

THE ARTS AND CULTURE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

CULTURE BEYOND
COVID

January 2021

THE ARTS COLLABORATION NETWORK

*"We understand that culture is everything."*¹

Since March 2020, Northern Ireland has been battling the Covid-19 pandemic. Lives have been altered in many ways - losing loved ones, enduring illness, losing livelihoods and a fundamental loss of social connection and cohesion due to the necessary restrictions on our daily lives. Culture is essential to help NI heal from those losses - but we cannot play our part in that healing if we are not here to do so.

Culture is essential for the positive recovery of NI which is why we must act together now to protect the cultural economy. Through culture we can make the most of the opportunity to learn from our experiences during 2020 and truly build back better, towards a society that is fairer, more inclusive and places its citizens' health and wellbeing at the top of the agenda.

The critically important role that the ecology of artists and freelance creatives, organisations and venues can play in delivering the social and economic recovery of NI has been acknowledged by Ministers, MLAs and NI MPs. To support the realisation of social and economic renewal and recovery, the Arts Collaboration Network² has 5 key requests for the First and Deputy First Ministers, the NI Executive and Department for Communities to ensure the sector can make its contribution in 2021 and beyond:

1. Building the sector's infrastructure, capacity and skills to meet society's emerging needs.

People's lives have changed and are continuing to change due to Covid-19. The full impact of those changes and the role of arts and culture in people's lives is emerging. Realising the undoubted opportunities these changes bring to our citizens and international visitors requires sector investment in capital infrastructure, the development of future-focused skills, technologies and organisational change.

2. Invest to sustain and develop the workforce of artists, creatives and other highly skilled roles that form the foundation of NI's creative ecology.

NI's creative workforce is essential to Northern Ireland's recovery and future. Currently the make-up of that workforce is predominantly freelance, meaning the lack of income and the inability to create work, due to Covid restrictions, has been felt even more acutely by the people in these roles. Further investment and access to appropriate support are needed now to ensure thousands of highly skilled individuals aren't forced to leave the sector due to Covid induced financial hardship, poor mental health and reduced well-being.

Despite emergency funding for individuals, many are still falling through the cracks. In the short term we need to see an extension of CJRIS and SEISS. In the medium term we need an innovative solution that resolves the precarious pre-Covid position of creative freelancers and leads to a more robust development and employment framework. Without these interventions we risk not only a much-reduced workforce as a direct result of Covid, but also preventing a generation of young people from being able to gain secure employment in NI's cultural sector.

3. The NI Executive and the Public Health Agency to engage with the arts and culture sector regarding reopening venues, cultural spaces, and cultural activity.

Detailed plans and risk assessments are already in place. In order to plan for a safe reopening the sector needs guidance, a partnership approach and to agree a clear communications plan that seeks to build public confidence in the sector's ability to deliver all activities in a Covid-secure way.

4. A commitment to increasing the Arts Council of NI's annual budget year on year, beginning in 2021-22, to support the ongoing stabilisation and renewal of the sector.

Our ability to deliver the social change that is possible through arts participation is dependent on a significantly increased baseline for arts funding in NI. The sector stands ready to help individuals and communities heal and grow, to meet the challenges of social isolation, poverty and mental health whilst also restoring our economy. We share the NI Executive's vision to create a future-focused and vibrant NI – a place where people want to live, work and visit.

Realising that vision requires a properly publicly funded and sustainable sector as the essential bedrock of our creative ecology. A standstill budget for 2021-22, after years of funding cuts, will deepen the crisis within the subsidised sector even further. It will add to our already fragile position and reduce the real benefits that the arts has on people across NI irrespective of their capacity to pay.

5. An Integrated Arts and Culture Strategy co-created with an NI Cultural Taskforce.

To fully maximise the positive differences arts and culture can make to people's lives across NI, a coherent and consistent integrated strategy across all NI Government Departments needs to be delivered aligned to pan-Executive outcomes. This strategy must be co-created by the public, the cultural sector, private sector, local government and the NI Executive, and engage other key stakeholder groups. The process should be led by the Department for Communities and engage other Departments.

A NI Cultural Taskforce, comprising of representatives from these key stakeholders groups, would ensure an equitable strategy that places the health and wellbeing of the NI population and a healthy economy at its core.

The principle of co-design has been endorsed by Minister Ní Chuilín. We are ready to work alongside Minister Hargey, ACNI and others to take this forward and agree a timetable and Terms of Reference early in 2021.

What will be different as a result?

Culture-led recovery and regeneration has been shown to deliver a broad range of social and economic impacts, including:

- Developing the skills, knowledge and confidence of citizens: Participation in arts and culture can produce engaged citizens, and helps minority groups to find a voice and express their identity.³
- Enhancing community cohesion and pride: Culture creates a positive social environment resulting in greater civic participation, lower truancy rates and lower delinquency rates.⁴
- Attracting more visitors, boosting the tourism sector: 4m tourists visiting NI per year engage with the arts and culture here.⁵ In 2013, more than 1 million people visited Derry-Londonderry as UK Capital of Culture. £400m of all spending by NI visitors in 2018 involved engagement with arts and culture;⁶
- Supporting enhanced resident health: Participating in or attending cultural places or events has a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing - those who had attended a cultural event or place in the preceding 12 months were 60% more likely to report good health.⁷
- Stimulating town centre footfall, boosting local business: There are examples from across the UK successfully transforming high streets through the growth of high-quality visitor experiences. A strong arts and cultural offer can support efforts to maintain or enhance the attractiveness of retail centres as places to live, work and visit by offering unique experiences for visitors and/or shoppers through the animation of public spaces including art works, live performances and opportunities for local cultural identity to be explored and celebrated.⁸
- Bringing enjoyment for residents: 85% of people surveyed across NI said they attended or participated in cultural experiences to enjoy themselves.⁹
- Stimulating and supporting creative sector growth and jobs: Creativity is an essential skill for the future within and beyond the culture sector. The World Economic Forum's 'Future of Jobs Report'¹⁰ cites 'Creativity' as one of the 'Top 10 Skills of 2025'. The British Council¹¹ found that jobs asking for creativity are more likely to grow as a percentage of the labour market by the year 2030. In particular, many types of engineers and people in manufacturing and business development roles have much in common with 'creative jobs'. Ensuring that we invest in and nurture creativity as an essential skill will be a critical factor to consider within the new Skills Strategy for NI.¹²
- Attracting inward investment and enhancing the area's image, helping to attract skilled people and business investment: Business leaders including Invest NI agree that the arts and culture sector is vital as it underlines the strength of the economy as a whole. A strong arts sector is a litmus test of how the economy is actually performing. An improvement in the arts sector gives us more confidence that the economy is recovering.¹³

These civic and economic outcomes reflect those in the NI Executive outcomes for Northern Ireland and the 11 local Council Community plans. Covid-19 has created a momentum for change across all areas of our lives and Brexit also brings challenges that will need to be met. The arts and cultural sector will also need to change and that change must happen in co-production with the NI Executive and key stakeholders including the public to fully realise a stronger, healthier, and safer NI where all people can enjoy more opportunities to live, work and visit.

Covid Context

The Covid-19 pandemic has shut down theatres, venues and community arts spaces across the country with no plan for reopening. The economic recession brought about by Covid threatens another wave of long-term underfunding that many cannot survive.

As the physical sector across NI was closing down, artists, musicians and creatives started sharing their work online to offer some hope and respite to people in difficult times. The public, separated from their networks of friends and family during the initial lockdown, responded by engaging with arts and culture in an unprecedented way. This was in fact a global movement and we led the local response. People reported not feeling so alone anymore. A sense of community was created in the midst of a crisis, and musicians, artists and cultural organisations who had lost so much, were at the heart of it.

Covid-19 has been devastating but also created opportunities for the arts and culture sector – and for the public who value the many individual and collective benefits the sector and its workers bring to life in NI.

This document produced by the Arts Collaboration Network is designed to show how culture will contribute to healing and recovery and what the sector needs to make a vital contribution to life in NI as it has done over many difficult times across our history.

The Arts Collaboration Network acknowledges the significant work undertaken by the NI Executive, the Minister for Communities and Department officials and the Departments' arms-length bodies in responding to the initial needs of the sector informed by our documents of July and August 2020. These included reallocation of existing DfC funds and £29m of the £33m allocated to NI from the UK's Chancellor Cultural Fund announced in July 2020 and provided support for some individuals and organisations.¹⁴

We understand that there is still some emergency Covid funding to be allocated by the Department for Communities.

The ACN also recognises that consultation has taken place between the Department for Communities and the sector in developing these schemes to allow those not usually needing to rely on public funding to be able to access this emergency support.

The sector has where possible adapted to the challenging conditions since March, with online and outdoor work being delivered to communities across NI, and some cultural spaces reopening in a safe way (galleries and museums) as government restrictions permitted. This adaptation continues as we cope with the second wave of Covid and its many impacts and deal with another necessary lockdown at the start of 2021.

Other nations of the UK and the Republic of Ireland have invested in arts and culture to help support recovery, in a number of ways including:

- Republic of Ireland Government has allocated €130 million in funding for the Arts Council in 2021. This is the highest budget ever allocated to the Arts Council and an increase of over €50 million on the 2020 budget of €75 million.
- Arts Council England has increased their available funding by £34.4m to help support communities, individuals and artists through the ongoing impacts of the Covid crisis in addition to distributing £257m from the UK Chancellor's Cultural Recovery Fund.
- In Scotland the future of arts and culture has become an issue in the 2021 Election¹⁵

About The Arts Collaboration Network

The Arts Collaboration Network is an informal network of the main sector support organisations and a number of creative hubs across Northern Ireland. The people involved are Margaret Henry, Thrive Audience Development, Niamh Flanagan, Theatre and Dance NI, Mary Nagele, Arts & Business NI, Rob Hilken & Noel Kelly, Visual Artists Ireland, Kevin Murphy, Voluntary Arts Ireland, Katherine McDonald, Craft NI, Charlotte Dryden, Oh Yeah, Sarah Jones, Creative & Cultural Skills, Peter Richards, Golden Thread Gallery/Chair Belfast Visual Arts Forum, Sophie Hayles, Crescent Arts Centre, Cath McBride In Your Space Circus / Chair: DCSDC Arts & Cultural Strategy, Co-Delivery Group, Anne McReynolds and Maeve Hawkins, The MAC, Damien Coyle, University of Atypical and Jenna Hall, Belfast Community Circus School/Co-Chair Belfast Festivals Forum.

Notes:

1. 'A City Imagining' Cultural Strategy 2020-2030
2. The Arts Collaboration Network is an informal network of the main sector support organisations and a number of creative hubs across Northern Ireland including thrive audience development, Theatre and Dance NI, Arts & Business NI, Visual Artists Ireland, Voluntary Arts Ireland, Craft NI, Oh Yeah Centre, DCSDC Arts & Cultural Strategy, Co-Delivery Group, Belfast Festivals Forum, Creative & Cultural Skills, Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast Visual Arts Forum, Crescent Arts Centre, In Your Space, DCSDC Cultural Delivery Group, University of Atypical, Belfast Community Circus School, Belfast Festivals Forum and The MAC.
3. AHRC Cultural Value Project Report
4. Evidence from Report into the Power of Community Arts
5. Based on 83% of overseas visitors said that interest in history and culture is very important when choosing Ireland for a holiday, The Value of Arts and Culture to the People and Society, ACE & 2018 NI annual tourism statistics 2018
6. UK average 42% of all spending by overseas visitors to the UK involved engagement with arts and culture, The Value of Arts and Culture to the People and Society, ACE & 2018 NI annual tourism statistics 2018
7. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/304899/Quantifying_and_valuing_the_wellbeing_impacts_of_sport_and_culture.pdf
8. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Value%20of%20Arts%20and%20Culture%20in%20Place-Shaping.pdf>
9. <https://wewillthrive.co.uk/audience-insights/reports/culture-beyond-covid-insights>
10. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020/in-full/infographics-e4e69e4de7>
11. [1] <https://www.britishcouncil.org/anyone-anywhere/explore/digital-creativity/job-market-future>
12. OECD (2019[6]), OECD Skills Strategy 2019: Skills to Shape a Better Future, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264313835-en>
13. <https://www.artsandbusinessni.org.uk/blog/2020/september/why-northern-irelands-art-sector-must-be-supported-now-a-business-viewpoint>
14. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/culture-languages-arts-and-heritage-support-programme-2020-2021>
15. <https://culturecounts.scot/cultural-manifesto-2021>