

Arts Strategy Consultation

**Observations by
Ministerial Arts Advisory Forum**

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1: Introduction

The purpose of this note is to offer some thoughts from the members of the Ministerial Arts Advisory Forum on the Consultation document published by the Minister in late November 2015. It is not a formal response along the lines sought by the Department - that will be more appropriate for individuals and arts organisations - but a reprise of the ideas that animated its work at the early stage of this work. As a context for these thoughts, it is useful to recall the engagement that the members of the Forum had with the overall process.

The Forum was established by the Minister in January 2015. In consultation with the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL), the Forum identified a timescale for its work that accommodated the need for a document that would enable a consultation process to begin in July with a strategy being finalised in the autumn for discussion by the Minister with her Executive colleagues and, it was hoped, a positive decision to endorse the strategy and embark on a new engagement with the arts in Northern Ireland.

This was a challenging, if not an impossible, timescale. To try to meet it, the Forum, having had a number of meetings, including some day-long sessions, decided, again in consultation with the Department, to concentrate on preparing a draft consultation document in the first instance. Its intention also was to work during the consultation period on a comprehensive round of discussions with those in the arts and culture sectors to ensure that the eventual strategy would resonate with the public as a whole and with those organisations and individuals directly engaged with arts and culture - two fundamental principles from the outset.

The Forum saw the presentation of the draft consultation document not as the totality of its work but as its first phase. In the event, however, the Forum was not able to complete this first element because there was no response to the draft material presented to the Department in late June. The final draft being worked on by the secretariat was never presented to the members of the Forum. No member of the Forum saw the material submitted to the Minister within DCAL in early July and none had any subsequent engagement of any kind in the preparation of the consultation document published in November.

Although some of the thoughts developed by the Forum- and some of its language - find expression in the consultation document, it was a source of disappointment for the members of the Forum that they were not given an opportunity to complete their input to the draft consultation document and they are anxious that it be understood that the published document does not reflect the fullness of their ambitions for the arts in Northern Ireland.

That said, the Forum members are very clear that they welcome the Minister's decision to publish a new strategy for the arts. They welcome the potential of such a strategy to be a profound statement of commitment to the arts as central to the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland. They welcome the intention to engage all Departments in the implementation of a structured policy supported by the Executive. They welcome the possibility that such a development will ensure that the necessary investment is made in the future of the arts for the benefit of the people and of Northern Ireland in all aspects of its life and work. In this context, they encourage all with an interest in the future of the arts to respond with imagination to the consultation so that the eventual strategy will have benefitted from the fullest range of creative ideas.

2: The Arts as central in our lives

The starting point for any strategy related to the arts must be the recognition that the arts are part of the lives of every individual. That simple statement - that simple truth - has profound implications. Everybody, without exception, makes cultural choices. And everybody, without exception, engages with the arts in one form or other.

The music we listen to, the books we read, the songs we sing, the films we watch, the plays we have seen, the paintings we like, the drawings we do, the pottery we make, the choirs we join, the stories we tell our children, their ability to move and cheer us with their imaginative talent - all these are part of our engagement with the arts. That is why the arts are important to us, why they are about us. Because they belong to us.

Everybody has the ability to enjoy being involved. Everybody has the capacity to be uplifted by the talents and abilities of others. Everybody has the promise of exploring and developing the talents and abilities that each one of us has by virtue of being human.

That last is a key point. We should not be surprised that all these elements in the arts and in cultural life are for all of us. They have been part of the human experience, a signature of human existence, since the dawn of time. This is how our cultures, our traditions, have grown. This is the richness that has been passed to us over the generations. This is how we, in turn, create a sense of ourselves and pass that on to those who come after us.

The arts also make a powerful statement of how a community sees itself and offers itself to others. They are a sign of confidence, of self-confidence, and they proclaim a maturity of mind and imagination. They are a crucial way in which each generation interrogates itself and tells its story.

Northern Ireland is blessed by the range of artistic talent across a wide spread of disciplines who have enhanced and enriched the lives of this place. Their names resonate in every community. Their work and achievement have been celebrated and honoured around the world. They have made an extraordinary contribution to our sense of ourselves. It is blessed, also, in the vast number of people who engage with the arts in a wide variety of ways.

But there are some who believe that the arts are the preserve of the few, that they hold no interest for very many people and, worse, that, in some particular way, they are not part of the lives of working class people. Nothing could be further from the truth. That is why the

centrality of the arts must be at the core of this strategy. And that is why the central priority of bringing the arts to all; of encouraging all to participate and enjoy; and of ensuring that all must have equal opportunity to make their cultural choice from the same rich range of options, must continue to be, as it is, at the heart of policy and practice.

3: Ambition for the Arts

If the arts are to fulfil their potential - in themselves and as agents for change - then there must be an ambition to achieve the best that is possible. Excellence must be the goal.

There is no conflict or contradiction between excellence and access. The ambition must be to achieve and support excellence while at the same time expanding access to that excellence. There is a real risk that the view that a balance must be found between quality and access will diminish both. It is not a measure of equality that broader access be provided by diminishing quality. It would be an unhappy principle if applied to the health service. The real challenge of equality is that all have access to the best that can be produced and, as already said, that people have equality in making their choices from the same range of options.

It is, of course, the case that not everyone has the capacity to reach the highest level of excellence in the arts. That is true of every discipline. But it should not act as a barrier to achieving excellence or deter those who will not scale the dizzy heights.

In sport we live with this reality all the time and have adopted sensible and strategically sound policies and practices that recognise it. We support elite athletes (the word is not feared in a sporting context) so that they can establish and sustain world class standards. At the same time we make every effort to encourage the widest possible participation in sports of all kinds, making facilities available, having a strong presence in schools and recognising the intrinsic and related values of the involvement.

That is an approach that should equally be applied to the arts. The achievements of the very best act as an encouragement to all - to some, to strive even more for excellence; to others, to sample, to attempt, to enjoy, to benefit. It is right and it is appropriate that we should aim to achieve world class standards in the arts as in other areas of life. As the renown in which Northern Ireland artists from a variety of disciplines are held testifies, that is the aspiration of the arts community. Surprisingly many from this small place achieve

that goal of world class standard. That is both a source of pride and a spur to devote resources and energy in sustaining that level of excellence.

If we are to achieve the benefits that the arts confer on individuals, then we must ensure that the level of attainment in the arts is at the highest possible level - for all. If the lever is to be effective in moving the boulder, it must be the best, the strongest that can be found.

Northern Ireland can have a particular understanding of the importance of excellence as a means of giving a wider world a new understanding of its traditions and possibilities.

The vision for the arts, then, must not only be articulated through the benefits they can confer or through the contribution they can make to other important policy objectives. The underlying vision must be for achievement in the arts themselves and for the engagement in them by the widest possible range of people, recognising and addressing all the inherited or contemporary barriers to those objectives. Then, as this note will consider later, the benefits of the arts as agents of change and development can be addressed with greater confidence.

4: Investment in the Arts

If, as we believe, the arts are central in the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland and that ambition for the arts must be at the heart of the strategy - both to ensure that the arts achieve the fullest of their potential and can confer the greatest benefit - then, it follows that they must be on an equal footing as a claimant for investment with other areas of public expenditure.

A very welcome outcome of a strategy supported by the Executive would be the engagement by each Department with the significance of the arts to its work and the associated commitment by the executive to sustained investment to realise the full potential - for individuals, for communities and for the entire society.

A feature of the arts is the extent to which the real effort required to produce the extraordinary range of achievement is inadequately understood. This can often be the case with areas of human endeavour where something of a vocational commitment is perceived to exist. But it puts at risk the realisation of the potential if the need for investment is not recognised.

The need for, and justification of, investment in the arts is widely recognised. Policy makers the world over have long appreciated the transformative impact their investment in arts and culture have at individual, communal, regional and national levels. The range of benefits that flow from that investment will be addressed in a later section. But across the EU and farther afield the importance of that investment is appreciated. The Chancellor of the Exchequer made particular reference to this very point in the most recent Autumn Statement.

There is a strong case to be made for Northern Ireland to set its goal for investment in the arts at the median of European countries' investment as a share of total expenditure.

5: The Arts as Agents of Development

In addition to the value of the arts in themselves and their central and crucial roles as part of the essence of being human - as a vital expression of individual dignity and potential - the arts can play a range of powerful roles in a variety of aspects of our lives. Realising the fullness of that potential has real value and is rightly part of a strategy for the arts. But securing that value will be a measure of the extent to which the arts have strength, are given voice and supported in a variety of ways.

The lives of very many people are transformed by their introduction to and engagement with the arts and cultural life in general. Lives have been changed. New pathways have opened up. Communities have been enriched. Sick children have had a new and unimagined source of stimulus and joy brought into their lives. Those with dementia have been reached in a way that is not otherwise possible

Arts are recognised as a significant means to bringing people together to celebrate our culture and our sense of who we are; they can contribute to making NI a less fearful place, they bring enjoyment and entertainment, and help us to mark key civic events and occasions. They reflect our cultural values. And carnivals, theatre, art, public and gallery based, literature, poetry and music highlight the best of our achievements.

Promoting equality and tackling poverty and social exclusion have been central to the role of publicly-funded arts for decades. With dedicated expertise, the arts are a key instrument in connecting individuals and communities to new opportunities, learning and practical life-enhancing benefit.

Wellbeing will become a more widely quoted social measurement in the next 10 years. Maintaining good health and actively improving the health of others in medical settings can be very effectively achieved through the arts. Recognising the potential of arts and culture to improve people's lives in health, education, work and learning will be a key facet of arts engagement.

The arts can help to ensure that others in the United Kingdom, in Ireland, in Europe and across the world see the modern, progressive, outward-looking, international, confident, vibrant, creative, talented people who can help Northern Ireland to take its place on any international stage and shine.

The arts play an essential role in developing a healthy creative environment in Northern Ireland. We live in a world made by and surrounded by the fruits of creative endeavour. Creativity - in all its forms - affects the lives of every person living in Northern Ireland.

The arts are the bedrock of the creative industries - they have to be creative before they can be industries. Without the arts and cultural sector, the creative industries would be much more difficult to develop. Without the strong base of investment in education, broadcasting, film-making, all of which has entirely or significantly benefitted from public investment, the extent of indigenous creative contribution to the media in all their forms would be far less than it is. And the economic return would be less too.

The economic benefits of a vibrant arts community are not confined to the creative industries. The powerful statement that a lively, outward-looking arts environment makes to the world is an important attraction in terms of tourism. It assists the promotion of direct foreign investment by showing that Northern Ireland offers a way of life that matches that of other modern democracies. And it counters enduring, old, but out of date, stereotypes

Crucially, the arts and the promotion of widespread engagement in them has powerful possibilities for personal and community development. They enrich communities. They allow people to explore possibilities that they may not have appreciated were open to them. The arts have significant potential to expand the range of creative opportunities open to all.

The lives of children, the wellbeing of all, the dignity of older people can be enhanced by engagement with the arts.

6: The Potential of the Strategy

This will be the first Inter-Departmental Arts and Culture Strategy developed in more than 10 years and will build upon the foundations of the last strategy. However, it sits against a background of a range of reports and reflections on these matters as they affect Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland generally. These include *The Arts And Northern Ireland Economy*, *John Myerscough Northern Ireland Economic Research 1996*, *Multimedia Ireland Call Realising The Potential By Forbairt 1998*, *Opening Up The Arts The Strategic Review Of The Arts Council By Anthony Everett in 2000*, and, of course, *Unlocking Creativity* in 2000 which heralded the first major policy development of the then newly established *Department For Culture Arts And Leisure*. It will sit also within a context that includes the Arts Council's current five year strategy and a range of important art form strategies that articulate policy and aspiration and generate action.

This new 10 year strategy must look forward, trying to imagine what Northern Ireland and our society might be like. We should remember that today's population of children and young people includes all the writers, painters, playwrights, poets, composers, musicians, architects, town planners, digital creators, song-writers, film makers who will shape Northern Ireland and our understanding of it in the next 30-40 years and who will have an impact on the following fifty years. The imaginative power of children must be recognised and its capacity to shape a new future respected. As technological development races to explore new digital horizons, our creativity must keep pace. Growing and harnessing the wealth of local creative expertise to maximise the potential for everyone will be key. That has challenge and potential. This strategy offers the opportunity to explore, exploit and develop that potential.

What our society might be like in 10 years is hard to imagine. We would like to see a place where;

- Everyone enjoys the fundamental right of access to the fullest range of creative opportunities
- Participation is promoted across all settings and circumstances, formal and informal
- Experimentation, endeavour and excellence in process and product, publication, performance and exhibition are recognised and valued
- Health and wellbeing are enhanced through active engagement in creativity, for all ages, in all places

We see arts and culture as shaping this future...

- Where the rich and diverse layers of culture in our communities can make ideas and imaginations flourish
- Where the connections between people, places and the world are transformed through imagination, ambition and an understanding of the potential of creativity
- Where the excellence of our arts spaces showcases the breadth of our art
- Where career opportunities and community aspirations are creatively sustained
- Where our distinctive creativity, is connected and celebrated at home and across the globe
- Where the wealth of our talent is only surpassed by the ambition for our success

We sit at the edge of Europe but from these shores, centuries of art and artists have flowed back and forth across oceans and continents, across the world. Over 1.8 million people live here and our increasingly diverse lives and communities are reflected in a vibrant, varied and vital creative sector, employing some 40,000 people, 5,500 of those within the arts sector alone and generating huge impacts locally across our economy and at all levels in our society.

But what does our creative future look like in 2026?

The years to 2026 will witness exponential technological growth for a truly global conversation engaging all facets of life, digitally. It is thought by January 2026 that the European population will still be much the same but there will be 1 billion more people who inhabit the earth. Here, the promise of peace and prosperity will see our population rise by attracting more people to call here home.

For us to become a haven for creativity and offer support for opportunities locally, nationally and internationally we need the resources to do so. We require a comprehensive policy platform that we can look to, reflecting our ambition not only for the arts themselves but for our communities and our society so that together our economy and our creative futures can be strengthened. In so doing, the future well-being of society in terms of social cohesion, promoting equality, tackling exclusion and social deprivation will

be supported alongside a flourishing creative industry sector with a sustainable arts infrastructure that can inspire our educators, our business leaders, visitors, investors, artists, young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight, the worried-well and those challenged by serious illness.

This can be a place that understands the power of the arts in and of themselves and that also has figured out how to translate that power into having meaningful, deep, resonating impact across our whole community.

In other words, this strategy is the moment to articulate an ambition for the arts that simultaneously reflects and animates the ambition that Northern Ireland has for itself and its place in the world.

7: What the strategy might contain

In offering these observations, the members of the Forum wish to share with the Minister, and more widely, some of the thoughts and ideas that emerged in its work and which it had hoped to develop further.

The Forum identified a vision for the strategy as being for a Northern Ireland that values the arts and culture; sees them as part of everyone's daily life; recognises and celebrates creativity as central for personal and social development; appreciates the educational, economic and health benefits of engaging in the arts and cultural life; aspires to and celebrates world class achievement; has real ambition for how Northern Ireland is seen as a vibrant centre of the arts; and is committed at Executive level to a sustained programme of investment that will encourage the full flowering of arts and culture and promote access to and active participation in the arts and cultural life for everyone.

It envisaged a strategy that would capture the imagination of the public and that would;

- show convincingly that the arts belong to everybody
- explain that all too often we had taken the arts for granted, had undervalued their contribution and potential and had underestimated what it takes to produce and deliver them
- take people beyond the old, narrow 'elite'-based attitudes that still pervade some thinking
- show how broadly-based and deeply-rooted the arts are in people's lives
- show the link - the transformative link - between the arts and personal development
- recognise that as well as being part of us, the arts are good for us - all of us
- understand the implications of the new digital world, reaching beyond the phenomenon of the social media to recognise the transformative change that could profoundly democratise access to cultural self-expression
- explore the potential - and the responsibility - of the media, especially of broadcasting, to reflect the centrality of the arts in their output
- invest the concept of the arts with universal relevance

- show that although Northern Ireland is fixed in its geography it is not limited in its ambitions and appreciate that how we think of this place influences others' perceptions of it
- assert that the people see themselves as part of a global community, know that they are not bound in their aspirations by Northern Ireland's boundaries, recognise the richness of their traditions and the possibility of their ability and have ambitions for themselves, for their futures and for their children
- would situate its conclusions and recommendations in a sense of the future not limited by the gravitational pull of now
- see the importance of including all parts of Northern Ireland in the realisation of the vision and recognise the potential and the responsibility of local government in this work
- make a claim on the engagement of every Department and public authority and stake a claim for a sustained programme of investment by the Executive.

The Forum identified some broad themes and related priorities. Some of these are incorporated in the consultation document but there may be merit in reflecting some of them briefly in these observations.

Valuing the Arts

- Appreciate the role that the arts and culture can play in personal and social development of everyone at all ages
- Having an ambition for everyone to realise their full potential in engaging with the arts and culture
- Appreciating the contribution of all those involved in arts and culture
- Understanding the benefits of arts and culture for Northern Ireland's place in the world

Access for Everybody

- Recognising all that is involved in opening up access
- Appreciating the valuable work of voluntary engagement with arts and culture
- Understanding the barriers to active participation and finding ways to remove them
- Making all the connections across government and the arts community to realise the benefits and support innovative new projects

Rich Cultural Expression

- Finding new ways to bring people into greater contact with the arts
- Enhancing the potential for community engagement to enhance active participation
- Recognising the potential - and the urgency - of bringing everyone into the new media world
- Encouraging children to value the power of their own imaginations

Community and Cohesion

- Giving everyone in Northern Ireland a greater understanding of the rich traditions across all communities
- Creating and supporting opportunities for the arts to bring people together
- Recognising the richness and variety that new residents of Northern Ireland bring to its social and cultural life

Creativity and Skills

- Exploring educational opportunities to foster creativity
- Seeing the power of creativity in our personal lives
- Recognising the value of the experience of creative arts in other work-related spheres
- Developing the skills and talents that will see the economic potential of creative insights

Wellbeing

- Find ways to make better known the research on the benefits of arts and culture in healthcare
- Encourage and support the greater engagement with the arts and culture in healthcare settings
- Develop a greater understanding of the work opportunities opened up by active engagement with the arts
- Recognise the educational benefits of developing imagination and innovation in the arts and culture.

8: Conclusion

In summary, then, the members of the Forum could encapsulate their approach to a strategy for the arts in this way.

- Promise and possibility for all are at the heart of the entire project
- Recognise the central role of the arts in our lives and in our communities, recognising also the contribution that artists and arts organisations make to society
- Invest in the arts
- Make them equally accessible to all
- Equalise the opportunity of participating in the arts and of choosing from the same rich range of options
- Realise the full benefits of the arts across all other areas of life

It is because of their confidence and certainty in the importance of the arts in themselves and to society and in the extent to which the arts touch everybody and have such potential for personal development and community wellbeing, that the members of the Forum see a strategy for the arts making a justified demand on the Executive to take the arts seriously as something that merits its consideration and wholehearted support. By endorsing a strategy that recognises the value of excellence and the aspiration to achieve world class standards, the Executive will recognise that the arts are genuinely for everyone; that everyone engages in the arts - often in ways that are not fully appreciated; and that, therefore, the arts are a public good with a direct, distinct point of contact and relevance for every Department and every aspect of government. Such a strategy will celebrate and nurture Northern Ireland's talent, will realise its potential and benefit everybody.