arts council of Northern Ireland

Creative Connections a 5 year plan for developing the arts 2007–2012

Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company. Photo: Max Beer

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Chairman's Preface

The publication of a new 5 year plan marks a crucial point in the development of any organisation. A strategy looks forward, making sense of changing circumstances, of new opportunities and challenges. It should provide a vision and a framework for future development. A good strategy should also remember the past.

From 2001-2006 the Arts Council of Northern Ireland has operated within the framework of a plan entitled *The Arts: Inspiring the Imagination, Building the Future*. It sets out a range of objectives and priorities which fed from the principle that the arts matter because they enrich all our lives and because they provide a more cohesive and inclusive view of society. These are long held principles and we continue to uphold them but we need to meet new challenges. These include widening access to cultural excellence; creating and sustaining opportunities for employment; developing the creative and thinking skills for a new information age and contributing to community well-being. We will embrace these new challenges, work together with a wide range of agencies and the arts sector by developing creative connections.

Our mission is to place the arts at the heart of our social, economic and creative life.

Realising the ambitions outlined in this five year plan requires a step change in how we support artists and invest in arts organisations. It is no longer tenable to expect them to do more with less. We need to develop further our seed bed of talent and innovation by backing artistic entrepreneurs. We need to resource our arts organisations to act as catalysts for community development and regeneration as well as helping change the image of Northern Ireland internationally, as a confident and creative place in which to live, work and do business.

On the part of the Arts Council, we are committed to improving our own performance to meet those challenges and we pledge to work collaboratively with our artists, arts organisations and other partners in local and central government in doing so.

Golden Thread Gallery, *Prepossession Exhibition*. Image: Darren Siwes

I wish to acknowledge the role of the Director of Strategic Development, Nick Livingston, under the guidance of the Chief Executive, Roisín McDonough, in preparing this plan which I have great pleasure in commending.

The starting point for the development of our new 5 year plan was to review the outgoing one. Independent consultants undertook an ambitious and thorough programme of research to assess the impact and achievements of the plan, the success of the funding streams, the challenges facing the arts in the region, the internal organisation of the Arts Council and how effectively the Arts Council had linked with central and local government and the arts sector.

The findings of the review were then fed into the broadest public consultation exercise that the Arts Council has ever undertaken. Focus groups, workshops and public consultations were held all over Northern Ireland. The result of this was the production of a draft strategy which has been widely circulated and consulted upon.
The publication of this 5 year plan, entitled *Creative Connections*, marks the culmination of this process.

Of course, the strategy only provides a framework for the next 5 years. The specific objectives and activities of the Council are set out in the 3 year Corporate Plan, and a series of artform funding priorities. Taken together, these provide a thorough overview of the activities that you can expect the Arts Council to undertake over the next 5 years.

Rosemary Kelly
Chairman, Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Roisín McDonough
Chief Executive, Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Prime Cut Productions, *Endgame*. Photo: Chris Hill

Introduction

The arts have the power to broaden and enrich lives.

More than any other activity, they transform the familiar, everyday world – presenting it to us as new, different and unexpected. The arts allow us to better understand ourselves and our society.

The arts give people confidence and skills which contribute to their employment. They attract investment, boost the country's profile, give the community a greater identity and attract visitors from elsewhere. They also help us design the buildings, services and environments which transform our quality of life.

As the Arts Council, we strongly believe in making a direct link between how a society encourages and protects the creativity of its people and the importance that society places on its own future. The arts, for example, transform education, helping young people develop the creative resources our economy depends on.

In all sections of the arts, highly original and well-crafted work is being produced and our artists, writers, musicians, architects and designers are enjoying more publicity than ever before through showcases, festivals and tours at home and abroad. The arts produced by our individuals and organisations, are proving ambitious, exciting and memorable. Northern Ireland's arts have never been more visible.

The arts themselves have expanded to include new ways of being creative, celebrating modern sources of inspiration and attracting younger generations to them.

Our mission is to place the arts at the heart of our social, economic and creative life.

Under four broad themes, you will find here what we believe needs to be done over the next five years to achieve this vision – promoting the value of the arts; strengthening the arts; increasing audiences and improving our organisation's performance.

Belfast Wheel sculpture – New Belfast Community Arts Initiative

Theme 1 Art at the Heart - Promoting the Value of the Arts

Artists want to live and work in a society that recognises their skill and gives value to their art. There is a universal importance to innovative theatre, composition, writing and other forms of creativity.

By expressing their artistic freedom, artists can bring about much-needed discussion on the issues facing society. An open society recognises this principle and that everyone, no matter what background they come from, is entitled to enjoy culture and the arts.

However, many artists' roles are changing to meet the wide-ranging demands of a changing society. Their work is contributing to the powerful role the arts can play in society. We will continue to support them and promote the significance and value of the arts to the public.

As we move into a new era in Northern Ireland, with a vision to establish a fairer society where all individuals are considered equals and diversity is respected, we will highlight ways in which the arts and artists can play a role in addressing issues such as racism, discrimination and sectarianism.

Through artist-led programmes like the 'Art of Regeneration' and 'Re-imaging Communities' we will continue work which is helping to make positive and creative neighbourhoods. We will assess these projects, among others, to see how they are helping to realise people's potential and transform the life of local communities.

As a regional agency the Arts Council of Northern Ireland contributes to the development of the arts from the local to the transnational. One of the most consistent signs of success in the arts is how Northern Ireland repeatedly produces gifted artists whose work is celebrated on the world stage. Not only is this increasing the profile of the arts from Northern Ireland but it is positively altering perceptions of Northern Ireland and contributing to the economy by promoting cultural exchange and cultural tourism.

Despite this, the per capita funding of the arts in Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. We will promote the benefits of using public funding for the arts and actively lobby government for increased funding.

Many policy areas, including healthcare, education and criminal justice, recognise the role the arts

have to play in boosting people's confidence, enhancing well-being and empowering individuals. We have singled out education and lifelong learning for particular focus. By introducing children to the arts at a young age we will ensure a lifelong interest in the arts and help remove the intellectual and social barriers to attendance and participation.

The Review of Public Administration is taking forward far reaching changes to central and local government. Through partnership working, we will seize this opportunity to encourage stronger links between the arts and other policy areas, highlighting the possibilities for using the arts as a transformative tool.

These changes will impact on our relationship with local government. During this time of change it is our responsibility to develop and help deliver a joined-up approach for the arts throughout the region. We will work with local authorities to ensure that the arts are included in the new community planning process. In addition, through the Forum for Local Government and the Arts, we will campaign to promote the arts at a local level and to encourage stronger links with local authorities.

In summary, this theme describes our objectives to place the arts at the heart of society. To achieve this aim we will:

- **improve recognition of the contribution artists and arts organisations make to society**
- **influence government regarding the contribution the arts make to the achievement of a range of policy objectives**
- **gain broad acceptance of the need for increased funding for the arts in Northern Ireland**
- **achieve international recognition for the arts from Northern Ireland**

Theme 2 Strengthening the Arts

Individual artists

Individual artists are at the heart of everything that arts bring to our society and Northern Ireland has been a 'cradle of creativity'. In literature, theatre, music and the visual arts, the extraordinary quality and range of work has had a huge effect that goes beyond what might be expected of a small region with a population of 1.7 million people.

Whether artists in Northern Ireland are 'career artists' or not, we are committed to the continued development and support of all our artists to ensure that artistic excellence and the highest standards in all artforms are pursued.

We value and celebrate the achievements of our talented artists – we recognise and will reward commitment through our grants, commissions, residencies and travel awards. We will work with our artists to create opportunities for them to showcase their work not only locally but across the world and to identify and exploit new and emerging markets.

Our artists' willingness to take risks and try out new things will make sure that Northern Ireland stays at the fore of the latest developments in the arts. However, to be able to continue with their work in the long-term, some artists are also taking on other jobs and careers. We need to better understand the conditions in which they live and work and the kind of career and business choices they make. We will carry out a full survey of the working conditions of artists in Northern Ireland to make sure our systems for supporting them are relevant, focused and effective. Working with others we will explore options for providing affordable, high quality workspace for artists.

We will assess what type of support artists and creative business people need to develop and sustain a flourishing creative industries sector in Northern Ireland. The range of possible ways through which we can offer this support is varied. We will promote entrepreneurial skills development through a range of delivery partners, encouraging artists to expand into new markets and to make the most of new commercial opportunities. As the way in which we produce, present and enjoy art is changing, for example through the internet and digital content development, so the opportunities for showcasing culture are expanding.

Laganvale Brass Band. Opera Theatre Company. Big Telly Theatre Company – photo: Emma Critchley. Photographer John Baucher. Rachael Grimes. Carlo Gébler.
Nicky Keogh and Patrick Bloomer, *Bin Boat* – photo: Ian Charlesworth. Damian Gorman. Arts Council Launch. Glenn Patterson.
Susan MacWilliam, From Stereoscopes, 2001, Girl Standing, Girl on Ground, Dress Detail, Arts Council Collection. Grand Opera House, *The Nutcracker*.

We will encourage artists to use new methods for distributing their work as a way of improving their financial well-being and long-term future.

Arts organisations

Arts organisations are important cultural assets and form part of the basic infrastructure of the arts. Their work touches the lives of many people, transforms our view of ourselves and contributes to an outward-looking society. Over the years, it has been mainly through public support that Northern Ireland has developed a network of cultural organisations that is varied, confident and constantly changing. We are committed to protecting the health and well-being of organisations and supporting excellence, creativity and access. We will promote the best of our arts organisations, improving their long-term creative and financial future.

Arts organisations need to have long-term guaranteed funding to plan and work effectively. We will award funding to a number of organisations for three years at a time. We also recognise that arts organisations have to look beyond grant support and use the market, making the most of their customers and using sponsorship. We will support cultural organisations to develop a mix of different sources of income, bring new approaches to their work and form partnerships with others to encourage enterprise within the sector.
We want to make sure that leadership in the arts sector is strong and to do this we will work with a range of providers (the best advisers and coaches) to support learning and development for board members. We will set up a Chairs' Forum to encourage new approaches to governance issues and we will develop a leadership programme to give senior executives of our arts organisations the knowledge and skills to respond to an ever-changing environment.

Infrastructure

Some of the most obvious signs of regeneration in both urban and rural areas in Northern Ireland have been the new and exciting cultural buildings which have been created within local communities. Not only have these developments been successful in artistic terms, they are beginning to show wider effects on society and the economy as a whole. As a result, audiences are now enjoying more opportunities than ever to experience the arts in exciting new buildings and the range of spaces and places where people encounter art has expanded. For example, the role libraries have in society is changing and we envisage they could also be used as a space for cultural events and arts activity.

People living in Northern Ireland can rightly claim to enjoy access to quality arts facilities but if the region is to take its place among the cultural capitals of modern Europe, it deserves a major art gallery. There are examples from around the world of how flagship art galleries have proven to be the catalyst for transforming the cultural and economic fortunes of a region. A major gallery will raise the profile of the arts, increase tourism, broaden access, provide new educational opportunities, develop new audiences but perhaps most significantly it will provide inspiration for new generations of emerging artists.

At the heart of the 'Architecture and the Built Environment for Northern Ireland' policy is a demand for change in the quality of design and construction. We are committed to achieving higher standards so that our cities, towns and neighbourhoods provide an exciting and welcoming environment and we will actively support the principles set out in the government's Sustainable Development Strategy. We will also promote partnerships between artists, design professionals and clients to encourage the use of art when designing public buildings and spaces.

In summary, this theme describes our objectives for supporting artists, arts organisations and the physical infrastructure. To achieve this aim we will:

- **improve the well-being of individual artists**
- **strengthen and develop arts organisations**
- **strengthen and develop the arts infrastructure**

Brian Irvine

Opposite page photographs (left-right): Rawlife Theatre Company. Cahoots NI. Wheelworks' *Respect Exhibition*. NIPPA - The Early Years Organisation. Kabosh Theatre - photo: Lesley Doyle. New Lodge Arts. The Riverside Theatre. Open Arts Choir. Castleward Opera - photo: Stanley Matchett.

Theme 3 Growing Audiences and Increasing Participation

We want to encourage as many people as possible to enjoy and take part in arts activities. The report 'Art and Culture in Northern Ireland' provides an assessment of the first large-scale survey carried out in the region on participation in the arts and attitudes towards the arts. The need to better understand audiences and the communities they are based in is one of the significant challenges the creative community faces. It takes time and resources to develop an audience so this needs to be part of a long-term strategy to develop the market.

Setting up Audiences Northern Ireland has been an important part of this wider strategy. Its members access its expertise in marketing and audience development, consultancy and training services as well as being part of a community that shares the benefits of working together. The ability to profile audiences, identify new target markets, develop the business of the arts and establish sector benchmarking is crucial to the emergence and development of sustainable arts organisations.

Increasing numbers of people from around the world are choosing Northern Ireland as a place to live and work. Arts activity has the power to both express the richness and diversity of contemporary society and confront the challenges raised by prejudice. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland through its funding will continue to actively foster the expression of cultural pluralism, build dialogue and promote mutual understanding, through interchanges within and between communities and their cultures. Research is also taking forward our understanding of the barriers that limit attendance at arts events. By furthering our knowledge as to why certain groups are less frequent attenders and what specific barriers are encountered by Section 75 Groups, we will identify measures that can be put in place to strengthen access. We need to capture public interest by stimulating targeted initiatives and being ambitious and daring in communicating the appeal of the arts through the broadcast and print media. We are committed to improving public participation and attendance in the arts.

Education

Northern Ireland has one of the youngest populations of any region in Europe (under 16s make up 24% of the population). Artists and arts organisations recognise the importance of promoting creativity and cultural understanding through schools, while increasing numbers are engaging with children and young people in non-formal settings.

Castleward Opera. Photo: Stanley Matchett

An education which involves arts contributes to achievement in other areas of learning and life.

The Creative Youth Partnership (CYP) programme has helped to build and develop arts programmes for young people. The programme has encouraged thousands of children and young people to use their imagination and make the most of their creative potential. Pioneering and inspiring projects have been developed with artists in schools, youth clubs and community groups in every corner of Northern Ireland. With the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of Education we are committed to build on the success of the CYP pilot.

The government's vision for 'Extended Schools' creates a new culture in which the school will consult with families and local groups, become the centre of the local community and deliver better outcomes. We can see the value and benefits of engaging in the arts during and beyond the school day and particularly in rural communities where the resources and opportunities for being creative may otherwise be limited. This vision can be a vehicle for us to achieve our aims. We will work with other agencies and explore opportunities for encouraging creativity.

Research shows that the profile of the population is changing. It is estimated that numbers in the older age groups will be significantly larger in future years. We can predict that there are going to be more retired people with more time to spend on leisure activities. We will explore and develop opportunities for older people to engage with the arts.

We want to see the arts valued as part of everyone's education and cultural development. We recognise that education is a lifelong process which takes place through teaching, personal motivation and experience. Formal education is a vital part of that process, but lifelong learning covers a whole range of opportunities. These include support for parenting and early-years education, access courses for adults, developing new work-related skills and achieving things in retirement that, for whatever reason, were unachievable earlier in life. We will foster links with a range of providers to achieve this vision.

Cara Murphy, *Anticlastic Growth*. Photo: David Pauley

In summary, this theme describes our objectives for encouraging people to engage with the arts. To grow audiences and increase participation we will:

- **expand the range of opportunities for people to enjoy the arts**
- **expand the range of opportunities for people to take part in the arts**
- **encourage more young people to experience the arts**

Theme 4 Improving our Performance

If we are to put art at the heart of our society, we also need to maintain our commitment to improving our performance. By learning from the findings of a recent client satisfaction survey we will continue to develop strong links with our clients, make sure our grant programmes and processes are working effectively and strengthen how we work with our partners.

We recognise that relationships with our clients should be clearly structured and easily understood. To help this process we have drawn up a 'Service Charter' which sets out what our clients can expect from us, and what we expect from them. We will regularly consult with the arts sector to make sure that our programmes and processes are effective, and also to gauge their feelings on more general issues.

We will refine our systems for awarding grants and managing our finances. We want to develop our assessment and feedback procedures, and streamline the number of funding schemes and their application processes.

We need to maintain and strengthen our relationship with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to ensure that government policy expectations are met. A vital part of this will be making research a priority as a way of underpinning our evidence-based approach to decision making. Work is under way on improving the quality of information available using the internet and other media. We will also develop our staff and board so that they can provide leadership and guidance to the sector over the next five years.

In summary, this theme describes our objectives for improving the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's business processes and developing the organisation and its people. To achieve this aim we will:

- **become a more client focused organisation**
- **develop our structures and processes to achieve our business objectives**
- **develop our people in line with our business strategy**
- **strengthen governance and accountability within the Arts Council of Northern Ireland**

In order to achieve our goals, we will strengthen existing partnerships with other agencies and forge new ways of working collaboratively with others.

Underpinning the delivery of the strategy is a number of principles and values:

Excellence: we are committed to excellence in arts and arts practice
Openness: we will consult, encourage feedback and be open and responsive
Fairness: we will be fair, trustworthy and transparent in our dealings
Equity: we will provide equal opportunities for all sections of society

The text for this document has been developed with the help of the Plain English Campaign.

National Deaf Children's Society

Armagh Pipers Club – photo: Paul Eliasberg.

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