

**ARTS COUNCIL OF NORTHERN IRELAND
RESPONSE TO COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE
REPORT ON ITS INQUIRY INTO THE FUNDING OF THE ARTS
IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

Submitted to the CAL Committee on 15th January 2010

ARTS COUNCIL OF NORTHERN IRELAND RESPONSE TO COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE REPORT ON ITS INQUIRY INTO THE FUNDING OF THE ARTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Preamble

The Board of the Arts Council has now had an opportunity to discuss the recommendations arising from the CAL Committee's Inquiry into Funding of the Arts and finds there are a number of areas and recommendations that it would wish to support: it shares the CAL Committee's ambition to increase participation and access to the arts across society (56% of principal grants are made within the 20% most deprived areas in Northern Ireland) and the Arts Council would, for example, very much like to act on its recommendation to expand the successful STart UP programme, which targeted 'cold spot' areas where there had been little or no previous involvement in the arts. We hope to work with the Committee to explore practical ways to secure the additional resources the extension of this pilot programme would require.

The Board also welcomed the fact that the Inquiry had brought some degree of focus onto the arts with particular emphasis on the aim it set itself at the beginning of the paper

“The arts are one of the key spending areas for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. However, over recent years there has been a growing concern at the relatively low levels of funding to the arts in Northern Ireland as compared to other countries and regions.

In this report, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has sought to establish how and to what level the arts are funded in Northern Ireland by the public and private sectors, the impact of this funding, and how monies are allocated across the various art forms.”

The Board of the Arts Council has embarked on a considered, strategic programme to stabilise the arts sector over a number of years, but particularly in the current round of the CSR, given the modest uplift in its baseline in the past two years. In the final year of the

CSR the Arts Council was aware that new venues were due to come on stream and planned accordingly within the indicative budget advised by DCAL. These include: Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin; the Playhouse; the Waterside Theatre; the Crescent Arts centre; the Lyric and the Metropolitan Arts centre, all of which have significant revenue implications for the Arts Council's budget.

In addition, there are increased pressures on arts organisations which have seen a fall in their capacity to raise money through earned income due to reduced box office receipts, allied to diminished private investment opportunities, all of which combine to mean that the sector is in an even more precarious position than it was two years ago. At the time of the arts sector's Campaign for the Arts, it was argued that a modest increase in public expenditure for the arts would have a disproportionately positive benefit for the economy and society. Sadly, the converse is also true – even the smallest cut will have a disproportionately *negative* impact on what, by comparison, is a very modest area of public funding.

Hence, it was particularly disappointing that in its recommendations the Committee chose not to answer this question but instead to concentrate on the deployment and consolidation of existing funds, rather than tackling head on the evident need for additional public funding for the arts. With the imminent prospect of cuts across public sector spending, the report might have presented a very timely opportunity to appropriately position the arts and to impress that even a small cut will have a wholly disproportionate impact on what is a very **modest** area of public funding. Even the accepted argument for parity of spending with the rest of the UK and Ireland is undermined by the Committee's decision to contest the veracity of the comparative spending figures supplied by each of the Arts Councils. Several of the Committee's recommendations do not appear to be substantiated by analysis of the evidence presented. (This will be discussed at each appropriate recommendation.)

The Arts Council executive furnished a lengthy submission to the Inquiry on 28 February 2009 and the Chief Executive and senior staff presented directly to the Committee on two

occasions. It supplied a number of responses to requests arising from the Inquiry. In addition, all of our funded organisations were encouraged to contribute to the Inquiry. Many of the latter made independent submissions and, indeed, we facilitated three sessions in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry to assist organisations who had no experience in public inquiries as to how best to present their case.

Having furnished detailed evidence from robust data sources, the Arts Council is disconcerted at the number of inaccuracies about both the Council and some of the organisations it funds; these will be detailed later. We are aware that many organisations made written and oral submissions to support the Committee in its deliberations and appreciate that not all of those contributions can be referenced in the main body of the report; however, there appears to have been undue emphasis given to organisations representing the community and voluntary arts sectors without proportionate attention given to the professional arts sector. Many of the latter presented a significant account of their programmes of activity, their beneficiaries and impact as well as their delivery challenges. These appear to be largely ignored and, where reference is made to professional arts organisations such as the Ulster Orchestra, the Lyric and the Grand Opera House, a narrow portrayal of their work is presented with a consequent recommendation that the Arts Council should “require” them to increase the amount of outreach and community work they undertake. The Arts Council would be pleased to receive the Committee’s supporting base-line evidence upon which this recommendation was founded.

Per Capita Spend on the Arts

The Arts Council’s analysis of the per capita arts spend across the UK and Ireland is accurate and represents a true like-for-like comparison of Voted Funds across the five nations in these islands. These figures have been continuously collected for more than ten years and within a framework which has been previously accepted by DCAL.

As capital funding fluctuates on a project by project basis, these comparative figures have never included capital expenditure. The paramount point is that these are the funds that are voted by sovereign parliaments for the express purposes of supporting the arts and not the indirect by-product of other departments' funding.

DCAL's evidence quoted at paragraph 14 in relation to Scotland is not necessarily a helpful comparison. It is stated that per capita spend in Scotland includes reference to spend on the national companies. This is correct. However, we would also point out that, with respect to our national companies, such as the Ulster Orchestra and the Lyric Theatre, those organisations are similarly included in *our* calculations. It is therefore a like for like comparison. We do accept, nonetheless, that investment in our arts infrastructure would enable us to further develop our national companies to an equivalent standard as well as deal with other priorities.

In paragraph 17 we note that in other countries spend on culture refers only to spend by the Culture Ministries responsible. It does not refer to other Departments or Ministries which do not have a remit for arts and culture. The Arts Council contends this is entirely consistent with the framework used by the 5 Arts Councils in these islands as this only describes spending expressly voted for arts purposes by their Parliaments.

.

Other Funding Bodies and the Arts

The Arts Council accepts that as the strategic body for the development of the arts in Northern Ireland many of the Committee's recommendations would be appropriately directed to it. Notwithstanding, we also wish to draw to the Committee's attention the fact that the totality of resources deployed by the Local Authorities in Northern Ireland in support of local arts activity, is greater than the resources distributed by the Arts Council. It is therefore surprising that there are no significant recommendations for Local Authorities to take forward. The Arts Council shares the Committee's desire to maximise

access to the arts and believes that the network of arts venues across Northern Ireland represents a valuable resource to enable that to occur. However, the Arts Council is also aware that the understandable charges levied to community, amateur and voluntary organisations can discourage such access. Interestingly, in some of the larger local authority areas cost considerations can often be prohibitive for professional arts organisations, for example, some of the touring theatre companies can no longer afford to tour because of the high cost of local authority venue hire.

Whilst we share the Committee's aspiration to leverage increased funding for the arts from other Central Government sources, our experience to date shows that the opposite trend is emerging with Departments such as DSD and DE withdrawing funding for vital community arts and youth arts programmes, as well as the difficulties faced by the Re-Imaging Communities Programme to maintain its highly-successful, consortium-funded programme. This situation will be further compounded in light of imminent public sector funding reductions.

ARTS COUNCIL OF NORTHERN IRELAND RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *We recommend that DCAL undertakes research to ascertain how much money is being spent on the arts by other government departments. This information should be used by DCAL and the Arts Council to gain a wider understanding of where arts funding is currently being targeted and to identify areas which receive little or no funding from any department.*

We note the recommendation that DCAL undertakes research to ascertain how much money is being spent on the arts by other government departments. The Arts Council would point out that the latest Regularly Funded Organisations Survey demonstrates that only 2% of income to arts organisations is from other government department sources. This represents such a small proportion of their funding that the Arts Council would caution against such a costly and time-consuming exercise. It is also important to note that small contributions from other departments can never be considered a substitute for adequate resourcing for the arts through DCAL.

2. *We recommend that DCAL works with local councils post-RPA to assist them in reviewing how much they spend on the arts, with a view to ensuring that there is a greater degree of equality in arts provision across the different council areas than exists presently.*

The Arts Council supports the view that there should be a greater consistency of funding support from local authorities across Northern Ireland and has been assiduously monitoring that pattern of expenditure for over 10 years in order to track the variations. The Report states that the Arts Council does not keep these figures whilst going on then to reproduce them in a table on page 7. This must be a drafting error. The Arts Council supports the principle that the responsibility for local arts as outlined in the Review of Public Administration should transfer to local authorities

who are best placed to support the needs of local community arts. We very much hope this will lead to an increase in the level of Local Authority funding of the arts.

3. *We recommend that DCAL targets its investment in the arts in such a way as to further embed the arts in people's everyday lives right across Northern Ireland. The Committee is of the view that greater participation and access to the arts will lead to greater support both among the public and within government for increased funding for the arts.*

The Arts Council supports the Committee's view that greater participation and access will lead to greater support for the arts amongst the public and Government. In both its written and oral evidence the Arts Council demonstrated, through its spatial distribution analysis, that 56% of its funds go to the top 20% most deprived neighbourhoods. This was achieved through targeted interventions and programmes. In oral and written submissions the Arts Council stated that if further resources were available it would accelerate the delivery of that objective. However, it is disappointing to note that the Committee did not make such a recommendation.

4. *We recommend that DCAL sets up an inter-departmental group on funding for the arts.*

With reference to the establishment of an inter-departmental group for funding for the arts we would refer to our comments at Recommendation 1. An inter-departmental group is not a substitute for adequate core funding dedicated to supporting the intrinsic benefits and value of the arts. We would also point out that it is more important to strengthen existing partnerships, for example, in cultural tourism with NITB and Tourism Ireland; in the creative industries with DETI, DEL, DCAL and Invest NI as well as contribute to the Shared Future policy agenda through initiatives such as Re-Imaging Communities, than it is to create new ones. The Arts Council remains cautious about the merit of convening an inter-departmental group without a commensurate increase in the budget for the arts.

5. *We recommend that the Arts Council pro-actively seeks out arts organisations that may be eligible for EU funding and assists those organisations in making applications for such funding.*

We agree that there is potential for arts organisations to secure funding from Europe and in particular the EU Cultural Programme, and we have been assisting arts organisations to that end. The Arts Council agrees with Recommendation 5 and will continue to work as best it can within its own staffing resource and constraints. However, it is worth noting that some local authorities employ European Affairs Officers and that the European Union funds the European Commission office in Belfast as a resource to be tapped into. In addition, the SEUPB has a critical role to play in delivering funding for community-based activities and the Arts Council has encouraged organisations to avail of those resources. We find it surprising that the Committee did not incorporate reference to these potential opportunities within its report.

6. *We recommend DCAL and the Arts Council work together so that budgets for coming years can be finalised in the January of the new financial year in April, so that arts organisations are given as much prior notice as possible of their funding position.*

The Arts Council agrees with the Committee that early notification would be helpful. However, it would point out that the timing of the budgetary announcement for the arts is outside its control.

7. *We recommend that DCAL and the Arts Council work with Arts & Business NI to ensure that more support is given to community based arts organisations in terms of accessing private sponsorship.*

It is regrettable that much of the excellent work undertaken by Arts & Business in generating effective synergies with the private sector through its training initiatives and incentive schemes was not profiled in the main body of the report. The Arts Council has a close working relationship with Arts & Business and will be discussing this recommendation in the course of their regular quarterly meetings. Whilst fully supportive of this recommendation, it is difficult to see how more can be achieved given the relatively weak state of the private sector in Northern Ireland and the continuing recessionary pressures.

8. *We recommend that the arts Council increases the level of funding which goes to community arts organisations.*

In the absence of a commonly agreed definition of what constitutes “community arts” and “professional arts”, the Arts Council argued that most practitioners do not primarily characterise themselves as falling within one category or the other. This was a point also made by Voluntary Arts Ireland. That said, for the purposes of assisting the Committee in its Inquiry, the Arts Council calculated that approximately 20% of its funding through its Annual Support for Organisations Programme funding is allocated to community arts, rather than 9% as claimed by CAF. This was supported by returns made by arts organisations as to who are the beneficiaries of their activities and where the programmes are delivered. However, this figure rises to 56% when all of the Council’s principal funding programmes under Exchequer and Lottery are taken into consideration. It is a source of concern that the views of one organisation (CAF), which subsequently made erroneous claims about the Council’s appeals procedure, should take precedence over and/or be equated to the substantial body of evidence produced by Government’s own strategic body for the arts. As was explained to the Committee, the Council does not have dedicated budgets for particular artform areas but rather allocates clients to individual expert officers as appropriate and as operational circumstances dictate. For instance, the community arts officer may have 15-20 clients in his/her portfolio but this cannot be exclusively considered as the only support community arts receives from the ASOP

funding programme as the youth arts and music portfolios will also contain community arts organisations.

The Arts Council is proud of its track record for support for community arts; it has worked with CAF, VAI the FLGA, and with other partners, to increase opportunities for people to participate at grass roots level. Northern Ireland is renowned for its reputation in participatory arts, and their contribution to the local community in which they are rooted. It is also worth remembering that the Arts Council has a wider remit and also provides support to professional, creating and presenting organisations and individual artists: calibrating that balance is central to the work of the Arts Council. In this respect we would disagree that the Committee has established an appropriate balance in its recommendations for the community and professional sectors as outlined in the terms of reference for its inquiry.

In the next funding round 2010/11, the Arts Council will continue to meet these diverse needs in light of our own strategy and that of DCAL in the context of a potential significant reduction in its budget.

9. We recommend that the Arts Council requires professional arts organisations which it funds to increase the amount of outreach/community work they currently deliver.

The Arts Council has consistently encouraged professional arts organisations to undertake community/outreach activities. Over ten years ago the Council introduced specific funding schemes through its Lottery programme to encourage community engagement (“Access to the Arts”), work which has now been mainstreamed within the practice of most professional arts organisations. As stated in our evidence to the Committee, some professional organisations such as Replay Theatre, Kids in Control, Kids Own Publishing, Headliners, ArtsCare, Waterside Theatre, the Playhouse and Live Music Now, to name but a few, have as their *raison d’être*, community engagement.

In the absence of further resources it would be difficult for the Arts Council to “require” professional arts organisations to increase the current levels of activity in this arena.

10. We recommend that the Arts Council sets up a specific funding programme for community arts organisations that deliver participation opportunities to people living in Super Output Areas ranked in the top 20% of areas of deprivation according to the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure.

Targeting Social Need is already a cross-cutting theme mainstreamed within core funding in both our Lottery and Exchequer programmes as per Government’s own policy directions. Funding criteria have been amended to reflect this policy imperative. This has proved to be a successful strategy as indicated above.

In the interests of accuracy we must correct comments made in paragraphs 88 and 89 of the Report.

Whilst respecting individual views, the Arts Council regrets that it did not have the opportunity to respond to the inaccurate statements made in respect of (1) the Grand Opera House and (2) funding to community based organisations in the Derry City Council area.

With respect to the Grand Opera House, analysis of their audience attendance by post code shows high attendance rates from those in the top 10 socially deprived areas, in addition to those in social groups C2, D and E. This material is drawn from their box office ticketing system and reflects the broad appeal of the Grand Opera House’s programme. The Grand Opera House is a model of good practice with respect to the initiatives it has taken to reach out to the most disadvantaged groups in society. These include free tickets to charitable organisations and half price tickets to older people, unemployed and students to name but a few. The Arts Council believes in

the principle of access to the arts both within communities and through attendance at arts events of excellence and through the high quality programmes offered by our network of funded venues.

In respect of the comments in paragraph 89, organisations such as An Gaeláras, the Playhouse, the Waterside Theatre and the Gasyard operate programmes which actively engage with communities from deprived areas.

11. We recommend that the Arts Council increases the current budget for the Start-Up programme which will distribute grants to community based groups which have received little or no previous funding from the Arts Council.

Start Up is an example of a highly successful programme, originally funded through ring-fenced resources from DSD, no longer available. We agree with the Committee that it is important that organisations which, for a variety of reasons, have not previously received Arts Council funding, should have the opportunity to do so and that relatively small amounts of money, judiciously targeted, can have significant impacts. In 2010/11 Council will seek to continue the programme with commensurate resources.

12. We recommend that in distributing these funds, the Arts Council pro-actively identifies groups which may be eligible for this funding.

The Arts Council agrees with this recommendation.

13. We recommend that given its levels of participation, we recommend that the Arts Council increases the level of funding which goes to voluntary arts organisations, such as those involved in amateur drama or traditional arts.

The Arts Council recognises the richness and diversity of voluntary arts in Northern Ireland and its ability to offer a range of platforms for local people to participate in

arts activity, many for the first time. For a small number it also provides the springboard to take up a professional career in the arts. However, we also recognise that the strength of the voluntary and amateur sector derives precisely from its spirit of voluntarism and independence in which people freely give of their time without the expectation of reward other than for personal and community benefit. The voluntary sector's ability to attract small donations and contributions in kind from within their local communities is part of a traditional community compact that adds strength to both the community and the individuals involved. The Arts Council targets its support for this important sector through funding the umbrella bodies charged with sectoral development, such as the Association of Ulster Drama Festivals, Voluntary Arts Ireland and Ulster Association of Youth Drama, and by supporting professional input into productions where appropriate. For example, St Agnes Choral Society recently requested assistance towards hiring the Grand Opera House and employing a professional musical director and choreographer, given the development path they have embarked upon over many years. For other organisations support takes the form of payment for professional adjudication at competitions through the Council's Small Grants Programme. Moreover voluntary arts organisations have accessed Council's capital funds, eg. Belvoir Players Studio in Castlereagh and The Patrician Hall in Carrickmore.

With respect to funding for Traditional Arts, it is a source of concern that the Arts Council has been put on notice by the Department of Education that funding under its Cultural Traditions programme is in question. That said the Council is proud of its support for traditional arts activity and was the first Council in these islands to employ a dedicated Traditional Arts Officer. In addition to its main portfolio of traditional arts organisations, the Council provides support to the Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann through its Small Grants Programme for events and equipment in its clubs across Northern Ireland. The Board is pleased to note that some traditional arts activity is commercially viable given the location in which it takes place.

14. *We recommend that in the interests of transparency and fairness, the Arts Council should establish a feedback process for unsuccessful funding applicants to clarify why they did not receive funding.*

It is disappointing that the accuracy of the statement at paragraph 109 was not checked with us. The Arts Council has operated an appeals process for a number of years, details of which are clearly set out on its website. Furthermore, each rejected applicant is made aware of the appeals process in an accompanying letter. It is also of concern that the Community Arts Forum, the umbrella body for the community arts sector, and funded as such by the Arts Council, may well be giving misleading advice to its members.

The Arts Council endorses the principle of transparency and fairness in the case of rejected applications. In our letters of rejection we outline the reasons why applications failed and offer the opportunity for feedback from relevant officers. For information, in 2008/09 the Arts Council made 1,361 funding decisions, awarded 651 grants and rejected 710 applications. It received 16 formal appeals of which 7 were upheld and funding subsequently awarded.

Conclusion

The Arts Council responded positively to the Committee's Inquiry and encouraged the arts sector to do so likewise. It was heartening to read of the number of written and oral submissions to the Committee and of the depth of thought and analysis contained in those submissions. Given the explicit focus of the inquiry, at the time it was announced, it was greeted with genuine optimism, due to the years of neglect that the arts had suffered under Direct Rule administration. It is therefore disappointing that the Committee has not recommended any increase in the funding for the arts or indeed the maintenance of the third year of the current CSR settlement.

The Arts Council regrets the loss of this missed opportunity to advocate for the needs of the arts sector as a whole and will continue its efforts to ensure the arts receive adequate

funding and that the appropriate balance continues to be achieved across the full spectrum of arts activity.

Finally, of further concern was the fact that a significant number of the recommendations carry a further resource implication. It is difficult to see how these can be achieved in a context in which there is not only no increase, but rather a significant decline in funds.