



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working-
class Communities: Flowerfield Arts Centre

12 June 2014

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Mr Malcolm Murchison Flowerfield Arts Centre

The Chairperson: I would like to extend our thanks to Malcolm for welcoming us this morning and allowing us to use the facility. We have certainly chosen a wonderful day to come to the north coast. On behalf of the Committee, I extend our thanks to you and ask you to make an opening statement, and members will follow it with some questions.

Mr Malcolm Murchison (Flowerfield Arts Centre): Chair and Committee, thank you very much. On behalf of Coleraine Borough Council, we are absolutely delighted to welcome you here. Hopefully, you will come back again some time soon. I am going to talk quite briefly about the work of Flowerfield and I am going to use a couple of very short films to help show that work. I will introduce each of them in turn.

People often ask what we do in Flowerfield and what goes on, and it is not an easy one-liner. It is easy to say what a theatre or performance area does, but we have quite a broad range of activities. If you think of it as a table with four legs, then of the four legs of Flowerfield, one would be exhibitions. You saw the areas down below where we have both professional and amateur exhibitions. We show work made by the classes here as well. We also have a performance venue. With a very good theatre down the road, we did not want to duplicate that here, so it is much more about music, performance and presentations. It is very much a community space.

We have also done quite a lot of work in craft development. We have a number of craft businesses that we have started here in partnership with Craft Northern Ireland. Those are actual businesses where people are now renting spaces and developing the associated creative industries. The makers then put value back into what we do here by teaching a lot of the classes, so we have very expert tutors working here.

The biggest and strongest leg of the table is the education programme for adults and children. Since this place opened in 1980, we have focused on courses and classes. People come here, to what used to be the old part of the building, into rooms that were like domestic dwellings — which they were originally — and enjoy working in very relaxed spaces. They paint and draw. There are creative writers and a bodhrán and tin whistle class. There is a whole range of workshops. There is very strong pottery, ceramics, glass, and that sort of thing.

I am now going to show a very short video. I will pull the shutters across, which will create more dynamics. As you can see, the video opens with a scene in Portstewart. Many people have been here for an ice cream on a nice sunny day, but sometimes the sea can be a bit rougher.

In that video, you saw two of our most successful artists, Adam Frew and Catherine Keenan, a ceramicist and a glassmaker. All the work they make here is exported, so the creative industries are alive and thriving. Unfortunately, you will not be able to meet them today because they are both away on their honeymoon. They met as part of the Making It scheme and we are delighted that it has been an additional pay-off.

Reaching hard-to-reach communities is a big challenge. We do not do enough. We are certainly hoping to do a lot more in the future. It is quite difficult. Sometimes even engaging with our local elected members can be difficult enough because we know that they have priorities and major issues, so we almost see them as a hard-to-reach community sometimes as well. We had a visit from them not that long ago and were trying to think how best to show what we actually do here.

This is the second video, in which our elected members engage in some creative activity. The work of local government is very serious. Sometimes there are laughs and sometimes there are quite serious faces, but I think you will note that in this video there are a lot of smiles, and not just smiles because people are having fun. There are smiles because people are being creative, successful, and are learning. There were a lot of folded arms and people saying, "There is no way I am doing that", but they got stuck in. Everybody made something and it was fired and glazed and given back to them. If we had had time today I would have liked the Committee to have had a go as well. I promise you that you would have made something and that we would have sent it to you. Next time, perhaps.

To finish off, I will refer to the paper I presented. One of the big challenges is seeing the equitable spread of provision and funding and reaching all sorts of communities. Quite often, one of the best ways to do that is through the education system and schools. You can be sure that you will reach all the communities in that way. Children are always game to have a go. There was a scheme some time back called Creative Youth Partnerships. We engaged very strongly with schools through that. We also used to engage with them through residency schemes when we had funding from the Arts Council for that. Unfortunately, both those areas have now fallen aside and we feel a bit disconnected. We are trying to find ways to rebuild that. As I pointed out in my paper, there are opportunities in those areas.

There is a real opportunity through the community planning programme of local government reform for joined-up government between central government and local government and slam a foot in the door and say, "This stuff is really important to give young people opportunities". The local authorities, of course, are working with communities at the coalface. Quite often, however, there is a silo mentality in many organisations, not just local government. Hopefully, we will break down some of those barriers. This is an important time to raise these issues and maybe challenge some of the weaknesses of the past and move to better times. In paragraphs 11 to 14 of my document, I summarise some recommendations that might be useful in taking work forward.

I will conclude with that. I know that we are tight on time today. Obviously, I would be very pleased to receive any questions from the Committee.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. Obviously, you are in a rural setting, which maybe presents its own difficulties. You have a geographically dispersed stakeholder group. How do you try to overcome that barrier?

Mr Murchison: It is challenging. When we looked at the refurbishment of this facility, we questioned whether we should put an arts centre into the town with the biggest central population. Starting from scratch, that is what you really should do. It should possibly be based more around a service rather than a building. However, we had about 23 years of very good work and had built up quite a significant profile. There was a strong sense of maintaining what we had already built. There are swings and roundabouts; we have good parking facilities. You cannot have a swimming pool in every

village. If you have specialist facilities like pottery, glass and ceramics, as we have, it makes sense to bring people in.

We always planned to have an outreach officer. The post was never appointed, which was down to financial pressures in local government. In the future, we will have to step up to that mark and engage a lot more rigorously with the various communities. Recently, we have been doing some projects for some of the areas considered to be areas of deprivation, where we have been offering free workshops to some of those communities. However, it costs money and takes time. You cannot do it on fresh air. We are under a lot of financial pressure to increase our income and get more people paying for classes. There is challenge in that regard, and finding the right balance between the two things is difficult. I think that the community planning process in the future will address that significantly.

The Chairperson: What type of engagement do you have with other arts venues in more urban areas? Do you have much engagement with facilities in Londonderry or even as far away as Belfast?

Mr Murchison: We sometimes work through the arts managers' group, which is quite a coherent group across Northern Ireland. In fact, I was the chair of it for a total of eight years over two four-year sessions. We meet regularly and share touring programming, experiences and ideas. That is very useful; I recommend it to the Committee as a useful point of contact at some point in the future. You tend to find that partnerships are really based around people. When you make personal contact with individuals, you tend to get things done. We have worked closely with Seacourt Print Workshop in north Down, Belfast Print Workshop, and various other organisations, such as Down Arts Centre, that have similar sorts of patterns of activity that we have. They tend to be natural partners. I hope that that answers your question.

The Chairperson: You said that there were hard-to-reach communities and that you perhaps do not do enough to reach out to them. What is your plan of work to try to rectify that?

Mr Murchison: We need to be a lot more connected with council departments, and it applies, outside this inquiry, into the creative industries as well through the departments of tourism and economic development. Certainly, we need to be a lot more connected with the community development sections. There are quite often strong funding strands within those sections, whereas we would find our funds very tight. So, there are ways, possibly through working in partnership with them, that we could reach some of those communities more effectively.

It is not something that has happened strongly in the past. I think that there has probably been a failure of local government in many areas across the Province. From speaking to my colleagues in other councils, I think that this seems to be something that can happen. I am sure that there are examples of good practice, but I think that there are quite a lot of weaknesses across Northern Ireland in that area. The community planning process will help to address that. We have raised funds through a local arts committee to take workshops out to some of those communities but finding the cash to do it is a challenge.

The Chairperson: What is the footfall in the centre?

Mr Murchison: Forty thousand people come into this building per year. We reckon that we run about 1,000 learning sessions — classes — in a year. We have 80 sessions per year by the Stroke Association; it held two sessions yesterday for people who had suffered strokes. We have good disability access throughout the building, and thanks to the refurbishment and extension, with Arts Lottery funding in 2003, we are able to make very good use of the facility. We have 80 sessions a year from the University of the Third Age as well.

The Chairperson: OK. Is the overall cost of keeping this venue going funded primarily by Coleraine Borough Council?

Mr Murchison: Yes, it is funded pretty well exclusively by Coleraine Borough Council. The annual running costs are about £250,000 a year.

Mr McMullan: Thank you, Malcolm, for your presentation. You have a great building. You say that you get £250,000 a year from Coleraine Council. Do you have any kind of a strategy or plans for when the council amalgamates with others in the new Causeway Coast and Glens District Council, which will take in a bigger area? How do you hope to get your message out there?

Mr Murchison: Those of us working in the sector and, I think, in the council broadly, are delighted with the reorganisation plans. We have worked in partnership with Moyle District Council, Limavady Borough Council and Ballymoney Borough Council for many years. In fact, a Causeway coast arts committee has been working together for 40 years. So, there is a natural partnership across the four councils. The arts officers work closely together. We avoid duplication and we share whenever we can, so there is a strong will to move forward on that.

We are pleased to see that there is a terrific arts facility in Limavady, which is quite some distance away, and different communities access it. The mountain between here and there is sometimes seen as a bit of a landscape barrier, but we have two dedicated arts facilities within those two council areas. Over the spread of the territory, we feel that there are quite good facilities. We need to build strongly on pooling that expertise and developing the outreach activity, which, as referred to earlier, is a big demand. With the expertise that we have within the cluster, we feel that we can be much more effective in the future.

Mr McMullan: The Moyle District Council arts officer is part-time and the role is really non-existent; there is nothing really going on there as far as the arts goes. Do you work with the regional colleges?

Mr Murchison: Yes. In fact, before the exhibition on show downstairs, which is from the University of Ulster, we had an exhibition from Limavady College of its associate degree show. We have hosted that for about 10 years, so we are pleased to work with regional colleges. We will work with anyone when we possibly can.

I know that Moyle has been strong in its public art. Of course, it does not have a dedicated arts venue, but a lot of artists work in the area, so it is very strong and it is a very attractive area for artists to settle in. Those are opportunities for the future. We might describe it as creative capital that can be expressed. We know that we need to bring together a forum across the four council areas of practitioners, artists and people who are involved in the sector. Those discussions are in progress. We are hoping to measure up to the mark on that.

Mr McMullan: Do you go out to the day centres?

Mr Murchison: We do not. Our resources are very limited. We are absolutely stretched, by and large, to keep this facility going. As I said, there is acknowledgement that there is more to be done and we look forward to engaging, but there is a limit as to how many people you can get around, so we would have to target and focus on areas of particular need.

Mr McMullan: Have you ever been approached by the Health Department or anybody like that to go into the day centres?

Mr Murchison: Quite regularly. We have people from day centres and the social service sector coming in and making use of some of our facilities like classrooms or some of the specialist facilities we can offer. We have offered funding from time to time to homes for the elderly to take arts activity in those homes through our arts committee, but there is a limit to what can be done with a very small staff and a limited budget. We would certainly be pleased to do more.

Mr Hilditch: To be honest, most of my questions have been covered. To add, from the RPA side of things, Malcolm, you explained last night that you had a very good and practical working relationship with the neighbouring councils that will be within the new super council, but, it has been established that there has been an underspend or a low uptake of funding opportunities for the arts throughout Northern Ireland. I know that my own council area would be guilty of it as well. Are there mechanisms to try to get the message out there? You mentioned a Northern Ireland body. Is there somebody who could take up the challenge to get the message out in relation to arts funding?

Mr Murchison: There are probably a lot of answers to that question. If we are looking at the Arts Council, for instance; it wrote to the chief executives of all of the local authorities some years back and said that they were being classed as low priority. Essentially, the door closed on direct funding from the Arts Council. A lot of the Arts Council's funding goes to independent organisations. Of course, where you have cities you have larger sectoral bodies that have the capacity to make significant funding applications, but, as you get into the region, the resources get more stretched, the community

and arts groups tend to be smaller and they do not have, for instance, professional dedicated fundraising officers, so they are a bit more limited in what they can actually achieve.

Hopefully, we will build a bit more capacity. Another part of your question was in reference to the Forum for Local Government and the Arts, which was set up some years back to be a body in which there could be discussion on these sorts of things. Unfortunately, it has been faltering over the last three years and has probably not delivered. There is a real need to see a sectoral grouping and join up local government and the Arts Council with some common strategy so that the focus is not just on cities, as is often a concern and complaint.

Mr Hilditch: I think that that is a very important point today — that the interim body should try to work on that situation. You covered the older people situation as well. We have done the creative industries report in the Committee. Have you had a chance to look at that?

Mr Murchison: I am not sure if I have seen that exact one. I have been reading a number of creative industries reports and there are quite a lot out there. It is certainly an area of keen interest. The author Richard Florida wrote 'The Rise of the Creative Class' and showed the cities, towns and areas that are open to creative opportunity. That includes medicine, science, computing and so on — the whole range of things. Those are the ones that are winning the economic race. We have been banging on that door and saying that we need to do more here. We looked keenly at what has been happening with the Fab Labs, 3D printing, laser cutting and so on. Those are areas that we would be keen to explore here, as well as contemporary crafts, which has been a big success. Interestingly, there are fewer professional craftspeople on the north coast than anywhere else in Ireland. We saw that as a strange anomaly and as something that was missing. Across the water, in places such as Cornwall and Devon, there are knitters, spinners, woodturners and potters everywhere. That has a very strong bearing on tourism in those areas. This is one of the long-term strategies that we have embarked on here, to create incubation units for makers who will, hopefully, go out into the community and work in the towns on the coast. We will then, possibly, see an increased level of craft activity for visitors. Tourism is not just golf and beaches; there is a lot more to it. We are keen to do our bit to raise the profile of that sector.

Mr Hilditch: Obviously, today's announcement about the golf coming to Portrush, potentially, in 2019 will create interest.

Mr Murchison: We like to think that the creative side of things can complement all that. It is all part of a big picture, so we are keen to do our bit for that.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thanks, Malcolm, for inviting the Committee to Flowerfield which, of course, is in my constituency, so I am acutely aware of the work that you have been doing down the years. I have been an irregular visitor here and I know about your outreach work. David made a point about the Forum for Local Government and the Arts (FLGA); I sat on that for quite a number of years during my time in local government, and I always felt that it was rather toothless and ineffective. We have an opportunity, perhaps, with the reorganisation to get something that is more workable and amenable on the ground.

Back in December, the Minister announced a legacy programme specifically for the City of Culture. The idea was to widen it out to the adjacent local government regions, including Limavady, Coleraine and Strabane. That has been done; money has been set aside and an office has been set up in Derry for that purpose. Quite a bit of money has gone into that, some of which is going on sporting facilities, and rightly so, in the boroughs of Coleraine and Limavady. Have you looked into the potential or possibility of any funding through that legacy programme, particularly for the development, as you mentioned, of incubation units in the arts and crafts sector?

Mr Murchison: I have to put my hands up and say that, while I have been aware of it, and it looks very interesting, it is one of those things that has fallen off the edge of the table. There is so much to do and so much opportunity, but I will take your point and take a fresh look at that because we would love to engage with that. I attended some of the events and activities up the road in Derry/Londonderry, and I was knocked out by some of them, particularly the Lumiere show with the fire garden and so on, which was absolutely fabulous. It really seems that that city has turned a corner in its future. I applaud all the work that went into that with great admiration.

Mr Ó hOisín: Part of your restrictions here have been about sourcing funding. The last day I was here, you will remember, I was with the MEP, and we were looking at the potential for European funding as well. Have you followed up on any of that, as a matter of interest?

Mr Murchison: No. A key member of staff has been off sick, which has tipped the balance of keeping things on the road. There is a lot of opportunity, and having the resources to avail ourselves of them can be challenging at times.

Mr Ó hOisín: I appreciate that, and I am not putting you on the spot, Malcolm, I am sorry.

Mr Murchison: No, you are very welcome. It is useful to be reminded of opportunities sometimes, so it is strongly welcomed.

Mrs McKeivitt: Thank you for your invitation here to these beautiful premises. One of the recommendations was to reinstate the Creative Youth Partnership. Can you enlighten us as to how that would filter into the working-class community here?

Mr Murchison: One of the opportunities in the Creative Youth Partnership is that it reaches into schools so that you reach all young people. There is an opportunity to build up a carefully prepared strategy to make sure that you focus and engage, particularly with catchment areas that may include areas of deprivation and so on. I can sympathise with that; where you have areas of deprivation, there are families and individuals whose needs are the priorities of life — of putting a roof over their heads and food on the table — and the arts seems like an indulgence. Nevertheless, it is an important area, because so many careers are based around the arts and the creative industries, as we know. So, getting opportunities to engage with young people at an early stage is particularly important.

It seems that the Creative Youth Partnership failed to reignite, down to minor details of administration and maybe a lack of full will among some parties. It seems an awful shame. Everyone thought it was a really good thing, and there was disappointment across the board that it failed. Sometimes you have to keep going back and having another go at things, and I think it is time to have another look at it. We engaged strongly with the Creative Youth Partnership officer. I think there were five of them in each of the education and library board areas. We have resources and facilities that we were very pleased to make use of to support the programme.

Mrs McKeivitt: In your submission you mentioned that the University of the Third Age (U3A) uses your premises quite a lot. I do not think there is any area that does not have a U3A group of some kind. I know that, in my own area, a lot of people get introduced to a computer for the first time, etc, so there is an advantage and additional quality of life that it can give people. Have you any communication or engagement with other areas of U3A? Do you, maybe, intend to invite groups down here for a two-day programme to use the premises and bring up the tourist numbers, because it is a beautiful location? Have you any plans to do that?

Mr Murchison: We have no plans as yet, but we are certainly very open to it. We were pleased that, for one of our workshops, not so long ago, somebody phoned us from London and said that they had searched and could not find the course anywhere in the UK, so they took a flight for a one-day workshop and stayed in a local hotel. We gave them information on travel and a bit of extra help. It shows that there is a lot of opportunity to build cultural tourism around the creative sector. We have plans to develop all of that. Lifelong learning is a cornerstone of what we do here. It is very important to the economy as well, with a lot of older people even generating income through making a career change. It is something that we warmly embrace. If there are areas that we can get involved in, we will.

Mrs McKeivitt: You are engaged with the Health Department. You mentioned that a lot of stroke patients come here for your courses. Do you intend to branch that out, maybe to those who suffer from cancer, with a therapeutic art class of some kind? Is there any communication with the Health Department?

Mr Murchison: We have different sorts of courses happening all the time. We had a course for people who had brain trauma. We have had courses for people with sight impairment. It is a changing situation. A lot of the time we are keen to do it, and when people come to us, we are led by what we can deliver, but we have a fairly small team here, and I would say it is running at about

maximum. I think we probably need to raise the publicity levels about what we can offer and deliver more in that sector.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much for your presentation and your hospitality today. What is your relationship with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland?

Mr Murchison: I have always had a number of friends working in the Arts Council. I started here in 1982 and built up relationships over many years. We used to have stronger relationships when there were funding strands that were open to us. We are enormously grateful for the support that we got for the capital spend here. They offered us 75% funding when they said, at the time, that 75% funding was a thing of the past. I think it was a reflection of how much they liked the project proposal and the mix of what we were doing here. We have had very warm relations in that regard. I think we have just fallen down in so far as funding to all local authorities outside the two main cities has been a prioritisation move of the Arts Council. It indicated in its strategy that it would have special relationships with Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. Many of us who saw that raised some concerns that it might exclude other areas.

I think that, with the new council structures, there will be a lot more opportunity for larger councils to have a bit more impact. They will be more aware that there is funding potential for that sector and that they have a bigger duty to follow through. The smaller councils probably just did not have the resources or were too busy with more fundamental issues so arts funding was not a major priority. I hope that that will change with the bigger councils.

Mr Humphrey: The point is, though, that smaller councils not having the budget and it not being their priority is all the more reason that the Arts Council should be supporting activities in facilities such as this. When did you last get funding from it and what was it for?

Mr Murchison: I am trying to remember how many years ago it was. I think that it was about five years ago, and it was for the art of regeneration, which was a project that was open to local authorities. We did a project with Ballymoney Borough Council, where we put pieces of public art into 12 play areas across the two councils. They were based on recycling themes, so they involved local communities in designing and creating pieces of public art made mostly from recycled materials and installed in play areas, some of which were in areas of deprivation. It was a terrific project for which we got significant funding, and it was a great success. It involved a lot of hard work of course. Those are the sorts of things that it would be terrific to see happen again.

Mr Humphrey: There are working-class and hard-to-reach communities in this borough, as there are in Londonderry and Belfast. There is a fundamental imbalance that the Committee should raise with the Arts Council. If you are saying that the focus is largely on the two principal cities in Northern Ireland, I do not think that is fair and equitable for the other towns and cities where the needs and problems are just as great.

The Chairperson: That is refreshing coming from a member representing North Belfast. There is life outside Belfast. Thank you very much, Mr Humphrey. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hilditch: We will have to get him out of Belfast more often. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Malcolm, thank you very much for your presentation and for taking questions. Members will have an opportunity for further conversation and a look around the centre when we finish our inquiry work this morning.

Mr Murchison: Thank you.