



Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working-class Communities:
Northern Ireland Theatre Association

3 July 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Basil McCrea
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Mr John Davison	Northern Ireland Theatre Association
Ms Ali Fitzgibbon	Northern Ireland Theatre Association
Ms Emma Jordan	Northern Ireland Theatre Association
Mr Ciaran McAuley	Northern Ireland Theatre Association

The Chairperson: I welcome Ciaran McAuley, Northern Ireland Theatre Association (NITA) board member and CEO of the Lyric Theatre; Emma Jordan, Prime Cut Productions and NITA vice-chair ; Ali Fitzgibbon, a representative from Young at Art and the Belfast Children's Festival and a NITA member; and John Davison, who is from Terra Nova Productions and a NITA board member. I am not sure who wishes to make the opening statement — maybe it is a combination of all four — but please start, and then members will follow with questions.

Ms Emma Jordan (Northern Ireland Theatre Association): I will take the lead, if that is OK. I thank the Committee for the invitation to present our recommendations and for the leadership that you have shown in launching an inquiry into the inclusion in the arts of working-class communities in Northern Ireland. That issue is also the concern of the NITA membership. We have presented to you on several occasions, so please forgive me for recapping on the role and function of NITA.

We are a representative body for professional theatre in Northern Ireland. Our activities are designed to build capacity and strengthen the theatre sector in Northern Ireland. NITA membership is drawn from across Northern Ireland and includes everybody from students, emerging professionals and individual practitioners to the independent theatre and dance companies, regional venues and flagship theatres, all of which, at some level, work with, for or represent working-class communities in Northern Ireland. Our membership also includes support bodies such as Audiences NI and the Ulster Association of Youth Drama, developing audiences for, and participation in, theatre.

Almost all of our members are working on, producing or delivering arts projects in and for working-class communities across Northern Ireland, whether that is playwriting, delivering community engagement and outreach projects or producing professional theatre with inbuilt access schemes.

In our written evidence, we presented to the Committee examples of some of the sterling work being carried out by our membership to encourage engagement with the arts in working-class communities. Many of our members receive Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) funding, and, for our established venues and theatre companies, any funding from ACNI is predicated on ensuring that inclusivity and community engagement are essential elements of all of our outputs. That is monitored annually in our regularly funded organisations (RFO) submissions to the Arts Council. However, it is fair to say that almost all who work in the arts do so not because we are compelled but because we want to improve and transform the community and society in which we live. Reaching audiences and providing opportunities for participation in the arts for working-class communities are core elements in helping to transform society. Our membership, for instance, includes many emerging companies and professionals largely unfunded by the Arts Council, some examples of which are Fahy Productions, based in Derry/Londonderry; Brassneck Theatre Company, based in west Belfast; and Terra Nova Productions, based in east Belfast. They continue to deliver work that is made for and in working-class communities, simply because they want to make a difference to those communities.

For our more established companies and venues, Arts Council funding is only one part of a complex funding mix required to deliver community engagement projects. Funding for outreach and community engagement requires a mix of funding from other sources, including local councils, other statutory funders, a small number of trusts and foundations, and partnerships with business. It is in our sector's interest to grow and develop the audience for theatre and to ensure that arts are enjoyed by all in Northern Ireland. We believe that theatre has an important role to play in developing Northern Irish society. It can contribute to and inspire social improvement, address difficult issues in a neutral environment and augment the learning and personal development of individuals and communities.

It may be helpful to clarify the distinction between representation of working-class communities in the sector, community engagement and the attendance by working-class communities as an audience. It is our anecdotal experience that the sector is disproportionately made up of actors, producers, writers, front-of-house staff and back-office support who identify themselves as working class. Working-class representation in our sector is high, and this is reflected in the type of work that we produce and in the plays and stories that we share with our audiences. Many NITA members deliver community engagement projects in identified targeting social need (TSN) areas throughout Northern Ireland. We have plenty of community participation and engagement, but perhaps our biggest challenge is to convert our community participants into regular arts and theatre attendees.

Having consulted our membership and requested written submissions from NITA, we identified four primary obstacles/barriers to theatre attendance and active participation in the arts. The first is price, and our sectoral experience indicates that this is a barrier than can be mitigated through the provision of concessionary or subsidised tickets. Often, however, this is symptomatic of another problem, which is the lack of value placed on the arts.

Theatre and dance are consistently the most popular art forms, accounting for 58% of all ticket sales, according to Audiences NI. However, each year, only one in five households from the demographic groups typical of working-class community make a theatre or dance booking. Community engagement projects delivered by producing theatre companies can begin to break down this barrier but, in many cases, it is a condition of their funding that projects are time-limited and restricted in their repetition. The consistency of relationship that might lead them to following up the experience at a regional or flagship venue is not sustained. Consequently, the venues have to expend further efforts and resources to recapture that community as an audience.

Lastly, this breakdown contributes to the community misconceptions that our members identified as a third barrier. Among our working-class communities, there can be a misconception that theatre or the performing arts are not for them. As a consequence, they may never engage in what is on offer in the first place. So we need to consider community engagement as currently delivered and resourced: is it the most effective means to drive participation and increase audiences from working-class communities?

We make four main recommendations that may improve working-class community engagement with theatre and dance. First, there is a need to increase aspirations in working-class communities to produce professional arts and theatre by creating opportunities for employment or work experience in theatre, through bursaries and training targeted at such communities. Secondly, support for subsidised

tickets needs to be matched by efforts to capture audience data that is site-specific for pop-up theatre and festivals, as a means of measuring and increasing working-class exposure to theatre in non-traditional venues. Thirdly, through schools and play groups, we need to introduce the concept of theatre from the very start, thus exposing children and young people from a working-class background to the arts and creating a love for theatre. If we could make one recommendation that would have a lasting impact on working-class inclusion in the arts, it would be for every child to be afforded the opportunity to attend a professional theatre performance during their primary and post-primary education. Lastly, for venues in receipt of statutory funding, we would welcome efforts to support the introduction of a "theatre mile" to complement the existing community engagement work. That would involve working-class communities in a pre-defined area forming a group to help to shape the activity and programming of the venues located in their community and ensuring access by providing a subsidised ticketing scheme.

We welcome the Committee's inquiry into the inclusion in the arts of working-class communities. Throughout the inquiry, it has been clear that the Committee places huge value on achieving the best outcomes for these groups. We hope that the findings of the inquiry will answer some simple questions. What does success look like? What benchmark should we be striving to support as a sector? What level of working-class participation, engagement and representation in the arts should be achieved? If a clear answer can be determined, what policy and action must follow? What steps must the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), in collaboration with the other Executive Departments, the Arts Council and our 11 new district councils take to deliver it? How will it take advantage of the people working on the ground in the sector?

We are happy to be on the receiving end of your questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. Will you talk to us a little more about your idea of a "theatre mile" and tell us whether you have approached any venues about their willingness to participate in a pilot?

Mr Ciaran McAuley (Northern Ireland Theatre Association): The Lyric is lucky in that, because it is a producing theatre, it has control over the income from all of its tickets. Therefore, in a way, we are best placed to look at the concept of a "theatre mile", and we are doing so. We are looking at a way of attracting audiences from the vicinity. There is a common perception that we are a middle-class theatre in a middle-class area, but, if you walk 100 metres in any direction other than south, you arrive at a socially deprived area. So we are looking at how we will target those audiences and bring those communities into the theatre by providing opportunities through discounted ticket schemes.

We already run a community ticketing scheme across Northern Ireland, which allows community groups to come to the Lyric Theatre, with tickets costing only £5. Over the last three years, we have provided such heavily discounted tickets that we have provided a discount of £130,000. We are very well placed to do that. Other venues might struggle: for example, producers external to Northern Ireland may not be as keen to discount tickets for people in the locality. Maybe the Committee could look at offering funding to enable organisations to do that.

The Chairperson: You talked about the challenges that you face, even in encouraging those who already participate in community arts to become theatregoers. How effectively can you work with some of the arts venues, including the Lyric, to try to combat the perception and the barriers?

Ms Jordan: There can be follow-up community engagement on the ground, and I can give you examples of how that may work. Recently, Prime Cut produced three Chilean plays in the Mac. We have also been working for about seven months with community groups from all over Belfast—east, west, north and south—in their community. Inbuilt in our funding stream was an allocation of money to subsidise tickets for community participants, with whom we have been working with on the ground, to see our work in the Mac. That can be very effective because everybody is working together, including the venue and the producing company, and there is a sustained relationship on the ground between the company and community participants, whereby you can transition people who are probably first-time attendees. That mechanism of sustained engagement effectively helps the transition.

Mr John Davison (Northern Ireland Theatre Association): Simply put, there is a gap. As mentioned in previous evidence to the Committee, community engagement tends to be parachuted in for a time. As you all know, it takes a really long time to build trust and relationships with communities. That is what producing theatre companies are doing, not only because it is an Arts Council

requirement but because that is what their theatre is about. The difficulty is what happens on the venue side. The funding is time limited, and, quite often, there is a requirement not to repeat a project in an area where it has already happened, so it moves on. At the same time, however, the venue is trying to keep hold of that audience or get it back. So there is a disconnect because of the way in which funding is structured for producing theatres that work in community engagement. Venues, then, have to work harder to get an audience that should be receptive to theatre because it has had some exposure to it, but that follow-up does not always happen. Prime Cut is a good example of where it did, but, more often than not, that is not the case.

The Chairperson: Ciaran, when compiling the Lyric programme, do you look specifically at something that might attract a broader audience, or do you focus on what can be done with local producers?

Mr McAuley: When compiling our programme, we try to get a broad range that will appeal to the entire audience. At the heart of programming is what our audience will want to see. There is no point in producing theatre that people do not want to see. We try to get a broad range across the season. Last year, for example, we had a Belfast season, which specifically looked at the communities of Belfast and how we address issues that interest them or with which they are dealing. Absolutely, we consider that because, at the heart of programming, is bringing audiences in and making sure that people want to see it.

The Chairperson: The flagship venues are based, primarily, in Belfast, so that makes it a challenge for those outside Belfast to travel to them. Is any consideration given to assisting with transport for local groups?

Mr McAuley: We are very conscious of trying to provide as many discounted tickets as we can, but, if travel to the theatre is an economic barrier, it still prevents people coming. We find, particularly when bringing schools to the theatre, that the price of tickets is not what matters. We can ring up schools and say that we will provide them with free or discounted tickets, but their reply will often be that the cost of the bus fare means that they simply cannot get to our theatre. Each year, part of our budget is set aside to facilitate schools or community groups by providing them with transport, but there is only a certain amount that we can do.

Perhaps we should look at how to connect some of the agencies and companies working in Northern Ireland in order to provide discounted transport to venues not just in Belfast but right across Northern Ireland

Mr Davison: The great network of regional theatres across Northern Ireland was a previous commitment of capital funding. Some 50% of theatre audiences come from outside the two large metropolitan areas. This comes back to the disconnect between venues and community engagement projects. The biggest provider of funding for community engagement projects is Belfast City Council, but not all councils make the same investment. So there is no encouragement for an audience, which should be ripe for the picking, to attend regional venues because the council funding simply is not there.

Ms Jordan: We have toured for 22 years in Northern Ireland and now find it very difficult to expand our community engagement projects outside Belfast. That is because the majority of funding for such projects comes via trusts and foundations and through support from Belfast City Council, which requires us to work within its boundaries. Even though our desire is to extend our outreach beyond Belfast, it is difficult for us to access the funding to do so.

Ms Ali Fitzgibbon (Northern Ireland Theatre Association): As well as running the Belfast Children's Festival, we produce various projects and events. We work only with children and young people, so we are, naturally, in a continuous engagement process. One of the challenges of spreading the regional impact of community engagement is that most of the venues are under local authority control and there is a whole set of other priorities and strategies at play. We have found there is a real need to engage on a strategic, long-term level, and one of the things that we recommend is looking at strategic, long-term collaborative relationships between the people who are making work, the artists, the local authority venues and the flagship theatres. It should look at long-term development. There is a lot of crossover: people will go from the Market Place in Armagh and travel up to the Lyric and elsewhere. We could build on that, but we do not have a strong enough evidence base or the capacity to plan and work collaboratively in a long-term way. The nature of the funding cycle is quite short and quite tight, and there is an active desire for us not to continue. If we have done one community, it is deemed that you have done that area and should now move on to another one. So, we really struggle

to build relationships. We are about to embark on our third year of working with playgroups, nursery schools and parents and grandparents in the Shankill and Woodvale areas, but we are now on our third set of different funders to sustain that work. Every time, we have to pause the work, stop the work, find new money, find new priorities and meet new criteria. If that work had been continuous, I think that we would be much further on now than we are.

Mr Humphrey: Thanks very much for your presentation. As a former member of Belfast City Council, I agree entirely about the councils outside Belfast. There is sometimes a view in Belfast that it does the heavy lifting and other councils do not pull their weight. We now have an opportunity with the 11 super-councils. What strategy do you have in place? Do you have one? Effectively, they should have larger budgets, and they do have larger budgets. They will have greater economies of scale and, therefore, should have, with a much larger rate base, more resource to help you in what you are trying to do.

Mr Davison: As a sector, we see the new super-councils as a real opportunity for theatre, but it needs to come as a joined-up approach with what is happening in the Arts Council. It is no good if we are, as Ali pointed out, trying to fit our projects into different criteria for funding, and, if we had some formal policy around community engagement and had a baseline target that was set by DCAL and looked at what the Arts Council is doing and what the 11 new councils are seeking to achieve, I absolutely think that it would be a massive opportunity. Belfast City Council has taken the lead in looking at different models. Look at what it is planning to do with creative and cultural Belfast, which is a collaborative model where different art forms from different parts of the city, whether it is visual art, theatre or heritage, are being brought together to celebrate and connect communities across Belfast. Belfast is way ahead. We need to see that approach in all council areas, but it needs to tie up with what is happening and is prioritised in DCAL and the Arts Council.

Mr Humphrey: I do not disagree with what you are saying about Belfast, but I have some criticisms, and I met John McGrillen and his team recently about it. If you are in, you are in, but new groups have a difficulty getting in. I have a concern about that. If people are skilled at writing applications and continue to put in those applications, they will continue to get funding because the capacity is there. New groups that are formed do not necessarily have that. I accept what you say, but surely you have a model there already, if you have been working with Belfast, that you can simply roll out to the other councils. It is important that it is joined up, not just between you and the councils but the Department, the Arts Council and whatever arm's-length bodies are involved. It needs to have that joined-upness to have maximum impact. Do you agree?

Ms Jordan: I am interested in how you recommend we engage on that because, in one way, if Belfast City Council has a blueprint as such —

Mr Humphrey: Have you been working with Belfast City Council? That is what I am saying.

Ms Jordan: Yes, we have been working with Belfast City Council consistently.

Mr Humphrey: Can what you have been doing in Belfast not be rolled out to the other councils?

Ms Jordan: The funding streams are not —

Mr Humphrey: Yes, but —

Ms Jordan: — and, obviously, we are Belfast-based so, at this moment in time, we are not able to access funding because we are outside of that jurisdiction.

Mr Humphrey: And the new councils do not effectively happen until next year, but it gives you time to do that.

Ms Jordan: Absolutely.

Mr Davison: If I could come back to your point, William, I think we agree. It is not in our gift to set the priorities; that is the gift of the councils and the Arts Council. We are of the opinion, as representatives of the sector, that there is a need for a model that ties those things up, but we are the people struggling to fill the application forms.

As I think we pointed out, many of our members are not core-funded. They are emerging professional companies or are people who are on that transition. So, a lot of our members struggle to find and secure the funding that allows them to take on community engagement projects. If they do get Arts Council funding, for instance, it can be a yoke around their neck to begin with, because they do not have the knowledge or experience to deliver community engagement in a really meaningful way. That level of experience and building up capacity within the sector is just not there. I agree with you: I think more needs to be done to look at how we can encourage a wider breadth of community engagement from smaller companies.

Ms Fitzgibbon: I think the idea is very interesting. There is evidence that Belfast has devised some very interesting approaches in its culture, arts and tourism strategy, looking at the different kinds of priorities and managing to balance the drivers for social and economic regeneration with the need for access and participation. It is a really interesting model, and I am really looking forward to how that rolls out.

One of the things I am hesitant about is the idea that a model that is based on the largest urban area in Northern Ireland could be lifted and put down into another one of the super-council areas. I think it would be a disservice to the regional councils to attempt that. I think we can learn lots from models of good practice, not just here but in other countries and other regions.

In north Belfast — again, I use a Belfast example, because our second biggest funder is Belfast City Council — we worked in the Waterworks area and delivered the first cross-community event that took place in the Waterworks park. We spent two years just having conversations and, actually, what started out as an idea became completely different by the end of that conversation and we had buy-in from all the local residents' associations and the local schools. That model worked in that area because everybody who was involved was on board and it was specific to that area. You could take a lot of learning from it, but you could not replicate that model if you lifted it and put it down in the People's Park in Lurgan. You would need to have the same process and discuss the same things, but the issues are different and the people are different.

There is a lot of commonality and a lot of humanity is the same, but you need to tailor every single community engagement project to communities and respect their interests and needs. The gatekeepers in each community are different. One might be the parish priest and the other might be a youth worker. There are some extremely effective community development organisations. There are others that may not be so effective, so a single network, agency, body and sector will not necessarily be the same in every region.

As an organisation that works across a number of different sectors and art forms, the approach that we always take is the idea that each thing has to be tailored to the community in the way that it needs, in a respectful way and with a partnership approach.

Mr Humphrey: Absolutely. I agree with what you are saying. The next nine months give you the opportunity to do that with the shadow councils so that you hit the ground running when they actually do have the powers and the purse strings and the new councils are set to make decisions.

Ciaran, you talked about the subsidies. I think it was £5.

Mr McAuley: It is £5 for community tickets, yes.

Mr Humphrey: Who paid for that?

Mr McAuley: The communities pay the £5, but the discount is absorbed by us, so we are providing the ticket that is usually £25 for a price of £5. We absorb that loss of income, effectively, but we do not see it as a loss of income. We actually see it as getting somebody who will pay £5 into the theatre and getting the opportunity to engage with them, develop a relationship with them and, hopefully, encourage them to come back.

Mr Humphrey: I have to agree with the point you made, Emma. For a lot of the communities that I represent in north Belfast, £50, as it would effectively be for a couple going out for an evening, is just not doable. I welcome your comments on that.

Mr Irwin: My colleague has stolen my thunder. In relation to local government, you believe that it could play a more encouraging role in the participation of arts. You believe that it could play a better role.

Mr Davison: I think it is simply the case that Arts Council funding provided to and used in professional theatre companies has a requirement for community engagement, but the funding that is provided does not sustain that engagement. What sustains it is a mix of other sources. Primarily, the largest funder, beyond the Arts Council, is Belfast City Council. It provided the model for a lot of community engagement as a consequence. Other council areas place different priorities on community engagement through the arts. It is a kind of mixed economy out there.

One of our members, Big Telly, gets no funding from Belfast City Council because it is based in Coleraine. It has to meet a different set of criteria to get funding from its council, so it ends up relying on a mix of funding sources in order to do community engagement projects. It has been innovative: it has gone and done business partnerships; and it has found money from trusts. The point is that this sector is extremely good at bringing other funding sources together.

We would like to see some benchmarking around what level of community engagement is appropriate for a region this size. How does it differ from the community engagement that we would expect to see in urban areas in Derry/Londonderry and Belfast versus what we would expect to see in Strabane and Fermanagh? We would like to see that clear policy direction given from DCAL down to the Arts Council and involving all the other statutory providers, the sector itself and the expertise and the knowledge that we have. We also want to see business organisations, such as Arts and Business NI, involved and the businesses that work with it, including Audiences NI, in order to develop the audiences, as well as the trusts and foundations that provide the funding to deliver this work.

Ms Fitzgibbon: One thing that we as the Northern Ireland Theatre Association would like to convey is that, as a sector, we are a membership organisation made up of multiple organisations, and even the biggest is not a very big organisation. One thing that is really important for us is that we actively want to seek collaborative ways of resolving some of the challenges. We do not want to be the only people coming up with solutions, nor do we want to pass the buck and expect somebody else to fix it for us. The only way that this will work is through a joined-up approach with multiple partners, including those in communities, that will suit the needs of the community and that will be within the ability of the sector to deliver. That is a challenge to the ability of the sector.

I will come back to Mr Humphrey's comment about ticket pricing. A study done for NITA's report a number of years ago found that the average price of a theatre ticket in Northern Ireland was £14.88. Five million tickets were sold in 2011 at an average price of £14.88. That is less than the cost of a ticket to see a Belfast Giants game. In looking at relative levels of expense, we have to be proportionate about what ticket pricing is. That is lower than the average UK pricing. Northern Ireland Theatre Association members account for three and a half million of those ticket sales, and the average ticket price paid across the NITA membership was £12.44. If you look at the relative cost of cinema tickets, admissions to sporting events and things like the Belfast Giants tickets, I think you will see that the Northern Ireland theatre community is using a large part of its subsidy to offset the cost of tickets and find alternative funding sources. We have 22 different funding sources, and, as an organisation with a full-time staff of two, that is quite hard to find.

Mr Humphrey: I know that times are difficult for companies at the moment because of the economic climate, but is there scope for or has any work been done around private companies subsidising ticket or production costs that would allow money to be transferred to reducing ticket costs?

Mr McAuley: Yes. One example at the moment is that we have a corporate partner who is funding bursary schemes for our Lyric Theatre and summer school. That allows children whose families would not otherwise be able to afford to place their child with us in the summer to get a free place. There are small partnerships like that. The difficulty is getting it at any large level. All companies are finding it difficult at the moment. What they are prepared to fund is at a low level and is often just a one-off or will only happen once or twice. I think that the key for arts organisations is to find long-term partnerships at a larger level. That will probably come in the years ahead as opposed to at the moment when we are still coming out of recession.

Mr Davison: I was just going to add another example, which is the Replay Theatre Company, and which is based in this building. It has worked extremely hard to find additional sources of income. It has had a partnership for two or three years now with Brennan's Bread. Replay deals almost

exclusively with children and young people, so most of its performances are in schools. It is only really as a result of the partnership with Brennan's that it has been able to go in and produce theatre in schools. It is a great example of how it works, but that relationship and the time, effort and resource that was required to secure it were years in the making. There are opportunities out there. Arts and Business is facilitating those arrangements, but it will not be a panacea.

Ultimately, subsidy is not the only answer to this. As Ali was saying, we have some of the lowest ticket costs across Northern Ireland. People are prepared to pay for theatre. It is entertainment as well as a cultural experience. It competes relatively well.

The breakdown of audiences varies. If you look at the audience from what might be termed working-class communities — it is a very loose term — so if you are looking at Housing Executive tenants, for example, you see that it sits at around 10%. I suppose that it goes back to this question: what are we actually aspiring to? If we had an answer to that, we could look at the resources for the sector. Around one sixth of 1% of the entire Executive Budget goes into the arts. That sends out a message that it is not valued and, therefore, it is not valuable to people in working-class communities.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thanks for your presentation. John, you mentioned the Big Telly Theatre Company in Portstewart. I know it; it is in my constituency. I would say that that is probably the exception rather than the rule in areas.

When I was in local government, I sat on the Forum for Local Government and the Arts (FLGA). I am not suggesting that organisation because I do not know how effective it was during the time that I was there, but is there any merit in or appetite for some sort of body to tie together local government and the arts in some sort of formal setting?

Mr Davison: Beyond getting a body, we first need a clear strategy. Frankly, that is a role that DCAL could be playing to look at what the Arts Council and the 11 councils could do collaboratively, because it is not about the 11 councils having a homogenous answer to this; it is about each of the 11 councils having its own plans, as has rightly been pointed out, and about those plans being consistent with the overall outcome that the Arts Council and DCAL wish to achieve.

Mr Ó hOisín: It seems a shame. Under the previous 26 councils, most local government areas developed a great infrastructure of theatres and proper sized venues for their own particular area. In terms of your membership, how much outreach is there towards taking stuff out of the city and putting it elsewhere, for example, going into communities and using those facilities?

Mr Davison: I think that I mentioned earlier that around 50% of audiences come in from rural areas or attend regional venues. So, it is not a case of the outreach not being there; it is about the capacity of the sector. There is a problem with programming. We have great venues, but there is a real struggle at the moment for venues to find the quality of work. That is largely down to the fact that, as we mentioned, the sector is not properly resourced to achieve the outcomes that are set, either on community engagement or what they are also there to do, which is put on a good show.

Ms Jordan: As budgets minimise, our capacity to tour our work away from our home bases becomes more and more challenging. It is a major issue that we have that we have seen over the past number of years. The resources are not there in the regional venues to be able to afford to place a programme —

Mr Davison: A programme of quality work.

Ms Fitzgibbon: The Northern Ireland Theatre Association includes in its membership people from the Burnavon Theatre and the Market Place Theatre in Armagh. It is not an us-and-them situation; it is a partnership approach. However, there are challenges for those individual venues in that they have those buildings but have relatively low numbers of staff and maybe a shorter planning cycle. We run a social economy trading arm, which is designed to support individual artists to get their work out to different audiences. One of the things that we noticed is that the venues used to bring in shows for three or four days. The company or artist was in the area on the ground, and word of mouth went around, which helped to build the audience and a sense of presence. As their budgets have contracted, they have really looked for a one-night stand. That is changing the relationship. It also means that companies cannot stay in the area long enough. It is a double-edged sword: we cannot get further out, and they cannot reach forward to us. That is where we should look at an overarching strategy, which maybe trickles down to individual strategies for each of the 11 super-councils specific

to their needs, bearing in mind the variation between urban and rural; average population size; the distance each population is from a small town centre; and the fact that most of the arts centres, by dint of simple geography, are based in towns. What relationships could be built? What other partners could be around the table? What about the education and library boards, and the massive upheaval that has been going through things like the Youth Council? What about the voluntary youth sector? A huge number of potential partners should be sitting round the table to discuss how we create a coherent strategy to address this. What is the involvement of DSD in something like this, with its responsibility for the community and voluntary sector?

Mr Ó hOisín: The concept of the theatre from the very start is very laudable. There must be some costings. Do you have any idea of those?

Mr Davison: Off the top of my head, I do not know. Ali can probably tell you about what the Danish Government have done.

Ms Fitzgibbon: Denmark has 5.5 million people. It has a similar urban:rural split. In my work, I have travelled quite regularly to the country. It is considered to be one of the world experts in creating professional theatre for young audiences. In the mid-1970s, in response to a real issue around educational development, they established the principle that every child should see a piece of quality professional theatre every year they were in school. They then did the mathematics and established that, if one third of a population of 5.5 million people were of school-going age, and if the average theatre company could perform 100 times a year, they needed 130 theatre companies, so they changed the funding model to fund 130 theatre companies. That created a body of community, but it also created a body of children who were active learners, were creative and were developing skills in emotional literacy, visual literacy, different kinds of capacities, and learning about diversity and all the different things that roll out of what happens when quality theatre comes into a child's life.

The knock-on effect was that Danish children's theatre became the single greatest cultural export of Denmark. They reckon that, two years ago, a piece of Danish theatre was performed somewhere in the world every four minutes. There is an economic tipping point. You start with what you think has to happen, and you cost it accordingly.

Mr Ó hOisín: Has anybody done the sums for here?

Mr Davison: For Northern Ireland?

Mr Ó hOisín: Yes.

Mr Davison: No. This is the opportunity to look at what other Departments could be involved. The Department of Education has a curriculum requirement for drama. We suggest that there could be a lead in the Department of Education to provide a commitment to funding and to do that analysis to see what it would cost to bring a theatre performance to a school or schools to theatre performances at post-primary and primary level.

Ms Jordan: We have companies that present their work in a school context. If we want to develop a culture of engagement with art at a societal level, it is important that young people and children go to our arts venues, that they feel that they own that space and that they engage with the work and the idea of art and culture on that level. That is maybe a little bit of a sea change in terms of policy.

Mr D Bradley: Morning. The Department has a key priority, as you probably know, of tackling poverty and social exclusion. It communicates that to its arm's-length bodies, one of which is the Arts Council. Ciaran, how is that policy priority communicated to you when you get funding from the Arts Council?

Mr McAuley: When we apply for funding, we have to demonstrate within that funding application how we are going to tackle a specific area. We set out our targets. We set benchmarks that we will then be assessed against. I have to return to the Arts Council during the year and, at quarterly meetings, demonstrate how we are meeting those targets. There is a very clear process of what are we expected to do and what we will deliver on, and we are then measured against that.

Mr D Bradley: What sort of programme does the Lyric design to respond to that priority?

Mr McAuley: We have a variety of schemes. We have a whole department called our creative learning department that is based on including everybody in theatre. That creative learning department might include something like our Pat and Plain project, which went around primary schools across Northern Ireland, worked with 2,000 children and invited their families along — up to 13,000 people came to see performances. That introduced children to theatre in their school environment, giving them and their teachers theatre skills. We work with secondary schools. We work with 18- to 25-year-olds in our drama studio project.

We work with all other ages, which can involve bringing people into theatre for projects in the Spectrum Centre on the Shankill Road or in Kilkeel, Omagh, Enniskillen and Derry/Londonderry. It is really a breadth of programming that is aimed at making sure that we are delivering on what we have promised to deliver on. It is also about building relationships and creating opportunities so that people come to theatre and feel welcome in the theatre and that it is natural to them. There are a lot of people out there who do not think that the theatre is for them. Part of our challenge is to break down that barrier and make people realise that theatre is welcoming to everybody.

Mr D Bradley: That is monitored through quarterly meetings. You report back to the Arts Council on that.

Mr McAuley: Yes.

Mr D Bradley: Is the nature of the engagement in the various projects in the various places that you mentioned necessarily short term?

Mr McAuley: We try to make it as long term as possible. There are some projects that, by their nature, are short term. You go in for a specific purpose, deliver that project or workshop and come away again. However, what we try to do is, at least, leave a relationship. It might be as simple as going out and working with a group. For example, with the one in the Spectrum Centre last year that I mentioned, we went out and provided professional theatre practitioners to work with the people involved in the 'Crimea Square' project. We put in voice coaches and acting coaches. They are people who go around the world, pick up best skills from around the world and bring them back to Belfast. There were professional actors who went out and worked with the group. They provided the facilities for that group to put on its performance. Then, rather than just breaking the relationship with that group there, we brought them into the Lyric and provided them with tickets to see a show. We meet them and keep in communication with them. It is about trying to find ways of making sure that relationships are long term. There is a variety of ways of doing that, and that is just one example.

Mr D Bradley: The first of the overall proposals that you mention in your document is increased aspirations. You could say that there is a long-term and a short-term aspect to that. The short-term aspect is through the type of engagement that you are talking about, which can turn out to be long term, and the discounted tickets. Do you think that there is too much dependence on discounted tickets to fulfil this policy obligation?

Ms Jordan: I do not think that we are at the stage of developing our audiences where that is an issue. At this moment in time, it is a very important aspect of developing audiences for theatre and dance in Northern Ireland in ensuring access for everyone. As we have indicated, when we dig a bit deeper in working class communities, we find that there is a sense that theatre is not for them. We have to put in place everything that we can to ensure that access is given to them. At this stage, it is necessary to include in any of our community engagement or outreach plans an aspect of ticket price subsidy. That is different from free tickets. We have had this debate ourselves, Ali. There must be value placed on the art. Part of your initial contract with your audience or attendee is that there is value placed on the art. It is not the notion of free ticketing which, in my experience, has not worked. However, providing that initial way in through the subsidy is really important.

Mr Davison: One of the other points that we made is that we are able to capture only a percentage of what happens, mostly in venues, whereas a lot of people's first exposure to theatre or the arts is in pop-up theatre or festivals, which is harder to measure. So, as well as ticket subsidies, there are free events and ticketed events that have a subsidy applied to them, the data for which we are not capturing well enough.

Ms Fitzgibbon: One of the things that we have identified in that recommendation is not just looking at subsidised tickets in and of themselves but looking at improving how we capture audience data where

the theatre is performed in non-theatre venues such as schools and community centres. However, we also look at some of the activity that happens in parks and on streets and some of the more drop-in, socialising events. We rely a lot on going in and doing informal information sessions. Those are not workshops or theatre performances, but they are just about finding people. I think that we all feel that the route to effective community engagement starts with the individual people who take part in that.

I do not know that we have all the answers and all the forms of effective community engagement. However, we are posing questions, and one of the reasons why we are posing questions back to the Committee is that we think that one of the best ways to do this is to have more open conversations about what this should look like, what we all want to get out of it, and how we adopt a long-term approach to resolving some of the barriers.

The conversation that we had about the idea of there being some element of ticket price contract ties in with the idea that, in my experience, people place different values on it. The actual physical cash price is not necessarily the issue. It is about the value that they place on it and the feeling of ownership of that experience. That is maybe what we have to work on, but it requires a different, much more intimate, much more long-term approach that has multiple partners, some of whom are working on the ground in those communities, be they the volunteers that we work with as parent ambassadors, the teachers or the youth workers, the individual people and residents within communities, or specialist facilitators who go in and deliver effective drama work.

Mr D Bradley: I notice that, in your submission, you say that theatre and drama are the most popular art forms, with 58% of all audiences attending those two genres — if there are two genres there. Ironically, it is the people who are poorest and most socially excluded who do not attend. Can we find better ways of targeting them specifically? You mentioned Housing Executive tenants, poor seniors, poor solos, small-town renters and so on.

Ms Fitzgibbon: We are conscious that there needs to be a better, more joined-up approach. I think that there is huge merit in looking at collaborative working. People who go in as individual organisations are not necessarily in a position to offer the experiences to the same people 365 days a year. Adopting a longer-term, collaborative strategy on some of this would improve our ability to share and develop audiences so that we can pass the audiences from one project that we do over to a theatre audience, over to —

Mr Davison: That is a really important point. All funded organisations are reporting on this, and that is being taken in. A question that we sometimes ask ourselves and scratch our heads on is why are we providing all this information? What is the end goal here? Is it to report on it, or is it to have a clear goal as to what community engagement sets out to achieve? We do not necessarily have that clear goal laid out for us. We are providing a lot of information to the Arts Council, but that is not being reported back and shared amongst the people who can actually deliver on it.

Ms Fitzgibbon: We are not seeing the overview. What we are seeing is our own individual organisation's experience. For example, a study that was done on the festivals in Belfast showed that the Belfast Children's Festival's attendance from the top 10% most deprived ward areas was 8%. We took steps to make changes to our volunteering programme, our education programme, our outreach programme, our choice of events, and the way that we did our marketing. We changed everything in order to move that on, and this year it was 25%.

It is critical to have the time to sit and look at that and work in partnerships. Our organisation has two full-time staff, and Emma's organisation has three. You are looking at organisations that are working with big ideas but with very small staffing bases. You have to look at how we collaborate, how we work effectively and how you look at the long-term resource implications. Again, what should it look like? What is the goal we are working to? What percentage do we want?

Mr Davison: It is ultimately a political issue and problem that requires a political answer. It does require our expertise and knowledge, but the direction needs to come from policy, and at the moment it is not clear.

Mr D Bradley: So you want to know what under-representation means and what would be an acceptable level of representation.

Mr Davison: Absolutely.

Mr D Bradley: I think some of you said that there is no one answer to this issue and there is probably going to be a variety of approaches. The idea that you have of theatre from the very start is obviously a longer-term one, but it seems to me that, along with the other initiatives that you have mentioned, theatre from the very start is an important one because it establishes theatre as a central part of people's lives from early on so that it should never be something that is strange to them.

Ms Fitzgibbon: I think it also has a huge level of impact. Dr Suzanne Zeedyk, who is originally from Stirling University, has been working with some of the health trusts in Northern Ireland on infant mental health. Certain aspects of core skills like creative play, eye contact, observation skills, critical skills, critical thinking skills, lateral thinking, imagination and problem solving all derive from that kind of experience.

We have been working with Stranmillis College, training the third-year students on its degree enhancement programme on how to use critical appraisal skills with live performance with their children in order to improve things like literacy, visual literacy, articulation, confidence and opinion-forming. Actually, it is not terribly challenging to deliver that kind of work, but it is the domain of a very large Department with a very substantial budget in the Department of Education, which has a priority.

One of the five learning areas in the primary curriculum is the arts, but the level to which that is being manifested in provision in schools and provision for children to visit theatre venues, as Emma pointed out, is not there. That is all devolved down towards DCAL's budget and then down to the Arts Council's budget. So, essentially you have one of the smallest budgets within the Executive addressing one of the most major challenges, which is actually not just a challenge for the present, in that children have the right to engage in the arts as much as adults in the present, but also in that you are also looking at what those children will feel about the arts and theatre experiences in 10 or 15 years' time and whether there are opportunities available in other regions like Scotland and Wales, which have really high-level early years programmes. What opportunities are our children missing because there is not a level of joined-up thinking?

I go back to the interdepartmental strategy on creativity, if I can cast your minds back a significant number of years. That showed real, imaginative, cross-departmental working and led to the changes in the primary curriculum, which I think are huge. That may need to be re-examined and reinvigorated to address some of the issues you are talking about. My experience is that parents come with their children, so you get the parents seeing and having a different, positive, creative experience, and you develop an adult audience at the same time as you work with the children.

Mr Davison: I think there is definitely an opportunity, and an underrating by the other Departments of the value that the arts can add. To give an example that I know the Chair will be familiar with, and to widen the scope of what we are talking about in the inquiry and look at other disadvantaged communities, Replay Theatre Company took a strategic decision to look at an audience that was not being catered for, which was children with profound and multiple learning difficulties. That crosses the Department of Health, the Department of Education and DCAL.

In order to get that project running, they took a strategic risk to use their core funding to deliver it. As a consequence, they recently received money to carry that project further with what has become the Up project. That funding has come primarily from DCAL again. It has not received the support of the other Executive Departments. That is consistently the case. There are larger budgets, as we mentioned earlier, but the arts only receive around one sixth of 1% of the overall Executive budget, so there are opportunities for the rest of the Executive to feed in and see the benefits of what the arts can contribute.

Mr D Bradley: Childhood play is a form of drama in itself, and it should be relatively easy to extend that into drama in the curriculum.

Ms Fitzgibbon: My background is in drama in education and that is about looking at the combination of providing professional theatre that is made for children as an audience, that speaks to them about their experiences. They are very sophisticated as an audience. It is also about looking at drama skills as a core way of delivering learning; looking at drama to deliver language; looking at drama to deliver social and interpersonal skills; and how teachers use drama to learn about history and geography. I come from a background in that and youth theatre, where the act of being involved in a drama process is an extremely positive and life-affirming decision that supports you when you go into future careers and look at your employability. Your sense of openness to the world and the widening of your horizons is, I think, directly related to your early experience in these art forms.

Mr McAuley: To add to that, drama is part of the curriculum and is required from preschool right through. It is simply not being delivered at the level at which it needs to be delivered. There are schools where children are not coming to the theatre, and I know that theatre is only one part of drama, but they are not even getting the delivery of drama in their school context. We recognise that there is a need as a society, but we are simply not delivering on it, and it is down to the arts community with the small budget to try to deliver it, and yet there is a huge education budget.

Ms Fitzgibbon: One reason why it was a very conscious decision that one of our four recommendations — and there are only four; there are not that many — was because we wanted to say that this is where the Committee could work with Executive colleagues on something that is much more meaningful and long term and that could deliver real change. The difficulty is that it has to have a level of aspiration that is long term and that has an open-endedness to it rather than something that says, "Right, do this and it must be finished within six months", which is our experience of many funding streams that are based on initiatives.

Mr D Bradley: So, you are saying there is a need for more joined-up working between Education, DCAL and even Health?

Mr Davison: I think that the Executive need to take some leadership and say that they place a value on the arts as a contributor to those areas. They are sending out a message at the moment that, because DCAL receives the smallest percentage of the Executive Budget and arts receives a small percentage of that, it is not that important and that it is really not for communities out there. It is not even a case of working together; rather of seeing it as a priority of the Executive.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for your presentation. The whole purpose of our inquiry is to look at the arts in working class areas. I have heard very little of that here today, but I am more concerned about what your fears are for the arts. It is more to do with budgets and priorities of the Executive and how to include arts. John, you made a comment about having been asked for all of this information that is feeding into the arts: could that be a stick for the arts to beat its own back with?

Mr Davison: No, the point that I was trying to make is that I think that it is a stick that we are being beaten with at the moment. We are being asked to report on community engagement in working-class areas, and there is a requirement on us to do so on a quarterly and an annual basis, but there is no clarity as to why.

To go back to your point, Oliver, we are here to talk about our work with working-class communities. We have outlined in our submission the sheer breadth of what we do, and we do it not just because we are told to do it, but because we feel that it is important to do it. What we lack is the policy content that says that this is what we want to achieve. We have asked when we would know that this has been successful. When we will be able to recognise, as decision-makers and policy-makers, that we have achieved the level of engagement with working-class communities that is adequate and when have we been more successful than adequate? At the moment, we are being asked regularly for information, but there is no reporting back as to whether we are achieving the aspirations of government.

Ms Jordan: If I can just answer one aspect of your question about the work that we are doing on the ground and what we are worried about, I will use an example from my organisation. We produce one special outreach show each year. It is usually a long-term, six-month project that has, for all intents and purposes, a big show at the end that is led by professionals but with community participants. We have been doing that for four or five years, and, in the aftermath of our last project, we sat back and thought that, yes, this is successful, but this is ad hoc; we are parachuting in, working with the communities and then leaving, and the aftermath is that people who had participated in the projects really want to work with us again. However, by necessity, we have moved on somewhere else. As a result of that, our idea, and what we have been doing for the past six months, is to create a community ensemble, a much more long-term engagement in which we work on the ground with communities from all over Belfast, and, at the end, we will create a community ensemble that will be an entity in itself. It will not be separate community groups scattered around but will be a composite ensemble with members from all over Belfast, who we will then move into our next project.

That is a very pragmatic decision on our part to address one thing that we are worried about as an organisation, and that is how we create projects and ideas where community participants can come with us on a journey long term and how can we effect ideas about making projects that fit into that

model. That is an example of the things that, personally, as artistic director of Prime Cut, I think and worry about and some of the issues that I think we would all like to outline today.

Mr Davison: It is about making it more sustainable and realising the benefit. Every theatre company in Northern Ireland has produced some piece of work that relates to working-class communities; in fact, there are hundreds of really great plays and writers that have come from or represent working-class communities. You think of 'Hurricane' or 'Man in the Moon'; writers, producers and directors like Dan Gordon and Marie Jones. We are telling the stories. If engagement with the community is not sustainable, then I think that what we are trying to get across is that we are going to lose some of those stories, and we are not going to get the creative and cultural product that represents us.

Mr McMullan: Do you think that somebody is not listening to you? Do you think that the Arts Council is not listening to you? It seems to me that there is more of a disconnect between the arts and those working in the arts at ground level, like yourselves. Could you lose that connection?

Ms Jordan: If I may, I do not think that that is where we are at, and that is why we welcome the inquiry. I think that the inquiry is the opportunity that perhaps has come at the right time for all of the agencies, for everybody who has invested in working with working-class communities, with the Arts Council and with you. You have created the right forum at the right time.

Maybe, on the ground, we have needed to deliver it in this way to understand what is not working. There has been significant investment from the Arts Council, there has been significant investment from the city council, we have trusts and foundations that I do not think are acknowledged in a great sense, like Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, which have significantly invested in the arts organisations delivering community projects in Northern Ireland for a really long time. They have invested substantial amounts of money. The ground has been set, and the time is perhaps right now for everything to come together for us to have a coherent pathway forward to do it better.

Mr McMullan: How long do you think that this can be sustained? We said that we cannot get people in the door unless we subsidise and unless we do all of this to coerce them in. How long can that carry on? What we have heard today is quite worrying for the future of the arts.

Ms Fitzgibbon: I think that goes back to the questions that we posed at the end of Emma's submission: what is it that we all collectively want to achieve in this? My experience is that the level to which we provide extra assistance for people to come from working-class communities, specifically to support them to come to the events that I put on, only needs to happen in the first year or two and then they become independent attendees at my festival. We then help them on a journey to go and see other events in the sense that we keep them informed of other information. That is working in an environment where the full ticket price that we charge is already subsidised to the tune of 80% or 90% because that is the nature of the model for putting on most children's events. There is a general feeling that families cannot afford to bring three or four children to something if they do not have quite substantial subsidy.

Mr McMullan: Do you pay VAT on your tickets?

Ms Fitzgibbon: Not under the cultural exemption — only if you sell commercially. It depends on how you are set up; we also cannot recover VAT on our charges, so we pay 20% more for anything that we buy.

Mr McMullan: Fifty per cent of your audience is from outside the city.

Ms Fitzgibbon: It is 50% across the whole NITA membership. We are only four of the organisations in NITA; the list of NITA members is at the back of our briefing. Across all those members, it is 50% of all the tickets counted independently by Audiences NI.

Mr Davison: It is important to say that we have this information because NITA commissioned Audiences NI to look into the statistics around audiences in theatre. It is only because we took the initiative that all that information is reported. We have nearly had to ask for it back. As we said before, it captures only where there is an ability to capture attendance, so it does not include pop-up theatre or more casual events. It could be higher, Oliver; we simply do not know.

Mr McMullan: What part of society is the most lucrative for the arts? It is not the working-class areas.

Mr Davison: I will give you a breakdown of the make-up of the theatre audience. Wealth and wisdom — these are Audiences NI terms — are around 14%, better-off families are 14%, ageing suburbanites are 20%; and younger nest makers are 11%. Small-town renters are 7%; students and singles are 5%, and poor seniors and solos are 4% — I feel bad for those people. Housing Executive tenants are 10%, and the farming community is 14%. Again, it is hard to grasp exactly what proportion of that is working-class communities, but if you assume it is the latter parts of that, you are talking about a combined total of around 32%, comprising students, singles, poor seniors, Housing Executive tenants and the farming community.

Thirty-two per cent is reasonably successful, given the investment, commitment and time that is put in. Again, it goes back to this: what is the success that we are looking for? Is it 35% or 40% of that audience? There is an argument to make that we are investing because we receive public funding in those areas and we are doing it, as we have pointed out, because we feel it is important. However, you could take the same budget and apply it and focus on growing your audience in better-off families because, still, around 50% of seats in venues, particularly the regional venues, are unsold. It is about audience development; as a sector, we want to develop that whole audience, particularly in working-class communities, because we receive a public subsidy, but it is about growing the entire sector.

Mr McMullan: I would be worried about using those figures for the Housing Executive as a working-class indication.

Mr Davison: No, I am saying that it is the best that we have got. Frankly, there are probably better stats out there because all the projects are reported back in, but we do not have them available to us.

Mr McMullan: Your figure for the farming community is much higher.

Mr B McCrea: I am a supporter of theatre; I have been on a couple of occasions, and I have even been on stage. 'Spelling Bee' at the MAC is very good, if anyone is interested.

Mr McAuley: I saw that.

Mr B McCrea: The key point that comes across here is that your budget is so small and you think that people do not really understand how valuable the arts are. Do you actually think you have convinced anybody in today's meeting that the arts is worth investing in?

Ms Jordan: I am sorry if those are the key things that you have taken from our submission. I know and believe, as an arts practitioner, that the experience of engaging with art can be absolutely transformative.

Mr B McCrea: I know that you know, and I heard from Denmark, and I believe it myself. I just said that the evidence is that you are not convincing anybody, because you are not getting any funding from the Executive or anybody else. I just wonder how you convince people. I am sorry, but it is a luxury; it is just a luxury. There are other budgets and people have other priorities, and you have not convinced them that you should be part of those priorities.

Ms Fitzgibbon: The conviction was that the Committee called this inquiry, to be honest. You are convinced that there is value in investment in the arts, otherwise why would you be having this inquiry? Why would you be having repeated inquiries that look at different aspects of the arts? The fact that when the Executive was set up there were 10 Departments, one of which specifically has culture and arts as its remit, speaks volumes. If you look at the different departmental strategies and the draft priorities for the future of Belfast, everybody is talking about culture, arts and regeneration. The arts is one of five learning areas; the Department of Education is convinced of the value. We would say that the evidence and recognition of the value is there, but that is not following through in terms of departmental policies, planning, budgets and allocations and interdepartmental working.

Mr B McCrea: Why do you think that is? If people are convinced that the value is there, but they are not following through, why do you think they are not following through?

Mr Davison: I think it is historic. We have had this situation for the guts of 20 or 30 years. We are a knowledge economy; that is what we are trying to grow as a region. The arts has the potential to feed

into cultural tourism, economic development and education, as you have heard and we have implored you to consider.

Mr B McCrea: With respect, John, we are all preaching to the converted; we all agree these things. The question I am asking you is this: why do you think the message is not translating into the action that you want? What is the barrier to it?

Mr Davison: Part of it is the capacity of our sector. We are small. I am a volunteer board member of two arts organisations; nobody is paid to represent this sector. Compare us with manufacturing or the IT sector or even interest groups in larger charitable or voluntary organisations: they have the capacity to make the case. We are hoping that our evidence is compelling enough that the Committee can help us make the case. As I understand it, the Committee's role is to scrutinise the Executive and hold them and the Department to account. That is why we really welcome this inquiry because, frankly, it is not for a lack of demonstration from the sector; it is how audible we can be, given the size we are.

Mr B McCrea: You mentioned the Department of Education several times in your submission and you said that it had a very big budget with lots of resources that you should be getting a bit more of. Is there an understanding amongst you of the difference between a statutory responsibility and something that is non-statutory in budget terms?

Mr Davison: Yes.

Mr B McCrea: The point is that the Department of Education may well have the second-largest budget, but it also has a lot of responsibilities. You will see that it is faced with making teachers redundant, and there are lots of claims. It has to get back to those things that are statutorily required of it; that is what its budget goes to. The discretionary budget is fairly limited. Your ability to convince it to spend that discretionary thing is against —

Ms Fitzgibbon: One of the challenges is that the arts and drama in schools is actually a statutory provision and is not discretionary. The difficulty is that the expectation of who is going to provide it is being done in a relatively ad hoc way. The arts sector is a voluntary sector that is servicing a statutory provision, as the voluntary sector does in many other areas such as community and youth provision and other areas of social support. The relationship between the voluntary sector, which is delivering statutory provision, the level to which it is being resourced and the way that joined-up thinking is working, is problematic.

Mr B McCrea: I do not want you to think I am being unhelpful. I am pointing out, as an observation at the end of these conversations, some things that, maybe, you need to consider. It seems to me that there are three things to do with funding; one was to do with price, which was in your submission, but in the discussions here you said that price is not necessarily the issue because it could be value. The second thing is whether society needs it. If it did, then councils or DCAL or whoever might do it. The third thing is corporate sponsorship from other people. The real trouble that I am picking up is that we have not convinced any of these people to fund what you consider to be really useful.

Let me just ask you about the creative aspect, because presumably you are creative people. With regard to the issue of transportation, has any thought been given to cross-linked sponsorship? In other words, Translink runs a lot of empty buses and would be very keen to get people to go on the bus just to say that you can use the bus. So, do you do any cross-linked sponsorship? You know: "Buy a theatre ticket and get a free bus pass"?

Mr McAuley: There are projects from the past, and there is something that we are currently working on as an organisation within the Lyric, which looks at how we can engage with corporate partners to break through that transport barrier, and Translink is one of the partners. There are other partners, who actually manufacture buses in Northern Ireland, who may be interested in doing it as well, but certainly Translink has had projects with other organisations where they supply a discounted ticket.

Mr B McCrea: The last show that I was at in the Lyric had 20% occupancy. It was later on in the run, and so I am interested in this point in your submission at page 125, about the community mile. That is of interest to me. How do you communicate to the people within one mile or even two miles of your theatre that: "Look, the theatre is empty; please come along tonight."

Mr McAuley: What we do is we target by postcode; we narrow it right down. As you can imagine, within a mile of the Lyric, there are sections of the community that can well afford tickets, and there are large sections that cannot. So, it is about targeting those who cannot afford the tickets and that is really done by postcode, and through the super output areas as well, trying to narrow it right down to the audience that you want.

Mr B McCrea: I was struck by the fact that, when we phoned that night to see if we could get — actually we could have had any seat in the theatre. It was a sunny evening and there were people kicking around. Do you have anything to do with telephoning out or social media out or something that says, "Tonight is a one-off". The theatre is running anyway; the actors were there, things were happening. This bit about:

"This would require Executive support for such a subsidy".

Actually, your costs are already sunk, and I am asking how you bring people in. I know that you need to be careful about not giving it for free, so that nobody will ever pay, but there must be some way that you can say. I think the last figure that John mentioned was that 50% of seats out of Belfast were unsold. There must be some way of contacting people immediately, so that they can walk in, or come around and —

Mr Davison: I think that this is where there might be an opportunity for the new councils to play an active role in signposting. We are competing with any other form of entertainment, whether it is a big show at the Odyssey or a sports event. Marketing is something that my colleagues down the table have more experience of and can talk about at more length than I can. However, there is an opportunity to let people know what is on in their communities and, certainly, councils are probably well placed to partner with venues in order to do that, given the fact that many of the councils actually own and run those venues as well.

Mr B McCrea: My last question is in two parts. Let me just develop it. Does your membership take any funding from, or does anybody contribute money to, NITA?

Mr Davison: Yes, we are all paid members.

Mr B McCrea: So why do you not do your own website advertising? Why rely on councils to do it? You will know what is going on. Why can you not do that job?

Mr Davison: We do signposting, but —

Ms Fitzgibbon: If I can ask a question: when you are looking to see what is on, would you know to go to a site called the "The Northern Ireland Theatre Association"? Or would you go to something like: "What's On Craigavon?" or "Visit Belfast". You go to the tourist information websites. One of the challenges, I think, is that the tourist information centres and the individual bureaus have not yet fully addressed how those events need to be sold. There is an information and knowledge barrier, an understanding barrier. They are very good at promoting things like museums, parks and continuous visitor attractions. They do not quite get how to sell art forms. They are getting better; I am in Belfast City Council's festivals forum, and this has been an ongoing discussion, and they attend our meetings.

I think that there is a knowledge barrier between how our sector is talking and what other sectors maybe hear or understand about what we do: the sequences or stages by which we develop work and how we evolve projects. I know that we keep going back to the resourcing issue, but I do think that we have to reach a level where political leadership takes action on its own strategies and policies and translates that into resources becoming available. It is not that we have not convinced people to fund this. All of the [*Inaudible.*] are there; we are being asked to deliver them, but without addressing exactly how we pay for the bread and butter of who is going to pay for the drama facilitator, the car hire or the buses. The responsibility is falling to us as a sector to make up that patchwork.

Mr B McCrea: With regard to your last point, and as someone who is genuinely sympathetic, I say to you that government has a lot of things on its plate and cannot be expert on everything — maybe not even on anything. It requires someone to come with a clear blueprint. I say to you gently — I really do mean this — that some of the submissions that you have made today have been a little confusing; it is not that it was not all good, but I just could not quite follow every single point. If your medium is communication, you need to find a way to say to government, whether it is the Committee or at

another time, "Here are some specific things that we can do for ourselves and here are some things that you might do for us." People are full of lots of other things in their in-tray that they have to do.

You asked about why you were making returns. The answer, John, is that people need you to make returns because they have the job of making a report to somebody else. That is why they do it. I am finished on this now, but you can come back and tell me that I am wrong if you like. All I am saying is that we need to find a more coherent way of putting across a strategy that you want, and if you are the body that is doing this, it is your opportunity to go and do that in whatever forum. I am just saying to you, respectfully, that it needs to be a little sharper.

Mr Davison: Well, respectfully, we are here today, and we have given four recommendations to the Committee, which we hope are taken seriously. Our overarching recommendation is that, whilst we have the expertise on the ground, it requires the statutory bodies that are responsible, including the Arts Council and the Departments, to show some direction and leadership as to what they wish to have attained. We have been doing it, and we have seen an organic growth in what has been provided for working-class communities and the effort to include them. We can report back to you that what we have done is taken the leadership to try to bring some statistics to you that show how effective it has been. However, we do not know what level is success, and that is what we go back to. If there was clarity, then certainly we could contribute to a strategy or a direction. However, somebody needs to set the goal, and we will happily contribute to a strategy to achieve it.

Ms McCorley: Thank you very much for the presentation. You have had lots of questions, so I will be brief. I have a couple of points, and I am trying to drill it down. Inspiring young people and creating that aspiration is an admirable and necessary goal, especially in working-class areas. Is enough use being made of our local talent and our local playwrights and local actors who are famous, in terms of bringing them into schools to share their stories of how they did it, because the majority of them were from working-class backgrounds?

The other thing I wanted to say is that it seems that the only experience that primary-school children get of drama is the nativity play. I would ban nativity plays and make them do something else, because it is the same thing year in, year out.

You referred to the statistics that show how many people come and use the theatres and all of that. You also referred to community-based drama experiences, pop-up theatre and festivals. I know from my experience in west Belfast that there are people who go to plays during the festival when they are on locally, but they do not really want to go outside west Belfast. They do not want to go to the Lyric or the MAC for whatever reason, and that is their choice. Nevertheless, they are having arts experiences, because they all saw 'A Night with George' before it ever got to the big stage. Is that counted? I think that if you could find a way to capture all of those experiences that people go along to in their local area, your statistics would be much higher. Maybe they think that it is too expensive to go out of the area.

Ms Jordan: One of the things we have outlined is the lack of audience data in that way. Companies like Brass Neck work on the ground and do shows in the Felons in west Belfast. It delivers that work all the time, but it is not feeding in; it is not funded by the Arts Council. Lots of our members that produce work for their communities are not funded by the Arts Council in that way. The data is not being fed back. We need to discuss that issue with Audiences NI in terms of its engagement with the sector, how we capture data and how that moves forward.

There is some responsibility at that level in terms of the ethos of a school and how that filters out. One of the reasons why I work in the arts is because I went to St Louise's, where theatre was absolutely at the heart of the experience. There was an understanding that theatre could act as a mechanism for social change, which was part of my education. It invites theatre artists back in to talk to the pupils in the school, because there is an inherent value of art being important placed in that community. Past pupils who are seen as being excellent in their work come back in and become advocates for that to the pupils. We cannot legislate for the ethos of individual schools; they will place different levels of importance on art and theatre being part of their culture.

Ms Fitzgibbon: The knock-on effect is that it is not coherent or joined up. Children going through the same primary curriculum in different schools will have a completely different level of arts engagement, largely by dint of the principal's ethos or the teachers' ethos, or of which teacher has a skill set. I have been a PTA member of Dundela Infants' School, up the road from here, which is the area I live in. From talking to teachers, I have seen that they are extremely nervous about embarking on anything

that is not handed to them. The nativity play is so dominant because it works and there is maybe a certain expectation on the part of the parents that that is what happens. The journeys that schools and teachers have to go on to change that are much bigger than they can necessarily cope with while they have all the other things they have to deal with in an ordinary school day. We, as a sector, could probably contribute much more to the skill set of those schools, but it is about how we do that on a coherent level. That is where we have to go. The Northern Ireland Theatre Association is largely a voluntary association in a voluntary sector. How are we to influence? I take your point, Basil. If we have not made our points clearly enough, it is largely because we have to do that on top of the existing jobs we do, as many people do. How do we influence at high level a change to how things are done that can have a direct impact on children and communities? We can do quite a lot; we can offer a lot of expertise, but we are working at a very organic level because that is the level for which we are resourced. We can achieve a certain amount, but we can see the opportunities. We need other people to work with us to realise them.

Mr McAuley: I will reinforce a couple of the points. A project I mentioned was the Pat and Plane project, which we put out around schools in Northern Ireland. It was over three years. We wanted to engage with children, but the project was driven out of a need to educate teachers and to give them the skills and confidence to produce plays that were not just the nativity play. You are absolutely right: the nativity play is an easy story to be told, so everybody can do it. We went out with professional facilitators who worked with the teachers and gave them the experience. We gave them the technical equipment, the music, the stage direction and the script. We helped them to work with the children to produce a play that everybody came to see in the school dining hall, involving the dinner ladies and the caretakers. We left that school with not a play but the skills to produce a play the next year and the year after. That is very important.

The other thing to reinforce is that it is down to the schools and their passion. It is also down to the demands on the school timetable. You cannot go into every school in every year and work with the children in the middle of exam time or whatever else they might be working on. It is about slotting in at the right time with the right school.

Mr Davison: I want to reinforce something that Ciaran said. Most of our members who are actors or writers facilitate community theatre as well as working with professional organisations, so that expertise is being passed on. You are right: as a society, maybe we do not celebrate successful actors and writers as much as we celebrate our sports stars. There have been some tremendous successes in the sector and the industry, but we are vying, in terms of scale, with everyone else to gain attention. There are real opportunities to shine a light on some of those, and we welcome any suggestions from the Committee on how to champion some of the champions.

The Chairperson: I thank you all for your time and your submission and for succinctly arguing your points. We may need to contact you again to explore some areas, particularly when we are drafting our recommendations. Thank you so much for your valuable contribution.