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Collaborative cultural leadership: Northern Ireland's response to the COVID-19 crisis

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Introduction

This chapter explores how the impact of COVID-19 on arts and cultural activity in Northern Ireland (NI) gave rise to collaborative approaches to leadership across the cultural sector. It draws principally from a series of practitioner interviews, observations and discussions carried out in 2020 and 2021, combining the knowledge of organisational leaders with cultural freelancers and policymakers (both public body and government department).

Although exacerbated by the crisis of 2020, the tensions surrounding the recognition and definition of cultural leadership predate the pandemic. They are intrinsically linked to concerns of representation and attention in regional, national and devolved (subnational) policy structures and within arts and cultural practices and production systems. Pointing to particular manifestations of leadership equally points to where leadership is absent, excluded or ignored. Here, our focus is on shared and networked leadership and how these forms influence or shape policy relationships over an intense and relatively short period. We examine arts and cultural leadership as a crisis response through collaborative informal networks, and consider how these networked groups engaged in closer working relationships with policy-makers as collaborative policy networks. We then suggest ways in which these collaborative practices could shape future cultural policy-making and speculate about possible inhibitors. Despite many positive dimensions and the power of such collaborations as crisis response, it is apparent that the temporary nature of these alliances, as well as divergent interests and goals, can limit their potential.

While this chapter focuses on networks in NI, we situate this research within existing literature on cultural leadership. This poses questions about how leadership is shaped collaboratively and how it can be mobilised (or not) to address gaps or vacuums in policy and policy knowledge, particularly (as in during the pandemic) when normal systems of policy-making are disrupted and must be rapidly reassessed.

This chapter argues that networked and collaborative leadership are amplified in times of crisis, conditioned by historical precedence and relationships. However, the depth and context of these crises is always specific and their conditions understood differently. As a result, this chapter is presented through multiple perspectives, taking account of the different stakeholders and their relationships to each other.

Understanding collaborative policy/leadership relationships

The study of leadership has moved over time from the pursuit of (what some argue are unachievable) ideals of leadership style manifested by individuals to consideration of multi-faceted, diffuse and shared leadership (Kempster and Jackson, 2021). Increasingly, leadership is explored as a set of behaviours that can be distributed across and beyond individual organisations and systems (Todnem By, 2021). This new ideal of leadership behaviour is arguably better able to negotiate the increasingly complex, uncertain and interdependent nature of society and economy, and the growing attention to concerns of environmental and corporate responsibility (Bardy, 2018).

Cultural leadership by contrast has long been understood as both practice and theory in which shared and collaborative approaches are actually the default (Reynolds, Tonks and MacNeill, 2017). In part, this is explained at an organisational level by cultural organisations' dual artistic and executive logics (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007). Such studies, however, often focus on the roles of individuals in senior artistic and executive management positions, thus reinforcing leadership as a social construction within organisations (FitzGibbon, 2019; Goodwin, 2020). Embedded practices of cultural production instinctively share or pass on leadership temporarily as part of a

creative process (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007): an artistic director deferring to a choreographer in rehearsal or the transfer of leadership to participants by an artist facilitator in socially engaged practices. These practices of devolved leadership, however, vary widely, with no commonly understood approach across arts and cultural practices. Finally, collaborative approaches to shared leadership and decision-making are consciously adopted from socio-political movements, with political ideologies informing artistic purpose. These are most often manifest in artist-led and community-led programmes, supported by cooperative, collective, 'flatter' and non-hierarchical governance models (Donelli, Fanelli and Zangrandi, 2021; Jeon and Kim, 2021). They prove difficult to study as many players eschew the title of 'leader' (Goodwin, 2020). Many of the members of these groups take on leadership duties depending on their individual skills and experience. The importance for these groups in removing hierarchies is inherent in their political beliefs for communal working practices and has a history rooted in the socialist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Wright, 2019).

With such a long tradition of collaborative leadership, it might appear easy to form networked sectoral approaches to cultural leadership that can work on a common agenda or address public policy concerns, both in and outside of moments of crisis. Yet cultural leadership studies show us that such networks of leaders and their influence on policy are flawed: victims of benign and malign self-interest, acts of self-justification (FitzGibbon, 2019). Rather than mobilising sector-wide change and policy improvement, such networks often devolve into a 'closed shop' of elite decision-makers tacitly reinforcing inadequate policies while lacking or losing any tangible mandate (Nisbett and Walmsley, 2016). During 2020 and 2021, our research examined what was happening to cultural leadership in a moment of crisis and explored how the informal networks that emerged became a force and contact point for reviewing and prompting rapid policy change. We therefore sought to marry existing (cultural) leadership theory with the study of collaborative policy networks.

Christopher Weare, Paul Lichterman and Nicole Esparza (2014) theorised collaborative policy networks, focusing on the dynamics and cultural forces within interorganisational networks. This work evolved in the study of another quite different crisis: a housing crisis

in Los Angeles. Although not focused specifically on an arts or cultural context, its deployment of cultural theories and its effectiveness beyond network theories to capture the dynamics of a crisis moment proved useful here. Through this lens, we focus on how different actors within networks and broader ecosystems can form around 'wicked problems' in crisis situations. We apply this to examine the dynamics between all actors in a system, no matter how 'loose', and to investigate the power dynamics between policy and advocacy. Lastly, we borrow heavily from their work to 'consider the manner in which the interaction between differing cultures may drive the formation and dissolution of collaborative networks' (Wear, Lichterman and Esparza, 2014, p.591).

Methodology

Our methodology is shaped by our positionality. We both arrived to research from practitioner and arts activist backgrounds (working in England, Northern Ireland and Ireland) such that had our lives evolved differently, we might have been interviewees for this research. During 2020 and 2021, we also undertook secondments and advisory roles for policy-makers, including the Department for Communities (NI). As Røyseng and Stavrum (2019, p.3) put it, as policy researchers, 'we are part of relations to both the field of cultural production and the field of policy', additionally embedded in social and emotional relationships within the networks we explore here.

This chapter draws upon empirical data gathered from sixteen semi-structured interviews conducted through the Centre for Cultural Value and carried out between October 2020 and September 2021.The interviewees were selected through both a snowball process and by consultation with various networks. The process was designed to reach a diverse range of interviewees from different localities and art forms/disciplines. Although anonymised for ethical reasons (e.g. as Interviewee, 2021), interviewees' job titles/roles are cited as we felt this was relevant to the analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse interview data and draw out the key aspects of collaborative leadership and networks explored here. We also drew on additional secondary sources

pertinent to the Northern Irish context as well as field notes from our observations.

The chapter is structured as follows: firstly, we provide a brief historical context looking at the development of collaborative leadership in NI prior to the pandemic. Secondly, we focus on leadership at the start of the pandemic. This section focuses on the emergency responses and explores how they affected the development of collaborative leadership and policy networks. Then we focus on collaborative leadership outside of organisations and beyond the public sector. This section explores cultural freelancer inclusion at policy level and traces tensions around freelancer inclusion in collaborative leadership at sector level as the pandemic developed. Finally, we analyse the challenges of sustaining collaborative policy networks and leadership by highlighting the uneven process of moving towards 'recovery' and the pressures involved in sustaining these relationships between policy-makers and cultural practitioners.

Collaborative leadership and policy networks in Northern Ireland

To understand 2020 and the networks we describe, we must first understand more about their precedents, either as advocacy movements or as previous attempts and failures at fostering collaborative policy fora. We trace here a small number of networks that arose in NI from the mid-1990s, post-ceasefire and in the wake of NI's first published arts strategy, *To the Millennium* (Deeny, 1995). We concentrate on pan-sectoral networks and engagement with policy-makers. Not only does little record remain of some of these, but we also note that they centre on Belfast, explained in part by the city's position as the seat of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the base of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) and its lead government department, the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). As the largest urban centre, Belfast also represents the greatest concentration of cultural freelancers and organisations.

The period from 1995 to 2020 witnessed significant strides in arts policy and cultural provision in NI. There was large-scale capital and other investment through National Lottery funds, which led

to multiple new arts buildings and boosted cultural provision; NI got its first culture-specific minister and department in 1999 and launched a major interdepartmental strategy on creativity mentored by Sir Ken Robinson (DCAL, 2001); and Derry/Londonderry became the first UK City of Culture (2013). This positive picture was marred by ongoing political instability, a steady diminishing of dedicated arts/culture budgets, and outbreaks of tension between the culture sector and different ministers on the degree of artistic and cultural autonomy that public subsidy should afford.

From 1999, when the first Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure was appointed, until 2020, when the pandemic hit, there had been seven different culture ministers from three different political parties and three periods of suspension of the NI Assembly (including 2002–2007 and 2017–January 2020). Four 'Direct Rule' ministers had been appointed from the UK Parliament for portions of these suspension periods. By 2016, DCAL had been in part subsumed into a new 'Department for Communities' (DfC) with a new minister (notionally the eighth culture minister). This fragmented the cultural portfolio as NI Screen (film, TV and gaming) moved to the Department for Economy while Arts, Culture, Heritage (and notionally policy responsibility for Creative Industries) remained with DfC. Meanwhile, a restructuring of local authorities from twenty-six to eleven in 2014 had changed the region and its relationships between devolved government, local government and cultural providers. Throughout this period, arts and culture had lacked visibility in successive Programmes for Government. Political and public sector attention was focused elsewhere, while economic and social priorities were heavily shaped by ethnonationalism and political sparring.

Informal mutual support networks (for particular disciplines or in particular regions) formed throughout this period, some disappearing when key people moved on, others becoming resource organisations (for example, the Theatre Producers Group, later NI Theatre Association, and Dance Resource Base, which subsequently became Theatre and Dance NI; or the Arts Managers Group, a network of local authority arts officers). Other networks had formed around common provision or policy agenda as a result of strategic interventions by ACNI and others (Community Arts Partnership formed from Community Arts Forum and New

Belfast Community Arts Initiative; Arts and Disability Forum, now University of Atypical; Voluntary Arts Ireland and Visual Arts NI, both part of networked bodies at UK/all-island levels; Audiences NI, now Thrive). Over time, many of these became the base for targeted and reactive policy advocacy campaigns with pan-sectoral involvement – for example, Professional Arts Lobby (1998–1999), Invest in Inspiration (2007–2008) and Arts Matter NI (launched in January 2015). To varying degrees, these movements assumed cultural sector leadership. They responded to immediate threats (e.g. funding cuts and de-prioritisation within governmental strategies) and sought longer-term shared solutions and presence for culture within governmental priorities.

These campaigns might be described as 'uninvited' contributors to policy development (to borrow from Jane Woddis, 2014). The Professional Arts Lobby openly challenged low spending levels, lack of parity spend and lack of strategy. It was informally welcomed by ACNI officers at the time but could not be openly endorsed by the agency and its council. By contrast, the work of Invest in Inspiration (Northern Visions, 2007), mounted in the consultation period for the 2008 Programme for Government, was described by ACNI as a 'sister' campaign to its own efforts based on per capita spending. The 'Invest' group and ACNI had combined forces under the banner #KeepOurArtsAlive (ACNI, 2007). This alliance of planning and information sharing, however, was not sustained by ACNI following these rallies. In its aftermath, traditional funder–client relationships were reinstated, and tensions became apparent between ACNI and its lead department (DCAL). Departmental reports to a resulting committee inquiry challenged the per capita spend data of its own arts development agency (Bell, 2010).

The next significant mobilisation to arise was Arts Matter NI in 2014, which launched in January 2015. It operated concurrently with, but distinct from, ACNI's No More Cuts to the Arts or #13pforthearts campaign (ACNI, 2014). Arts Matter NI was perhaps the longest running, if intermittent, movement, surging into life to oppose a series of ministerial decisions to ringfence funds and impose in-year cuts (Bluebird Media, 2015). It later encouraged submissions to consultations and lobbied the Secretary of State for NI post-Assembly collapse. Although not initially critical of ACNI, Arts Matter NI eventually called for the resignation of the

ministerially appointed ACNI Chair, John Edmond (Shields, 2018). While there were instances of 'invited' policy cooperation (Woddis, 2014) between political/public sector bodies and cultural leadership networks, these were often instigated by public bodies around discrete policy areas such as art forms, youth and disability arts. Commitments to co-design at local authority level produced some interesting collaborative planning (most notably Derry/Strabane District and Belfast City Councils) but the process often exposed disparity in expectations of, and capacity for, visible policy change (Durrer, 2017).

In November 2000, four government departments came together to consult on a new cross-sector strategy for arts and culture with creativity as its main focus.[1] Although widely consulted on, Unlocking Creativity (DCAL, 2001) had been focused on inter-agency and interdepartmental negotiations and did not translate to any overarching cultural or creative strategy for DCAL. In 2015, Minister Caral ní Chuilín established a 'Ministerial Arts Advisory Forum' to consult on the creation of a draft strategy (DCAL, 2015). While this may be seen as an acknowledgement of earlier campaigns, this forum was marred by a lack of clarity over remit, lack of resourcing and buy-in from other departments/agencies, insufficient time and lack of freedom to direct its activities. Forum members publicly distanced themselves from the draft strategy consultation document released in 2016 (Ministerial Arts Advisory Forum, 2016). With the merging of the department into the DfC, a new minister from a different party and the collapse of the NI Assembly by early 2017, no strategy ever emerged.

The Arts Collaboration Network emerged informally into this environment, principally as a quiet and mutual support network, mobilised less by advocacy and campaigning and more by solution finding 'behind the scenes'. The group eschewed any mandate or desire to be 'the voice of the sector'. However, by the time the pandemic struck, successive attempts to influence policy had ended in failure and absence of either strategy or trust, leading many of the cultural leaders to create their own mutual support systems. This was described by one interviewee as follows: 'the inherent fragility [in the sector] has been exposed by Covid …; we have really felt the policy vacuum'. This same interviewee went on to compare NI with other parts of the UK by suggesting that the relationship between

Arts Council England and DCMS at least presents a stronger framework for arts and culture than that in NI.

Reluctant leadership at the start of the pandemic

In autumn 2020, we began to conduct cultural sector interviews in Northern Ireland. Recurrent features of these initial interviews included the wide-ranging emotions of participants combined with a sense of pragmatism. This pragmatism was mobilised by feelings that the status quo had been irrevocably changed. There was a tangible sense of hope in the face of horror, and participants articulated that in this moment they felt that there was room to reimagine leadership and support structures for arts and culture.

One of the most striking themes within these interviews was the invocation of mutual support, with colleagues reaching out to others across the sector. This was echoed in other cohorts throughout our study, especially in the Scottish festivals context (see Chapter 6). Whether through formal networks or through informal connections, these relationships provided places to vent, ask for advice, pool resources and, most importantly, offer mutual support. This sense of collegiality was captured by interviewees: 'it felt like it all happened really quickly …. I am involved in a cross-sectoral network …; we met very quickly when lockdown happened'. They described the mood of those initial days as trying to overcome the confusion and bewilderment, suggesting that 'the initial conversations were about … informal exchange of information …; we had to all react'. However, this was replaced quickly with a realisation that COVID-19 was going to impact the sector on a massive scale and particularly cultural freelancers. This interviewee went on to explain that this informal collaborative network started to move into an 'action phase' in late 2020, talking to funders and policy-makers to 'make the case' and in effect lobby the DfC.

It is vital to understand that although these networks existed pre-pandemic, the crisis itself, and the attendant collapse of the livelihoods of those in the cultural sector and associated sectors, galvanised these relationships into action and produced a shared leadership effort. This is theorised by Weare *et al.* as follows: '[T]he interorganisational dynamics that arise with the shift away from

hierarchical and market-based forms of organisation towards more networked forms are shaped by the cultural tensions and affinities that emerge as actors adjust to new patterns of interaction' (Weare, Lichterman and Esparza, 2014, p.591).

Indeed, this interviewee also revealed that they and their colleagues had never before worked so regularly and directly with government departments in such a relatively short space of time. Although it pre-dates the pandemic, the Arts Collaboration Network (ACN) expanded considerably during this action phase. Another interviewee explained this as the rapid development of a network of representative and support organisations coming together with third sector voluntary arts organisations, theatres, galleries, literature groups, venues, performing arts, circus and freelancers/artists. ACN sought discussions with ACNI and DfC, which then identified and started to plug evidence gaps in both agency and department. This was achieved by ACN gathering quantitative and qualitative data from its members. Members pooled knowledge from across the sector and through open online events such as 'the big gathering', producing written documentation which was passed on in meetings with DfC officials. One interviewee who was involved in this process stated that 'it was an attempt to get to the levels where we could really make a difference'.

As this last point implies, many of the interviewees involved in these networks suggested that ACNI and some local authorities had been slow to react in the initial phases of the pandemic and that the galvanised response of this loose network and direct contact with DfC officials (in effect bypassing ACNI) was a direct response to this perceived policy vacuum. Interviewees suggested this vacuum was in effect a leadership vacuum within cultural policy-makers in NI that pre-dated the pandemic and had several important consequences when the pandemic hit. Firstly, interviewees stated that they were thrust into leadership roles within their organisations as they responded to rapid change, uncertainty and rapidly changing restrictions without clear direction. Some were working with skeleton teams with most staff furloughed; others were already in a small team but had to shoulder extra responsibilities. Secondly, they identified that the leadership vacuum in the policy and political landscape had resulted in a plurality of networks – informal groups with different allegiances and varied aims that had formed over the years. At the start of the pandemic, this fragmented cultural voices at policy level (in

effect fragmenting strategic decision-making). Additionally, ACNI and DfC meetings with sector representatives were often not advertised or held as open meetings and the rationale of who was invited remained unclear. Nevertheless, common agreement existed within all the fragmented groups and gatherings that rapid policy responses from the government were needed and both short-term and long-term actions were demanded. This led to the development (at least temporarily) of a type of collaborative policy network described by Weare *et al.* as follows: '[C]ollaborative networks should not simply be viewed as instrumental means to achieve fixed ends but rather as particular sets of relationships that are manifestations and support for particular cultural biases' (Weare, Lichterman and Esparza, 2014, p.599).

Within any set of relationships there are tensions which are both essential for action and also potentially fractious. Many of the interviewees described the NI arts and cultural ecology as 'tribal' and at times contentious. This became apparent as ACN's open lobbying and public statements received backlash, according to some interviewees close to the processes. One stated that some individuals questioned: '[w]ho are you anyway and why are you doing this?' Yet the group felt compelled to act and to present evidence to the DfC to back up their recommendations (ACN, 2021). Some of those involved in ACN were also part of other networks and distinct pressure groups lobbying for the commercial entertainment, live events, music or venues sectors, or representing cultural freelancers.

Interviewees that were part of the ACN network made it clear that they were not there to represent 'the cultural sector' in a generalised sense. They resisted formalisation into an official 'voice' of the sector (they did not have an official terms of reference or membership) but had instead mobilised their collective resources to influence policy decisions by the DfC. Therefore, despite displaying traits of shared leadership in acting as advocates and seeking change 'beyond' their own organisations, and identifying a leadership vacuum, many neither espoused the title of cultural leaders nor accepted that responsibility.

One of the characteristics of collaborative policy networks is that they are predicated on both policy-makers and sectors sharing 'information and resources' and engaging in 'joint projects to achieve shared goals' (Weare, Lichterman and Esparza 2014, p.590). Among

interviewees, there was a general feeling that at local authority level and at a constituency level (with individual MLAs), trust and some history of cooperation existed. This was emphasised in a press release from the ACN in which the then CEO of Thrive, Margaret Henry (2020), stated: 'We believe local ministers do value the arts, as they have stated in the past, and we acknowledge the pressures they face as they manage the fallout from the Covid-19 crisis.'

However, before the pandemic such cooperation had rarely existed at the level of the NI Executive, not least due to the regular changes in minister, Assembly collapses and political disputes as well as occasional standoffs on cultural freedoms. One interviewee candidly noted the prevailing sense of distrust among many within the cultural sector when it came to the NI Executive, stating 'we don't believe our government'.

The result of this lack of cooperation was that it took a series of channels (pressure through local representation, information sharing with DfC officials and direct approaches to the minister) for the informal group around ACN to achieve progress. Aside from different appeals for support through 2020 and in early 2021, the minister agreed to establish a cultural recovery taskforce, one of the key recommendations made by the network and its collaborators. Our second stage of interviews took place in summer 2021 and interviewees felt that this was a significant moment for the arts and cultural sector in NI. However, they also by that time felt exhausted by the process and expressed concern about the long-term sustainability of such collaborations.

Collaborative leadership

Much has now been documented about the informal radical care networks that came into being among cultural freelancers during the first UK lockdown (e.g. FitzGibbon and Tsioulakis, 2022). However, as seen in the theorising of cultural leadership and discussion of the ACN above, many of the players who formed these freelancer movements were motivated by mutual support and resisted the title of leader, refusing to be made into a sectoral voice. Cultural freelancer networks such as 'NI Freelancers Surviving Corona' and campaigns such as the 'NI Bread & Butter Fund' arose within days of the first

closures in March 2020. They too resisted formalisation and showed perhaps a more dramatic reluctance to being made a point of reference for government departments, official bodies or networks. While some of the leading voices of these movements were involved in or attended ACN gatherings, or were invited to departmental and ACNI online meetings, they resisted pressure from both those within the sector and also from policy-makers such as the DfC to become a formal consultation apparatus representing the voice of cultural freelancers. They also refused to be formalised under the umbrella of different resource organisations. These actions, they argued, were in part a refusal to speak on behalf of their peers or have an organisation represent them; but they also highlighted their unsalaried status in the face of evidence searches by salaried officials and organisational heads. Indeed, one interviewee stated that 'it was like a part-time job on top of a full-time job' and that they were working fifteen-hour days, which was not sustainable. This inevitably resulted in many of members of the ACN and their colleagues experiencing fatigue by late 2020 and a degree of disappointment at the slow pace of response.

Where these informal networks intersected with the collaborative policy networks that were emerging, their concerns were focused on how the pandemic had exposed wider and longer-term structural issues within the whole arts and cultural sector. Contributions to sector meetings and a small number of open letters to ministers and officials highlighted concerns of precarity, career sustainability, exploitation, lack of inclusion and lack of accountability, not just at public policy level but also across cultural organisations. While many of these concerns became folded into ACN statements and recommendations, and the recovery taskforce priorities, tensions arose as freelancers perceived organisational players in the networks as lacking reflexivity and failing to execute change in their own structures and processes. Cultural freelancers, particularly artists, also expressed concern at their identity being conflated with their activism, either as 'poster girl' or token representatives for freelancers in a room of organisations with their own interests; or, by contrast, that their creative and professional identity was altered to become the voice and image of complaint, resulting in assumptions that they only wanted to work on issue-driven projects or that they would be 'difficult'.

These cultural freelancer movements brought with them pre-existing tensions and biases, a mistrust of other players and an historic imbalance of power, along with other barriers to their inclusion within collaborative policy networks. They also struggled at different stages to achieve the requisite sharing of information as DfC officials and ACNI offered constructed information-gathering processes and used them for evidence but did not necessarily share the decision-making or indeed discussion of results. As our interviews concluded in summer 2021, it became increasingly clear that there were issues of how sustainable these informal networks could be.

Collaborative leadership and change

Throughout the summer months of 2021, restrictions started to be lifted on NI arts venues and indoor and outdoor gatherings. This included the announcement that on 26 July 2021 theatres could reopen but only with seated events and social distancing of one metre still required (Northern Ireland Executive, 2021). A report to the DfC by the ACN highlighted that this made it financially unviable for many theatres and venues to reopen:

> As long as social-distancing measures allow for only c.20 per cent of capacity – this will render the business economically unviable. In most venues 50 per cent to 70 per cent occupancy is typically needed to break even and means theatres and some venues cannot operate (ACN, 2021).

This situation illustrates the real unevenness in the opening up of society with regard to the cultural sector. In stark contrast to the live arts sector, TV and film had been able to continue production and recover more quickly. This was outlined by an interviewee, who worked in both theatre and TV/film, who explained that they had access to regular PCR testing and full budgets for Covid-safe practices throughout any filming work. However, their theatre work was characterised by uncertainty as they 'were hearing about other productions being stopped a few days in because people were getting Covid'. The interviewee went on to suggest that gearing up for live shows in this way was just not viable because the rehearsal time needed could not be realised in practice.

This correlates with the UK-wide analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on specific art forms, with performing arts (including theatre) and visual arts being affected the most (Walmsley *et al.*, 2022; see also Chapters 2 and 5 of this volume). This was also apparent from data gathered in NI by the ACN, which demonstrated that as theatre productions and performing arts venues' business models are more reliant on freelancers, cultural freelancers and self-employed individuals had been more affected by the pandemic and resulting closures than employed workers (ACN, 2021). This has been supported by numerous studies (e.g. Jones, 2020; FitzGibbon and Tsioulakis, 2022; Walmsley *et al.*, 2022).

Beyond the divergent impacts between art forms there was also notable unevenness between rural and urban contexts in NI, largely as a result of pre-existing disparities. In an interview with a large rural festival, this was discussed in terms of local musicians: 'We're in a rural space, so we will be relying quite heavily on our locality to support that …. I would love to tap into the local [music scene] but from a Northern Irish perspective that would mean more capacity to support local touring' (Interviewee, 2021).

The interviewee went to suggest that there is no infrastructure outside of the big cities (Belfast and Derry) to support touring for live original music and that maybe it was time to discuss this situation, as it had been a recurring issue for many years. Conversely, they also stated that in relative terms at the point of interview in summer 2021, their festival and other live outdoor events were in a better position to open viably with social distancing than indoor smaller live music venues. Indeed, many of our interviewees stated that the effects of social distancing restrictions would take venues time (several years in some cases) to recover from, even when restrictions were completely lifted.

This complexity and unevenness across the arts and cultural ecology in NI led to divergence in the ways the collaborative leadership that had emerged navigated these issues. For example, the festival mentioned above developed a closer working relationship with the Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce thanks to greater levels of networking than they had previously undertaken. This brought the interests of traditional Irish music (their specialism) into the negotiations and the festival was able to 'get music

back in the outdoor setting' across Northern Ireland (Interviewee, 2021). The interviewee went on to say that several meetings had taken place with senior figures in government and different parts of the music sector in NI that had not occurred before COVID-19. In their view, this had increased confidence both on a personal level and within the broader music sector.

We draw attention to how each art form carries with it specific socio-cultural relationships that are embedded in the geo-political, historical and economic specificities of place and thus cannot be reduced to generalised or top-down policy decisions. The emergence of these forms of collaborative leadership and broader collaborative policy networks revealed that leadership can arise from and across multiple spaces. Moreover, this collaborative leadership creates its own narratives, which can be less ego-driven and more collective in articulation, both within and beyond cultural settings and activities.

Examples of this collaborative leadership abound throughout the interviews. We interviewed a prominent circus company based near Derry which told us that it began to reach out to videographers and different sector leaders to form collaborative working groups in order to deliver online workshop lessons for schoolchildren and young people. This process changed the content and operational and business models for the company. It shifted its focus towards collaboration with local authorities in order to set up studios under Covid-safe working and worked with experts in videography and technical audio-visual producers. This reflected a wider change in sharing and practice within the NI circus community. This was evident during one of the ACN's Big Gathering events as representatives stated that they had started 'having Zoom meetings about how to recover from this together, sharing risk assessments and conversations about wages too' (ACN, 2021). Another multi-arts and advocacy organisation, which runs a large festival in Belfast, spoke of its movement towards providing creative care boxes, which included food and activities for children (Interviewee, 2021). This became an integral part of its operation in light of cancellations of the festival and the company worked with local community leaders to direct provision where it was needed most. Crucially, these responses were cross-sector, collaborative and responsive to local communities.

Across all the interviews was a sense that the NI Government/ public sector as a whole did not respond quickly enough and that years of underinvestment in arts and culture (including infrastructure) had left NI even more vulnerable than the rest of the UK to the impact of the pandemic. However, this state of play galvanised the rapid response from the sector itself and led to the rise in collaborative and networked leadership. This is nothing new: as we have suggested earlier, patterns of collaborative leadership have responded to previous crises and tended to dissipate once the immediate pressures on the NI cultural sector shifted to another state, which could be characterised as 'less urgent' rather than resolved. The difference in this crisis was in its nature, namely its magnitude and scale, which affected all areas of society. What is certain, though, is that the experience of reopening was fragmented across the cultural sector and in different ways this made sustaining collaborative policy networks especially difficult.

The development of the long-called-for Northern Irish Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce in May 2021 represented an opportunity for a more formal collaborative policy network to develop from the crisis. Throughout summer 2021, the taskforce consulted with a wide range of stakeholders throughout the arts, culture and heritage sectors. Despite the taskforce being a key 'ask' from 'cultural leaders', including ACN, by the time it was up and running the landscape had shifted once again. The taskforce recommendations (which included the rollout of significant highly resourced professional development and capacity building programmes) required momentum and energy. By late 2021, this was no longer present in the sector, which had by then reached the point of chronic burnout. Once the taskforce report was completed, no further plans existed for formalised collaborative policy-making.

Challenges for collaborative policy networks

This chapter has examined pre-pandemic and pandemic activity to explore the mobilisation and potential of collaborative leadership and collaborative policy networks. We have shown that, especially when in crisis, these networks arise through a range of approaches (as 'top-down' taskforces, joint campaigning, and as 'grassroots'

informal mutual support networks prompted into advocacy). We also see that many are constructed around traces of pre-existing formal and informal relationships, reinforcing the points of Weare, Lichterman and Esparza (2014) about the social construction of collaborative policy networks. We argue too that these movements were most importantly networks of mutual care and support; sharing emotional and professional difficulties of a challenging practice and policy environment alongside collective acts of change and advocacy.

As we conclude, we articulate the recurring challenges for such collaborations to translate into effective recognised forms of collaborative cultural leadership or collaborative policy networks. As we observed, leadership reluctance (as articulated by Goodwin, 2020) or resistance to 'imposed' leadership (FitzGibbon, 2019), either on individuals or networks, makes discourses of who will be leader, how mandates are formed and what are common goals or defined successes difficult, even when such discourses are collaborative in intent. The second challenge we observed is an imbalance of power, characterised partly by information flows leading to an absence of trust. In order to fully collaborate within policy-making, those with greatest authority and knowledge must find ways to give these away. As we noted, many of the earlier and pandemic-related approaches by public officials to consult and share decision-making were over-defined and operated on pre-determined agenda and timescales. Similarly, where this collaboration arose at a public policy level, it could often be undermined by tensions between and actions from sector, public or political players. This amplified mistrust and generated feelings of tokenism, even when there was pan-sectoral participation.

The third and perhaps most significant challenge is the reliance of such collaborative relationships on interpersonal relationships and sustained personal investment. While the intention and success of a collaborative policy network may be to solve problems through policy action, equally as important is the problem sharing and formation of dialogues based on trust, mutual support and (as above) knowledge sharing. Political uncertainty and the extensive restructuring of the culture portfolio over different levels of government pre-pandemic made it difficult to form sustained dialogues with public officials and politicians. The relationships were

coloured by other parallel relationships: between government and its agencies; politicians and staff/sector; funder and client; employer and freelancer; artist/organisation and arts council; funded and unfunded. Inasmuch as these networks thrived through mutual support, they fragmented as interests diverged or other demands encroached. Additionally, they relied heavily on individuals driving momentum and undertaking care. In a sector already characterised by poor working conditions (FitzGibbon, 2019), this human effort eventually became exhausted, demoralised or, as a means of basic human self-protection, key players withdrew or shifted their attention elsewhere.

A feature we explore less in this chapter, but one that certainly merits deeper investigation, is the degree to which the different officials (in public bodies and government departments) as well as political figures (ministers and MLAs) embodied leadership behaviours or saw themselves as taking on a mantle of leadership, particularly cultural leadership. While sector interviewees spoke often about working with government in an unprecedented way, public officials from ACNI and DfC also spoke of a previously unimaginable pace of change in internal processes to enact new policy measures or release funds. DfC especially noted the ramping up of engagement with culture sector individuals and unprecedented levels of consultation on departmental planning. This was, however, not unusual in the pandemic response as all units and departments opened up channels to discuss urgent policy action. While officials made policy recommendations to ministers, we need to understand more about how those politicians understood the role they were playing in encouraging or opening up to such collaborative measures. Further research of this may reveal other understandings or solutions to some of the challenges we describe here.

We conclude our observations by noting that individual commitment and effort and the interpersonal relationships formed are the key drivers of collaborative leadership and policy network success. They are also the principal reasons why such networks rapidly become unsustainable and lose momentum. While a purely theoretical view might articulate this as a failure in leadership behaviour, we would propose that the benefits of collaborative leadership (in crisis and not) can only be realised when the wider environment and relationships are conditioned by mutual support, transparency and trust.

Note

1 The departments were: Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure; Department for Education; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; and finally the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment.

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