



ARTS COUNCIL OF NORTHERN IRELAND

## Review of the Strategic Plan 2001-2006

Conducted by Deloitte MCS, Belfast, May 2006 : Summary

Between 2001 and 2006, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) operated within the guidance of a Strategic Plan entitled *The Arts: Inspiring the Imagination, Building the Future*. As the period covered by that plan drew to an end, the Arts Council commissioned a review of its achievements to date, both to report to stakeholders and to inform the next phase of the Council's development.

Deloitte MCS Ltd conducted the review between September 2005 and April 2006, and a detailed report is now available to the public. It includes much detailed analysis of the Arts Council's work, but the broad findings are that:

- The Arts Council has achieved a substantial part of the ambitious goals that it set in 2001, especially in relation to support for arts organisations and individual artists;
- Its financial support to the arts in Northern Ireland has been increased, and the principle organisations have the greater security of multi-annual funding agreements;
- The application process and service to the arts constituency have been improved, along with the organisation's internal management processes;
- There have been valuable initiatives in access, education and audience development, and the arts infrastructure outside Belfast has been upgraded;
- Some elements of the strategy were implemented relatively late in the five year period it covered, with the result that they have not yet fully achieved their potential;
- Communications could be better and there is evidence of misunderstanding or wariness among some stakeholders about aspects of the Arts Council's aims and work;
- There are weaknesses in the Arts Council's knowledge base, though this is not unusual in the cultural sector, and measures are being taken to improve the situation.

The rest of this document outlines these principle findings in further detail.

This document is a summary of a review of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Strategic Plan for the period 2001-2006. The review was undertaken by Deloitte MCS Ltd, between September 2005 and April 2006, and published in Belfast in May 2006. The full text of the report is available from by the Arts Council, MacNeice House, 77 Malone Road, Belfast BT9 6AQ (tel. 02890 385200) or from the ACNI website at: <http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/>. The summary was prepared by François Matarasso, who also advised the Deloitte team on some cultural issues.

## INTRODUCTION

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### The Arts Council of Northern Ireland

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland was established in 1995 as a non-departmental public body, and the successor to an earlier association. Its purpose is similar to those of its peers in England, Scotland and Wales, namely:

- 'To develop and improve the knowledge, appreciation and practice of the arts;
- To increase public access to, and participation in, the arts; and
- To advise the Department and other government departments, district councils and other bodies on matters relating to the arts;'

It is the lead development agency for the arts in Northern Ireland, offering financial and other support to artists and arts organisations through Treasury and National Lottery funds.

### The Review of the Strategic Plan

In 1995, the Arts Council adopted its first strategic plan, *To The Millennium*, which was followed by a second plan covering the period 2001 to 2006. These documents have guided the organisation's work and development over the past decade. In summer 2005, the Arts Council sought independent expertise to review its progress under the current plan and, following an open tender process, appointed Deloitte MCS Ltd to do the work.

The review was conducted through desk research, interviews and discussion groups, with regular reports to an Arts Council Reference Group. A wide range of stakeholders were consulted, including people who had received and been refused grants, public bodies, local government, the voluntary sector, members, staff and the public. A full analysis of ACNI documents and records was undertaken, and the final report is based on both documentary and other evidence, tested throughout the process by reference to key stakeholders.

## THE STRATEGIC PLAN 2001 - 2006

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### The Vision and Priorities

The Arts Council set out its vision in the title of its second strategic plan, *The Arts: Inspiring the Imagination, Building the Future*. This reflected its aspiration to place the arts at the heart of economic and social development in Northern Ireland. Underpinning that goal were four priorities:

1. To increase opportunities for creative participation in the arts;
2. To develop new audiences for the arts;
3. To extend opportunities for artists to develop their work and practice; and
4. To strengthen the capacity of arts organisations to deliver quality experiences of the arts.

### The Objectives

These priorities were interpreted in seven strategic objectives for the Arts Council's programme for the period; (another, relating to internal management was added in 2002). These objectives have framed all the Arts Council's work in the period under review: the various programmes and initiatives developed since 2001 have all been directly linked to delivery of one or more of them. Deloitte's work therefore focused principally on the extent to which these programmes achieved their outcomes, and how the Arts Council operated to deliver them. The objectives are reproduced below (see 'Delivery Against Objectives'), alongside Deloitte's summary findings.

## THE CONTEXT

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Since the Arts Council operates in partnership with many public, private and voluntary sector bodies, and within a wider cultural environment, the review had to put developments since 2001 into a broader context. Many external factors

have influenced, for better or worse, the Arts Council's ability to achieve its plans, but the following were considered particularly important by the review team:

- Developments in the political framework of affairs in Northern Ireland, following the Good Friday Agreement;
- Increasing policy interest in the potential of the arts and culture to contribute to economic development and social cohesion;
- Developments in arts management practice and research in the UK and elsewhere;
- Shifts in how art is produced, distributed and consumed as a result of social, demographic and technological change.

The review calculates that increased government spending allowed the Arts Council to raise its spend per head of population by 23% over the period. However, this was less than the growth secured over the same period by Arts Councils in Scotland (44%), Wales (55%) and England (61%). In 2005-06, the amount spent on the arts per head of population in Northern Ireland (£6.33) was 69% of that in the UK (£9.23) and 59% of spending in the Republic of Ireland (£10.72).

After many years of restricted arts funding, the Arts Council's relatively low increases in grant aid, together with Northern Ireland's comparatively small arts sector, help to explain why the period 2001 to 2006 is characterised by stabilisation rather than the growth evident in England.

## ARTS COUNCIL PROGRAMMES

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland is an enabling agency. It sees its task as being to support artists and arts organisations to thrive, but not to manage arts facilities or companies itself. Its single most important method of assisting artists is through the distribution of funds, and it has four principal grant schemes:

- Support for the Individual Artist (SIAP);
- Annual Support for Organisations (ASOP);
- Special Initiatives and Project Funds; and
- National Lottery Programmes.

The review finds that grants through these programmes increased substantially between 2001/02 and 2004/05:

- SIAP up by 124% to almost £1 million;
- ASOP up by 41% to £7.4 million;
- Special Initiatives up by 87% to £1.5 million;
- Lottery funds up by 68% to £13.8 million.

Importantly, increasing funds allowed more artists and organisations to get support from the Arts Council. Over this period, the number of awards made under SIAP increased from 194 to 394, and through National Lottery funds from 260 to 422.

The review calculates that between 45% and 55% of applications to the Support for the Individual Artist Programme were successful, and that the awards were weighted towards the fields of visual art, music and literature.

A total of 130 organisations are supported on an annual basis through ASOP; 63% of them receive less than £30,000 a year. Thirteen organisations receive about 56% of the total funds allocated to this programme. Music and opera receives 29% of ASOP funds and drama gets 21%.

Lottery funds were distributed via several targeted schemes. Forty one percent of the budget was allocated to capital projects, 33% to access and audience development and 10% to new work. Community and combined arts was the main art form (44%); drama received 18% and music 15%.

During this period, Special Initiatives funds supported strategic programmes focusing on young people, regeneration, access to arts venues, Belfast's bid to be European Capital of Culture and some under-represented forms such as craft, applied arts and design.

## DELIVERY AGAINST OBJECTIVES

The review's main focus is the Arts Council's progress in respect of the strategic objectives set out in its Strategic Plan. This section gives a brief outline of the review's main findings in this area.

### **1 To increase opportunities for artists working to the highest standards and in innovative ways**

The main activities undertaken for this objective were the Support for the Individual Artist Programme and funding new commissions. Further support was given through professional development initiatives, travel bursaries and showcase platforms for artists to present their work.

The review finds that the Arts Council has had a significant impact in this area, with a high proportion of artists reporting that its support had enabled them to create work that would not otherwise have been possible and to develop artistically and professionally. There were suggestions for minor changes to the programme, but consultation feedback was generally very positive. The combination of initiatives is beginning to make a real difference to the work and careers of individual artists in Northern Ireland.

### **2 To strengthen the arts infrastructure**

The arts infrastructure is taken by the Arts Council to include not just the venues and fabric that enable the arts to happen, but the key organisations that form the bedrock of arts creation in Northern Ireland. A wide range of initiatives were undertaken in pursuit of this objective:

- Investment through the Annual Support for Organisations Programme;
- The introduction of three-year funding cycles for some organisations (MAP);
- Launch of a Business Support Programme;
- Investment in arts facilities and equipment;
- The establishment of Craft NI and support for Irish and Ulster Scots language work;

- Various activities in individual art forms such as literature, architecture and dance;
- Technical support through the annual survey of work and the evaluation toolkit.

These initiatives have been more complex than those for individual artists, and their impact has been more varied. Some, such as the launch of Craft NI or the investment in arts facilities outside Belfast, have had a clear positive impact. Others, like the annual survey of regularly funded organisations, are too recent to be fully felt.

There are also initiatives, such as the development of multi-annual funding, that are welcomed, but whose future sustainability some in the arts sector consider insecure. Finally, there are aspirations in respect of this objective, such as development of arts facilities of Belfast, that remain unfulfilled.

Although substantial progress has been made here, some initiatives happened more slowly than expected and others remain incomplete. But the key issue, governing the Arts Council's ability to achieve its own and others' aspirations for the arts infrastructure, is its relatively limited funding. The review notes that two thirds of regularly funded organisations receive less than £30,000 a year. It is hard to see how the stability and strengthening that both the Arts Council and the arts sector aim for can be achieved within these parameters.

### **3 To engage with community arts to increase opportunities for creative participation, to develop new audiences and to expand the range of contexts in which artists work**

The Arts Council aimed to achieve this objective through several strands of work, underpinned by an investment of some £17.7 million in community arts work between 2001/02 and 2004/05. In addition to support for existing projects, a number of new initiatives were implemented including the Artists in the Community Scheme, Art in Contested Spaces and Cultural Traditions, among

others. The sector was also supported by the creation of an evaluation toolkit for community and voluntary arts, and the appointment of an additional member of Arts Council staff with responsibility for social inclusion.

The achievements in the community arts sector were widely, though not universally, recognised by people in the review consultations. Whether it has been possible to achieve a sustainable level of work, and consistency for the practitioners is, for the same reasons of resources that apply to objective 2, open to interpretation.

#### **4 To engage with voluntary arts to increase opportunities for creative participation, to develop new audiences and to expand the range of contexts in which artists work**

There is a degree of overlap between objectives 3 and 4, since community and voluntary arts activities, while distinct in their ethos and practice, have much in common. The Arts Council's work therefore parallels to some degree that in community arts, though the investment pattern has been different. Funds have been mainly directed at support organisations (Voluntary Arts Ireland) and networks (Northern Ireland Visual Arts Forum and the Association of Ulster Drama Festivals). Other voluntary arts work has been supported through Awards for All and, to a lesser degree, through other programmes. The sector has also benefited from the evaluation toolkit.

Although these are significant steps, the review reports some feeling that the Arts Council has still to engage fully with the voluntary arts sector. Some consultees felt that ACNI makes distinctions between professional and voluntary arts practice to the disadvantage of the latter. The fairness or correctness is not the main issue; rather the review highlights that, despite demonstrable progress, the Arts Council still has work to do to achieve this objective fully.

#### **5 To increase the quality of access for disabled people to the arts**

The Arts Council took various steps to improve access to the arts by disabled people. These include funding organisations working with disabled people (such as Open Arts or Drake Music) or working to improve access to non-specialist provision (e.g. through ADAPT NI). Alongside this, the Arts Council supported initiatives to raise awareness of the issue, for instance through the Arts and Disability Awards Ireland, and commissioned research and access auditing work.

The adoption of this objective by the Arts Council was widely welcomed and consultees recognised that good progress had been made. At the same time, wider aspirations were expressed, for instance in relation to arts in health. Here, as in some other areas, it was evident that even people quite closely involved in the sector were not fully aware of what the Arts Council is doing.

More generally, it may be observed that this objective is not something that will be achieved in the near future, since expectations and ideas of quality change. It is perhaps inevitable that, at the broad level on which a Strategic Plan operates, objectives tend to be general and aspirational. Specific goals and targets are more useful in the context of a yearly action plan.

#### **6 To enhance children's and young people's access through creative expression through the arts, in contexts of their own choosing, and increase opportunities for participation as they grow and develop**

The Arts Council created two major new initiatives intended advance this objective. The first, Creative Youth Partnerships (CYP), is a £1.55 million partnership with the Department of Education, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Education and Library Boards. It was launched in 2004 and aims to develop an

active role for the arts in Northern Ireland's schools. The Early Years Programme invests about £165,000 in arts activities and training for artists working in a pre-school context. In addition to these programmes, many organisations funded through ASOP and the Lottery work with children and young people.

An early evaluation of CYP by the Education and Training Inspectorate found substantial strengths to its work, which was rated variously as satisfactory to excellent. This also identified areas for practical and administrative attention, some of which were also reported in the review consultation process. Beyond these, there was wide support for what the Arts Council is achieving in this area, and a wish to see it extended beyond schools, and to more forms of art. In the context of these focused programmes and the engagement of young people by a wide range of regularly funded arts organisations, the review finds that the Arts Council has made significant progress towards this objective.

## **7 To increase audiences for the arts**

The Arts Council has invested substantially to increase audiences for the arts. It has supported structural developments, such as a computerised box office system for 16 venues, at a cost of over half a million pounds to date. It has established Audiences NI and the Internet guide, artslistings.com. Between 2001 and 2004, it invested £300,000 in an Audience Development Programme. It has also commissioned research into barriers to the arts, and published baseline information about attendance and participation in the arts in Northern Ireland.

The Review finds that there has been substantial progress towards this objective, particularly in the most recent period. The Audience Development Programme was valued, but it was argued by some consultees that it should have been sus-

tained for longer to fulfil its potential. It is still early to assess the impact of Audiences NI and the listings service, and there are aspects of both that remain to be worked out. Lack of consistent or reliable knowledge about past audiences for the arts make it impossible to give a definitive assessment of the impact of the Arts Council's success in this area so far. However, the measures taken in the past three years and evidence of consultees confirms that solid foundations have been laid for audience development.

## **MANAGEMENT ISSUES**

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The terms of reference for the review required Deloitte to consider a number of management and administrative issues in respect of how the Arts Council functions. Some of the most salient points are set out here.

### **Planning, management and value for money**

The review recognises the continuing improvement in the Arts Council's planning, management and administration processes. Stakeholders identified clear progress in all these areas, with positive results for many aspects of the Arts Council's work and service. However improvements should be made to the planning cycle to coordinate the objectives, actions and targets more effectively. Among other consequences, this made it impossible in some areas to compare data from the beginning of the period with later achievements.

The review finds that the Arts Council's programmes are fit for purpose and effective, but notes a number of areas where they might be improved. In terms of Value for Money, the Review found that the Arts Council's administration costs (at 12%) are comparable with those of its counterparts in Scotland and Wales. Comparison with Arts Council England highlights the economies of scale possible within larger budgets.

## Information

The review finds that the Arts Council has made significant progress in developing its systems for monitoring its investment in the arts sector. The development of an annual survey for regularly funded organisations, of equal opportunities monitoring and of the evaluation toolkit are all recognised as important achievements.

However, there remain gaps in the information gathered about the impact of investment, and these can make it difficult to connect the outcomes of the Arts Council's programmes with the strategic planning process. The review notes the limited quantitative evidence of the impact of investment. It is still more difficult to assess progress in relation to issues of quality, whether of the work or the experience of audiences and participants. The Arts Council's difficulties in this area are common to the cultural sector, but it is essential to keep up with international best practice in this area.

## Communication

The Arts Council has developed a much more effective communication strategy during the period under review. The relative clarity of its Strategic Plan, its publications and the development of its website have all contributed to this. There is scope, however, to build on this and develop a more coherent and pro-active approach to communicating the Arts Council's values, work and offer within the arts sector.

Beyond the arts world, there is often very limited understanding of the Arts Council's priorities and work. This restricts the potential for extending partnership and building support for the arts. There is also a strong wish in the arts constituency to see the Arts Council develop its role in advocating for the arts more widely.

There is evidence of improving relationships between the Arts Council and many of the organisa-

tions it supports, though the picture is mixed. While some report excellent support from officers, others are less satisfied; mistrust has not been wholly overcome, despite welcome transparency in the grant-making process. The review notes scope for improvement in the Arts Council's communications generally.

## CONCLUSIONS

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### Achievements 2001 - 2006

The Review identifies the following successes:

- Increased opportunities for individual artists through SIAP;
- Development of Multi-Annual Funding for key arts organisations;
- A more effective and more open application process with a wider range of opportunities;
- Improvements to arts venues outside Belfast, and better access provision generally;
- Extended access to the arts through better funded community arts programmes;
- Strategic developments in certain forms, notably craft, dance and public art;
- Education work, including Creative Youth Partnerships;
- New attention given to arts and disability and arts and health;
- Strategic work with key partners including Government Departments;
- Improving relationships with clients;
- Improving knowledge base about arts attendance and the Arts Council's impact.

### Areas for attention and development

At the same time, the Review highlights some areas for work in the next planning cycle:

- Continuing improvements to the administration and openness of the grant process;

- Better communication with and beyond the arts sector and dialogue about expectations;
- Continuing improvement of the evidence base (e.g. monitoring and evaluation);
- A better fit between the strategic planning process and yearly work plans;
- Access to the arts by disabled people.

Some of these issues relate to goals in the current plan, where only limited progress was made. Others, however, such as access by disabled people or advocacy for the arts, are long-term and were never likely to be achieved in the period under review. The Arts Council's next plan will need to take all these into account, as well as building on the achievements noted already.

## **NEXT STEPS**

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The Arts Council remains committed to its aim of strengthening the arts in Northern Ireland for the enjoyment and benefit of the whole community.

In tandem with the review process, Council members and staff have been rethinking how this might be done better through the next strategic plan. A draft of this, which takes account of all the findings of the Deloitte review, is in preparation, and will be open for public consultation during the summer.

The new Strategic Plan will set the Arts Council's direction between 2006 and 2011, and lay out the organisation's goals and targets for the coming years. For further information, please contact:

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