

Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure Inquiry  
into Inclusion in the Arts of Working Class Communities

**Roe Valley Arts & Cultural Centre/Ionad Ealaíon agus Cultúir Ghleann na Ró  
Limavady Borough Council**

## **1. Background:**

Opened in October 2010, the Roe Valley Arts & Cultural Centre/Ionad Ealaíon agus Cultúir Ghleann na Ró is the first dedicated Arts Centre for the Limavady Borough area. We provide a dynamic cultural programme of activities throughout the year, including national and international theatre, music, visual arts and heritage exhibitions, film and engaging creative learning opportunities.

2. An emphasis of our service is exploring, celebrating and showcasing local stories reflecting the rich cultural diversity of the borough. We also support diverse cultural practice throughout the borough area, maintaining a thriving outreach initiative and helping community and voluntary arts groups develop more arts and heritage activities.

3. Comprising of the Danny Boy Auditorium with 221 seating capacity, the O'Hampsey Dance Studio, Ritter, Keady and Brighter Galleries, Ross-McCurry and Keenaught Boardrooms, community workshop rooms, meeting rooms and our Drumceatt Square, we accommodate a wide range of arts activities, community activities and external corporate bookings.

4. Our award-winning venue is also home to Council's heritage and tourism services. The centre represents Limavady Borough Council's recognition of the multiple benefits and importance of arts and culture to the local communities and to wider societies and, in conjunction with the recruitment of additional service staff in 2010, heralds a new era of cultural service provision in the Limavady borough. Since opening, we have established over 60,000 visitors per year and have confirmed ourselves as a valuable arts venue in the North West, availing of our prime situation along the Causeway Coast, the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry corridor and Magilligan to Donegal access.

## **5. Staff & Experience:**

Limavady Borough Council currently employs two full-time arts staff:

Desima Connolly is the Arts & Cultural Services Officer and Manager of the Roe Valley Arts & Cultural Centre. Desima oversees the effective operational running of the venue, promotion of the venue and programmes the rolling events programme which includes visual arts exhibitions, theatre and performance, music, film, talks and all creative learning opportunities based in the venue. Desima also provides selected community arts projects. Desima has a BA Hons in Fine Art, MFA (Master of Fine Art) and Pg Dip in Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies and has worked in the arts/cultural sector of Northern Ireland for fourteen years, maintaining positions in local government and the community arts/voluntary sector. She sits on the Causeway Coast Arts Committee, Arts Managers Group NI, NWRC Employer's Advisory Forum and external to employment, is also a committee member of the John Hewitt Society.

6. Geraldine Smyth is the Arts Outreach & Events Officer. Geraldine organises the annual borough events of the Danny Boy Festival, Christmas Illuminations and Halloween event. Geraldine also co-ordinates creative arts courses for community groups across the borough and specific arts projects for local schools. Geraldine has a Masters in International Tourism Development and a Pg Dip in Tourism/Rural Development and was previously the Events & Cultural Officer in Limavady Borough Council.

7. Despite staffing levels in comparison with other cultural venues which have additional programming officers and dedicated education and/or marketing staff, the Centre has surpassed expectation and is now widely recognised, both by sector organisations, patrons and client groups, as an invaluable cultural addition to the North West and province on the whole.

## **8. Ethos:**

Building on the previous arts service provision in tandem with introducing a new arts facility for the people and communities of Limavady borough has been extremely challenging but has allowed the establishment of a core ethos for our venue.

9. Since launching, we have striven to develop the venue as a cultural hub for the people of the borough, welcoming voluntary arts groups usage and project developments, introducing new initiatives to promote access to the arts, and generating a sense of collective 'ownership' of the service and its on-going development.

10. An ethos of friendliness, helpfulness and high customer service has been generated and nurtured amongst all staff. Internal working groups within the venue addressing operational issues, customer service, marketing and publicity, programming and finance involve all staff, ensuring that each team member from housekeepers to senior officers can contribute to our venue and service development and share in our belief in the significance of arts and cultural service delivery to the local communities and general public. We receive continuous positive feedback and thanks from our patrons and this information is shared with staff and featured in our events guides.

### **Sample Patron Comments:**

*"It would be difficult to improve on something which is exceptional in every way. Thank you."*

*"The staff were extremely welcoming and fine ambassadors for the theatre, who would definitely encourage me to return again."*

*"It's a real hub of the community."*

*"Wishing you a very happy third birthday and congratulations on the terrific success you have made of your first three years. The Centre has been an inspiration and a focus for all that is good about Limavady, the Borough and the Arts in general. Culture is not something that is easy to quantify and it is all too readily criticised as unproductive or with benefits that are at best intangible or at worst irrelevant. Your work has gone a long way towards proving that culture can be tangible, productive and highly relevant to the community it serves. As a native of Limavady it is gratifying to see how you have highlighted the positive and exceptional in this area, while at the same time opening our eyes to wider horizons. From a flickering candle to a roaring fire in less than three years -well done to all concerned."*

**Sample Staff Comments:**

*"I like that we're encouraged to put the local community at the heart of everything we do. I also think that we have a fantastic team working here which makes the Centre feel welcoming and makes it come to life."*

*"What is so special about the Centre is that it's a contemporary space where young and old people alike can come and enjoy so many creative arts and cultural events."*

*"I really enjoy maximising venue use and meeting so many different community groups and organisations. I love the diversity of my role and it's especially pleasing when I can enhance their experience of the Centre."*

*"The Centre is also used so much by community groups and it's great to be able to provide this service for them."*

**11. Service:**

We provide a rolling programme of events which includes multiple theatre/performance events, music events, film screenings, creative learning workshops, art and craft exhibitions, artist talks and demonstrations, catering for early years to senior citizens. This venue-based service is complemented by an outreach programme, delivering creative arts workshops and projects to local communities and schools and specifically targeting disadvantaged and minority groups. Limavady borough is a rural area and arts service delivery and arts venue management in a rural locale demands service necessities such as increased community engagement, public engagement and partnership working. Our arts service is complemented by a strong heritage and museums service also housed within our venue, which includes a rolling heritage exhibitions, talks and workshops programme.

Summary initiatives which promote access to the arts for disadvantaged communities are:

**12. Dedicated Outreach Service:**

Limavady Borough Council employs a full-time Arts Outreach & Events Officer. Our rolling outreach programme which delivers a minimum of twenty-five creative arts courses per year to community groups in various borough locations is complemented by specific community arts projects delivered by the Arts Outreach & Events Officer and Arts & Cultural Services Officer.



*Adult Photography Course, 2013*

13. Examples are: (1) Delivery of The Tale that Wags the Dog Project (Sept-Nov 2013). Featuring a visual arts exhibition in our two art galleries by artist Eleanor Wheeler based on local cultural heritage, we delivered free associated storytelling and ceramics sessions to and in five local schools, and creative arts (storytelling and visual art) public workshops in our venue. Resulting artwork created by participants was displayed in our community gallery. Over 160 pupils participated and 54 members of the public.

(2) Brighter Gold Homecoming project (Nov-Dec 2013). Pupils from Rossmar School (a local school catering for pupils aged 3-19 years with statements of special educational needs) created a large-scale willow sculpture of the Brighter Boat now housed in the National Museum of Ireland, and is permanently displayed in our foyer. The project also delivered free public workshops and talks to engage the wider communities.

(3) Delivery of 'Myths and Legends of the Roe Valley' project (Sept-Dec 2013). We commissioned Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company to work with three local schools to create performance pieces inspired by local myths, performed in our auditorium.

#### **14. Widening our Arts Events Programme:**

We purposely 'open up' our venue based arts events as much as possible to actively engage with our wider communities where possible.

15. Gallery Programme: Over 70% of our art exhibitions include accompanying interactive workshop and learning materials to encourage family and school time in our galleries. We also have free gallery talks by exhibiting artists on an on-going basis. We also host the annual 'Limavady Open Art' exhibition, displaying artwork created by community members regardless of professional art experience or qualifications. Although we do not have dedicated education or learning staff, the Arts & Cultural Services Officer provides tours of exhibitions to any enquiring community or school group. Furthermore, since opening we have displayed local community art exhibitions continuously. Created by local schools or community groups, we have never refused any exhibition request and are delighted to showcase community creativity however we can.



*Henri Matisse: Drawing with Scissors Exhibition, Nov 2013, Gallery workshop*

16. Film Programme: In 2013 we widened our film programme to include 'Classic Saturday Screenings', celebrated film matinees specifically targeted at senior citizens, local healthcare groups and day care facilities. We also screen 'Family Films' on an on-going basis.

17. Family Activities: We provide a range of arts events and activities designed for families, at least 20% of which are free. These include: (1) the annual 'Drawing Inspiration' annual art day which welcomes hundreds of attendees (2) regular storytelling sessions (3) regular arts and crafts drop-in sessions (4) an average of five free music events and ten free street theatre performances per year in our external space, Drumceatt Square.

18. Our annual August Children's Month includes a range of arts events encouraging family participation in the arts, such as film screenings, theatre, and tailored arts exhibitions in our galleries which are transformed with beanbags, children's books and interactive educational material related to the exhibitions. Resulting in greater venue and service usage of families (average of 400 people attend per year) who may be experiencing financial difficulties preventing arts participation or might not traditionally frequent arts venues.

19. Theatre Programme: We try and accommodate additional outreach work with visiting touring theatre groups where possible. Previous activities have been facilitated by Big Telly Theatre, Echo Echo Dance and Quantum Theatre. This can include a complementary one-off drama workshop with the local Limavady Drama Club or local youth drama group or a question and answer session with the actors and production team.

**20. Purposeful nurturing of beneficial relationships with existent voluntary arts groups and individual practitioners resident in the borough:**

Resulting in generating greater access to the arts amongst rural communities and strengthening the cultural fabric of the borough through professional practice sharing, partnership working and relationship-oriented events provision (Example: Partnership working with Limavady Jazz and Blues Festival resulting in festival events inclusion in our core programme and marketing initiatives; sourcing external funding for Limavady Drama Group via ACNI)

**21. Community and Patron Consultation:** We conduct regular and on-going service evaluation with our activity users, patrons and the wider general public through staff conducting on the spot surveys; usage and promotion of online surveys; development and distribution of feedback surveys for every activity we provide, including tailored feedback methods for children aged 6+ years and parents, teachers and youth. Resulting in making sure we deliver the best service we can, resources allowing, and encouraging a sense of valued contribution and ownership of our venue and service.

**22. Introduction of reduced venue hire rates for the community/voluntary sector.** Our standard pricing policy has a reduced price band for community/voluntary organisations. This has been further enhanced since August 2013 with the introduction of venue hire costs reduction for local arts and heritage groups affiliated with the Roe Valley Arts & Heritage Committee. Resulting in increased venue usage of locally based arts/heritage voluntary groups. Regular users of our venue include Roe Valley Friends Indeed (Cancer Support Group), Be Safe Be Well, Roe Valley Bereaved by Suicide, Limavady Drama Group, Limavady Jazz and Blues Festival, Stendhal Festival, Roe Valley Community Film Society, Limavady Cultural & Historical Society, Limavady Big Band, Roe Valley Singers.

**23. Introduction of Community Special group ticket rates for selected events.** Resulting in increased access to the arts for locally based community groups.

**24. Introduction of the 'Cool for Schools' Initiative:** developing subsidised creative arts projects with local schools. Majority of schools within the area are rural with limited arts venue participation. We develop specialised creative activities with Rossmar School. Per year, we welcome between 300-600 school pupils through our events and learning activities.



*Pupils from Teramacomice Primary School on a gallery tour with the Arts & Cultural Services Officer, Nov 2013*

**25. Development of the Youth Writers' Initiative:** This opportunity is aimed at 16-21 year olds interested in writing and blogging on arts practice. The group review our own arts events and comment on wider cultural events for our website blog, whilst in turn getting the chance to meet and interview our touring artists as well as hearing guest speakers from the arts and media sector. Their resulting articles are also published in local newspapers.

**26. On-going enhancement of our venue to ensure accessibility.** Despite being only over three years in existence, we strive to ensure our venue is as welcoming and all-inclusive as possible and are introducing new developments on an on-going basis.

- In 2011 we received a Prestige Access Award from The William Keown Trust , recognising that our centre 'exceeds basic building control standards to ensure fair and equal access for all', an ethos also reflected in our service programming.
- We have recently acquired membership of Adapt NI and intend to further address physical access barriers for our venue and service.
- We are in the process of creating a 'Family Zone' in our venue, with additional comfortable, colourful seating, small library of arts and educational books and interactive activities for families and community groups. This area will be fully accessible during venue opening hours and free to use.
- We have recently completed an enhancement of Drumceatt Square, our outdoor events space, creating a holistic space for the community. Planting schemes and



craft sessions were introduced with members of the local Willow group, adults with learning difficulties. The Willow Group and community volunteers will continue to nurture the horticultural development of the square in conjunction with Council Technical Services.

**27. Participation in Audiences NI's Test Drive the Arts Initiative:** ensuring that individuals from across Northern Ireland can experience quality arts events at our venue at no cost.

### **28. Barriers to participation:**

Issues or circumstances which may prove detrimental to disadvantaged communities participating in the arts are widely recognised and include economic and social issues, such as sectarian divide, low income, educational limitations, unemployment, health problems, transport, ethnicity, lack of awareness.

29. However, within our own service, the following patron consultation responses further illustrate these issues:

- The need for discounted tickets and subsidised activities which is proving more and more difficult for service providers to financially justify
- The problem facing rural communities and individuals of restrictive transport and additional costs for attending arts venues
- The sense of the arts being viewed as elitist
- Maintaining a varied arts programme combining quality and more populist appeal
- Maintaining a cost effective service whilst offering visitors and patrons more accessible opening hours and enhanced outreach provision
- Related to above, patrons have increasing conflicting time commitments and the arts find themselves competing with other pursuits such as sports, home entertainment.
- Weak evening economy within our town, leading to limited regeneration development
- Limitations of marketing and promoting our venue and service due to lack of dedicated marketing/PR staff and limited resources.



*Drawing Inspiration Event, October 2013*



**30. We would like to further comment:**

- Within the existent local authorities in Northern Ireland, only a certain percentage employ dedicated Community Arts focused staff. If local authorities merely provide an arts venue and events within (as important as this is), meaningful and beneficial community arts development within our wider communities is never going to be maximised nor achieved. There needs to be a real focus on participation and learning at all arts venues and this needs additional financial and human resources and policy focus. The evolution of contemporary museum practice to pro-active inclusive service provision is a good example.
- 31. The many benefits of arts participation are often cited and include pro-active citizenship, economic and tourism growth, business development, social and personal development, community cohesion and mutual understanding contributing to peace and reconciliation. But we should also recognise that the cultural practice of a country or locale is more than the above – it voices to the wider world who we are. If the arts continue to be undervalued and underfunded, what are we saying about how we value and recognise the importance of our own cultures and our cultural achievements?
- 32. Successful arts practice includes quality venue provision and quality programme delivery but also any arts service delivered by local authorities needs to nurture and develop the cultural fabric of their area. This necessitates strong community arts development, harnessing and working with community identities, supporting individual art practitioners and creative businesses, working with cross-sectoral agencies to tackle economic and social issues.
- 33. Existent resources are not sufficient. Core funding for local authority arts programme delivery is a low priority via the Arts Council. Within local authorities, the arts are often least prioritised, regardless of the many identified tangible and non-tangible benefits.



*Local Primary School visiting The Giant is Coming Installation by Young at Art, March 2012*

### **34. Recommendations:**

To enhance greater inclusion of working class communities within the arts:

- There needs to be much more financial and staffing resources dedicated to community arts development employed via local authority services. An emphasis on learning and participation is required.
- This needs to be a serious consideration within the forthcoming Local Government Reform and restructuring of councils from April 2015.
- Arts Council NI and other funding allocation and distribution programmes should be reviewed and reallocated with the new 'super councils' in mind.
- Financial and development support for touring arts organisations which purposely focus on outreach work with rural communities should be further encouraged.
- Equally, artist residency schemes generate high impact arts engagement amongst communities and schools. ACNI's Artist in the Community scheme was a good mechanism to enable residencies between professional artists and host organisations in NI. Unfortunately, this scheme is no longer available.
- There needs to be greater awareness of good community arts practice and its potential amongst the sector and general public. There are many professional groups such as the Arts Managers NI, Touring Exhibitions Group, Northern Ireland Theatre Association for example, but, Community Arts Partnership notwithstanding, other regional and national groups promoting community arts development, research and best practice should be nurtured. There is poor networking amongst existing Community Arts and Learning & Participation Officers.
- Museum networks in the UK, NI and Ireland are extremely pro-active in sharing good practice, networking, research and development. The arts sector should emulate such practice and there should be increased partnership initiatives between arts venues, arts organisations and museums.
- Evidence on the non-tangible impact of community arts participation is poor and demands further research and support, particularly in relation to health and well-being.
- Funding for community arts projects are often short-term. This does not allow the time it realistically takes for an initiative to become more self-sufficient and attain the necessary partnerships and support essential to its longer-term survival.
- Additional resources to enable effective marketing and audience development methods specifically targeting disadvantaged communities are required for local authority arts services. Hopefully this will be addressed within the new council reform.

### **35. Conclusion:**

We are fortunate that the capital development of a new cultural venue necessitated a generous service budget in its infancy, ensuring the establishment of a diverse and quality arts programme and related outreach service to build community and public engagement, our local, regional and national profile and encourage audiences.

36. However, with the dedication of staff we have established a core ethos of patron engagement and community support through various initiatives as outlined. There remain developments which we are unable to implement due to limited staffing and/or financial resources, as is the case for most other arts venues. Our ability to deliver increased learning programmes and longer-term, more

beneficial community arts projects is currently restricted due to increasingly reduced service budgets in this current economic climate. We know there is much more we should be doing but we hope that merging with our neighbour local government partners, Ballymoney, Coleraine and Moyle, in 2015, will generate a strategic, focused emphasis on outreach work and community arts development in conjunction with marketing resources we do not currently have. The internationally recognised landscape and cultural richness of the Causeway Coast and Glens areas certainly warrants it.

37. The existence of an arts/cultural venue within close proximity to rural communities is of course, invaluable. Not only in providing access to quality arts events, but also in nurturing the cultural profile of the local region – for communities and to both harness and ‘announce’ what is so special about the place and its people. As one acclaimed exhibiting artist who grew up in Limavady said on viewing the emergence of the centre, ‘It’s not just about what goes on behind these walls. It’s as much about what you’re saying to the outside world about the place.’