

THE ARTS AND CULTURE SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND – COVID-19 AND THE CHALLENGE OF RECOVERY

1. Headline Summary

“We understand that culture is everything.”¹

The arts and culture sector in Northern Ireland is right at the heart of our society, an important part of the broader, interconnected and multimillion pound creative industries. This sector is a critical part of an all-island tourism offering, with further reach and impact through partnerships across the UK, US, Europe and internationally. It contributes significantly to life in Northern Ireland and to all those who live here, work here or choose to visit us. It helps to advance at least 9 of the 14 Programme for Government objectives² and makes a significant contribution to the NI economy; it improves outcomes for individual residents and communities, supports education, and helps to position Northern Ireland as a must-go destination.

The necessary measures taken in response to Covid-19 have brought the sector close to terminal closure. If fundamental and comprehensive action is not taken now, this major part of Northern Irish cultural life and economy will be lost.

With positive impacts on hospitality and tourism, as well as its role in improving citizens' health and well-being, social regeneration and bringing communities together, the arts are essential to the social and economic recovery from Covid-19. To ensure the sector can survive and then recover, five needs have been identified that place the well-being of NI citizens and communities at the centre of this process:



¹ A City Imagining 'Cultural Strategy 2020-2030

² Cultural participation contributes to Programme for Government outcomes 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12 and 14.

2. The arts and culture sector plays a vital role in the social and economic life of NI. It significantly contributes to:

a) Northern Ireland economy

- The arts and culture sector makes a significant contribution to the NI economy. Participatory arts and community arts organisations support individuals to gain social capital and skills, knowledge and experience through social and emotional learning (SEL). According to the World Economic Forum, these are critical to help young people secure work or start new businesses in the 21st century.³ Arts and culture are important aspects for tourism across NI, all-island, the UK and beyond and act as a key part of the region's success in attracting mobile international investment.
 - The NI creative industries account for 43,000 of the NI workforce and contribute £797million to the economy - 2.4% of Northern Ireland's total GVA.⁴
 - In the financial year 2018-19 arts events across Northern Ireland generated over £24million in ticket revenue. Further ancillary spend is estimated at an additional £90million, contributing over £110m to the local economy.⁵
 - 4m tourists visiting NI per year engage with the arts and culture here.⁶ 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;⁷
 - Festivals and events in NI create a return of £7 for every £1 of public investment, attracting visitors, participants and tourists, increasing dwell-time and spending.

b) Citizens' health and well-being

- The physical and mental well-being of all who live in Northern Ireland is at the core of the NI Executive's Programme for Government and the 11 local council community plans. Truly vibrant communities, where people want to live and work are needed to ensure peoples' lives are happier and healthier. It is widely agreed that:
 - 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.
 - The power of culture and the arts to unite people during lockdown has been captured by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) and the Intellectual Property Office (IPO)'s report showing the amount of creative content being consumed across the UK during lockdown was at an all-time high;
 - Involvement in community arts helps to counter the effects of bereavement⁸;
 - Arts projects reduce isolation among older people right across the UK.
- A recent thrive survey of over 6,500 audience members showed that the well-being aspects of attending live events is what people are missing most during lockdown.⁹

³ World Economic Forum report 'New Vision for Education: Fostering Social and Emotional Learning Through Technology'

⁴ Department for Communities, 2013

⁵ Based on average spend per head of £72.50 for visitors/ £149 for non-NI visitors to The MAC Hockney exhibition, 2016

⁶ 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

⁷ 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

⁸ Mental Health Foundation (MHF), *An Evidence Review of the Impact of Participatory Arts on Older People*, 2011

⁹ 65% are "missing having something special to look forward to that gets me out of the house".

c) Bringing communities together

- Throughout our troubled past and since the Good Friday Agreement, the arts and culture sector continue to help people come together to share and make sense of their experiences, good or bad. They create safer places to discuss how we want our streets, estates, villages, towns and cities to be for ourselves and future generations. The arts do this in several ways:
 - Participation in the arts contributes to community cohesion, peace-building and reduces social exclusion for example in Belfast City Council and Derry City & Strabane District Council areas where over 350,000 residents participate in arts and culture every year.¹⁰
 - Community arts programmes help people to get motivated and take action in their own communities;
 - Culture and sport volunteers are more likely than average to be involved and influential in their local communities.

3. The devastating impact of Covid-19 on the arts and culture sector

- With all arts venues closed for almost three months, **box office income and ancillary trading is at zero.**
- Fixed costs remain high, including listed building overheads. **Many venues and organisations across Northern Ireland will run out of cash by October 2020.**
- Job Retention Scheme has avoided large-scale redundancies to this point. Without intervention, there is likely to be **thousands of job losses** by October 2020 or earlier (employed and freelancers).
- The impact on some individuals has been catastrophic. Without a thriving sector the future looks bleak for thousands of freelancers across all art forms. Some are facing **real financial hardship**, dealing with poor mental health and for many this is likely to continue for a significant period of time. For example in Belfast, the many and diverse festivals funded by Belfast City Council employ around 6,000 freelancers and the Black Box music venue alone works with over 3,000 freelance artists per year.
- Government Grant and Loan schemes are challenging to access, for example because of charitable status restrictions and many freelancers have been unable to avail of government benefits because they do not qualify for them.
- As long as **social-distancing measures allow for only c.20% of capacity** – this will render the business economically unviable. In most venues 50% to 70% occupancy is typically needed to break even and means **theatres and some venues cannot operate.**
- The **participatory and community arts and culture** providers are facing similar challenges. To ensure both current guidelines and safeguarding policies can be met, tutor:participant ratios have to increase, meaning cost per head more than doubles and business models quickly become untenable.
- **Enormous economic impact** on all related hospitality and related businesses if theatres and arts venues are forced to shut down permanently. This will limit or halt our ability to create tourism product offerings for domestic, national and international market, even post Covid-19 when restrictions been lifted.

¹⁰ Thrive Research, 81% of Belfast City Council residents, 92% of Derry City & Strabane DC residents participate, 2018

- **Risk to regional towns and cities across Northern Ireland** where investment in arts venues and jobs has led to the animation of villages, towns and cities and regeneration and growth of these areas. Since opening in 2016, Seamus Heaney Homeplace in Mid Ulster has welcomed thousands of visitors from 45 countries across the world; The MAC in Belfast city centre alone for example, currently contributes £9.7 million a year to the local economy.
- Like other parts of the UK, **the situation is critical in Northern Ireland**. Our sector has already suffered from year after year of under investment, with arts budgets cut by £23 million since 2012, and some of our independent theatre companies and visual arts organisations have been cut completely or have been left to produce work on minimal levels of investment.
- Ecosystem of the culture and arts sector cannot easily be rebuilt from scratch if lost.

4. The arts and culture are vital to Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's arts and culture sector improves health and well-being, helps people to fulfil their potential, generates civic pride, creates a sense of place and makes a significant contribution to the economy and our tourism offer. Furthermore, the creative industries are emerging as one of the fastest growing and increasingly important sectors of the economy.

The Department for Communities recognises that prosperous economies are characterised by a strong creative sector. Northern Ireland's offer is vibrant and internationally renowned. How we nurture and develop talent and preserve, promote and project our work attracts investment and raises the profile of the region on the world's stage, including: Derry Girls, Adrian Dunbar, The Undertones, Liam Neeson, Snow Patrol, Medbh McGuckian, Colin Davidson, Kenneth Branagh, Game of Thrones, Ash, Marie Jones, Seamus Heaney and many more...

Many of our global talent would attest, success is almost always inspired and nurtured through participation in the wide range of funded arts¹¹. From classes and community events, to literature, festivals, theatres, visual arts, comedy, gigs, circus, carnivals and much more besides, every aspect of the sector plays a critical part in realising the potential of our people and this place.

The inclusive, accessible, welcoming and diverse nature of our offer helps us to recognise and empower all individuals to support, to play and to learn together across all communities. The sector actively helps to protect the mental health of citizens, celebrates diversity, challenges assumptions, engages the vulnerable and supports those who suffer marginalisation.

Arts and culture, in all of its forms, brings people together, it develops relationships, creates vibrant experiences, encourages self-expression, improves well-being, builds skills and supports the economy to prosper. It has a vital role to play in Northern Ireland's recovery from Covid-19 and beyond.

¹¹ Ian McElhinney speaking at an event hosted by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland The RT HON Karen Bradley MP, Feb 2019

5. Arts and culture sector needs for action by the NI Executive

WHAT'S NEEDED WHEN

This paper presents the urgent measures needed to rescue the arts and culture sector. It calls for support towards 5 immediate needs:

Sustain the workforce through:

- 1) Immediate Hardship Fund for individuals within the workforce to support and sustain the freelancers and self-employed artists who create so much of our work and who have fallen through the gaps in government support;
- 2) Support for the self-employed and employees through the continuation and extension of the Job Retention Scheme & SEISS Scheme.

Support sector recovery through:

- 3) Stabilisation Fund for arts organisations;
- 4) Rescue Fund for venues.

Invest in the recovery of NI through:

- 5) Cultural Sector Recovery Plan which is co-ordinated across the sector including the creation of a NI Cultural Taskforce.

The impact of Covid-19 on society and the arts sector is evolving daily and remains uncertain as we move carefully through the NI Executive 5 stages of Recovery Plan.

We have estimated that what we need now is an immediate Covid-19 related financial injection of £24m to ensure the actual survival of the NI arts and culture ecosystem for the immediate future and until a new normal emerges.

If the financial intervention is made by the NI Executive now it will ensure that, as we all emerge from the Covid-19 crisis, we do so not in a cultural wasteland. Rather it will be a Northern Ireland where the arts and culture sector is alive, providing hope and helping to facilitate the re-emergence of a vibrant, shared society which can heal together, and where people want to live, work, visit and spend.

Post Covid-19, the arts and culture sector can help Northern Ireland thrive, but only if we survive.

This document has been drawn together by the Arts Collaboration Network: a collective of sector support and other organisations working in arts and culture in NI. The ACN has been meeting for about 3 years, but recently more often to assess the impact of Covid-19 on the arts sector. The group is composed of representatives including freelancers, producers, umbrella organisations, galleries, festivals, venues and many others across multiple disciplines and public and peer-facing approaches. The group offers a cross-section of this hugely diverse sector, and - whilst it cannot represent the many thousands of voices of every individual, intersection or demographic - we have consulted with as many colleagues as possible from all areas of arts and culture, as well as with the public, about their fears for the future; all of whom are united around the important role that the arts need to play in our region's recovery.

The ACN comprises:

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, Peter Richards, Belfast Visual Arts Forum, Sophie Hayles, Crescent Arts Centre, Jane Morrow, University of Atypical and Jenna Hall, Belfast Community Circus with additional support on this document from Claire Murray, Lyric Theatre and Áine McVerry, The MAC