



ARTSEKA

SUBMISSION TO CAL COMMITTEE

ENQUIRY INTO THE INCLUSION OF THE ARTS OF WORKING CLASS COMMUNITIES



1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This enquiry is welcomed by ArtsEkta as a key participatory arts organisation working to improve access and participation in the arts among deprived and hard to reach groups. The findings from this enquiry will undoubtedly help provide grassroots knowledge that will reflect the thinking of the arts and other associated sectors to improve relevant government policy into the future.
- 1.2 ArtsEkta is arguably one of the most successful and exciting new community arts organisations to be developed in Northern Ireland within the last 10 years. We pioneer the development of a quality, inclusive and highly professional programme that incorporates an innovative and interlinked mix of arts and heritage outreach programmes, dance development, large scale festivals, artistic development and support, and sectoral development via collaborative initiatives to create linkages between the arts and racial equality sectors. We operate with the following vision, mission and aims:
- Our **vision** is: "To assist in creating an inclusive society which is respectful, embracing and reflective of the multiple cultural identities that exist in Northern Ireland"*
- Our **mission** is: "To promote and support interculturalism by sharing the value of unique cultural experiences and raising awareness and acceptance of different cultures by fostering respect for people of all backgrounds through a wide range of activities".*
- Our **aims** are: to challenge perceptions, promote greater dialogue and understanding of diversity within our society; to raise awareness and celebrate the diverse cultures within our society; to build the capacity of minority ethnic artists, enabling their professional development and supporting the delivery of ArtsEkta's work; to advocate and develop the sectoral position of ArtsEkta; and to be a well resourced, structured and sustainable organisation.*
- 1.3 ArtsEkta was established by the community, for the community, and in particular minority ethnic communities. The company has developed organically based on the critical need of providing a platform for minority ethnic arts and artists in Northern Ireland. This is a need which is very much prevalent today and from our operational experiences requires more attention than ever before as we continue to operate in an environment where service provision is limited and often not prioritised. Our diverse and unique programme of work seamlessly links culture and arts to community development, good relations and integration processes, meeting numerous Programme for Government objectives that are strengthening the minority ethnic sector whilst engaging with the most deprived communities across the region. We advocate with our strategic partners on this basis to improve and sustain equality of opportunity in our cultural industries for people from diverse backgrounds. This is an ambition that is well communicated to all our stakeholders and is at the heart of everything we do.

2. ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND

2.1 ArtsEkta's mixed use facility which includes offices, workshop and dance studio space is located on York Street in North Belfast on the periphery of the City Centre, Belfast's culture hub – Cathedral Quarter, and the New Lodge area. New Lodge is a Super Output Area (SOA) ranked 3 (out of 582) on the multiple deprivation measure 2010 meaning it is one of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland. According to the 2011 Census in New Lodge, **10.79%** had a degree or higher qualification; while **64.21%** had no or low (Level 1*) qualifications. Furthermore **50.98%** were economically inactive. Whilst ArtsEkta has an administrative base in North Belfast, it works on a regional basis with a strong presence in rural Northern Ireland where they are similar trends in deprivation.

2.2 Some of our key achievements to date include:

- A core funded client of Office of the First & Deputy First Minister, Belfast City Council, and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland;
- 100s of innovative arts/culture/heritage based initiatives, events and programmes reaching an satisfied audience of over 0.8 million over seven years;
- Demonstrable impact of an increased understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity through arts and heritage across community, educational and organisational settings;
- Design, development and delivery of major innovative outreach programmes across Northern Ireland which are supported by key stakeholders such as the Arts Council NI, Community Relations Council and Belfast City Council;
- The development and growth of three key flagship festivals in Belfast including *Belfast Mela* which have grown into UK & Irish models of best practice of cultural celebration, and are the leading platform for world music, dance and arts showcases;
- Winner of the 2010 Intercultural Achievement Award for Good Race Relations awarded by OFMDFM, the 2010 Event Travel & Tourism Award for Belfast Mela; and receiving an award for outstanding contribution to the multi-agency anti-hate campaign 'Unite Against Hate' in 2011.

1.6. ArtsEkta develops positive, imaginative, and innovative interventions through arts and cultural programmes that challenges perceptions, develops understanding and facilitates dialogue within and between Belfast's diverse communities. We are, by our very nature, an engaging arts organisation that works to encourage connectivity and understanding between the local and minority ethnic communities living in Belfast. **Over seven years we have engaged with local and visitor audiences of 0.8m through our programmes, with a high percentage from the marginalised communities across Belfast helping to ensure participation in the arts**, with the legacy being a positive impact on community development, good relations and cultural cohesion. A key example of our cultural and artistic product is organisation's festival programme which includes the *Belfast Mela*, *Diwali & Samhain* and *Festival of Colours*. This programme, through its ground-breaking approach, has pioneered, innovative, creative and leading civic events that positively

showcases Belfast's cultural diversity and encourages cultural understanding, leading to the profiling of the city as a peaceful, welcoming and culturally diverse place to live, work and visit. Whilst the festivals have grown into confident tourism events that deliver strong economic impact, ArtsEkta maintains the community aspects of their design, development and delivery, with its primary aim being to provide a platform for the expression of multiple cultural identities engendering an environment of cultural understanding and acceptance.

3. CHALLENGES

- 3.1 ArtsEkta feel that barriers for working class communities continue to be severely underestimated in a variety of different contexts. Whilst the barriers have been recognised the strategic schemes that are place for overcoming them they are failing. For example how as a sector are we attempting to evade perception that prominent arts venues are only for middle to upper class indigenous communities? Is our lead arts agency really demonstrating the leadership that is required? Our arts venues receive a substantial proportion of the ACNI budget but multiple research continues to show that they are not creating access for working class communities. What are the proactive steps that give working class communities opportunities to attend arts events outside of their own communities? ArtsEkta, along with an extremely commitment community arts sector, are pioneering the way forward but continue to not be supported with the necessary investment.
- 3.2 ArtsEkta's ethos is to work with minority ethnic communities and local communities within an intercultural context to improve access and participation in the arts and deliver on good relations, integration and community development. ArtsEkta believes that a key weakness of Arts Council's Intercultural Arts Strategy is that it sees the main role of increasing the infrastructure of minority ethnic arts to improve social integration and make "our" art more accessible to "them". In other words, due prominence has been placed on increasing audience numbers rather than affording equal access and opportunity to artistic representation of culture based on ethnicity. ArtsEkta is concerned that there is no sense that "the minority arts" are the external expression of internal individuals/collective cultures or that artists from ethnic backgrounds have equal entitlement to support their professional and artistic development with all other artists.
- 3.3 When considering funding of festivals, which if developed with and within communities provides significant benefits in terms of participation, there is no festival in Arts Council's portfolio that exclusively . Indeed, ArtsEkta's Belfast Mela continues to be sidelined by Arts Council and its senior management team as a "community" initiative, where the focus should be on the "professional" festivals. **Mela is a ticket free, outdoor arts festival with a celebratory ethos that attracts a non-traditional arts audience meaning it creates much needed access to the arts when compared to high cost ticketed festivals and shows in venues.** It drives long term audience development by helping garner an appreciation for the arts which is essential component to maintain demand in our arts venues to ensure their continued commercial viability. It provides a link between community arts and professional arts sectors which helps mentor emerging arts (who are very much likely to be from low income backgrounds) to develop as arts practitioners. Audience development needs to be focused at communities who do not avail of arts programmes rather than those who are likely to attend events, shows, exhibitions etc.
- 3.4 In addition, many festivals do not have the grassroots understanding of how to tailor their programmes to create access for working class communities relying on initiatives such as '*Test Drive the Arts*' which in itself can be argued as an impersonal audience development tool – in a recent survey conducted by ArtsEkta through its outreach programme less than 10% of those interviewed had heard of this initiative. They also fail to build relationships with communities which will drive longer term audience development and instead promote top down discounted ticketing schemes to encourage access.

3.5 More broadly, if a study of funding towards the community arts sector in general is considered, it is very clear that **funding allocations are skewed towards a small number of organisations, all based in Belfast, none based in working class communities and all attracting a demographic which is primarily from social classes A and B.** This is critically demonstrated in the table below where out of £13,732,148 distributed through AFP for 2014/15, £5,014,247 was awarded to what is generally regarded in the sector as the 'Big 5' or 'Arts Council babies' with the credentials described above.

Organisation	AFP Funding Allocation 2014/15
The Lyric Theatre	£1,018,500
The MAC	£1,000,000
The Grand Opera House	£594,610
Ulster Orchestra	£1,879,568
Northern Ireland Opera	£521,569
Total ACNI Investment in the Big 5	£5,014,247

3.6. Whilst ArtsEkta is in support of the organisations above and the work they do (evident by the past partnerships we have created with them), and understands the need to protect capital investment and the “professional” arts, a better balance is desperately needed if DCAL is serious about increasing access to the arts where there are barriers for groups. **If each of the Big 5 above had their budget reduced by only 1% this would release £515,655 for other artforms which are hugely underresourced.** Many of the above are operating on a commercial basis with huge teams and resources so they should be able to improve their business plans to recover cuts made to their AFP budget. This is in stark comparison to small community arts organisations working directly or based in deprived areas who heavily rely on public subsidy to undertake their work. ArtsEkta is lucky in that it has a diversified funding portfolio and a separate trading company offering services in the creative industry, however this is not the case for many other organisations in the sector who are struggling on a daily basis – the smallest increase in funding, would make the biggest difference, in the areas of highest need.

3.7 Underspend in current ACNI budgets is also a concerning issue with monies being returned to DCAL without an relevant analysis of how it could be targeted to existing arts organisations to help enhance strategic outcomes. A key recent example of this is underspends in the Intercultural Arts Strategy when it is highly evident that this particular stand of work requires careful targeting of resources. The existing funding mechanisms are laughable as they exclude organisations such as ArtsEkta (Ireland’s leading intercultural arts organisation) from applying. Being a key organisation working in this sector ArtsEkta has never been invited to produce a business case to ACNI about how it could help deliver on the Intercultural Arts Strategy and re-invest underspends for the betterment of the participatory arts sector.

It is our view the management and distribution of DCAL funds, at the hands of a small senior management team, remains the single largest flaw in the arts sector today with communities at need losing out.

Great art should be in the reach of everyone but is highly evident our sector does not fully reflect that aspiration.