

CHAIRMAN'S SPEECH – LAUNCH OF FIVE YEAR STRATEGY
The Baby Grand, Grand Opera House
Monday 29 January 2007 10 30am – 12 noon

Publication of this new 5-year Arts Council Strategy marks a crucial point in the development of the arts in Northern Ireland. A good strategy looks forward and anticipates changing circumstances, it seeks new opportunities and identifies challenges. It provides both the vision for the future - and the framework in which to realise this vision. A good strategy also remembers the past and builds on the successes of previous achievements. This is what 'Creative Connections', the Arts Council's new 5-year plan for the arts in Northern Ireland, is all about.

It is, of course, a shared plan, because the process has been a collaborative one. There has been the widest consultation which the Arts Council has ever undertaken, with the full range of stakeholders, including our political representatives and district councils, and of course arts organisations and artists. All offered us help and ideas on the priorities for arts development in Northern Ireland over the next five years. These ideas are now encompassed in our strategy document. You in the sector have worked with us, from start to finish, and I want to thank you for that.

Of course no overarching plan can satisfy every artist's or arts organisations needs or desires, but it is our task to provide a broad focus for direction to the whole arts community, and to prioritise our limited resources on areas which have been identified as the most important.

At the heart of 'Creative Connections' is the long-held principle which, I know, we share with you, and which we espoused in our outgoing strategy, that 'the arts matter because they enrich the lives of everyone, and because they provide a more cohesive and inclusive view of society.

Creative Connections – this 5-year strategy has four main themes:
To promote the value of the Arts; to strengthen the Arts; to grow audiences;
and to improve organisational performance

The key element in all artistic endeavour is, of course, the artist; and we aim to continue to build support for our Northern Ireland artists in their careers, by providing affordable, high quality workspaces for painters and sculptors; by increasing entrepreneurial skills development in order to enable artists to expand into new markets and explore new media; and by increasing the opportunities for artists and arts organisations to showcase their work at prestigious world festivals such as the Venice Biennale Art Fair and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington DC. The Venice Biennale 2005 experience has already begun to elevate Northern Ireland's image on the international stage.

We all know of the impact that arts and artists from Northern Ireland have made on the world stage. That it far exceeds what might be expected of a

small region, that in the past, and indeed the present - NI has been a cradle of considerable creativity, boasting some of the finest writers, actors, artists and musicians in the world – Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Graham Reid, Frank McGinness, Liam Neeson, Kenneth Branagh, Basil Blackshaw, Willie Doherty, Barry Douglas, Brian Irvine and James Galway.

And, of course, our home grown theatre companies and Ulster Orchestra have also achieved international success, helping to draw the attention of the world to the creative resources of Northern Ireland and our unique sense of culture and identity. It is vital that we continue to nurture such talent and opportunities.

It is also vital that we stabilise the infrastructure of arts organisations and venues across Northern Ireland, and create capacity for development. Arts organisations ideally need long-term guaranteed funding to plan and work effectively. We plan to move to three-year funding, as a start, for a particular number of arts organisations; and to encourage enterprise in the sector by supporting the development of leadership and organisational skills amongst a range of arts providers. Of course most importantly, we intend to help organisations to develop in the marketplace and grow their audiences.

In the preparation of our strategy, we have been mindful of the wider Government agenda, and indeed the Council fully supports Government's vision to develop a "vibrant economy and a fair society". So the strategy details a series of innovative schemes which will contribute to the growth of cultural tourism, the creative industries, the built environment, and the development of entrepreneurial skills for artists.

It has been part of our view at the Arts Council for some time that we must continue to work collaboratively with a wide range of agencies - in health, education, housing, in architecture, and tourism to contribute to the wider social and economic goals. It is perhaps not enough recognised the vital role that artists in Northern Ireland presently play in this respect. That many have diversified to meet the increasingly wide-ranging demands of a society in transition. You will still find artists occupying the traditional artistic high ground as social commentators, and critics, and visionaries, but artists are also influencing and shaping society directly, working at local community level or in our schools and hospitals; and indeed in the growing creative industries – making a real contribution to the re-generation of our economy and society.

75,000 school children took part in arts workshops last year across a whole range of programmes. It is in our plan, through the Creative Youth Partnership programme, that soon thousands more children and young people will be able to participate in projects for young people, as we extend CYP beyond the school gates into the most disadvantaged communities.

Of course, arts provide an essential part of a balanced education, providing distinctive learning experiences which help to form the basis of the development of rounded individuals. This is a view shared by 99% of the population of Northern Ireland according to some recent research. It is a well

established fact that in education the arts can also help develop communication and social skills, as well as creative and thinking skills.

If I move to the healthcare environment - over the past 30 years the relationship between arts and improved health outcomes has been increasingly recognised. This has been manifested through arts in hospital programmes, therapeutic work and the use of arts as a core recreational activity in long term care facilities. Most important perhaps is the development of links between the arts and public health policy that recognises not only the preventative capacity of the arts but its power to aid patient recovery and reduce anxiety and depression levels. For example, in Westminster and Chelsea Hospital the positive power of the arts reduced patients' stay in hospital by one day, on average, representing a substantial cost saving to the NHS. This value was endorsed in a British Medical Journal article in 2002 entitled "Spend (slightly) less on health and more on the arts".

The Arts Council has a strong track record of public art in hospitals. In recent years we have invested just under £1.2m in a variety of healthcare facilities across the province. As a result of that type of support for both health service staff and patients, 87% of those surveyed at the Mater Hospital described arts activity as beneficial to their sense of well-being.

Other significant interventions include the Clown Doctors programme delivered in our hospitals for life-limited children and creative workshops and programmes, offered by ArtsCare, to patients with both physical illnesses and learning disabilities.

This is a success story and we are proud of our strong association with the health sector which has yielded such benefit for patients, visitors and staff."

In Architecture – the transforming power of art and architecture has been an important theme for the Arts Council for some time. We know that arts led urban renewal has transformed the image of many of the world's cities. Think of Bilbao of Newcastle and Gateshead of Dublin, and all those years ago Sydney and its Opera House. The initiatives not only changed how the world perceived them but, just as importantly, how they felt about themselves. With urban regeneration was re-born civic pride.

Indeed many major international agencies are addressing the future of cities through a co-ordinated strategy for development which makes connections with high quality design and a creative arts sector. We are working with the RSUA and other such agencies on this because we believe it is essential that in NI we too move in that direction.

Think of the Waterfront Hall, built in 1997, and its surrounding public space at Lanyon Place, this is an example of the impact, in recent times, of arts-led urban regeneration on Belfast City, as it re-orientates the city to the River Lagan. Then there is further enlivenment by public art, such as that great iconic 'Big Fish' sculpture by John Kindness and not just in Belfast but all over

Northern Ireland. Think of Derry and that lovely piece “The Emigrants” by Eamonn O’Doherty or the powerful “Atlantic Drift by Locky Morris, and then the fine refurbishment of the Verbal Arts Centre with more to come on stream in the near future.

At the Arts Council we argue strongly, and I am sure it is true of you as well, for the intrinsic cultural value of the arts, but we also highlight and celebrate their associated social and economic benefits.

Innovation and enterprise are now recognised as essential ingredients in the economic growth of any society, and the arts and the wider creative sector can play a real part in this. In Northern Ireland, if we want to prepare ourselves for the challenges of the coming period, the experience of other places tells us that we should invest in the development of a creative entrepreneurial people - in the jargon “tooled up” to provide a strong foundation for a sustainable economy.

One of our big tasks in the coming years, as we work to realise this 5 year vision, is to make politicians, opinion formers, and the general public aware of the considerable contribution arts is making and has the potential to make the lives of everyone and to re-position it as essential to growth and development. - Our Vision: To place Arts at the heart of Northern Ireland’s social, economic and creative life.

The Arts Council cannot do this alone. We hope that with the help of you our partners, we can make the case for strengthening the arts for artists and audiences.

Delivering on this Five Year Strategy will require Government to invest in arts and culture in Northern Ireland in a way which provides parity of treatment with other parts of the United Kingdom and Ireland. Our request to Government is to raise the per capita spend on the arts from £6 to £10, which is an increase of approximately £20m for the 2008 to 2011 funding horizon.

With funding of £10 per head of population, we can ensure that our artists don’t just survive, but have room to grow and add value to the economy.

This investment is crucial if we are to develop further our seed bed of artistic talent and innovation, and if Northern Ireland is to continue to develop creatively.

Lest anyone thinks that we are proposing to be profligate with public money, bear in mind the picture I painted earlier of the arts contribution to health and education; and note the relative size of the budgets for the arts as compared with, for example, the health and education sectors. The Arts Council’s entire budget for the coming year 2007/08 is less than one third of one percent of that allocated to the Department of Health and Social Services; and two-thirds of one percent of the budget allocated to the Department of Education. The contribution made by the arts in these areas far exceeds what would normally be expected from such resources.

It actually takes a modest amount of money to nurture the arts sector, to build trust and confidence with stakeholders, to strengthen skills and to encourage audiences.

There is currently a window of opportunity to make a bid in the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. CSR, as we know, represents a long-term and fundamental review of Government spending, setting out departmental spending plans and priorities for the years 2008/9 to 2010/11.

The Arts Council has been deeply engaged in developing the artistic, social and economic case for additional Government commitment to the arts in NI, and the research is highly persuasive.

I referred earlier to the Venice Biennale and the fact that the experience has already begun to elevate Northern Ireland's image on the international stage, and how that in turn will help attract visitors and investors, and 84% of people agree that arts and cultural activity helps to bring visitors to Northern Ireland by presenting a positive image and adding to the sophistication of its overall appeal.

I spoke of the Smithsonian event in Washington this spring; and it is expected that Northern Ireland's arts participation in this 2007 event will lead to a 10% increase in the number of North American visitors to NI, translating to an estimated additional visitor spend of £2.9 million – a real boost to cultural tourism.

Government funding for the arts also has overwhelming public support, a recent piece of research put the figure at 78% of the Northern Ireland population, and 99% of people interviewed believe that arts provides an essential part of a balanced education.

There are a couple of other interesting facts: for example, two thirds of arts activity supports cross-community participation; and every £1 invested by the Arts Council returns over £3.60 into the local economy.

It not by accident that we chose to launch our strategy in the Grand Opera House, Baby Grand with its marvellous new facilities, and thanks to public investment, the Grand Opera House can now go from strength to strength, building on these solid foundations. It will make an increasing contribution to Belfast's growing cultural confidence and economic prosperity, and help to reinforce the positive image of Belfast as a modern European city, worth visiting and investing in.

Not only is this a building much loved by the Northern Ireland public and one which holds a special place in our hearts. It is a fine example of the drive that is reflected in the "Creative Connections" strategy, to continue to strengthen

the arts infrastructure and to build new audiences for the arts. It is a perfect example of the social, economic and creative dividends of public investment in the arts.

The Arts Council has already invested around £28 million of our Lottery funds in regional arts facilities. Striking new buildings like Armagh's Market Place Theatre, Lisburn's Island Arts Centre and the Millennium Forum in Derry City (which has added substantially to Derry's already vibrant arts offering); these have created a positive impact on the delivery of the full range of arts activities in their areas. It remains our ambition to provide a quality arts building within reach of everyone in Northern Ireland.

Our emphasis recently has been to strengthen the performing arts in Belfast. We've supported DCAL's investment of £27 million with almost £10 million of Lottery money, towards renovating the Crescent Arts Centre, rebuilding the Lyric Theatre, establishing a new arts centre in the Cathedral Quarter, and, of course, the opening of the Baby Grand at the Opera House.

Notwithstanding that, I have to express concern that our development of the city's arts infrastructure is frustratingly slow with the only capital project completed being the Baby Grand - and smaller Black Box - which has also been a welcome addition.

And I want at this point to pay tribute to the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure and Ministers David Hanson, and Maria Eagle and indeed the Permanent Secretary Paul Sweeney who have made available the capital sums which have been pledged so far but, in short, if the scene was bleak for Belfast in autumn 2002 when the City of Culture shortlist was announced and Belfast was not included, it is only a little better now. I would ask Government to consider this during the Comprehensive Spending Review.

In terms of the Review of Public Administration - as the development and funding agency for the arts here, the Arts Council is responsible for developing and delivering this plan which is designed to give cohesion and direction to all of the arts practised across Northern Ireland. Providing a joined-up approach to the arts will be of paramount importance, given that the Review of Public Administration will change the landscape and culture of public services in Northern Ireland. We will seize the opportunity to encourage stronger links between the arts and other policy areas, highlighting the possibilities for using the arts as a transformative tool.

The arts are increasingly recognised in other places as a catalyst for community development and regeneration of civic pride. Successful artists have the potential to make the world talk about NI for all the right reasons and to promote an image of a confident and creative place in which to live, work and do business. This is a vibrant sector which deserves to be nurtured and which is already a potent force in enhancing the image of Northern Ireland abroad. Now is the time to build on what we have.

The vision we have set out is considered and appropriate, planned to keep pace with the artistic and cultural expectations of a modern society; and designed to make a real contribution to the social, economic and cultural re-generation of Northern Ireland.

If we look at social thinkers and designers and architects and artists and, indeed thankfully, some governments across the world, there is increasing recognition of the inherent contribution that arts can make to society in enriching lives, as a source of renewal and growth.

Our 'Creative Connections' strategy will steer the course of the arts in Northern Ireland over the next five years. It is driven by a vision: 'to place the arts at the heart of Northern Ireland's social, economic and creative life'.

We pledge to work in close partnership with artists, arts organisations and other agencies in using all the resources available to us in order to build a culturally rich Northern Ireland.

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