-funded professional theatre companies. There is significant overlap in the views expressed by both organisations to the key funding agencies with regard to urgent matters of concern.

## **1.7 Expressed Needs**

The Expressed Needs, individually and corporately, of the Arts Council's revenue-funded Independent Professional Theatre Companies are:

### **1.7.1 FUNDING**

- **Increased revenue funding** to consolidate core operations and contribute to production costs with the aim of increasing productivity, creative development, and allowing for more flexible programming.
- **Introduction of multi-annual funding** to facilitate longer-term planning.
- **More justification and transparency with regard to revenue funding allocations** to create a better understanding of how resource levels match client achievements within a strategic context.
- **Improvements to Lottery procedures** to make Lottery funding more flexible, less bureaucratic, and therefore more sympathetic to and effective in addressing the real needs of arts organisations.
- **Representation** of the professional theatre sector at Council level in the Arts Council.

### **1.7.2 AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT**

- **Access to more and better information about existing and potential audiences** so that audience development can be more effectively achieved and monitored.
- **More regular presentation of product** to facilitate audience development and to create more employment opportunities for individual artists.
- **An overarching strategy for the development of audiences for live theatre** to ensure that the sector and key agencies are working in partnership towards shared goals.
- **Resources to support touring across the border** to allow companies to maximise the value of original investment in productions and extend their audience base.
- **Resources to tour work out of Ireland** to allow companies to showcase to a wider audience, and raise the national and international profile of Northern Ireland through cultural export.

### **1.7.3 ARTISTIC**

- **Options to diversify with regard to programmes of work** allowing the option of presenting balanced programmes where appropriate.

### **1.7.4 FACILITIES**

- **A new mid-scale venue in Belfast** with an adequate programming budget which can provide support for the work of the independent sector.
- **A greater sense of confidence in venue managers/programmers** with regard to regional touring in particular.

### **1.7.5 PERSONNEL**

- **More experienced stage management and technical stage management.**
- **Resources to provide training opportunities and apprenticeships** to allow companies to offer skills development at entry level to the industry.
- **Improvements in the terms and conditions for those working in the sector**, both full-time and contractual staff, to ensure that individual artists do not continue to personally subsidise the arts in Northern Ireland.

## **1.8 Observations and Analysis**

Collectively, the independent revenue funded companies have significant value with regard to furthering the strategic objectives of the Arts Council. They provide more than half of Northern Ireland's indigenous drama, and collectively cater to total audiences of around 70,000 each year. They provide product for regional venues. They have an ability to develop new audiences for the arts and have already demonstrated a commitment to increased provision of workshops and training. They are a major provider of employment opportunities for individual artists, and a training ground for the creative development of practitioners many of whom go on to make a significant contribution to the creative industries. Recent successes within the creative industries specifically include Marie Jones (National and International award-winning playwright), Ian McElhinney (Director and Film/TV Actor), Stephen Wright (Head of Development, BBC NI Drama Department), Tim Loane (Writer and Director for film and television) and Gary Mitchell (writer for stage and screen), all of whom gained entry to their profession through the small scale theatre sector.

Three of the key points emerging from the Southwood Review of Performing Arts Venues and Spaces in Belfast (commissioned by the Arts Council and Belfast City Council in 1996) are still unresolved and continue to affect the development of the independent theatre sector:

- The local professional production base – especially in the field of dance and drama – remains quite slender. The range of international, UK and Irish productions is fairly limited except during the Belfast Festival
- The City’s key performance venues suffer considerable physical constraints that feed directly back into their financial performance. Several venues are under-resourced both in terms of programming and the staffing resources to carry through their aspirations
- There is no shared view of responsibilities between the key funders about who is responsible for funding what and against what set of policy expectations...There is also a lack of focus for cultural planning within the City and the absence of an integrated cultural strategy both within the City Council and with its external partners.

Although voted funds to the independent professional theatre sector have technically increased by £202,500 since 1999/2000 this has not had the impact that it might have had as most of the additional resources were used to replace the Cultural Traditions funding from which Big Telly and Replay had previously been supported and were not new money as such. The sector has therefore in reality had an increase of £64,000 of additional revenue money since 1999/00. The increasingly schematic nature of the local funding environment is not addressing the most urgent needs of the independent theatre sector whose representatives are feeling under-valued and disillusioned. Continued standstill funding will risk a further decline in productivity within the sector with consequent reductions in the number of participative, audience and employment opportunities. The sector is unable to plan adequately in advance due to the short term nature of current funding sources, and is unclear as to the justification for current revenue levels beyond historical precedent.

Despite the advent of Lottery funding, the productivity of the independent professional theatre has not increased significantly. Lottery funding has been counterbalanced for most companies by increased operational costs in the face of broadly standstill revenue funding. Without Lottery funding there would have been a reduction in productivity within the sector and in its scale of operation. Lottery funding has in general enabled productivity levels to stay the same, it has not solved the problems with regard to revenue funding. Companies in Northern Ireland are more dependent on Lottery funding for their core business than their counterparts in Scotland or the Republic of Ireland. Lottery New Work funding has led more companies down the route of producing new writing as they can no longer afford to produce shows from core funds.

Companies have a wide range of major issues with regard to the application and monitoring procedures for Lottery along with aspects of the eligibility criteria. The requirements of Lottery bureaucracy are placing significant increased demands on small numbers of core staff and are contributing to administrative ‘burn-out’ resulting in a relatively high turnover of staff in key jobs. The schematic nature of the distribution is not conducive to advance planning and increased productivity.

In Northern Ireland there has been a decrease in ‘mainstream’ theatre provision and touring, due in part to difficulties at the Lyric and the lack of a mid-scale receiving venue in Belfast. As a result, the small-scale independent sector is coming under increasing pressure from agencies and venues to fulfil the role of ‘mainstream’ or ‘mid scale’ product provider. Not all the companies are keen to take on this role in view of the small-scale sector’s culture of

risk and innovation. There remains an imbalance between the built theatre infrastructure in the regions and the sources of artistic product with which to develop audiences to fill the spaces.

There is an urgent need for more data and profiling on audiences. Most companies have only observational evidence with regard to audiences and more information is vital if development is to be carried out strategically. In general the sector does not demonstrate significant audience growth in recent years, although there are now resources available through Lottery to address this area. This issue is not unique to the independent professional theatre sector. All the companies have seen both increases and decreases in their audiences over the last few years, depending on their programmes of activity. All have experienced critical successes and failures. Risk-taking and experimentation are seen as vital attributes of the small-scale theatre sector, a seedbed for the development of talent. There is often a price to pay at box office, particularly in Northern Ireland where audiences appear to be more conservative and where we have a lower than UK average attendance at performing arts events. Audience numbers are obviously not the only measure of success within the arts sector and are not always an indication of artistic quality, but companies must continue to strive to find ways to support Government agendas with regard to New TSN and tackling social exclusion, or to more clearly demonstrate actual achievements.

Poor venue provision in Belfast has impacted on audience numbers with an increasing number of companies playing of necessity in low capacity, site specific venues. Companies are concerned about a perceived lack of strategic direction and partnership with regard to the development of the theatre infrastructure in Belfast. Companies are concerned that they will be competing with new regional theatre venues for any additional revenue.

There are few positive signs with regard to the emergence of new, sustainable professional theatre companies in Northern Ireland. This is an issue of concern in relation to the development of local theatre, and is in part the result of the current funding environment. With so little flexibility in recent years within the Arts Council's revenue budget, and the recent demise of Arts Council project funding, there are limited routes by which young companies can access funds to support their early stages of development and build a track record of delivery. Lottery 'Awards for All' offers one potential source, but prioritises organisations with a turnover of less than £15,000.

Revenue companies without a full-time administrator are less successful in diversifying their funding base. They attempt to produce beyond their financial means, and this has an impact on their ability to comply with union terms and conditions for the employment of contractual staff. Wages for core and contractual staff remain low. The pool of professionals based in Northern Ireland is dwindling as employment opportunities decrease.

There is an urgent requirement for an overarching strategy for the development of theatre and theatre audiences, and it is a matter of concern that the development of artform is secondary to the pursuit of broad cross-cutting themes.

## **1.9 Options and Recommendations**

A summary of key recommendations with regard to the way forward would be:

- A strategy for theatre in Northern Ireland.
- Revisiting of the key issues and recommendations in the Southwood Review of Performing Arts Venues and Spaces.
- Additional revenue funding for the professional theatre sector.

- Promotion and encouragement of good practice with regard to terms and conditions of employment within the sector.
- Ease of access to Lottery funding.
- A template for collation of data on theatre production outputs.
- More detail linked to announcement of specific funding allocations.
- A united, broad-based theatre lobby.
- Clarification of the situation and timescale with regard to the introduction of multi-annual funding.
- Resources and strategy for improvements to electronic ticketing facilities to ensure better data capture on audiences.
- An audience baseline for theatre in Northern Ireland.
- A strategic discussion with the sector on the development of capital provision for theatre.
- Resources and strategy for touring work outside Northern Ireland.
- Subsidy for cross-border touring.
- Trainee bursaries.

## **2. The Framework - Related Research**

Until recently there had been relatively little written about the development of the theatre sector in the north in the last thirty years. This deficiency was first addressed with the publication of Ophelia Byrne's *'Theatre in Ulster from the Eighteenth Century'* and the *'State of Play'* catalogue as part of the work of the performing arts archive at the Linenhall Library, and the recently launched *'Stepping Stones'* edited by Mark Carruthers and Stephen Douds. Publications focusing on theatre in the north are also anticipated from Sam McCready, and from Dr Imelda Foley *'The Girls in the Big Picture'*.

To date there has been no holistic research commissioned regarding the development of the theatre sector in the north. There have, however, been a number of pieces of research carried out in recent years which directly address one particular aspect of the theatre sector, or include related issues within a broader arts remit. These include:

### **2.1 Southwood Review of Performing Arts Venues and Spaces in Belfast**

In 1996 Belfast City Council, in partnership with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, commissioned a Review of Performing Arts Venues and Spaces throughout the City. The study was born out of a concern by the two commissioning bodies that the non-strategic development of the infrastructure could lead to an inability to provide required levels of revenue funding in the future. The report took the form of a briefing paper looking at existing and potential audiences for performance in Belfast, what 'product' is currently being performed and how it is funded, the current position of the venues in terms of facilities and box office, and the sources of financial support for existing venues.

Several key points emerged from the research, including:

- Growth in audiences likely to plateau after the opening of the Waterfront Hall. However, opportunities would seem to exist, based on market research, for further ballet and opera, whilst the market for classical music is in danger of saturation.
- The local professional production base - especially in the field of dance and drama - remains quite slender. The range of international, UK and Irish productions is fairly limited except during the Belfast Festival.
- The City's key performance venues suffer considerable physical constraints that feed directly back into their financial performance. Several venues are under-resourced both in terms of programming and the staffing resources to carry through their aspirations.
- There is no shared view of responsibilities between the key funders about who is responsible for funding what and against what set of policy expectations. There is an absence of an overall vision for the future of Belfast and this causes difficulties for the strategic development of its cultural infrastructure. There is also a lack of a focus for cultural planning within the City and the absence of an integrated cultural strategy both within the City Council and with its external partners.
- The need to move from 'islands of local communities' to a city for all

Eight key recommendations were identified in the report for further action including the establishment of formal mechanisms between the key funding agencies to ensure a strategic approach in the support of the arts in Belfast, upgrading of the Lyric's facilities, refurbishment of the Ulster Hall and Group Theatre, and the development of a major, city centre arts centre for Belfast.

## **2.2 Touring Theatre Review**

A position paper prepared by the Performing Arts Department of the Arts Council and independent consultant Jan Branch, was published in November 1998. This report grew out of unease amongst regional venues and touring companies about the position of touring theatre in Northern Ireland, and aimed to focus attention on this aspect and gather opinion for concerned parties. It incorporated a statistical analysis based on questionnaire results, and a series of consultative outcomes and recommendations. One of the most hotly debated issues arising was in relation to anomalies between the perceived needs of regional venues and their audiences and the programming preferences of the independent theatre companies. Many of the issues raised in this report continue to be relevant and unresolved, as evidenced in recent debate at the 2001 Theatre Exchange event.

## **2.3 The Creative Imperative - Individual Artist**

A report written by Anthony Everitt and commissioned by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon to help them ascertain the most appropriate model and mechanisms for supporting the individual artist. This was the second stage of a two part research project which commenced with a survey of individual artists by Annabel Jackson. According to the survey, subsidy has made little impact on the economic status of artists in Ireland, and many live on the edge of poverty. Recommendations in the report include that the Arts Councils should identify as a core objective a measurable improvement in the economic status of individual artists, and that they should agree long-term strategies for the improvement and enlargement of the performing arts infrastructure from which many individual artists benefit in terms of showcasing and employment.

## **2.4 Auditoria**

A key piece of research which will soon be available and which will influence strategy for touring programmes in the future is the Auditoria Report. Auditoria is a major review of the performing Arts in Ireland undertaken by An Chomhairle Ealaíon in association with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. It aims to fulfil a number of objectives:

- Prepare a comprehensive data base for the physical infrastructure in Ireland
- Provide both Arts Councils with a means of relating their infrastructural support programmes to their expenditure on performing arts productions
- Provide advice to the Arts Council about the appropriate levels and structures for assistance to the newly developed Cultural Development Incentive Scheme venues
- Provide a means for the Arts Councils to offer advice to their parent Departments about capital investment for the arts.

The report is currently in draft but the finalised report should be available by the end of the year 2001.

## **2.5 Creative Industries Research**

An ongoing 18-month research and development programme headed by Paul Jeffcut of Queen's University and funded by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, which aims to assess the current status, capabilities and potential of the creative industries in Northern Ireland to make a key contribution to economic growth and social regeneration. The creative industries are detailed as – craft, design, software, visual art, architecture, performing arts, multi media and games, advertising, broadcast, publishing, fashion, music, film. The limited information

currently available on the website for this creative industries research with regard to the Performing Arts does emphasise the importance of indigenous talent to the full exploitations of the sector.

## **2.6 Inquiry into Cultural Tourism and the Arts**

The Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure is currently carrying out an inquiry looking at the potential for Northern Ireland's culture, heritage and arts to be incorporated into a cultural tourism product that can be actively promoted by the tourist industry. It has received written submissions and taken oral evidence from a wide range of organisations active in the cultural sector, and the Committee has also undertaken a number of study visits to Boston, Paris and Barcelona to engage with cultural tourism professionals in those cities. The terms of reference for the inquiry are:

- To determine the status of the existing relationship between the cultural and tourism sectors in Northern Ireland
- To identify areas within aspects of the arts that have the potential to be incorporated into a cultural tourism product that can be actively promoted by the tourist industry
- To identify the support required by cultural activities, including languages, to enable that heritage to be maintained and enhanced
- To report to the Assembly making recommendations to the Department and/or others on actions that would strengthen the link between culture and tourism

## **2.7 The Cultural Sector: A Development Opportunity for Tourism in Northern Ireland (1998)**

This study encompassed the implementation of an audit of existing urban and rural arts-based tourism activities; a definition of potential markets for cultural sector tourism development; the preparation of a SWOT analysis; the provision of clear recommendations on the way forward in developing a cultural tourism product; the development of an outline marketing plan for the sector. With regard to the performing arts, the author, John Edmond reported that 'very few tourists take in a show or a concert as part of their visit.' This was attributed in part to marketing related issues, theatre closure during the peak tourist season, and a lack of new or unique productions or exhibitions which could be classified as a 'must-see' for the visitor. Looking specifically at drama, the report concluded that there would appear to be little to offer the visitor audience without the development of suitable programming which in itself would require specific subsidies. 'Northern Ireland is not gifted with large scale, high quality professional drama companies regularly performing new work with strong production values in quality venues. There is a lack of funding within the system to support them.'

## **2.8 A Review of the Craft Sector in Northern Ireland (2000)**

Carried out by Blueprint consultancy, this review included an audit of current activity, and a strategic framework and Action Plan for future development.

## **2.9 Olsberg Review (2001)**

A review commissioned by the Department of Trade and Industry into the Film and Television sector in Northern Ireland, including an evaluation of the Northern Ireland Film Commission.

## **2.10 Community Arts Review (ongoing)**

A major review commissioned by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, currently being carried out by Stratagem.

**Other research undertaken in the UK and Ireland in relation to theatre includes:**

## **2.11 Views of Theatre in Ireland (1995)**

A research project conducted at the Graduate School of Business, University College Dublin in association with Coopers and Lybrand Corporate Finance. The purpose of the report was to prepare the groundwork for the Theatre Review by providing a research-based, detailed overview of the theatre sector in the Republic of Ireland. The key objectives were to achieve a detailed description of the sector, to identify key strategic issues in relation to the future development of theatre in Ireland, and to reanalyse audience data nationally. The report looked at the structure of the sector including a financial and employment overview, the resource base including training, human resources and hidden subsidy, funding including Arts Council policy and practice and funding priorities, repertoire, touring, the audience for theatre, the National Theatre Society, drama and young people, drama and communities, and training.

## **2.12 National Policy for Theatre in England (July 2000)**

This policy was developed by the Arts Council and informed by research from the Boyden Report. It aims to transform and sustain theatre in England ensuring that a wide range of audiences has access to bold, relevant and exciting work. The Policy is intended to embrace the theatre sector as a whole and involve a wide range of venues and sources of production, and will be supported by the further development of the Arts Council's National Touring Policy.

'The National Policy for Theatre in England is written at a time when our theatre is still regarded by many as the best in the world, and yet this is an art form in crisis. The Boyden Report and the Arts Council's own document 'The Next Stage' showed that theatre has been inadequately funded since the mid-80s. The result has been a concentration of resources on buildings and institutions rather than people and art. Many organisations have become inward looking and territorial and there has been a drain on talent and resources resulting in an environment in which it is much harder for artists and managers to take creative risks. Large parts of our theatre have been caught in a downward spiral with less exceptional work being produced. Not surprisingly audiences for some kinds of theatre are falling. In many parts of the country theatre has failed to engage with a broad audience. It has certainly failed to engage adequately with young people and with multi-cultural Britain.'

In response to the issues raised, the Arts Council of England sees its role as being to set national objectives, to maintain an overview of national provision, to act as an advocate and to argue the national case for the funds necessary to achieve those objectives. It intends to lead the process of implementing the Policy and has set out a process and timetable accordingly. The eight priorities within the document are:

- A better range of high quality work
- Attract more people
- Develop new ways of working
- Education
- Address diversity and inclusion
- Develop the artists and creative managers of the future

- An international reputation
- Regional distinctiveness

Substantial new investment of £25million has been unlocked from Government by the Arts Council of England specifically for the implementation of the policy over several years. The extra funds increases the current ACE theatre budget of £40million to £70million by 2003/04 reflecting growth of 72 per cent. Many organisations will receive increases above 30 percent and some will receive four or five times more than their current grant. Production theatre and touring companies will be the major beneficiaries.

### **2.13 Scottish National Theatre**

Following the launch of Scotland's National Cultural strategy in August, the Scottish Executive invited the Scottish Arts Council to conduct a detailed feasibility study into the establishment of a national theatre organisation for Scotland. A working group was established to undertake the project. The Scottish Minister for Environment, Sport and Culture identified specific resources of £0.5m in 2002/03 and £1.5m in 2003/04 that would be made available to support the establishment of the national theatre subject to the identification of a practicable proposal. The final report describes key activities of the Scottish National Theatre as commissioning touring productions from building-based or touring companies and organising tours; initiating new collaborations; providing productions of international quality; encouraging international collaboration in every area of Scottish theatre; initiating area or venue-based community theatre projects; and testing and developing creative ideas in workshops and labs. It concludes that **'A Scottish National Theatre can play a major role in enhancing and energising the Scottish Theatre scene, and in winning a higher profile for the achievements of Scottish Theatre. However, it cannot by itself solve the problems of under-investment in Scotland's theatre infrastructure.'**

### **2.14 London Arts' Theatre Plan 2001 – 2004**

Increasing the support available to independent companies and artists is a central part of London Arts' Theatre Plan 2001-2004 with over a third of new funds in 2002/3 prioritised for the sector. £1.3million new funds will be invested through a range of new fixed-term funding agreements for established and emerging companies, fixed-term grants to support venue programming and larger, more flexible project grants.

### **3. The Framework - Strategic Context**

#### **3.1 Arts Council of Northern Ireland**

The Arts Council commissioned a review of its five year plan (1995-2000) which resulted in Prof. Anthony Everitt and Annabel Jackson's report 'Opening up the Arts' published in May 2000. Thereafter Council officers worked with a number of consultants to develop a new arts strategy for the organisation. It launched a 5-year plan in June 2001 following an extensive consultation period. The four key priorities outlined within the plan were to:

- Increase opportunities for creative participation in the arts
- Develop new audiences for the arts
- Extend opportunities for artists to develop their work and practice
- Strengthen the capacity of arts organisations to deliver quality experiences of the arts

The document promises a further stage of the planning process at which the ACNI will set out targets and performance measures in greater detail over a three-year period (Corporate Plan). It is also proposed that an Operational Plan will be produced annually, proposing levels of service to be achieved.

There is a stated intention within the Plan to develop a language arts policy for Irish, Ulster Scots and ethnic minority languages

#### **3.2 Northern Ireland Assembly**

##### **3.2.1 Programme for Government**

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to the creativity agenda through 'providing co-ordinated community-based programmes for maximising individual creativity' and focusing on 'promoting entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity'.

##### **3.2.2 Unlocking Creativity**

A consultative document adopted and launched in November 2000 by four government departments – the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure; Department of Education; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; and the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment. Unlocking Creativity underpinned the recognition in the Programme for Government of the significance of creativity as a cross-cutting issue and illustrated how individual creativity could be harnessed in the context of Northern Ireland's existing educational, commercial and cultural communities. It placed particular emphasis on the development of creative education and the creative industries as fundamental to the knowledge-based economy of Northern Ireland.

##### **3.2.3 Unlocking Creativity – Making it Happen**

This follow-up to the original '*Unlocking Creativity*', takes account of the responses and the consultation process, and presenting the policy and development context and Action Agenda. The stated mission – to develop the capacities of all our people for creativity and innovation, and so promote and sustain the social, cultural and economic well-being of Northern Ireland. Responsibility for the co-ordination of operational priorities and

interdepartmental co-operation, for managing existing strategic initiatives and developing new joint proposals is with the Creativity Action group, an interdepartmental body with representation from DCAL, DE, DETI, DEL as well as agencies such as ACNI, NIFC and a variety of practitioners.

Milestones for the end of 2001 include identification of activity contributing to each objective, development of a comprehensive plan for innovative actions supporting Unlocking Creativity and initial implementation of high priority issues, launch of the Creativity Seed Fund and identification of other potential funds, production of performance indicators for activities established under Unlocking Creativity.

### **3.2.4 Face to Face: A Vision for Arts and Culture in Northern Ireland (2001)**

This document was produced by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure following its Future Search process which brought together representatives of a wide range of agencies and organisations from the cultural sector. The eight core themes in the document are: Creativity in Education; Creative Industries; Cultural Diversity; DCAL's strategy; Infrastructure; Support for the Individual Artist; Universal Accessibility; International Issues.

### **3.3 Local Authority**

Belfast City Council is singled out amongst local authorities for mention in the context of this report because of its significant role as a funder of independent professional theatre in the city. Following the development and implementation of a series of arts strategies between 1995 and 2001, Belfast City Council currently supports the arts within the strategic objectives of its Renaissance Strategy devised by the Development Department in which the newly titled Arts and Culture Unit is housed as part of the Economic Initiatives section. The two main mechanisms of support are its Arts Grant Scheme and the Annual Funding for the Arts initiative.

### **3.4 Imagine Belfast 2008**

In October 2001 Imagine Belfast launched Belfast's bid for European Capital of Culture status in 2008. Imagine Belfast is an independent company created to devise the bid, and is managed by a Board of Directors drawn from Belfast City Council, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the business community and various cultural and sporting agencies. The arts representative on the Board is David Fisk of the Ulster Orchestra. The challenge is to win the UK's designated year for European Capital of Culture in 2008. The bid must be submitted by March 2002 after which a shortlist of cities will have a further year to flesh out their bids before the final decision is made by the European Commission in March 2003.

To date Imagine Belfast has received significant funding from DCAL and BCC towards preparation of the bid. A number of 'key demonstration projects' are planned to take place from October 2001 – March 2002. Imagine Belfast states that the bid 'will cover four core areas: culture and arts; design and environment; community and society; media and entertainment. All proposals will be challenging, pioneering and reflect the passion, paradoxes and creative tensions that will give the Belfast bid a unique and honest edge. The bid will present a cultural programme that builds up to a spectacular year in 2008 and leave a positive lasting legacy. The cultural programme will be routed locally with a European and International outlook.'

Key requirements of the Selection Criteria issued by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport for the successful city include:

- Clearly defined objectives for a year long programme, and the ability to deliver them
- The ability to create an event of excellence with maximum impact for all its residents and visitors
- A programme of events which will increase awareness of and participation in cultural opportunities, particular amongst the young and within community groups, and contribute to the promotion of social inclusion
- A programme of events which presents opportunities for learning and development to individuals and communities
- The ability to ensure co-ordination and full partnership between stakeholders and investors
- The ability to display the City's Cultural wealth within a European context and encourage other European states' participation
- The infrastructure to deliver the above or the ability to create it
- The financial resources to deliver the above, or a well developed plan to secure these
- A well developed tourism strategy for the year, and the infrastructure to support it
- A well developed media strategy which will promote the Capital of Culture at home and abroad
- A programme of events which is sustainable both financially and in terms of projected attendance figures, and the ability to translate this into long lasting benefits, both cultural and economic

## **4. Current Funding Environment**

### **4.1 Arts Council of Northern Ireland**

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland is the primary source of support for the independent professional theatre sector. The Arts Council's budget over the last ??? The main recipients of significant percentage increases at the last round of revenue funding decisions by the Arts Council for 2001/02 were community-based organisations. The professional independent theatre companies which received increases were Aisling Ghear (from £15,000 project funding to £50,000 revenue), Kabosh (revenue increase of £5,000), and Replay (revenue increase of £2,000). The performing arts department sought to free up funds within its allocation and implemented cuts in revenue funding to a number of organisations, including the Grand Opera House, the Ulster Orchestra, and Moving on Music. It also moved Replay and Big Telly out of Cultural Traditions funding in 2001/02 and into main revenue funding, and consequently had to find resources from elsewhere to subsume this transfer. A special touring grant to the Lyric of £25,000 in 2000/01 was subsumed into the Theatre's main revenue grant in 2001/02.

In June 2001 additional funding of £400,000 was announced by the Minister at the launch of *Face to Face*, the culmination of a lengthy consultation process with the arts sector known as the Futuresearch process. This brought the total allocation to the ACNI for 2001/02 to £7.737m. The additional £400,000 was earmarked at the time of announcement to a variety of projects and themes including a Community Arts Review (£30,000), research and development of the Old Museum's capital plans (£25,000), Crescent Arts Centre (£8,000), Barry Douglas Film (£28,000), Ulster Orchestra UKNY trip (£30,000), North West Fest (£14,000), Widening Access (£100,000), New Generation Audiences (£20,000), Early Years Provision (£65,000) and Development of Partnerships with District Councils (£80,000).

#### **4.1.2 Lottery Department**

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland holds responsibility for distributing Lottery funding. The Lottery Department currently operates within the context of a three-year distribution strategy, 1999 – 2002. Its eight key strategies include: whilst taking into account Government Policy and Financial Directions, to simplify the application process pre- and post-award; to influence Government policy on Lottery funding by promoting the views and expectations of the arts sector; to collaborate with other funding agencies to achieve the highest support for and investment in the arts; to support arts projects aimed at reducing the effects of social and economic deprivation and addressing the needs of people from all sections of society; to support the involvement of children and young people in the arts; to seek equitable distribution of funds taking into account the demand for arts provision in areas or sectors currently under-represented; to promote the development of the film and craft sectors. The current Lottery Schemes are Access, Audience Development, New Works, Building, Equipment, Musical Instruments and Film Finance.

### **4.2 Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure**

In June 2001 an additional £3million of investment was announced at the launch of *'Unlocking Creativity – Making it Happen'*, to 'help fuel the drive to unlock creativity in Northern Ireland'. These resources were secured from Executive Programme Funds through a cross-Departmental drive. The Minister announced that the funds would be used to establish a 'Creativity Seed Fund' to support projects 'which are new and innovative but which might not

otherwise attract Government help'. It is anticipated that the new Fund would have three main categories to cater for different sizes and types of project – possibly an 'Individual Creativity Fund' for small individual or group projects, a 'Creativity Development Fund' for larger projects, involving one or more organisations, which would improve the creative infrastructure in Northern Ireland, and a 'Digital Creativity Fund' to be funded under the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's Leapfrog Initiative and which would 'seek to stimulate creative projects which exploit or involve digital technology'.

DCAL announced an additional £500,000 in July to help support Belfast's bid to become the cultural capital of Europe in 2008. It is anticipated that these resources will be used to staff and equip the company established to develop the bid - Imagine Belfast – to promote the bid locally and internationally, and to allow Imagine Belfast to financially assist local arts projects and develop its own key demonstration projects.

### **4.3 Local Authorities**

Belfast City Council significantly increased its support to many arts organisations, including several of the professional independent theatre companies, following the establishment of its Arts Office in 1994 and the adoption at that time of an arts strategy. In 2000/2001 and 2001/02 the budget managed by its Arts and Heritage Office stood still at £1Million. Arts Council revenue companies in receipt of Annual Funding from Belfast City Council in 2001/02 are Tinderbox (£17,000), Prime Cut (£14,000), Kabosh (£20,600), Replay (£8,318), and Aisling Ghear (£14,000). Other companies such as Dubbeljoint, Centre Stage and Belfast Theatre Company have received project grants through the Council's Arts Grant Scheme. Additional 'cultural' funds were made available by Belfast City Council during the current financial year from the Development Department to support the bid for European Capital of Culture.

Big Telly is currently the only independent professional theatre company based outside Belfast. It does not receive any direct grant assistance from its local authority despite approaches made in the past. Instead the company is given office space by Coleraine Borough Council at no direct cost, and in return Big Telly provides a number of complimentary workshops within the Council area. The company has been unable to make any inroads with regard to accessing grant support from its local authority. Reportedly the Council feels that Big Telly is already heavily funded as it gets the same level of support from the Arts Council as the Riverside Theatre.

### **4.4 Trusts and Foundations**

There are a wide range of trusts and charities which support cultural activities in Northern Ireland. Support from these sources tends in the main to be on a one-off project basis and assists arts activities that take place in support of broader cross-cutting agendas such as youth provision, cultural diversity, disability awareness. A number of companies have been particularly successful in accessing money from such sources: Replay has received support from the First Trust Millennium Social Fund, Cultural Traditions, The Ireland Funds, Esmee Fairbairn Trust, Lloyds TSB Foundation for Northern Ireland, Millennium Festival Community Awards, BBC Children in Need, British Council, Cultures of Ireland; Kabosh has received support from Bass Ireland, Community Relations Council, the British Council; Tinderbox has raised funding from the Unity Theatre Trust, the Enkalon Foundation, the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the Mercers Charitable Foundations, the Ireland Funds, and the Community Relations Council. Income figures from recent years demonstrate that support from these sources tends to be a one-off specific to the theme of production.

#### **4.5 Community Grants**

The community-based companies have been successful in raising resources from community-related funds, including DubbelJoint which has raised finance from Making Belfast Work, the Training for Women Network, and Springhill Community House, and Aisling Ghear which has accessed substantial support from the Belfast Regeneration Office/Making Belfast Work, Bord na Gaeilge, Foras na Gaeilge, and the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation.

#### **4.6 European Funding Programmes**

There are no recorded instances of the theatre companies participating in any of the major European Funding Programmes, although this is not unique to the theatre sector within the arts in Northern Ireland. The requirement of such funds to have a minimum of three trans-national partners appears to be a major barrier.

#### **4.7 Commercial Sponsorship**

In general most of the theatre companies have had little success in attracting commercial sponsorship. The sponsorship environment in general in Northern Ireland poses increasing challenges to arts organisations, and limited success in this area is not confined to the theatre sector. It is questionable as to how much time can be spent on this area within organisations with limited staff resources. Tinderbox is the main exception to the rule with regular annual commercial sponsorship. Prime Cut had a successful sponsorship year in 2000/01 raising £15,000.

## 5. The Revenue Funded Professional Theatre Sector

### 5.1 Companies

The companies that form the subject of this review and their current Arts Council revenue allocations for 2001/02 are:

- Aisling Ghear (£50,000)
- Belfast Theatre Company (£10,000)
- Big Telly Theatre Company (£55,500)
- Centre Stage (£20,000)
- Dubbeljoint Productions (£42,500)
- Kabosh (£40,000)
- Prime Cut Productions (£60,000)
- Replay Productions (109,500)
- Ridiculusmus (£10,000)
- Tinderbox Theatre Company (£70,000)

### 5.2 Base

All the companies are based in Belfast, with the exception of Big Telly which is based in Portstewart.

### 5.3 Artistic Aims

Each company has a set of artistic aims and objectives:

**Aisling Ghear** aims to enhance the quality of life for the Irish speaking community, to foster inclusiveness, to promote a creative and progressive attitude, to stimulate debate and discussion and to produce theatrical work in Irish to the highest standard possible and make Irish language theatre as accessible as possible to as wide an audience as possible.

**Belfast Theatre Company** aims to promote the art and craft of live performance in all its manifestations using as our base the city of Belfast, NI & to initiate productions & touring further afield.

**Big Telly**'s work concentrates on the visual potential of theatre and uses other artforms such as dance, music, film and illusion to create a unique sense of spectacle. The company is driven by a determination to offer audiences entertainment which surprises, stimulates and ignites the imagination. Big Telly places its audience firmly at the centre of its work through innovative creative processes and extensive educational and outreach programmes. Each project undertaken by Big Telly contains an element which features the community and has been created in partnership with them, and therefore each finished piece is jointly owned by its collective audience.

**Centre Stage** - Since its inception in 1985 the company has presented and will continue to present the best of international and period drama rarely seen in Northern Ireland. The company has presented and will continue to endeavour to present the best of Ulster Drama written before 1969.

**DubbelJoint** aims to create plays that appeal throughout the whole island. Nearly all of the company's productions to date have opened in west Belfast and have absorbed the ethos of that area – critical, serious, progressive and entertaining. It also aims to create sharp, funny, provocative and popular theatre that is accessible and attractive to all

**Kabosh** aims to produce innovative and 'cutting edge' visual and physical theatre - Work, which provokes excitement, confounds expectation and creates new environments for performance.

**Prime Cut** aims to promote contemporary international drama throughout Ireland, increasing the repertoire and diversity of interest. The company seeks to uphold excellence in all areas and promote innovation through first class challenging theatre.

**Replay** is a professional theatre company dedicated to providing high quality educational theatre and theatre activities to students in primary, secondary and special schools across Northern Ireland. Replay aims to promote and produce new and international writing for young audiences. Underpinning its work, Replay is committed to promoting concepts of cultural diversity, shared cultural identity and the related themes of citizenship.

**Ridiculusmus** aims to produce the highest quality comic theatre in the world and to tour this work nationally and internationally. To regenerate the pursuit of this goal through research, education, training and exchange.

**Tinderbox** aims: to develop and produce the best new plays which interrogate and explore life in Northern Ireland: to provide support and inspiration for playwrights from, living in and writing about here: to develop new and existing audiences in Belfast and beyond; to provide challenging opportunities for the development of the creative community.

#### **5.4 Core Staffing**

Companies on £55,500 and over manage to maintain at least two full-time post equivalents. Kabosh (£40,000) has one full-time post at minimum wage level (£14,000) and a part-time Artistic Director. Tinderbox currently has three personnel working full-time in the office (although the third post of Administrative Assistant cannot be funded through revenue and is pieced together through a series of short-term contracts). Prime Cut has recently acquired a third full-time fixed term post courtesy of Lottery funding for audience development. Replay sustains two full-time and one part-time posts. Paid administrative and Artistic Director posts range in salary from £14,000 - £20,000. Core staffing levels have not risen in any of the companies, with the exception of Prime Cut for the reasons detailed above. Staffing levels in DubbelJoint appear to have reduced.

Recent UK-wide research by Equity into small-scale theatre discovered that the average company is likely to employ 4 full-time and 3 part-time staff.

#### **5.5 Employment of Individual Artists**

The sector is a significant provider of employment opportunities for individual artists – primarily actors, directors, designers, stage management and technicians. Collectively the companies provide around 2,000 employment weeks for theatre practitioners each year. This is the equivalent of 40 full-time jobs.

## 5.6 Arts Council Funding

In the current financial year the companies account for a total of £467,500 from the Arts Council's budget which is 25.94% of the total dance and drama budget. The funding to each company over the last three years is detailed in the table below:

	01/02 ACNI	01/02 Lottery	01/02 North South	00/01 ACNI	00/01 Lottery	00/01 North South	99/00 ACNI	99/00 Lottery	99/00 North South
<b>Aisling Ghear</b>	50,000		7,000	(15,000 project)		8,000		10,250 2,250	4,500
<b>Belfast Theatre Co</b>	10,000			10,000	4,990	3,300	10,000		
<b>Big Telly</b>	55,500		6,000	12,000 (43,500 CT)	-	7,500	12,000 (43,500 CT)	27,064	5,000
<b>Centre Stage</b>	20,000		2,800	(18,000 project)	-	400	20,000		800
<b>DubbelJoint</b>	62,500			62,500	30,500		62,500	20,800	
<b>Kabosh</b>	40,000		5,000	35,000		3,900	25,000		4,000
<b>Prime Cut</b>	60,000	81,530		60,000	38,200	9,600	60,000	14,900	8,700
<b>Replay</b>	109,500			12,500 (95,000 CT)	19,540	4,580	10,500 (95,000 CT)	14,575 69,000 over 3 yrs	1,000
<b>Ridiculusmus</b>	10,000			20,000	-		15,000	11,475	
<b>Tinderbox</b>	70,000	22,508 40,715		70,000	57,692	2,562	70,000	29,300 41,175 7,684	9,500
<b>TOTALS</b>	467,500	144,753		282,000 15,000 (proj.) 138,500 (CT)	150,922		285,000 138,500 (CT)	248,473	

Summary Total Funds distributed by the Arts Council to the companies from 1999/2000:

	Arts Council (£)	Lottery (£)	North/South Touring
2001/02 to date	487,500	144,753	20,800
2000/01	Revenue 282,000 Project 15,000 Cultural Traditions 138,500	150,922	50,842
1999/2000	Revenue 285,000 Cultural Traditions 138,500	248,473	33,500

The total funds received by each company through a combination of Arts Council project and revenue, Lottery, and North/South Touring are:

	1999/2000	2000/01	2001/02 (up to 10/01)
Aisling Ghear	15,250	8,000 +	57,000
Belfast Theatre Company	10,000	18,290	16,000
Big Telly	87,564	63,000	55,500
Centre Stage	20,800	400 +	33,800
DubbelJoint	83,300	93,000	42,500
Kabosh	29,000	38,900	40,000
Prime Cut	83,600	107,800	141,530
Replay	144,075	154,620	132,500
Ridiculusmus	26,475	20,000	10,000
Tinderbox	157,659	141,254	133,223

Other key recipients of funding within the performing arts allocation in 2001/02 are the venues including the Lyric Theatre (£475,000), the Millennium Forum (£50,000 for 6 month programme), the Ardhowen Theatre (£51,000), the Marketplace Theatre (£51,000), the Riverside Theatre (£51,000), and the Grand Opera House (£508,400).

There are other theatre companies that do not form part of this review as they receive revenue funding from the Arts Council's Community Arts budget. They include Sole Purpose Productions (£15,000), Just Us (£15,000), Shankill Community Theatre (£4,500), Belfast Community Theatre (£10,000) and Kids in Control (£15,000). The rationale as to how theatre providers have traditionally been divided between community arts and performing arts is not clear – for example, DubbelJoint and Just Us perform to a similar audience in west Belfast and on tour. Both pay professional wages to performers and have paid administration. Sole Purpose would consider itself a professional theatre company. All the theatre companies would consider themselves to be providing theatre for the community.

## 5.7 Annual Turnover

	1999/2000 ACNI Funds	1999/2000 Turnover	2000/01 ACNI Funds	2000/2001 Turnover
Aisling Ghear	15,250		8,000	154,200
Belfast Theatre Co	10,000	28,800	18,290	21,690
Big Telly	87,564	148,421	63,000	113,176
Centre Stage	20,800	49,078	400	30,745
DubbelJoint	83,300	103,630	93,000	
Kabosh	29,000	101,668	38,900	104,961
Prime Cut	83,600	154,411	107,800	189,919
Replay	144,075	172,367	154,620	186,270
Ridiculusmus	26,475		20,000	
Tinderbox	157,659	152,765	141,254	319,302
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>657,723</b>	<b>911,140</b>	<b>638,064</b>	<b>1,120,263</b>

## **5.8 Audience**

Combined figures for audience and participants over two years according to available statistics:

	Audience/ Participants 00/01	Audience/ Participants 99/2000
Aisling Ghear	8,300	
Belfast Theatre Co	2,510	
Big Telly	8,546	8,214
Centre Stage	7,500	
DubbelJoint		7,500
Kabosh	6,094	12,241
Prime Cut	6,701	6,974
Replay	10,562	13,750
Ridiculusmus		
Tinderbox	13,834	7,871
<b>Sub</b>	<b>64,047</b>	<b>56,550</b>

All the companies reviewed play primarily small-scale auditoriums (less than 300 seats). All the companies tour to some degree and would therefore be considered as small-scale touring companies. Recent UK-wide research by Equity into small-scale theatre details the average production run is 11.5 weeks following a rehearsal period lasting 4.8 weeks. Runs by Northern Ireland companies would generally be shorter, in part due to the geography of Northern Ireland. There are a relatively small number of purpose-built theatre spaces in Northern Ireland due to population

size, and most will only offer companies one-night stands.

In general the sector does not demonstrate significant audience growth in recent years, although there are now resources available through Lottery to address the area of audience development. This issue is not unique to the independent professional theatre sector. All the companies have seen both increases and decreases in their audiences over the last two years and more, depending on their programmes of activity. All have experienced critical successes and failures. Risk-taking and experimentation are seen as vital attributes of the small-scale theatre sector, a seedbed for the development of talent. There is often a price to pay at box office, particularly in Northern Ireland where audiences appear to be more conservative and where we have a lower than UK average attendance at performing arts events. Audience numbers are obviously not the only measure of success within the arts sector and are not always an indication of artistic quality. The situation with regard to venue provision in Belfast has impacted on audience numbers with more companies playing in low capacity, site specific venues.

## **5.9 Earned Income - Box Office/Performance Fees**

	1999/00 £	2000/01 £
Aisling Ghear		30,720
Belfast Theatre Company	12,000	9,550

Big Telly	48,647	31,521
Centre Stage	33,699	12,510
DubbelJoint	12,582	
Kabosh	36,181	15,106
Prime Cut	49,683	47,509
Replay	31,026	24,880
Ridiculusmus		
Tinderbox	39,171	101,681

Results at box office are very much dependant on the programme presented and are hard to predict, particularly when working in the field of new writing. It is widely known that audiences in Northern Ireland tend to respond in greater numbers to 'recognisable' classics such as Friel and Shakespeare. Big Telly had particular success at box office in the year that it toured and revived 'Lovers'. Kabosh had particular box office success in 1999/2000, the year in which it produced and toured 'Mojo Mickybo' a number of times and 'R + J' (its all-male 'Romeo and Juliet'). The production of such 'classics' is rarely in keeping with the artistic ethos and experimental nature of the independent theatre sector. Tinderbox had a very successful year in terms of audience numbers and box office in 2000/01 with 'Ruby' by Marie Jones.

## **6. Expressed Needs**

### **6.1 Finance**

#### **6.1.1 Increased revenue funding**

Most companies expressed an urgent need for an increase in their revenue funding. Aisling Ghear was the main exception, having recently received a substantial uplift. The majority of the companies have experienced standstill revenue funding for at least three years and report that they have found it increasingly difficult to maintain productivity at current levels in the face of rising operational costs. It is reported that rising costs within the sector have gone above the level of inflation in recent years in many areas including salaries for artists. Companies on standstill funding feel that their only choice to survive is to cut back on the number of productions and reduce cast sizes.

Although Lottery funding has created an alternative source of support for particular aspects of production, the companies have major concerns about the fact that standstill revenue over many years is forcing an over-reliance on Lottery and disguising the real issues with regard to their sustainability. When Lottery funding was first introduced, the sector was told that it was not intended that it would replace revenue funding. The companies feel that there is evidence that this is no longer the case and are extremely unhappy about this. The companies feel that there could be serious issues with regard to their future viability should Lottery funding decrease as a result of falling consumer spend or Government redirection of these resources into alternative or additional good causes.

The specific end purpose of increased revenue requirement varied depending upon each company's current level of support – the sector in question receives revenue grants varying from £10,000 - £109,500. Shared aims included addressing issues such as staff shortages, improving terms and conditions for core and contractual staff, and increasing productivity levels. It is generally felt that the administrative and financial demands particular to Lottery are putting additional pressures on a small number of key, full-time personnel who already feel over-stretched and under-valued. Four out of the ten revenue companies do not have a full-time paid administrator (Centre Stage, DubbelJoint, Belfast Theatre Company, Ridiculusmus), and this would be an aspiration. Kabosh is only able to offer a salary of £14,000 for its full-time administrative post, and has a part-time Artistic Director. It would aspire to improving the terms and conditions for full-time core staff. Companies in receipt of larger amounts of revenue such as Tinderbox feel that the company's scale of operation and levels of productivity requires additional core personnel such as a part-time finance officer. Such additional expertise and human resource is seen as increasingly relevant in the face of the financial monitoring requirements of Lottery. It is felt that revenue is the only means by which new core posts can be created on a secure footing, rather than through offering a series of piecemeal, short-term contracts courtesy of various project funds.

With revenue decreasing in real terms, companies feel that their productivity levels are also of necessity reducing. They are unable to meet their aspirational goals with regard to artistic development and are concerned that they are limited artistically and in terms of scale of production. It is felt that increased revenue would address these concerns and avoid a uniformity developing within the sector in terms of the product presented.

The substantial uplifts in percentage terms for community-based organisations during the revenue funding round for 2001/02 seems to have fuelled the dissatisfaction amongst the professional independent theatre sector with current funding arrangements. Although the companies did not object in general to the worth of individual community-based organisations in receipt of increased funding, there was a strong feeling that a political agenda had superseded genuine need in some cases. The view was expressed that it might have been more appropriate and equitable for the Arts Council to consider a wider range of smaller increases to such clients which could then be carefully monitored in terms of outputs. There is also a view amongst the professional theatre sector that community-based organisations currently have access to a wider range of funding sources than arts-focused organisations, such as the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. There is a concern that the Arts Council is not pursuing its commitment to artistic excellence to the same degree as other Government policy objectives such as widening access to the arts.

Different views were offered during consultation as to the best means of securing additional revenue for the independent theatre sector. Most would prefer that the Arts Council works with the sector to lobby Government more effectively to ensure that the allocation of funding to the arts is substantially increased. The independent professional theatre sector would then wish to benefit from a percentage of additional resources. The Arts Council is viewed by the sector as having failed to make a real case to Government for increased support for the arts in terms of 'voted funds'.

If an increase in the Arts Council's budget is not a reality in the immediate or short term, there are those within the professional theatre sector who would strongly advocate that the Arts Council considers a redistribution of funds within its overall budget in their favour. A number of companies drew attention to the fact that two building-based clients consume around 60% of the drama budget, and felt that the reasons for this were not transparent and that the situation did not appear to be monitored annually in terms of effectiveness of spend. DubbelJoint felt that larger organisations such as the Grand Opera House and the Ulster Orchestra consume an unfairly large percentage of resources in relation to the social make-up of the constituency that they serve and that this gives rise to issues in relation to the equality agenda. There was also a feeling that, in terms of the allocation of resources, the Arts Council should be prioritising the production of indigenous work and employment opportunities for indigenous artists that are created by the independent professional companies and producing theatres. It was felt that other agencies, such as the local authority, could be taking more responsibility for the maintenance of cultural institutions and significant economic drivers such as the Opera House.

### **6.1.2 Introduction of multi-annual funding**

It was pointed out that the need for revenue funding to be allocated by the Arts Council on a longer term basis has been raised regularly by the sector for over ten years. The former Small Scale Theatre Managers Association which existed in the early '90s and preceded the Theatre Producers Group, discussed longer term funding with key agencies as crucial to the sustainability and development of the professional theatre sector. There is a perception amongst the companies today that the relevant agencies are no further on with regard to introducing and implementing such mechanisms despite regular assurances to the contrary. This is felt to be particularly disappointing given that other Arts Councils, such as An Chomhairle Ealaíon and the Scottish Arts Council, are several years down this road already. Companies are unclear as to the reasons why longer term funding has proved so difficult to implement in Northern Ireland when the benefits are clear. They also find it difficult to comprehend the anomalies of public funding which allow the Government to offer 3-year

funding through Lottery to organisations which are only allowed 1-year Arts Council revenue support.

Three year funding is not seen as a solution to all problems, however it is felt that it would offer companies a level of security that would help them to plan ahead more confidently and to spend more time on creative developmental work.

### **6.1.3 Justification and transparency of funding allocations**

There is still a commonly held view within the independent professional theatre sector that there is insufficient explanation by the Arts Council of the rationale behind funding decisions. It is generally felt that there needs to be more clarity and accountability with regard to justifying the levels set for particular clients within policy priorities. Many companies individually commented that they were unsure as to the reasons why peer companies received higher revenue allocations, and said they would appreciate more information as to how funding decisions are made and justified – for example, is it in relation to artistic quality, audience figures, geographical impact, status? How is performance measured from one company to the next and on what basis are increases or cuts instigated? Many companies felt that the monitoring information that they submitted over the years had not been analysed. It was felt that a clear indication of Arts Council priorities within the artform might help with regard to clarifying spending decisions in the context of broader strategic priorities.

There is a feeling amongst several of the companies, including Prime Cut and Big Telly, that success in developing audiences and delivering quality product is not necessarily rewarded in relation to levels of revenue support. Big Telly is concerned that its level of revenue support in comparison to other companies of similar age, status and output delivery suggests that it is disadvantageous to be based outside Belfast. The revenue funding announcements for 2001/02 saw Aisling Ghear receive a substantial increase in funding. Many of the other companies in the sector felt that it would have been helpful and in the interests of good practice and accountability for there to have been clearer justification of the rationale behind such a decision. This was most strongly felt by other companies struggling to survive on lower levels of revenue which consider themselves to be achieving greater results in terms of audience development and other outputs without such financial recognition. Companies would like to see real successes rewarded.

### **6.1.4 Improvements to Lottery procedures**

First on the list of expressed needs at virtually every consultation meeting, and relayed with the most strength of feeling, was the stress and frustration caused by the weight of administrative and financial bureaucracy associated with accessing Lottery resources. All the companies would like the Arts Council and Lottery to continue to find ways in which it can simplify procedures for applicants and recipients of Lottery funds, particularly with regard to monitoring requirements. Some companies felt that they had reached a saturation point with regard to the bureaucracy, and relayed examples of occasions when ideas for creative projects were simply not followed through due to the inability of over-stretched staff to face further demands of Lottery paperwork.

Companies were quick to emphasise the value of Lottery resources in a climate of standstill revenue, and were appreciative of many of the changes to procedures that have been made to date. However, there was a strong feeling that there is much more that could still be done to make the process more user-friendly, and that many of the issues raised by the arts sector in earlier consultations had still not been addressed. Some felt that in essence there have

been less changes to the administrative systems and instead more diversification of the streams of funding.

A number of companies felt that the Lottery regulations were interpreted much more stringently in Northern Ireland than in other UK regions. There was a shared sense that the recent procedural changes implemented here, such as an end to the requirement to supply all original invoices, were simply bringing Northern Ireland closer to the baseline from which other Lottery regions have always operated and where such criteria had never been introduced in the first place. There were concerns expressed about the style and tone of correspondence from the Lottery Department which is felt to be excessively formal and recriminatory on occasion. Companies have been told on a number of occasions that Lottery and Arts Council funding streams will become inextricably linked. The wholehearted enthusiasm that this might be greeted with is tempered by a grave concern that this heralds a day when Arts Council revenue funding will take on the form, content and style of Lottery procedures.

Several of the companies take a pragmatic view of Lottery procedures and seek simply to work the system to the best of their ability. In general the Lottery Department is viewed as extremely 'civil service' in its style, and so bound by procedures that the creative processes and artistic product which it funds seem at best secondary. There is a feeling that the procedures of the Department are indicative of a 'paranoia' with regard to arts organisations, even those with a demonstrable track record of sound management and governance. It is important to note that there was much praise from the companies for individual case officers who are generally not held responsible for the procedures with which they too have to comply. There is also a feeling that the Department is under-resourced relative to the amount of grant applications processed and resources distributed.

In general, Lottery and the Arts Council are thought of by the theatre sector as two distinct organisations, particularly given the many anomalies that they feel exist in terms of criteria, systems and procedures. Examples cited included the fact that 3-year funding is distributed by Lottery to clients with the security of only one year's revenue support from the Arts Council. There is an impression that Lottery operates as a separate entity to the Arts Council and it is felt that 'the tail is wagging the dog'.

There was a view, also articulated in correspondence to the Arts Council by the Theatre Producers Group, that there was a need for greater knowledge and understanding of the drama development process amongst Officers in the Lottery Department. Another view was put forward during discussions that increased artform expertise would not make the current systems any more sympathetic to the creative processes as the same procedures would still have to be followed.

The professional theatre companies have gained substantial experience of the Lottery application process and gave numerous practical examples of ways in which the existing demands of the procedure have caused major difficulties for even the most experienced of administrators. It is felt that criteria such as only allowing one live application to go through at one time is not practical for full-time professional operations and does not assist good practice in terms of planning and delivery. One company gave an example of where it took nearly 18-months to achieve closure on all the monitoring requirements of Lottery. There was a consensus that the increasingly schematic nature of Lottery was placing even more pressure on limited staff resources within the independent theatre sector.

### **6.1.5 Representation at Council level**

The sector feels that there is not enough representation of professional arts practitioners at Council level within the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. It feels strongly that professional theatre in particular should be better represented and supported at Council level and feels that the responsibility for addressing this lies with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. It was remarked that at least three professional theatre practitioners had been short-listed to interview stage for membership of the Council, yet none of them were ultimately appointed.

## **Expressed Needs ctd.**

### **6.2 Audience Development**

#### **6.2.1 Access to more and better information on existing and potential audiences**

Most companies have only observational evidence with regard to their audiences and would like to have more accurate information about their customers so that they can encourage repeat visits and more easily target potential attenders. It is felt that the ability of independent companies to gather information on audiences is intrinsically linked to the capacity of venues to capture information at point of sale, and that venues can't deliver in terms of profiling audiences. Also, the ability of independent companies to maintain audiences and attract new attenders is influenced significantly by the quality of customer experience with regard to the host venue. Concerns were expressed about the quality of customer service and facilities in some venues in Belfast and the detrimental impact that this might have on audience development.

It was noted that there seemed to have been little progress in relation to implementing the recommendations in the Lottery Department's review of electronic ticketing which it had been hoped would go some way towards addressing the technical requirements for ticket sales and related information gathering and analysis.

There was a view put forward that audience development resources should be concentrated on venues as they are in a better position to record and analyse data on a wider range of attenders across art-form, and are not equipped or resourced to do this at present. In general, most companies stated that they choose the product first in line with artistic ethos, and look for an audience for the work thereafter. Replay is the only company that appears to have a focused and stated target market for its work.

#### **6.2.2 Regular presentation of product**

Many companies believe that they need to be able to produce more regularly in order to build and maintain audiences and develop a brand loyalty. It was acknowledged that this aspiration is currently difficult to achieve with average production levels at two shows per year, of which generally only one will tour. Several companies aspired, given the necessary level of revenue support, to raise production levels to three shows each year.

It is felt that increased productivity would also allow companies to be less limited artistically, thereby avoiding a uniformity of programme year after year.

#### **6.2.3 An overarching strategy for the development of audiences for live theatre**

There was general consensus that the regional venues in particular are not prepared to take risks and it is therefore difficult to marry their requirements with the work of independent companies which are primarily about experimentation and risk-taking. There is a growing awareness through the work of Theatre Exchange and 'Auditoria' of the anomalies that exist between the small-scale independent producers and the promoters, however it is felt that the responsibility for addressing these does not lie solely with the independent companies.

The sector feels that there needs to be a strategy for the development of the theatre sector as a whole identifying all the contributing elements that go together to make for healthy growth. It is felt that the Arts Council could take a lead in this with regard to the development

of artform policy and strategies and the prioritisation of resources, using the expertise of its Artform Officers in partnership with the sector.

#### **6.2.4 Resources to support touring to the south**

All the companies stated that their capacity to tour to the south would be severely diminished without the additional resources made available through the North/South Touring Scheme. This has enabled northern companies to go out at an affordable rate and several have built up a regular circuit in the south. Subsidy for this type of activity cannot currently be found elsewhere, and the companies are adamant that they cannot afford to go to any venue without a guarantee.

There is concern at the possible demise of the scheme following reductions in funding from the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, and it is felt that this would have damaging implications for the northern companies, particularly with regard to sustainability and audience development. The geography of the north, its relatively small population, and the inclination of northern venues to book just one performance means that northern companies need to look further afield if they are to create tours of more than two weeks. Longer tours are deemed to have many positive spin-offs for independent companies, particularly with regard to length of employment for contractual staff, audience development, and in terms of maximising the value of the original production investment.

#### **6.2.5 Resources to tour work out of Northern Ireland**

It was felt that no agency currently takes a lead on developing the cultural profile of Northern Ireland abroad by assisting indigenous companies to profile work overseas. One company was unable to access the £3,000 required to participate in a high-profile British Council arts showcase in Edinburgh in Summer 2001. It was to be the only representative from Northern Ireland. Belfast City Council's pilot Work Abroad scheme had been greeted with much enthusiasm by the sector and a number of companies had benefited, however it appeared to have been dropped after its first year of operation following a strategic review.

It was felt that issues relating to the capacity of arts organisation to tour overseas has an important bearing on the aspiration to achieve Capital of Culture status. It was felt that positive aspects of the arts and cultural life could be used to help change perceptions of Northern Ireland abroad, but that this potential could not be fulfilled if there are no mechanisms to resource such activity. There is a sense that DCAL has a policy commitment, but not the mechanism or resources to deliver.

## Expressed Needs etc.

### **6.3 Artistic Repertoire**

#### **6.3.1 Option to diversify with regard to programmes of work**

Several companies acknowledged advantages in presenting a ‘balanced’ programme of work but felt that current funding mechanisms militate against this. A number expressed a desire at some stage in the future to produce an interpretation of a ‘classic’ text alongside new work but stated that they currently do not have the resources to do so. Due to standstill or small increases in revenue funding, virtually all independent theatre production is now dependant on Lottery funding and has had to comply with new work (or new to Northern Ireland) criteria. To date ‘classic’ texts have not been eligible for production funding within Lottery, although the introduction of an Audience Development scheme may provide some support in this area.

It is felt that such financial challenges are exacerbated by the fact that the characteristics of ‘classics’ deem them very expensive to stage in that they tend to demand a large cast and set. Generally companies feel that the only financial means by which a ‘classic’ could be staged by an independent company would be through revenue and other non-Lottery sources. Nearly all companies felt that they could not sustain an administrative operation and produce a ‘classic’ show or ‘recognisable touring product’ on current revenue levels.

The companies were not short on creative ideas. They see their challenge as working within the systems to make these a reality in the face of increasing costs, standstill revenue, and increasing administrative demands eating into creative time.

## **Expressed Needs ctd.**

### **6.4 Facilities**

#### **6.4.1 A mid-scale venue in Belfast**

It is felt that the situation with regard to venue provision in Belfast, highlighted in the Boyden Southwood Review in 1996, remains relatively unchanged. There is no purpose-built mid-scale space, several of the existing facilities are in a poor state of repair, and the independent theatre sector views itself as one of the greatest casualties. Some have imaginatively made a virtue out of necessity and explored the potential of non-theatre spaces in the city, attracting new audiences in the process. Others have continued to play in small-scale venues which are by their own admission not appropriate. Some have staged productions at the Lyric either through co-production or buy-in, and there are mixed views as to the appropriateness of this as a solution. It was stressed that any new facility needs to have an adequate programming budget or it will simply not achieve its real potential.

At least one company felt that its increasing trend for site-specific work had been born of necessity due to the lack of purpose-built facilities in Belfast. It has, however, worked very successfully for some at an artistic level and also contributed to audience development as it has been proven that site specific work will attract people that do not normally go to theatres.

The downside of site specific work is felt to be the additional demands in terms of administration, technical requirements and financial resources. Many companies talked of the time spent trying to secure venues – Tinderbox spent a substantial amount of time negotiating its current deal for access to the Northern Bank in Cathedral Quarter, and Kabosh secured a venue for its ‘Sleep Show’ just weeks before it went into rehearsals. Companies record that it can cost an extra £20,000 to fit out a space for theatre production, and in addition they lose the hidden subsidy that a guarantee from a programmed theatre space usually affords. Another issue with regard to site specific work is the tendency for the audience capacity to be very limited, often much lower than companies of this age and stature would otherwise be expected to play.

#### **6.4.2 A greater sense of confidence in venue managers/programmers**

DubbelJoint has created its own touring circuit of non-theatre venues because it has found through experience that most of the purpose-built venues will not take its product due in its view to the subject matter being of a political nature – most recently with ‘The Laughter of Our Children’. It has nonetheless managed to do well in terms of building audiences in the regions, and this has led the company to question the ability of the theatre managers to judge what their audiences will respond to and their management of public funds. In a climate where audience development and increased access is paramount, a company which traditionally attracts people from disadvantaged areas and non-traditional theatregoers says that it cannot secure bookings from publicly-funded facilities.

The resource implication in touring to a hall or community centre is similar to that of a site-specific venue and the company loses out on the hidden subsidy of the purpose-built space. Playing community centres (something that most other companies now actively avoid) means kitting out the venue with technical equipment and requires more technical support.

There are concerns about the ongoing issues between the venues and producing companies with regard to product, first formally identified in the Touring Theatre Review.

## **Expressed Needs ctd.**

### **6.5 Personnel**

#### **6.5.1 More experienced stage management and technical stage management**

Every company commented on the difficulties in finding experienced technicians/technical stage management/stage management. There is currently a small pool of locally-based practitioners in these areas. It is acknowledged that difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that most companies tend to produce at the same time in the year - the Autumn season is particularly busy as attendances for arts events during this period are felt to be better. There is the added benefit of inclusion in the Belfast Festival programme. In Autumn 2001, during the period that this report was being compiled, Tinderbox, Replay, Prime Cut, Kabosh, Centre Stage, 'Toast' (an independent production for the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents), Bruiser, and Just Us were all in rehearsal or production.

#### **6.5.2 Resources to provide training opportunities /Apprenticeships**

A number of companies would like to be able to offer training opportunities such as Assistant Director posts on a project basis but feel they need additional resources to be able to deliver such initiatives.

#### **6.5.3 Improvements in the terms and conditions for those working in the sector**

##### **Full-time posts**

Companies on lower levels of revenue expressed concern about rates of pay for core staff relative to hours worked. One full-time professional theatre company manager is paid £14,000 (the average weekly hours of work go well beyond the standard 37 without overtime). It would appear that no administrator within the sector is paid more than £20,000. Many of the individuals concerned feel that they could command much higher salaries relative to their experience within the public or private sector, and report that a number of theatre administrators have moved into the public sector/local government in recent years with the financial package of benefits proving to be a major incentive.

It is reported that recruitment for full-time posts in the sector tends to attract a limited pool of applicants. Most of the companies feel that they are unable to compete with regard to offering adequate financial incentives to attract qualified individuals, and also to retain experienced personnel. They see increased revenue as the only means by which they can even marginally upgrade existing posts.

##### **Contractual posts**

The current ITC minimum weekly salary for actors and stage management is £275. If an actor was to work 52 weeks of the year at this rate he or she would earn £14,300. Voice-overs, television and film are more lucrative, but rare commodities in Northern Ireland. Some actors resort to other means to earn an income – such as providing skills workshops in schools, teaching, temping. Some move out of the profession altogether or relocate to Dublin or London.

It is felt that there is very little incentive for actors to base themselves in Northern Ireland. The amount of employment opportunities for actors has dropped significantly over the

last twelve months exacerbated by the fact that there have been less in-house productions at the Lyric. In addition there is no guarantee that an Artistic Director is going to cast locally, and in recent years indigenous talent was a scarce commodity on the Lyric stage. Most of the independent companies employ a very high percentage of locally-based actors, partly of financial necessity. Standstill revenue in the face of rising overheads is cited as a reason for an increasing tendency to select small cast shows which again has a knock-on effect with regard to the number of employment opportunities.

Most companies choose to pay parity, with the current maximum wage amongst independents at £350. It appears that pay differentiation is generally not made amongst casts, primarily because companies cannot afford to enter into open negotiations due to budgetary restrictions. Until recently actors wages were not eligible for Lottery funding so companies were unable to access additional resources to enhance this area of expenditure. Pay parity is also seen as a more practical way for the companies to work due to the difficulties of gauging the individual values of particular actors and dealing with inherent issues with regard to perceived value, market value. The companies seek to ensure that the parity wage is reasonable and that efforts are made to ensure that other related areas such as tour accommodation are of a good standard. At least one company felt that it was inappropriate to pay the same amount to an experienced professional as to an actor just graduated from drama school, and aspired to introducing some variation accordingly.

The companies felt that it was important to record that the recent injection of resources into theatre in England has meant that Equity will shortly be considering a motion to raise the minimum wage to ensure that its members reap some small benefit from recent new investment in the sector. Although the new resources are targeted at the English theatre sector, all UK-based ITC companies (including Kabosh, Tinderbox, and Replay) will have to comply with the new minimum wage requirements. This will place additional pressure on the companies to stretch existing resources even further .

## **7. Corporate Independent Professional Theatre Sector**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The main umbrella body for independent theatre companies is the Theatre Producers Group, established in 1996. Recently the sector has seen the emergence of the Independent Professional Theatre Lobby. There is some overlap of membership and broad overlap in terms of issues of concern. Many of the theatre companies had previously signed up to the Professional Arts Lobby, which now appears to be defunct. At least one theatre company is involved in a new arts lobby group, the Northern Ireland Arts Lobby, convened recently by a number of concerned individuals in the arts sector including Belfast Festival's Stella Hall and playwright Martin Lynch.

The needs of both the Theatre Producers Group and the Independent Theatre Lobby have been expressed in written correspondence from the respective organisations to the Arts Council and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Issues raised are covered in the earlier

### **7.2 Theatre Producers Group**

Established in 1996, the Theatre Producers Group stated aims are:

- To provide a forum for the exchange of information and for discussion of matters of mutual concern to theatre producers in Northern Ireland
- To provide a point of reference for communication with/from other appropriate bodies
- To provide opportunities for representation of other bodies to meet TPG members and discuss areas of mutual interest
- To combine for the purpose of facilitating concerted action in any matters generally connected with the welfare of theatre management and provide, where appropriate, a collective response to strategies and proposals from other bodies
- To provide a focus and opportunity for collective lobbying
- To access and encourage training for the group and others

There is a membership fee of £15 for individuals and £30 for companies. The current chair is Eamon Quinn, Vice Chair Vincent McCann. The Annual Report for 2000/01 lists 18 members. There were 6 meetings within the twelve month period. Key areas of activity were the organisation of short training courses, the launch of a website in June 2000, the appointment of a part-time Administrator on a seven-month contract, a series of liaison meetings with representatives of key agencies, and the planning of a 3<sup>rd</sup> Theatre Exchange event. The Theatre Producers Group received a grant of £2,500 from the Arts Council towards training and administration.

Recently (July 2001) the Chairman of the Theatre Producers Group wrote to the Minister requesting that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure initiate a review that would include:

- A detailed picture of the indigenous drama and dance communities, including venues, companies, freelance individuals, and their national and international impact
- An analysis of the financial input into theatre, from both public and private funding sources and the resulting outcomes which benefit the local economy, including direct and indirect employment and 'value for money'

- The contribution of the industry to skills development and lifelong learning in other areas of the creative industries
- Social impact studies to provide a comprehensive picture of the audiences and beneficiaries of the professional theatre and dance sector's activities
- An examination of the industry in relation to cultural diversity, socio-economic regeneration and the themes of new TSN
- An examination of the performing arts and its current and potential impact on cultural tourism in Northern Ireland, particularly timely as Belfast prepares its bid to become European City of Culture

The letter states that 'for a variety of reasons professional theatre is an industry facing crisis in Northern Ireland and immediate action needs to take place' and expresses concern at the lack of comprehensive and current data available with regard to the sector. Feels that this lack of information regarding the performing arts sector renders the Department incapable of making informed decisions regarding the role and development of the discipline. The implementation of a review is seen as a first step towards ensuring a sustainable professional theatre community and resultant benefits to the people of Northern Ireland.

The reply from the Assistant Private Secretary on behalf of the Minister details that it does not develop specific policies for particular artforms which is deemed the responsibility of the Arts Council. It states that 'the independent review of community arts currently under way reflects their status as an approach to arts development across a range of disciplines, rather than an individual artform' and draws attention to the Creative Enterprise research and development programme being carried out by Paul Jeffcut. The letter details that this research has already identified key issues for the performing arts, including enablers, limiters and cross-sectoral issues.

The Theatre Producers Group has also recently written a detailed letter to Roisin McDonough following a discussion of Arts Council policy and related issues at a TPG meeting. Issues identified in the letter include:

- Problem with way in which companies are being made over-reliant on the Lottery as a source of funding. Drop in funds, increase in good causes. Many other public funds available for access and participation. The only NI wide source of public funds dedicated to the production of theatre is the Arts Council.
- Disparity between what members advised regarding accessing Lottery funding
- Length of time for processing and administering projects. Lottery Department administers an annual grants budget equivalent to the rest of the ACNI
- Lack of knowledge about theatre in the ACNI
- Difficulties in matching individual company priorities with the needs of regional venues. Clear that needs of two are not the same.

There is a significant overlap in views to those put forward by the Independent Professional Theatre Lobby.

### **7.3 Independent Professional Theatre Lobby**

The Independent Professional Theatre Lobby represents 'a cross-section of professionals living and working in Northern Ireland who have a strong commitment to the survival of high quality indigenous Professional Theatre'. The group describes itself in correspondence to the ACNI as a separate entity to the TPG and 'deliberately convened by people not exclusively involved in Professional Theatre production who recognise the current

crisis in independent professional theatre'. Its membership includes Stephen Douds, Ophelia Byrne, Tim Loane, Eamon Quinn and Simon Magill.

The Lobby has prepared a definition of Independent Professional Theatre – 'it articulates and defines our culture from a unique perspective. It analyses and interrogates life here in a way that other theatre disciplines cannot. It is not bound by location or subject matter. It is art for everyone presented by practitioners trained in their field, often to a high standard, which offer a range of expertise and experience. It contributes to making Northern Ireland a better place to live in, work in and to visit.'

Action points which the IPTL has asked the Arts Council and the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to consider include:

- An economic impact survey
- Prioritising in the allocation of voted funds
- A needs analysis of the sector
- A long-term pro-active strategy

The IPTL feels that professional theatre in Northern Ireland is in a state of crisis due to 'the trend at present...towards cutting back on the vital revenue resources which make professional art happen'. Lottery funds are seen as a relatively unpredictable source of long-term revenue funding, and it is felt that professional theatre has limited avenues from which to obtain financial support in comparison to other sectors. The group feels that for the survival of the professional sector 'it is imperative that professional theatre's reliable sources of core funding are protected and shored up.' The working paper presented in May 2001 also talks of an employment crisis with theatre professionals leaving Northern Ireland, and remarks on the development of new regional theatre buildings that have 'insufficient professional theatre for their programmes' due to 'less money available to companies to practice their core professional functions, which result in work which fills those venues.'

In its response to the Independent Professional Theatre Lobby's working paper, the Arts Council comments on the expense of an Economic Impact Appraisal and suggests that this would have to involve a Lottery application by another organisation, perhaps the Theatre Producers Group. The response details that the Arts Council will use the Creative Enterprise research as a baseline on which to develop its own future research, commits to delivery of an Audience Development Seminar for the sector, and agrees to present Council with a request for a 'Needs Analysis'. It expresses disappointment that the introduction of new Lottery funding schemes, the easing of Lottery restrictions and simplifying of the application process has been met with such negativity.

The Independent Theatre Lobby is not satisfied with the Arts Council's response and in further correspondence expresses dissatisfaction with the present provision for Independent Professional Theatre by ACNI. It feels that it is the responsibility of the Strategic Development Department of the Arts Council and not the TPG to gather statistical information, and reiterates the sector's difficulties in relation to Lottery funding:

'The funding strands restrict long-term artistic planning and the number of projects a company can undertake at any one time. This is fatal for the development of a full programme of work and cannot accommodate the normal changes associated with the natural development of a project. We cannot accept that these present Lottery schemes could be seen as 'central to the development' of Independent Professional Theatre companies....Our main concern is the very nature of Lottery funding. It is an unstable

source of funding for professional theatre. Without a solid financial foundation no professional industry can stand. Has the Council considered the drop in Lottery funds for good causes already experienced from falling Lottery ticket sales? Has it prepared a safeguard system to account for further drops in this income? Has it challenged the Government's increasing reliance on the Lottery good causes income? Does it have a five-year plan for the professional arts industry in NI that is not intrinsically wedded to the Lottery? Most pertinently, has it considered how and why the ACE has re-evaluated the role of Professional Theatre and has made urgent provision of £20 million of revenue funding from its central reserve exclusively for professional theatre production?'

In response, the Arts Council states its intention that Lottery will be completely integrated within the Council's systems, but that implementation of such radical restructuring will take time. In the interim it is looking at ways to ease the process within a framework of accountability.

## 8. Observations and Analysis

### 8.1 Value

In regard to the Arts Council's main strategic priorities, the main strengths of the small-scale independent theatre companies would be considered to be:

#### **Provision of opportunities for local audiences to experience live indigenous drama.**

It was identified in the Southwood Review in 1996, that the production base in Northern Ireland was slender and this remains the case in 2001 as companies have been unable to increase their productivity in the current funding climate. With a continued shortage of visiting companies at small and mid-scale level, the local independent sector provides more than half of Northern Ireland's indigenous drama.

**The ability to develop new audiences for the arts.** Many of the companies have already demonstrated a growing commitment to the provision of workshops and training in theatre skills to increase direct, participative opportunities and engage with new audiences. Some have done this with additional funding from the Lottery, for example Aisling Ghear has established a three-year youth drama programme, Replay has completed a three-year programme of work for young people with special needs, Prime Cut has appointed an Audience Development Manager and is piloting various test drive schemes. Tinderbox implements a programme of workshops for young people linked to at least one of its main productions each year, DubbelJoint plays in community centres in areas where there is little access to theatre and has been involved in training amateur practitioners, Kabosh has an ongoing programme of work with students and has organised a number of theatre and circus skills training events, and over half of Big Telly's total audience figure last year were active participants in an extensive, regional workshop programme.

#### **Provision of opportunities for creative artists to develop their work and practice.**

The revenue funded companies provide around 2,000 weeks of employment annually for local writers, actors, directors, designers and technicians and this is a vital incentive to retaining actors based in Northern Ireland. The companies are a proven training ground for the creative talent and production skills that are essential to feed the creative industries, particularly television and film which requires a constant flow of innovative new writers, directors, designers and actors. To give just a few practical examples: Marie Jones and Ian McElhinney learned their craft in small scale touring theatre and are now celebrated on a national and international level for their artistic and popular success within the commercial theatre sector – the positive media coverage which this has generated for Northern Ireland is invaluable; Tim Loane, founder member of Tinderbox is a successful writer and director for film and television, his achievements include the critically-acclaimed series 'Teachers', Stephen Wright, former Artistic Director of Tinderbox, is Head of Development in BBC NI's Drama Department; playwright Gary Mitchell has had great success in developing audiences for his work on a national level and his play 'As the Beast Sleeps' has been produced for television by BBC NI. There are many more examples of such success, and there are many examples of actors from Northern Ireland who began their careers in the independent theatre sector and are now established performers at a national and international level. The versatility of small scale independent theatre and its experimental nature are conducive to skills development and training.

## **8.2 Funding – Revenue/Voted Funds**

Although new funds have been introduced into the arts and cultural sector in Northern Ireland in the last twelve months (including Capital of Culture funding, and Creative Industries funding) there is little evidence to suggest that the professional independent theatre sector has been able to benefit to date from these additional resources. These funds have been earmarked for specific purposes in line with particular Government priorities, support activities which must be additional to existing programmes, and do not therefore support core costs. Most of the new resources have heralded the introduction of yet more funding schemes. A significant amount of the new money identified within the sector is controlled and distributed by agencies other than the Arts Council. New voted funds specifically for theatre have been distributed recently in both England and Scotland.

The main value of ‘revenue’ funding for the companies is in its form and purpose. One allocation of funding for at least a twelve-month period makes good practical sense in terms of planning and operation, particularly for organisations with limited resources. Arts Council revenue is virtually the only source of funding for core activity. It is essential to allow companies to establish or consolidate the administrative and artistic base which drives production. Revenue funding for production would allow companies more flexibility in terms of programming and more time for creative development. It is an indication of the pressures within the current funding environment that there is such sensitivity within the independent professional theatre sector over even the smallest uplift. The stated requirement for ‘additionality’ with regard to accessing Lottery resources in tandem with standstill revenue for many from the Arts Council means that companies have difficulties in increasing investment in core programme and core costs. Funding from Belfast City Council has tended to focus on adding value to the companies’ programmes rather than directly contributing to core costs. There is also a danger that exciting new audience development initiatives manageable on fixed term Lottery funding, such as the special needs programme developed by Replay, will not continue once this funding comes to an end. Companies such as Replay which produce work for young people are under particular pressure to keep shows affordable, and would aim to reduce the cost of performances further to address access issues. This will not be possible if funding levels remain the same.

As detailed above, the Arts Council received an increase in its 2001/02 budget, followed by an additional allocation of £400,000 from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Only an additional £64,000 of voted funds went to the professional independent theatre sector in the current financial year in real terms – £35,000 of this went to one theatre company. The independent theatre sector is driven by a small number of dedicated, creative individuals who invest a large amount of personal subsidy in the development of their craft. Kabosh recently valued the unpaid overtime of core staff over a twelve month period at £12,000. The struggle to deliver a programme of innovative, creative activities on limited resources and to cope with the bureaucracy associated with accessing funds from an increasingly schematic funding environment appears to be taking its toll. The sector feels worn down and disillusioned following years of broadly standstill funding from Government. There is a relatively high turnover of staff, particularly in administrative posts. This is in part due to the pressures of heavy workloads and limited human and financial resources linked to adverse terms and conditions.

If the Arts Council accepts that the sector makes a valuable contribution to furthering its key strategic objectives and is committed to defending independent theatre’s culture of risk and innovation and enabling the sector to increase its productivity and outputs, it will have to access additional resources. This will either be through prioritising any increase from

Government, or through the redistribution of funds within its current budget. If the companies' most urgent needs are not addressed there is a danger that companies will cease to operate, will spread resources too thinly and fail to comply with good practice in relation to terms and conditions of employment for artists, or will cut productivity levels. There will continue to be a real value funding decline in the face of irreducible fixed costs which will translate into less work, surplus audience capacity, and relatively poor value for money.

### **8.3 Funding – Multi-Annual Funding**

With regard to the introduction of multi-annual funding, it would be deemed worthwhile for the Arts Council to clarify for the sector what the issues are that have prevented implementation to date. As stated earlier, Arts Councils in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland have already established long-term and multi-annual support and it is being piloted in England. There is a lack of awareness locally as to why progress here has been much slower. The Arts Council could also take advantage of the experiences of the other agencies with regard to implementing the measure, as teething problems and issues have arisen in both Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. The sector is aware that multi-annual funding is not a panacea for all ills, however it would be seen as an important gesture in terms of assisting companies to feel more secure and consequently improve their longer term planning.

### **8.4 Funding – Transparency of Funding Decisions**

With regard to transparency of decisions it would be helpful if the Arts Council could more clearly demonstrate how allocations, particularly increases in revenue, are matched to outputs. One simple way would be to circulate more information amongst companies in relation to the proposed outputs of other companies. Sharing of data, such as the statistical information gathered in this report, may help companies to view themselves in the context of the broader environment and will allow them to compare and contrast their performance to other players.

### **8.5 Funding - Lottery**

The reality for the arts sector in Northern Ireland is that they are increasingly being pushed in the direction of Lottery funds as a form of compensation for negligible increases in Government funding to the Arts Council, despite original assurances that this would not be the case. The Arts Council feels it is making the best of a difficult situation where there is simply not enough funding from Government to meet the needs of its client base. With a number of new venues around Northern Ireland now seeking contributions to their programming budgets, demand will be even greater this year. Most of the theatre companies are now heavily reliant on Lottery funding to be able to maintain a core programme of two shows each year and to develop new initiatives to develop audiences. Having talked to a number of revenue clients in Scotland, there is evidence that Northern Ireland companies are more heavily reliant on Lottery funding to produce basic programmes of work and that Lottery is not 'additional' here to the same degree that it is in Scotland.

Although the Lottery has provided much needed extra cash in a broad climate of standstill revenue, it is a double-edged sword. The schematic approach to distribution of Lottery funds means an increasing number of application forms, more monitoring requirements, and more paperwork which is evidently putting additional pressure on standstill levels of core staff. Some companies have a range of new and exciting projects that had never gone beyond the ideas stage because personnel can't cope with the workload required from more Lottery applications, and often these comments are made by extremely experienced,

professional and capable administrators. The sector has clearly articulated its specific difficulties with the current arrangements. In particular, the stipulation of only one live application at any one time appears to be having a detrimental affect with regard to productivity levels and is militates against the long term planning that would be deemed good practice amongst full-time operations.

There is evidence that organisations in Northern Ireland do endure more stringent requirements than their counterparts in Scotland as a result of the way in which Lottery guidelines are interpreted here. The theatre companies receive subsidy from various publicly accountable bodies including the Arts Council, Belfast City Council, and the Lottery. All of these agencies are subject to scrutiny by Auditors yet it is the procedures of Lottery, the 'people's fund' that cause the most pressure and hardship. Clients find the extreme rigour and demand of Lottery procedures in Northern Ireland hard to comprehend, particularly given the ease with which Lottery tickets are purchased by the public in the first instance. There is currently a backlog of around £19 Billion in Lottery funds held in Central Government because distributors are not getting the resources out to the sector quickly enough. The complications of the application and monitoring process are held partly accountable for this.

New work funding appears to have had a major impact on the artistic direction of the theatre sector. Over the years of its operation we have seen a gradual shift in terms of choice of product and virtually all the companies are now producing new work, as many consider this source of Lottery funding essential to survival. Centre Stage, which previously specialised in staging 'Ulster' classics, has recently registered as a limited company so that it can start to make application for Lottery funds, and is planning to stage a new work by a local writer in the New Year. This change in artistic focus has had an impact on the companies' ability to consider meeting the requirements of the regional venues for 'recognisable' touring product - regional venues remain reluctant to promote new work. New work is vital but also needs to be carefully nurtured and quality controlled and there needs to be adequate resources to enable specialist providers in this field to commission and develop new work that may not necessarily end up in production. With output of just two productions each year, the pressure to get it right is even greater.

Judging by the results of this consultation the Lottery is providing a vital source of income and enabling projects to happen, but at the same time is causing administrative and creative burn-out. Companies produced Lottery project files that were several inches thick with paperwork and it does beg the question as to how much more might be achieved both creatively and administratively if companies were not obliged to deal with such levels of bureaucracy in relation to each project grant. The Arts Council has stated its intention to more closely integrate the two funding streams of voted funds and Lottery. This is only likely to have a positive impact on the sector if Lottery funding can be administered in the same way as revenue funds.

## **8.6 Local Authority Support**

### **Belfast**

Belfast City Council's new role in terms of the support and strategic development of the arts in the city from 1994 was seen as long overdue and received with great enthusiasm and appreciation by the local arts sector. Most of the independent companies in Belfast have received support from Belfast City Council. Annual Funding grants were given to Tinderbox (£17,000), Prime Cut (£14,000), Kabosh (£20,600), Replay (£8,318) and Aisling Ghear

(£14,000). Other companies such as Dubbeljoint, Centre Stage and Belfast Theatre Company have received project grants through the Council's Arts Grant Scheme.

It is currently not clear to those working in the sector whether there is any strategic plan and priorities shared by the Arts Council and Belfast City Council as regards the development of the arts in the City (excepting capital provision) and the apportionment of responsibility for the allocation of funds accordingly. It is felt that such liaison, genuine partnership, and shared policy statements are long overdue and would be extremely beneficial to the sector. Improved strategic liaison between the two agencies was one of a number of recommendations identified in the Boyden Southwood Report in 1996.

There is weight to the argument that being based in the regions is not advantageous financially, and that this is not taken into account with regard to Arts Council revenue allocations. Given the shortage of regionally-based companies, and the Arts Council's stated priority to improve geographical spread of provision throughout Northern Ireland, there is more that should be done to incentivise companies to engage more fully with the regions, either through extended touring or by developing partnerships with the regional theatre venues. This could take the form of incentivised funding for partnerships between regional venues and producing companies, or prioritised additional revenue for companies that more fully engage with regional audiences.

## **8.7 Audience Development**

It is extremely difficult to develop audiences without first knowing who your existing audiences are. Most of the companies choose product first in line with artistic policy and then seek an audience for the work. Most have only observational evidence about the make-up of their audiences. It is vital that companies are able to access more and better information on attenders through the venues in which they produce. The best means of capturing data is at point of sale. Research several years ago by the Lottery into the potential of improved electronic ticketing needs to be followed up. The development and support of a co-ordinated, collaborative marketing operation that could provide useful services to the sector with regard to data capture and audience development schemes needs to be encouraged and may prove more effective than the distribution of large amounts of audience development money to individual organisations.

Government's policy priorities with regard to New TSN and addressing social exclusion have impacted on key agencies including the Arts Council. Many of the theatre companies have begun to address new requirements and have increased participatory opportunities, and are engaging more with young people. However, there is more that the companies can do, and there is more that needs to be done in partnership with venues to identify current attenders. Expectations that clients should expand into delivery of education and outreach activity have not generally been accompanied by enhanced core funding from the Arts Council. Many of the audience development initiatives are facilitated by fixed term Lottery funding and it is not clear how these programmes will be sustained once these funds have run their course.

Gathering simple attendance figures for this review was not an easy exercise. One company described its audiences on its Client Report form as 'good, disappointing' etc. where statistics were required. Companies without full-time, professional administrative support are particularly weak in terms of providing statistics, but this should not be an excuse. A template specific to soliciting statistical information on productions could be developed and would be useful. When figures are supplied there is no information given by companies on venue

capacities so it is difficult to gauge success in percentage terms of overall capacity. This exercise highlighted how little analysis has been done on theatre audiences and begged the question as to whose responsibility this was. There have been no broad studies of the sector since the Myerscough report. There needs to be a base line which can be revisited regularly to track development. This is particularly important in the light of the aspiration for Belfast to be European Capital of Culture. The Theatre Producers Group does not currently have the administrative capacity to manage a major research project, although companies could do more in terms of agreeing a formula for gathering basic attendance figures and sharing and analysing information.

Companies need to look again at the timing of productions. Virtually all the companies were in production during the period that this report was compiled. There are perceived merits to performing in the October/November period, and particularly to inclusion in the Belfast Festival programme. In terms of broader audience development, there would be merit in companies trying to spread product more evenly throughout the year. It is possible that there is a lot of overlap in attenders between companies and producing at the same time may be over-stretching the current audience base. There may be more growth achievable by looking at the situation strategically.

The Boyden Report provides extremely valuable information about audiences for live theatre and the new national policy identifies strategic priorities with regard to access and participation. The report details that it is on theatre's 'capacity to attract and stimulate the creative energies of young people as participants and as audiences that live theatre depends for its continuing relevance.' The continuing difficulties in profiling the audiences for small scale independent theatre must be addressed so that audience development can actually be monitored, and companies can be seen to demonstrate how they are collectively serving the widest possible audiences. 'Over the last twenty years, the fragmentation of culture into complex and difficult to reach sub-groups has made it harder for the theatre to attract and retain the attention of young people. Electronic popular culture forms reaching large audiences at low consumption costs threaten the core audience for live performance of all kinds. At the same time, changes in the education system have meant that fewer people leave school with a knowledge of and an affection for the core texts. As theatres have been forced into small cast shows with low design budgets the perceived 'spectacle gap' between subsidised theatre and a sophisticated mixed-media event-based culture has widened inexorably. For many young people, theatre is no longer a natural part of the process of tribal self definition and cultural reinforcement which drives leisure choices.

Government's policy priorities with regard to New TSN and addressing social exclusion have impacted on the agendas of key related agencies including the Arts Council. Many of the theatre companies have begun to address new requirements by providing increased participatory opportunities to engage more with young people. However, the companies do not have enough information to establish an audience baseline and profile from which an effective audience development plan can take shape and to which product choice can be geared. Venues need to play a greater role in terms of data collection and analysis on behalf of the companies.

## **8.8 Venue provision**

### **Belfast**

It is difficult to gauge the real extent to which poor venue provision in Belfast has impacted on the development of the sector and audiences for theatre. The Southwood Report

was commissioned in 1996. Five years on, many of its key recommendations have yet to be implemented, including refurbishment of the Lyric, development of a mid-scale theatre space, and the development of a new purpose-built city centre arts centre. It could take at least another five years for any of the capital proposals to come to fruition. There is limited awareness within the sector of the extent to which the key funding agencies are involved in developing capital provision, and concern at a perceived lack of strategic direction in this regard.

All but one of the independent companies consulted as part of this research are based in Belfast – several should have long outgrown the Old Museum in terms of scale and potential audience demand but continue to play there through lack of appropriate alternative provision. Some companies have resorted to producing site specific work and establishing temporary alternative venues. Often the capacities of such facilities are no greater than the Old Museum's performance space. Although the product can be extremely imaginative and attract new audiences, it tends to be less conducive to touring to other venues outside Belfast. The expense of equipping alternative spaces puts increased financial demands on the companies.

It could be at least another four years before any one of the current planned capital developments comes to fruition. There is an issue to be addressed by all those committed to the development of theatre in Northern Ireland with regard to accommodating small and mid-scale theatre in the interim. Small-scale companies should also consider the capacity of site specific venues and ensure that they are seen to be aspiring to grow audiences over time. This could be demonstrated through the provision of a balanced programme. For example, Tinderbox almost doubled its audience numbers in one year when it produced Marie Jones's 'Ruby' alongside the site-specific 'convictions' – 'convictions' sold out and achieved invaluable local and national critical acclaim for the company and Northern Ireland. It accounted for 11.6% of the company's total audience in that year.

There needs to be a clear strategic direction with regard to future scenarios for provision of an infrastructure for theatre. Proposals for new venues are welcomed by the companies, but there is understandably a concern that there will not be adequate revenue funds to follow and support the capital investment. New theatre buildings do not inevitably result in good theatre – there must be adequate programming and production finance to allow the facilities to be used to maximum effect. In Belfast we face a possible scenario whereby in five years time there could be a new mid-scale space at the Opera House, a studio and new mid-scale black box space at 'The Hub' (OMAC's proposed new venue in the Cathedral Quarter), and a refurbished Crescent with multi-purpose flexible space. The Arts Council of England's recent Boyden Report and research into producing theatres in other cities such as Glasgow, demonstrate that a 'mixed economy' of theatre (producing/receiving/co-producing) is the only viable way forward for theatres in the current financial environment. Independent professional companies in Glasgow are frequently involved in co-productions with Tron/Tramway/Citizens. We may therefore also have a refurbished dual auditorium Lyric Theatre that of necessity hosts a combination of in-house productions, visiting productions and co-productions. Here is another set of challenges. Who will take the necessary strategic decisions before capital funding is allocated to ensure that new provision is the most appropriate for the healthy development of the theatre sector.

There is a real danger ahead for Belfast venues and companies if key agencies are not prepared to pay the real cost of developing a thriving cultural sector. Belfast venues could suffer a similar fate as many of the new regional spaces – great new venues but not enough quality arts product because the resources available for programming and production are inadequate and there has been insufficient investment in the development of product and related audiences. There is an urgent requirement for debate and discussion about infrastructure

development, exploring how the sector and the key support agencies can rise to the challenge of meeting the needs of its theatre companies as well as current and potential audiences. There needs to be more debate on how these are to be resourced and what role the key agencies will be able to play in assisting both the capital and ongoing revenue expense.

## **8.9 Terms and Conditions**

Some of Northern Ireland's most experienced actors, in the business for over twenty years, are currently working in theatre in Northern Ireland for £350 a week. The independent companies that use union contracts pay between £275 and £350 per week. The companies on extremely low levels of revenue are unable to afford to use union contracts. Individual practitioners are subsidising the arts in Northern Ireland to an as yet unquantified level. Changes to Lottery criteria mean that actors' salaries can now be funded through Lottery, and this gives companies the option to address adverse terms and conditions if the key agencies are supportive of aspiring to good practice with regard to salary levels. Core full-time staff salaries range from £14,000 - £20,000 and this cannot be addressed without additional core investment.

The pool of professional actors based in Belfast and Northern Ireland is dwindling. Incentives to stay are few and far between with a slender production base, and decreasing cast sizes. Increasing subsidy to the sector is the only way at present to increase productivity levels and thereby increase employment opportunities. The Arts Council could also explore ways in which it might assist arts organisations to deal with unforeseen personnel issues such as recruitment costs, maternity benefits etc.

The agencies that manage and distribute public funds can offer staff pension schemes, standard annual inflationary increases, job evaluations, progressive pay scales, overtime or time off in lieu, maternity leave pay etc. This is very far removed from the conditions in which most artists and administrators are expected to work in the independent theatre sector. The Arts Council plan aims to increase opportunities for artists working to the highest standards and in innovative ways – there should also be a parallel commitment to promoting and monitoring improvements in terms and conditions of employment.

## **8.10 Strategic Development**

There have been a wealth of publications launched in the current year, outlining the strategies of key agencies with regard to the development of the arts and the creative industries. None of these documents appear to offer any strategic focus to the development of artforms, although specific pieces of research have been commissioned in relating to particular artforms including visual arts, craft, opera, and film. None of these strategies currently offer the sector a costed Action Plan identifying income and expenditure to meet aspirational targets, and this has given rise to a certain amount of cynicism about the ability of key agencies to deliver their own goals.

The key agencies concentrate on cross-cutting issues in line with Government policy priorities. In the context of the issues raised in this report, it is evident that more, quality theatre will not automatically develop as a result of increased audience development and access initiatives. It is impossible to develop audiences for the arts without an adequate supply of quality product and a solid base of practising artists. Audience development and increased access are two of many essential goals that every arts organisation should pursue, but they will not in themselves make good art. There will be very little theatre to develop audiences for, for cultural tourists to attend, to open out access to, and to tour to new purpose-built regional

venues, if we do not create an environment in which practitioners feel secure, valued, able to develop artistically, and in which their core activity is adequately resourced.

There is a perception in the theatre sector that the Arts Council is not strategic despite reference to itself in its five year plan as a 'development agency and a funder of the arts'. For example, the TPG feels that the ACNI should be taking a leading role in developing and implementing strategies, not just acting as a mechanism for distributing funds. There is a feeling that occasional studies and papers by key agencies have not translated into resourced actions. Within the context of this study, there is general consensus that the Arts Council has not been proactive in developing and implementing policy relating to theatre and if the Arts Council does not develop artform strategies it begs the question who will?

The nine strategic objectives in the Arts Council's plan include specific mention of engagement with community arts and engagement with voluntary arts – there is no specific mention of professional arts and it is understandable that this has given rise to a sense of insecurity amongst professional arts organisations as to whether there is a real commitment by the Arts Council to championing the case for continuing and increasing support for professional arts practitioners and organisations. The recent increase in lobbying directly to Government by the independent theatre sector would be viewed as a symptom of this concern.

The latest trend in strategic development terms is cultural planning. Northern Ireland has a new Department of Culture which is encouraging local authorities to develop cultural plans. Belfast City Council has recently re-titled its Arts and Heritage Unit as Culture and Arts Unit and no longer has a focused arts strategy having brought all the functions of its Development Department together in the broader 'Renaissance Strategy' document. Belfast's bid has been launched for European Capital of Culture. There is a real danger that this shift in strategic emphasis will mean that resources previously assigned to arts budgets will now be stretched to fit a broader cultural agenda. Potential increases in the budget of DCAL will not necessarily find their way to the Arts Council – this substantial new Government Department has many competing interests to attend to. There is no evidence as yet of adequate new resources within local authorities to meet the requirements of progressive cultural planning and development. Imagine Belfast is essentially a new organisation with its own demands in terms of start-up and operation and a broad agenda to satisfy. There is an unanswered question as to who will enable the existing arts infrastructure to stabilise and engage in a meaningful way in imagining a more creative future for Belfast and Northern Ireland. The creative industries are being researched and developed separately from the arts, yet the definitions of the two are interchangeable. £3 million has been allocated directly to the creative industries and is being administered separately from the arts budget. The theatre sector has a crucial role to play in terms of the development of the creative industries, but it seems unlikely that new creative industries resources will be geared towards basic stabilisation requirements of the sector.

### **8.11 Partnership**

The Arts Council stated at the Theatre Exchange Conference that the Arts Council was keen to work in partnership with the emerging sectoral lobby group. The content of the recent exchange of correspondence between the Arts Council and the Independent Professional Theatre lobby does not create a sense of a working partnership and could be regarded as combative. There is evidence of strong frustrations on the part of the IPTL at lack of progress by the Arts Council in addressing the needs of the sector. It is evident from the Theatre Exchange Conference that the Arts Council feels that it is working to achieve its priority objectives in collaboration with the theatre sector. Having talked with the sector it seems clear

that they do not share all the Arts Council's priority objectives, and more dialogue is needed between the two if true trust and partnership is to evolve.

### **8.12 Sectoral Growth**

Few new companies have remained on the scene in recent years. There are a wide range of companies that produce occasional projects, such as Bruiser, Shanakee, Glassceiling, Puppetus etc. but none appear to have been able to make the transition into a full-time operation. Part of the difficulty may be that there is simply no room within revenue funding for new clients. The Arts Council also no longer distributes project funding through which companies like Kabosh gained a first foot on the funding ladder. Issues such as this need to be explored as part of a broader strategic view of theatre development. 'Awards for All' is one potential avenue.

### **8.13 Lobby/Corporate**

The emergence of an Independent Professional Theatre Lobby, separate from the Theatre Producers Group, has caused some confusion, even within the sector itself, about the roles and remits of the different organisations. There are differing views as to whether the Independent Theatre Lobby is adequately representative of the sector that it seeks to promote and support. There is a counter argument however that, until the emergence of the IPTL, the proactive lobbying by the independent theatre sector was negligible and important opportunities were being lost to make a case for increased support. The degree to which companies actively participate in the corporate agenda is variable. Some offer tacit support whilst others are very prominent and at the forefront of discussions and negotiations. Some, although in agreement with the principle of lobbying, are not enamoured by the style with which it is being carried out.

Changes in arts funding patterns in recent years are perceived to be in part attributable to the success of the community arts lobby. Perceptions within the independent professional theatre sector are that the Arts Council and Government bowed to pressure from a regular campaign of aggressive and highly vocal, public attacks from the community sector. There is a belief that 'he who shouts loudest gets'.

It is unfortunate that the theatre sector, a relatively small community, is still unable to speak with one united voice. It is symptomatic of an insecurity within the arts sector that is borne out of a climate of competition for limited resources. Producing theatre companies are now competing with new theatre venues for any new funds that might be found. It is unlikely that allowances have been made to satisfy the needs of new players. Key agencies are receiving correspondence from both the TPG and the IPTL, often with similar substance if slight difference in tone. The community arts sector which has successfully unlocked new and additional resources and is the subject of a major sectoral review, galvanised wide support under one banner. Some of Northern Ireland's most successful and well-known theatre practitioners could be embraced within one lobby and local practitioners should look to successful models such as the Federation of Scottish Theatres. The FST has reaped the benefits of articulating the needs of its theatre community as a whole – independent companies, receiving and producing venues, and arts development officers work together to develop the profile, status and funding of professional theatre at Government level.

## **9. The Way Forward**

- 9.1 The theatre sector urgently requires a strategy which is particular to the development of all aspects of the artform. This will help to provide a clear sense of direction and priority need, identify overall resource requirements and potential sources of support, and ensure that the theatre sector in Northern Ireland is in a position to achieve its full potential. This should include a strategy for the development of capital provision for theatre in Belfast. It is reported that a capital strategy for Belfast is to be announced by the Arts Council early in 2002.
- 9.2 The Arts Council and Belfast City Council should revisit the key issues and recommendations of the Southwood Review of Performing Arts Venues and Spaces.
- 9.3 Additional revenue funding is vital if the Arts Council wishes to maintain and consolidate the current client base of revenue funded theatre companies and enable them to improve existing productivity levels and in some cases address adverse terms and conditions of employment. Revenue resources in the sector are currently spread too thinly and companies are struggling to survive, particularly those on less than £50,000. Revenue levels for key client companies in other UK regions are significantly higher than in Northern Ireland. Any revenue increases should be carefully discussed with individual clients, particularly with regard to agreeing specific outcomes. If no new money can be found, then the Arts Council should consider reducing the number of companies and re-dividing resources.
- 9.4 Funding agencies should encourage good practice amongst companies with regard to terms and conditions of employment and seek to ensure that resources are not spread too thinly at the expense of the individual artist.
- 9.5 Further consultation with regard to Lottery procedures is planned for the New Year. The Arts Council has also indicated that revenue and Lottery streams will become inextricably linked in the future. The Arts Council must continue to find more ways to ease the administrative burden for companies seeking to access Lottery funds. Current criteria and procedures are causing significant distress amongst arts professionals and placing increased administrative burdens on standstill levels of core staff. The ideal scenario would be one combined allocation of funding for an agreed annual programme of activity. This would have a radical effect in terms of improving morale within the sector, promoting good practice in terms of planning and budgeting, and achieving increased results in terms of creative development and product delivery. A reduction in time spent on grant application procedures could be spent on tackling audience development and income generation.
- 9.6 A template for companies to record monitoring data should be developed. The current format of reporting is soliciting mixed results in terms of the quality and quantity of information. More detailed information is required, particularly with regard to audiences, performance, and employment levels. This information should be shared amongst companies as it is important that the sector is aware of trends and patterns within the broader sector.
- 9.7 The Council should make available more specific detail on funding assessments for individual clients when funding decisions are announced. This could mean simply more detail about the agreed targets for each client and positioning with regard to Arts

Council strategic objectives. This will go some way towards raising awareness and understanding of the rationale behind decisions.

- 9.8 The revenue funded companies should explore successful models of broader-based theatre lobbies such as the Federation of Scottish Theatre.
- 9.9 The Arts Council should clarify the situation with regard to the introduction of multi-annual funding, letting clients know whether it can ever be implemented in Northern Ireland and if so, what the likely timescale might be. Such information provision would be morale-boosting and confidence-building.
- 9.10 Resources and strategy for improvements to electronic ticketing are required in order that audience data can be better captured and analysed by venues. The Lottery had commenced work in this area previously which should be followed through.
- 9.11 An audience baseline study is required for the arts in Northern Ireland to better establish the number and profile of current and potential arts attenders. This could form part of a broader economic impact study which updates Myerscough, measures development since the mid 90s, and provides a baseline for the Capital of Culture bid. Such an exercise needs to be carried out at agreed intervals. It is a major piece of research, and the arts community do not have the capacity to manage such a project.
- 9.12 The Arts Council should host an information meeting for theatre companies at which venue managers can outline their various proposals for capital development in Belfast incorporating theatre provision.
- 9.13 Further clarification is required as to resource and strategy options for touring work outside Ireland. Opportunities are currently being lost for theatre companies to showcase their work abroad due to a perceived lack of support mechanisms. Cultural export is a key consideration of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and companies need further encouragement in this regard.
- 9.14 Additional subsidy for cross-border touring has been used to good effect in terms of extending production runs, employment opportunities and audiences. The Arts Council should seek to maintain its North/South Touring Scheme in partnership with agencies in the south.
- 9.15 The Arts Council should seek to establish a number of bursaries which support year-long trainee posts in creative roles such as Assistant Director. This will help to bridge the gap between drama graduate and professional employment, and ensure that there are opportunities for new creative individuals to establish credibility at entry level to the sector.
- 9.16 The education sector needs to be made aware of skills gaps within the theatre sector so that strategies can be developed for meeting demand.

## Consultees

Aisling Ghear, Gearoid O’Caireallain  
Belfast Theatre Company, Paddy Scully  
Big Telly, Zoe Seaton and Bernie Magill  
Centre Stage, Roma Tomelty  
DubbelJoint, Pam Brighton  
Kabosh, Anne Langford  
Prime Cut, Jackie Doyle  
Replay, Richard Croxford  
Tinderbox, Eamon Quinn  
Jan Branch, Independent Producer  
Drew McFarlane, Equity  
Graham McLaren, Theatre Babel, Glasgow  
John Morgan, TAG, Glasgow  
Heather Baird, Federation of Scottish Theatre  
Imelda Foley, Arts Council of Northern Ireland  
Eamon Bradley, Ardhoven Theatre  
Jill Holmes, Marketplace Theatre  
Tony McCance, Burnavon, Cookstown  
Michael Poynor, Millennium Forum

## **Role**

What is the role of the independent professional theatre sector and is this different from what should it be. Traditionally independent companies have often developed out of a frustration with 'mainstream' theatre – a creative urge to experiment with the artform and provide more challenging and innovative work. Usually driven by one or two key individuals whose ongoing commitment to and involvement in the company is its lifeblood and intrinsic to its identity. Exploded on to the scene full of colour, energy, creativity, vision. Fringes of the sector. Who is providing fringe and who is providing mainstream drama in Northern Ireland?. Blurred.

Theatre sector in Northern Ireland experiencing problems, - Lyric – closure of the Arts – development of two large-scale Entertainment venues in recent years – very welcome to the development of Belfast and Northern Ireland, but taxing under-developed audience base.

Seed bed for the development of new talent in all aspects of the creative process

The ageing process –

Continuum

Audiences

Room for company's that more specifically focus on creating product for particular groups.

## Regional Venues

The independent professional theatre community is an extremely significant element of the Northern Ireland theatre sector. Provides a high proportion of the drama product available to local audiences. Significant employer. This of course is relative. Look at the theatre listings each week in UK or Ireland-wide supplements to recognise that for a substantial part of the year the choice for local audiences is extremely limited in comparison to other cities. Exacerbated in recent years – difficulties at the Lyric, closure of the Arts.

All the more significant given the difficulties faced by other key components in recent years

Is professional theatre represented on any of the Creative Industries Groups

## **Future scenarios**

Data capture

There have been quite significant and regular changes to Arts Council application forms over a relatively short period of time. This does pose difficulties in terms of gathering statistics and

tracking development in particular areas over a period of time. In the summary expenditure section of the client report form companies have been interpreting headings differently making it difficult to offer direct comparisons of spend in these areas. In particular As well as changes to revenue application forms there have been ?

The quality and quantity of information provided in the forms does vary between companies and tends to be extremely weak in those companies that do not have full-time administration.

Formal report forms for revenue allocations for 2000/2001 had not been requested from clients at the time this research was undertaken. This is in complete contrast to Lottery which operates extremely stringent monitoring procedures