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Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working-
class Communities: East Belfast Partnership

19 June 2014

Boyd and dozens and dozens of great writers from the past were all from east Belfast". All three of the One City One Book novelists are from east Belfast. It does not matter whether you look at music or visual arts — there is a huge amount of creativity.

This relates to that kind of general idea that Protestant working-class communities are not really interested in the arts and culture. There are sophisticated versions of the theory. In John Dunlop's book — I admire John a lot — called 'A Precarious Belonging', he talks about the Protestant culture in Northern Ireland and says that, although we are really good at shipbuilding, engineering, business and things like that, we are no good at writing poetry and fiction. That is a complete load of nonsense, and all the evidence absolutely refutes it. The trouble is that people buy into that and think that it belongs to a different community from theirs, but that is not true. Part of the strategy has to be about celebrating the richness of culture and creativity that is, in this case, in east Belfast.

I have developed a strategy for the arts in east Belfast, to which there are a number of different elements. First, there have been huge, fantastic developments in venues across Belfast. You have been to some of them, and you are going to see some of the others. That is brilliant, and it really is to your credit. I think that it is really taking off. The problem is that a lot of people in working-class east Belfast will not cross the bridge and, therefore, do not access venues that are not in east Belfast. It is a shame, but it is the truth. So the involvement in the arts is considerably lower — it is about a third of the average — in working-class communities in east Belfast.

We have been looking at the issue of venues. You will be aware that there are proposals to transform the Strand cinema. Once they opened the multi-screen cinemas in Dundonald and the Odyssey, it was always going to be difficult to maintain the Strand purely as a cinema, so we are involved in helping it transition to a non-profit arts centre. That will come back to you at various points, I am sure, because, obviously, there are some resource requirements needed to do that.

Secondly, a huge amount of development work needs to happen. Lots of people whom I talk to are involved and are really interested in the arts and want to do things, but when you ask them whether they have set up a non-profit organisation or applied for grants, they go, "How do you do that?" I am thinking, "Everybody knows how to", but, no, they do not. Actually, there is a whole lot of support work with grass-roots groups about how you develop from a small group of volunteers interested in the arts to creating something really viable.

The other thing which has happened, which is kind of fortuitous, is that the announcement of the closure of Orangefield High School resulted in an approach from Van Morrison to say that he was interested in doing something in relation to his old school. Probably more than 50,000 working-class young people have been to that school over the years. When we started to talk to people about Orangefield High School, we realised that a whole range of really, really creative people came out of Orangefield. Not just Van Morrison or Eric Bell, but poets like Gerald Dawe, Brian Keenan and Sam McCready; loads and loads of people. Marie Jones went to the girls' school. We are kind of using it as a vehicle to get lots of people from east Belfast to come back to their old school and experience the arts in a way that they would never otherwise do. We are planning that for August. It is an interesting process.

I want to say a couple of things about the brief that you have about accessing the arts. One of the things that I was thinking was that it is the wrong question. It feels like you are suggesting that the arts are over here and working-class people over there. It is interesting that lots of people who are over here are really interested and involved in the arts, but they need lots of support. It is not just a matter of how to get them to go over there; it is a question of how to build their capacity to engage in the arts and do what they actually want to do. One of the really interesting things about the pioneering principal of Orangefield High School is that he really cared about the arts. He said, "This is a really, really powerful tool for developing young people". He worked with every young person to maximise their creativity. As a result of what he did, a huge number of people have been able to express that creativity.

There are another couple of things. Research is very clear about some of the things that you need to do to increase access to the arts for working-class communities. This is not one of those really difficult problems to solve. We know which art forms: if you want to invest in art forms that working-class people are more likely to go to, you invest in circus, carnival and community festivals. The recent Belfast community festival fund had £70,000. It had applications for £700,000 and, therefore, turned down the vast majority of people who applied. In that sense, they had no choice.

So there are certain kinds of things that you need to invest in — the things that you are likely to get a kind of working-class audience for. You have the research about that. There has been an incredible transformation in theatre writing over 30 years. Before then, the idea that you would have working-class writers writing lots of plays was complete — that is one of the reasons why Sam Thompson's 'Over the Bridge' is iconic, because it was the start of that. You now have a string of incredible writers. On Tuesday night, I went to see David Ireland. A few weeks ago, I saw Gary Mitchell. Bobby Niblock — from before, obviously, people like Graham Reid, Owen McCafferty and Marie Jones. We have an incredible range of local writers who write in our context, which is brilliant.

There is still a real problem about even who will put that on. We have one or two examples of theatres working with local community groups to create something that really reflects them, like Crimea Square in the Shankill. We need a whole range of that, so people can really engage in theatre. It is hard to get Protestant male actors, for example. We need some real investment in the development of that.

The third element is, I think, supporting the building of capacity from the ground up. I talk to people in various community centres in east Belfast who really want to do things. Some of them have done things. Wandsworth partnered with Beat Carnival, for example, in a really exciting initiative. However, eventually, they could not maintain the funding, so that partnership ended. There is a real decision to be made about investing in that kind of community arts participation from the ground up, as opposed to simply saying to bigger arts organisations, "Well, you should do some outreach". In my view, it needs to start from the bottom up.

My conclusion is that I do not think that the real issue is that we know what we need to do. The question is what are you going to stop doing in order to fund that, or how you are going to persuade the Finance Minister that actually, you know what, the arts is one of the most important things that you can invest in for the future of Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. I am interested in your background and the fact that you were involved in youth and community work but also eventually set up what became the Crescent Arts Centre. Will you maybe chat to us about that?

Mr Courtney: I was very young then. I had no idea what I was doing, but I was talking to Peter McLaughlin — I cannot remember where he was working then — and he said that there were all kinds of youth and community groups who go away on these community relations holidays, and when they come back to Belfast, there is no real shared space. The old Victoria College school was empty, and he said, "You know where my office is. I do not want to see you" and walked off. So I went and got the keys for this derelict school with 52 classrooms. I had no idea what I was doing, but my starting point was where there were local community groups and local youth groups who might be interested in using it. So, very quickly, we developed one youth club and then two youth clubs from the Holylands and then from Sandy Row. What I was not quite expecting was that, immediately, as people became aware of what I was doing, I got dozens and dozens of arts organisations saying that they really needed some space to work and develop. So, within six months, I went and visited various community arts centres elsewhere, because I realised that it was going to have a major arts focus. I could tell you that I thought that at the beginning, but I did not; it kind of emerged. The interesting thing was having a combination of all those arts organisations and these two working-class youth clubs, which eventually worked in together. It was an interesting and unusual way of working.

The Chairperson: Now you are focused on the Strand theatre.

Mr Courtney: That is one of the strands, yes.

The Chairperson: Do you see the model that is used in Crescent Arts being used in the Strand?

Mr Courtney: There are different models. I am not dictating that it should be like the Crescent. The Crescent's model is mostly around participative workshops, which I think are great. There are obviously physical issues. You have what was an old cinema with four screens, so it is trying to get a balance between performance spaces. You have screens, but, for a theatre company, it does not have wings, it does not have changing rooms and it does not have the kind of facilities that you could use for theatre. There is a whole lot of work to try to maintain, hopefully, at least two key performance spaces — one bigger and one smaller. The rest of it would be used for a range of more participative stuff. It needs to be a mixture of models. There is no space really for visual arts.

The Chairperson: Where are you with regard to a business plan for the Strand?

Mr Courtney: A business plan for the Strand is being finalised as we speak. They will be coming to talk to you about that. A separate company has been established, and it has a business plan. The next stage is to look at an economic appraisal, which is the next step after the business plan. They will be coming to talk to you about that, I have no doubt.

The Chairperson: Regarding the arts strategy, which we have in front of us, how will it work on an ongoing basis linking up with other groups doing similar work across Belfast?

Mr Courtney: That is interesting. I think that that is really important. One of the first things that I did was go and talk to a range of other people who are running festivals, because it is not healthy simply to say, "We have our little area, and we are not going to do anything with anybody else". We have been talking to people like the Festival at Queen's, the Féile an Phobail and other festivals to look at ways of sharing things. So we are doing something, and we have something that we can share with them, and they can come and share things with us, so we create an outward-looking east Belfast and not an inward-looking one.

The Chairperson: One of the concerns that we have heard during this inquiry is that you have arts organisations coming into areas, and they are building up an expectation, and because of limited funding or whatever, money comes to an end, so they leave, and they leave a vacuum. How would you attempt to make sure that does not happen in east Belfast?

Mr Courtney: This is a much wider issue. There is a whole issue about how you create sustainable funding. There is a small number of particular organisations that are much bigger and have sustainable multi-annual funding. So they have a security that they are there for a long period, but the vast majority of funding comes in short bursts, and you get it from the Lottery Fund and it is for short periods. It is definitely something to have a look at. I was advised to look at EastSide Arts. It is not even worth looking at the multi-annual funding at this moment, because there is no space. It is a fixed amount of money and those bigger organisations are already in it, so there is no space for anybody new. However, there is scope for shorter-term funding from the lottery, but that is obviously very difficult when you are trying to create some sustainability, and that is us looking at the whole of east Belfast. It is obviously really, really difficult for little groups running a community centre to do it. You are right to identify that as an important issue.

Mr D Bradley: Thank you very much, Roger. That was a very animated presentation, and you are obviously very passionate about your work. It is great to see that. You said that the initial festival was maybe a bit overambitious. What lessons did you learn from that? Spending less money was one.

Mr Courtney: The trouble with spending less money is that you put on a less exciting festival. I talked to the Féile, and it was spending £250,000 on its festival. Last year, the partnership spent as little as possible, so you are talking about a few tens of thousands of pounds. The lesson from the first one was not to take big financial risks and not to agree to take the risk for a very large artist that you are not absolutely sure you had the audience for. To be absolutely fair to the partnership, it had no background in running festivals or arts events. It has 25 years to catch up with west Belfast. It learned some things from the first year; it learned that if it did not have some exciting things for the second year and names that people recognise, it will be hard to get an audience. One of the key issues is building an audience. The Strand, for example, is interesting because a huge number of people went to the Strand in east Belfast; everybody went to the Strand as a child. However, a cinema audience is not necessarily an arts audience. A lot of people from the local communities used to go to the Strand, and they need to be turned into an arts audience as well as just a film audience.

Mr D Bradley: In your experience, what type of mix makes for a good festival, especially in the early years?

Mr Courtney: I am dealing with that very question at the moment, because we are obviously planning the arts festival in Orangefield. You can just say that you want to get a good audience. The Féile has Boyzone, and I am sure that a lot of people will want to go and see Boyzone, but I think that it is also about something else. It is about educating and inspiring people. I am trying to get a whole range of those really exciting creative people who have an east Belfast background doing things at the festival, but doing it in a way that will be really attractive and get people. I think that there is an educational role there as well. However, it is no good if you put on something that is educational and four people come.

Mr D Bradley: How do you strike the balance between highbrow and lowbrow?

Mr Courtney: I am not very interested in lowbrow, in a sense. It depends on what you mean by lowbrow. For example —

Mr D Bradley: Some people might consider Boyzone to be lowbrow and others might —

Mr Courtney: That is all right; I am not putting on Boyzone.

Mr D Bradley: You said in some of your papers that you wanted the whole strategy to be inclusive of young people and not to be for adults. How do you get that involvement?

Mr Courtney: You are right; it needs to include some things that are of interest to young people. I have just realised that we actually have something that is very lowbrow. We have a horror movie called 'Willard', and I watched it the other night. Interestingly enough, it is based on the book 'Ratman's Notebooks' by an east Belfast writer, Stephen Gilbert, who was mentored by Forrest Reid. It is all about rats that take over a house. In one sense, it is lowbrow, and, in another sense, we are trying to interest people who might go to a horror movie in the work of this east Belfast writer. His son has agreed to come and talk before the film. You could consider that lowbrow, but it is all about building the idea that creativity is for everybody. It is not just about some special people; it is about you.

Mr D Bradley: When a festival is over, what would you like it to leave behind?

Mr Courtney: Ninety-five per cent of the strategy has nothing to do with the festival. The festival is, in a way, fortuitous. I am not a big fan of having a festival and then doing nothing, so one conclusion of the strategy is that a whole lot of developmental work needs to happen on the ground. The idea is that when the festival is over, there will be a round of discussions with local groups about what they would like to develop locally.

A lot more work needs to be done with some of the groups that Michelle talked about, groups from outside east Belfast, to get them to come into east Belfast to develop and put on events, and even to move into east Belfast and be based there. That developmental work needs to happen. In a way, I was slightly sidetracked by the festival for a couple of months before moving on to the real arts development work.

Mr D Bradley: Should the festival showcase all the activities that take place in the area in the 12 months leading up to it as well as other activities?

Mr Courtney: Yes. When the development work has been done, that should happen. This year, we highlighted a range of incredible and exciting artists, all of whom have emerged from east Belfast. If there is a festival next year, you are absolutely right in saying that activities during the year should be a key part of it. So, next year, there will be a range of locally developed work and big stars.

Mr Hilditch: Thanks, Roger, for your presentation. You are very welcome. I spent a lot of time in east Belfast in my younger days through work commitments, so I got to know a wee bit of the area. Now, when driving through, I am sometimes disappointed to see dereliction and so on in certain areas. However, it always struck me that certain parts of inner east Belfast have the potential to create a community arts hub. The likes of the pop-up idea can engage with communities and overcome dereliction for short periods. Has that taken off to any degree? Has anything like the Big Telly project been tried yet?

Mr Courtney: I do not think so. There are a whole lot of ideas of things to try. People have talked about pop-ups, and I would like a wide range of activities to develop.

Mr Hilditch: Perhaps they could be centred in a hub covering a couple of streets to start with.

Mr Courtney: Yes, there are a number of hot spots with real potential to do something. There are emerging venues, from Skainos to the East Belfast Network Centres in the inner area, and, slightly further out, a number of initiatives around the Strand, so I think that there will be hub areas where a lot of creative things will develop.

Mr Hilditch: One of the biggest events that engages the communities is Culture Night in Belfast in September. You said that people from east Belfast tend not to cross the bridges to go into the city. Would there be an opportunity to piggyback on the back of Culture Night to create something in the area?

Mr Courtney: We are involved in discussions with Culture Night, which is a good example. It started in the Cathedral Quarter and expanded and expanded. If any of you have experienced Culture Night, you will know that it creates a real buzz and a great feeling of creativity and innovation. When it comes to September, it is important that east Belfast plays a bigger role in that.

Mr Hilditch: It would be good to see that. Finally, you mentioned the festival, and I know that Dominic asked you about that. I attended the first one, which was a biggie, but things did not work out too well and the last one was smaller. You are reviewing the situation, but it is going ahead again. Is its future secure?

Mr Courtney: This year, we will have a festival in August, one part of which will be based in Orangefield school and the other part in the Strand Arts Centre.

Mr Hilditch: Was it centred on the Holywood Road before?

Mr Courtney: Last year, the organisers approached anybody who had a possible venue and asked whether there was anything that they fancied putting on. They encouraged the venues to take the risk on the events.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much for your presentation. You asked about the question that we put and said that you did not believe that it was the right question. Last week, someone in Coleraine made the same point to the Committee. The question is phrased like that because it is intended, as much as possible, to be a catch-all. There are those of us who represent urban constituencies and others who represent rural constituencies, but a considerable number of people, a lot of whom belong to what are called working-class communities, are detached from the arts.

Mr Courtney: I absolutely accept that.

Mr Humphrey: You talked about an arts strategy for east Belfast. What does that look like?

Mr Courtney: The arts strategy for east Belfast?

Mr Humphrey: Yes. You said that you had a strategy in east Belfast, which was about connecting working-class communities to the arts.

Mr Courtney: I have outlined some of the strategy's key elements. It is available and was sent to the Committee. It has a series of key elements, including the redevelopment of the Strand, the development of other venues in east Belfast and doing a lot of community arts work on the ground. There is a series of anniversaries next year of key creative people from east Belfast, so we will use those as a vehicle for celebration and as a reminder because, if you did a vox pop on the Newtownards Road and asked respondents to identify creative people from east Belfast, they would probably run out of names after Van Morrison and C S Lewis.

Mr Humphrey: Yes, that is the point. You named a lot of people, some of whom I knew were from east Belfast, but I am not from east Belfast. Had they been from the Woodvale area, I would have known them. In a sense, that typifies the problem, I think. You said that people do not cross the bridge to go, I presume, to venues in the city centre. A point that I have raised in the past is that that also applies to lots of people in North Belfast, which I represent. Why do they not go across the bridge, in your view?

Mr Courtney: That is a much wider question.

Mr Humphrey: That is why we are having the inquiry.

Mr Courtney: When I say "wider", I mean that it is not only about the arts. There is a sense of anxiety about going outside the area. We are not talking about everybody in east Belfast; we are talking about

people in disadvantaged areas, in particular those closest to the bridge, who find it most difficult to contemplate going to anything over the bridge.

Mr Humphrey: Yes, but why?

Mr Courtney: I have no idea. There is a sense that people are comfortable in an area that they feel is their own. It is a very Northern Ireland thing that people, therefore, feel uncomfortable and potentially under threat being in an area that is not their own.

Mr Humphrey: In that context — I am not disagreeing with you; I just wanted to tease out why that was the case — is it not the case that the institutions need to go to them and reach out into the community?

Mr Courtney: Yes, absolutely. That is really important, and it is why I have been talking to promoters and people in a range of arts venues outside east Belfast, inviting them to come into east Belfast to talk to us. Previously, they would not have been sure whom they should talk to. So part of the strategy is to create a small infrastructure, not to run things, as such, but to be animators who can say to each other, "Let's make something happen together."

Mr Humphrey: You mentioned Féile an Phobail, and New Lodge Arts is another successful group. Creativity, capacity building and confidence building are hugely important, particularly in deprived and disaffected areas. I am a former chairman of the development committee at City Hall, and I always banged this drum. You talked about multi-annual funding and a small group of organisations always getting the cake. How do smaller or new groups get in to get a share of that cake? That is a huge issue.

Mr Courtney: I do not have an answer to that, but it is an important issue for the Arts Council. Only when you have been a funder do you realise how difficult it is to give away money and to do so in a way that everyone does not criticise. How that is organised is a difficult issue. Many groups that receive multi-annual funding are wonderful, and I am keen that they continue to be supported, so I am not criticising them. However, if this is to be a developing agenda, there must be ways for other people to become part of that agenda.

Mr Humphrey: I agree entirely, but the problem, whether it is the Arts Council or Belfast City Council, of which we have been critical, is that capacity building and confidence building cannot happen if the funding goes to the same groups every year. It cannot be as widespread and have the impact that it needs to have or should have in disadvantaged and disaffected communities across this city.

Mr Courtney: I agree, which is why I said that the difficult thing is not what you do. If, because you have only a fixed amount, you were to have a discussion today about which groups to stop funding, it would be a difficult decision.

Mr Humphrey: Some groups have the capacity and employ full-time staff to do this year in and year out, but, if you are the new kid on the block and do not have that capacity, you cannot.

Ms McCorley: Thanks for your interesting presentation. You are talking about very much an east Belfast experience. East Belfast is predominantly a unionist area. Would the experience of, say, the Short Strand, a small nationalist working-class area, compare with that of the unionist area?

Mr Courtney: Are you talking about people not going to events?

Ms McCorley: Yes.

Mr Courtney: It is very similar.

Ms McCorley: Do you work with that community? Is there cross-community engagement?

Mr Courtney: There is. About two years ago, there were difficulties in general with cross-community engagements. One of the cross-community arts initiatives has been one of the best processes for enabling people to build cross-community understanding, and a really important part of the strategy is to support that.

Ms McCorley: So you are saying that taking the cultural arts route has had the benefit of closing the gap between communities.

Mr Courtney: Yes.

Ms McCorley: Good. The other positive aspect about east Belfast is that it has a growing Irish language community. Do you think that that is important in cultural development?

Mr Courtney: I am speaking personally. There has been a sense that the Irish language is owned by one particular community in Northern Ireland. In another life, I have been working on the Dissenter tradition. A lot of the pioneers of the Irish language were Presbyterians, so getting away from the idea that it is political is important. It is interesting that Linda Ervine has been leading in enabling that change to take place in east Belfast. That is really good.

Ms McCorley: I totally agree with you. It is one of the falsehoods that has developed over the years. History tells you that the development and revival of the Irish language came from the Presbyterian tradition. It is really good to see people taking ownership of the language. I firmly believe that the language is for everybody and can be a way to bring communities together. Do you work with Linda Ervine's group? Is that in your strategy?

Mr Courtney: The strategy does not mention her group, but she is based at Skainos, and it talks about working with Skainos and with other community groups in Short Strand.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for your presentation. I, too, enjoyed it. Your presentation refers to the more affluent people in east Belfast. Where did all that information come from? How was that acquired?

Mr Courtney: Which event?

Mr McMullan: People from Ballyhackamore and similar places, where income is over £25,000, tend to go into the centre of Belfast or to south Belfast rather than east Belfast. What relevance has that to east Belfast?

Mr Courtney: Sorry, I am lost.

Mr McMullan: Read your report.

Mr Courtney: Are you talking about the strategy itself?

Mr McMullan: Yes. Read your report, and you will see what I am talking about. I cannot see the relevance of that.

Mr Courtney: It talks about the levels of attendance in different wards in Belfast. Inner city east Belfast has about a third of the average attendance at arts events, but outer ring east Belfast has much better attendance than the average for Belfast. That is probably not entirely different from the entire outer ring around Belfast.

Mr McMullan: Is there anything that you can do to change that? Do you know what you are doing wrong that you cannot entice the ABC1s in?

Mr Courtney: The ABC1s are going to arts events. They are further away from the bridge but much happier to cross it, so that is not an issue. It is important for arts organisations to have that audience, too. They have income, so they can pay. Our difficulty is finding something that is broad enough to attract both audiences. The difficulty is not attracting the ABC1s.

Mr McMullan: Have you had conversations with the Féile?

Mr Courtney: Yes. I was at their lunch last Thursday.

Mr McMullan: Is there an ongoing togetherness in helping each other?

Mr Courtney: Yes, we are talking right now about events to put on in each other's festivals.

Mr McMullan: Very good. Quite a lot of the report and what I heard today centred on funding: on what happens if funding does not come in and how some groups get funding and others do not. Do you not agree that there are groups interested in the arts that will simply go for it, whether or not the funding is there? That is how a lot of groups started up in other parts of the country: not much funding was available, but they were really interested in the arts.

Mr Courtney: I agree. I am not at all a believer in things being funding-led. You are right: the trouble is that when funding is available, others who can write sophisticated funding applications jump on the bandwagon. One of your challenges is how you create a resource that will be accessed by groups working from the bottom up. That is important. You are right, in that the initiative — what people want to do — needs to come from the ground up, not the other way around.

Mr McMullan: Your report refers to Belfast City Council's £70,000 funding for arts groups.

Mr Courtney: That is the community festivals fund.

Mr McMullan: There was a lot more.

Mr Courtney: £500,000.

Mr McMullan: Does that mean that those that did not get funding simply went away? How many of them stayed and went ahead with what they had?

Mr Courtney: I have no idea. It would be interesting to find out. No one involved in the arts depends on one source. You spend far too much of your life scrabbling about to find bits and pieces of money from different funders. You might go to the city council, the Arts Council or some of the other lottery funds. Then, you might try to do a bit of community relations work and try the Community Relations Council, or, "Here are one or two tired old foundations, so we will try them." So you spend lots of time filling in application forms. That is the reality of the arts. It is a difficult arena.

Mr McMullan: Do you see the arts progressing in east Belfast, over and above this culture of looking for funding?

Mr Courtney: I think that funding tends to follow the commitment to want to make something happen. I run lots of funding workshops, and I tell people that the groups that are successful are those that are doggedly determined to make something happen and are prepared to come and talk to the Committee and get their politicians to support them. They really want to make something happen, so they will do what is required and go through all the hoops that they need to go through. It is difficult and frustrating. The other day, I was talking to a group that told me that, after 12 years, it had managed to get some funding. If, at the beginning, somebody had told them that it would take 12 years, there is no way that they would have spent that long. They had felt that they would have their project up and running within 18 months, but that is the world of the arts.

Mr McMullan: The last thing that I want to talk about is community festivals. It will be interesting to see how many applications are, in fact, for community festivals that centre on the arts. Community festivals are slightly different from the arts, in that they can centre on anything. A community can have a street party, but that is not the arts, and I think that it is a red herring. In a way, it gives a false impression of what may be going on, because there is a rich arts vein running through east Belfast.

Mr Courtney: If you look at the range of really exciting arts festivals, you will see that £70,000 is nothing. Last year, the Féile got £250,000.

Mr McMullan: The Féile started off —

Mr Courtney: I appreciate that. I agree that it started off as a very small festival.

Mr McMullan: Do not forget to say where it started from rather than saying that it got £250,000. It started with a baseline of nothing.

Mr Courtney: I agree.

The Chairperson: I will follow on from Mr McMullan's earlier question on the challenges. I will try to set aside the key challenge of funding, although that may be difficult. You have an implementation plan, and the timescale for its first phase is to March 2015. Are you on track with that? What challenges have you faced, or, perhaps, which challenges were unanticipated?

Mr Courtney: DCAL, the Minister and the Arts Council have been really supportive and helpful. Without their support, we would not have got to this point. Some of the challenges are just trying to get into the right kind of funding processes. So we are planning a festival but do not yet have any commitment to funding. It is difficult to programme a festival without such a commitment. That is a major challenge. It is not a criticism. Given the timescales and deadlines involved, it is difficult to do things at certain times of the year. Getting a tourist grant, for example, for something that runs in the third week of October is very difficult because the annual deadline for that grant is in the middle of October. It is a yearly cycle.

The Chairperson: Yes, but aside from the funding issue, you have a number of targets for engagement and for encouraging people who maybe did not see the arts as something that would have interested them to get involved. What challenges have you had in your discussions across the piece?

Mr Courtney: Those discussions have been incredibly powerful. I realised that, having talked to various people, a lot more of these discussions are needed. Once you start to talk to people, they all have ideas about what they want to do. Then, the conversation goes, "How do we make this happen"? Finding groups that want to do things is not the challenge. They want to talk more about how they can make something happen, and outside festivals are saying that they really want to do something in east Belfast. Those are not the difficult areas to deal with, assuming that we have the funding for the people having these conversations. That is the challenge at the moment.

The Chairperson: One of your targets, for example, is to:

"consider the feasibility of developing a community--based voluntary theatre company in East Belfast".

How is that moving forward?

Mr Courtney: That has not moved forward at all. We have had some discussions with people who have said that it is a really good idea, but making it happen requires a long series of discussions. We need to talk about a hub and where that will be, and there has to be engagement with people skilled in professional theatre. It is quite a long-term project, but it is a really exciting one. People who saw the 'Crimea Square' production on the Shankill thought that it was a really powerful concept. There will be all kinds of hurdles once we get to the next stage. We have been talking to a group, for example, about an international children's literature centre based around C S Lewis. There are loads of hurdles: for example, the group needs to go through the process of creating a business plan and looking at premises. Again, we are back to economic appraisals. I am absolutely sure that every single one of these projects will have a series of hurdles attached to it. Nevertheless, a lot of people need quite a lot of support to guide them. That whole process of business planning, feasibility studies and economic appraisals is very difficult and requires specialist skills.

The Chairperson: On the theme of children, as your presentation mentions, and as members are well aware, children are naturally creative. If we want to develop them in any sphere, be it in education or the arts, early intervention is the most important element. It is about having close relationships with schools and an appreciation of the arts. You mentioned that you are looking to set up partnerships with a variety of primary and post-primary schools in the area. Has that progressed?

Mr Courtney: Not much because, at the moment, we are organising the festival. We have had initial discussions with some teachers. They are keen on the idea, but it will be September before that goes to the next stage.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your presentation and for taking time this morning to discuss your work. We look forward to getting more information about the Strand, which is an exciting project.

Mr Courtney: Thank you very much for asking me. I really appreciate it, and it has been nice to talk to you.