



## **A response from Replay Theatre Company to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working Class Communities**

**March 2014**

Replay Theatre Company welcomes the opportunity to present information in response to the inquiry into the inclusion in the Arts of working class communities

### **Introduction**

Firstly we welcome the identification of need to further investigate inclusion in the Arts in Northern Ireland.

We hope that this Inquiry will contribute to the growth of the sector and help increase the provision of accessible, inclusive quality arts across Northern Ireland. In particular Replay is committed to working with all stakeholders to increase access to Youth Arts in Northern Ireland.

### **Background**

Replay is Northern Ireland's longest-running theatre company for young audiences, producing innovative high quality performance experiences that entertain, educate and stimulate the imaginations of children and young people aged 0-18 years.

Replay transform spaces into theatres for the day to give many children and young people in Northern Ireland their first opportunity to experience live theatre and the arts.

Each year Replay deliver an extensive programme of theatre productions, drama workshops and arts projects which engages over 10,000 children and young people. This work tours extensively throughout Northern Ireland to a range of settings including schools, youth and community centres, theatres and arts venues providing opportunities for children of all ages, all backgrounds and all abilities to experience theatre and the arts. These audiences include children living in both rural and urban locations, areas of deprivation and groups with little to no arts provision.

We are keenly aware of the phenomenal benefits of theatre and the Arts for children and young people; the Arts help them to feel alive, to imagine their possibilities and to develop their potential. For over 25 years Replay has worked to support social, economic and geographical accessibility, inclusion and equality of opportunity within our artistic programming for young audiences.

## **Barriers to arts access and participation**

Since 1988 Replay has worked to promote inclusion and social, economic and geographical accessibility within our artistic programming for young audiences, creating work which is tailored to each audience/ age group and provision for underserved groups with limited to no arts provision such as children with profound and multiple learning difficulties.

Replay believe that access to arts and cultural experiences is a basic human right for **all** children and like other arts organisations we are committed to ensuring that our work is as accessible and inclusive as possible however we cannot do this in isolation. We welcome solutions which support and enable young audiences from **all** backgrounds to access and participate in the arts.

### *Financial factors*

Replay's annual artistic programme includes 3-4 large-scale touring productions for a range of young audiences, ongoing engagement work and dedicated long-term projects for particular audience groups. Funding from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and local council supports approximately 50% of the organisation's annual expenditure and Replay is reliant on income secured through grants from trusts and foundations, corporate sponsorship and earned box office revenue to finance the remainder core and programme costs.

The company is tireless in its fundraising efforts to enable delivery of planned programming throughout the year and to enable the subsidisation and, where possible, full funding of this work to ensure that it is as accessible and inclusive as possible. In the last 6 months alone the organisation has completed over 35 applications to trusts, foundations and other grant schemes for programme funding at a time when competition for support from these sources is heightened due to widespread local and national cuts in public spending in the arts.

Whilst certain programmes can be supplemented through earned income, these charges are heavily subsidised and are competitively priced to enable schools, community centres and public venues to programme Replay's work for their local young audiences and their families. Despite these concessions, programming in local, council-run public theatres and arts venues is not always possible because these venues operate on a full-cost recovery system and cannot programme productions on a fee basis as they need to, at least, break even. Therefore work such as Replay's Early Years programme (which has lower audience capacity numbers and therefore lower box office potential) experiences difficulty in reaching wider community audiences as some venues are precluded from booking this work despite demand and popularity amongst their customers. With support from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland Replay is currently embarking on a review of the financing of this particular portfolio of work to identify short and long-term solutions which take account of factors such as this however it does not only apply to programming for this age group.

### *Inclusivity and Accessibility*

As a touring production company, Replay strives to make it as easy as possible for audiences to see our work. Aspects such as the uptake of our programme are beyond our control however the company markets work extensively to our customers ensuring that information is distributed equally to all schools and venues throughout all of NI.

In terms of examining the extent to which those from working class communities or areas of high deprivation engage with Replay's artistic programme the evidence is quite complex. Replay's administrative base is in the Ballymacarrett ward (ranked 18 out of 582 in the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2010) and whilst we work closely and regularly with children and young people from the local area, the company tours extensively throughout the province to work with young audiences from **all** backgrounds in a diverse range of settings which are local and accessible to them. Replay's programming in the last 12 months has engaged communities in areas of high deprivation including the Ballymacarrett, Falls, Duncairn and Shaftesbury wards in Belfast and partnership with Sure Start NI has enabled the company to work specifically with children from families living in deprived areas throughout the province.

Whilst we can map Replay's programme delivery geographically and the analysis of this demonstrates the comprehensive breath of the company's engagement in rural and urban locations and areas of deprivation throughout Northern Ireland this information can only provide a generalised overview. With difficulty in accessing audience information from schools, arts venues and community centres a review of this kind would be flawed and based on the assumption that audience members live in the same circumstances as that of the programme delivery location; for instance it will not demonstrate instances when children and families from areas of deprivation access performances in more 'affluent' areas and so forth.

Although we appreciate the necessity to widen access and inclusion in the arts for children from specific communities and areas we support the intention of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and believe that it is every child's right to have access to arts and cultural experiences and we therefore work hard to make our programming as accessible and inclusive for young audiences of all ages and backgrounds. Replay achieve this through a range of delivery structures and engagement strategies including partnership and collaboration with community and statutory agencies and the creation of work for underserved and disadvantaged groups with little to no arts provision.

## **Case study: Replay's Early Years Programming**

Academic research and government reports cannot overstate the importance of the Early Years (from 0-4 years) in strongly influencing children's outcomes in later life. Experiences at this stage in a child's life are the foundations for creating confident learners and participative citizens. Several studies outline the significance of arts access and participation from the earliest age in supporting children's personal and social development, enriching basic abilities and key competencies such as self-expression and confidence. Another benefit relates to preventative spending, with access to the arts for children from an early age helping to establish a life-long interest whereby the child and their family will continue to engage with the arts and take part in this shared experience in the years to come.

According to the 2011 census, Northern Ireland has the UK's fastest-growing and youngest population and in 2012, 25,269 babies were born here. Whilst Assembly, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Arts Council of Northern Ireland policy-makers all recognise the long-term importance of Early Years provision and the significance of Early Years Arts, currently there is a lack of high-quality work for this age group being created both locally and world-wide.

In the few years since it began, Replay's developing Early Years portfolio has attracted overwhelmingly positive feedback and critical review. Phenomenal demand from audiences, partners, venue and festival programmers and other stakeholders locally, nationally and internationally has recognised the innovation and world-class quality of Replay's Early Years programme, helping to position Replay and Northern Ireland's artistic work at the forefront of this specialised, developing field.

Replay's commitment to ensuring the accessibility and inclusivity of all our work is embedded across our entire creative programme but particularly within our Early Years repertoire. Use of portable pop-up theatres has made a substantial impact, enabling Replay to transform ordinary spaces into theatres for the day to reach widespread audiences. Replay first used this strategy with our Early Years production BABBLE; the portable performance space allowed the company to remove geographical and social barriers to access to deliver high-quality, distraction-free, immersive performances. By touring directly to the places and spaces audiences already used, those places and spaces which they felt comfortable in accessing, Replay has been able to reach wide audiences in a variety of settings and locations throughout Northern Ireland.

As outlined, Replay has striven to support arts inclusion and accessibility for all children. In recent years Replay has established partnerships with East Belfast Early Years Network (EBEYN) groups and Sure Start NI in the delivery of accessible Early Years theatre and arts programming for children from the most disadvantaged and difficult-to-reach families across the province. This positioning has enabled Replay to specifically target children and families from the most deprived neighbourhoods across NI, citizens who are least likely to have access to the arts and who in many cases feel that the arts are not for them. Sure Start NI and the EBEYN member groups' endorsement of the programme and involvement in delivery validates the process for their existing members and helps to broker and support buy-in.

This model supports the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister's priorities as Replay secures equality across programming to assist children and young people in their journey as part of a confident, creative, informed and healthy society. Replay, Sure Start NI and EBEYN are keen to explore how our ongoing partnership can continue to deliver arts and cultural activities for some of the most vulnerable children and families in our local communities in Belfast and throughout Northern

Ireland, looking toward continued and sustained ways of delivering inclusive and accessible Early Years arts programming.

Feedback from BABBLE, one of Replay's Early Years productions:

*"Beautiful. A very special moment with my baby"* (Parent)

*"I totally loved the experience and wish that all parents and children could have access to something so inspiring and creative... This show had every single baby listening and watching intently throughout...This is the first work I have seen with such a young audience, and the deep creativity and intuition that the company brings, alongside substantial research and consultation, means that they have created something really special here."* (Arts Council of Northern Ireland Independent Assessor Report)

*"We LOVED Babble. My 15 month old was enthralled and so chilled. Thank-you for making his first theatre experience so enjoyable."* (Parent)

"It was perfect for the age-group and really beautiful, with superb sounds in the singing which are excellent for language development. It was amazing in itself but also has fantastic potential for expanding the children's sensory development with its combinations of soft textures, visuals and sounds" (Sure Start Coordinator)

"Babble is very different from anything else provided for this age group. Replay have created a show which demonstrates lateral and innovative thinking on how to support the development of communication in very young children. It was extremely well received and challenged parents to think of how music and voice contributed to their infant's mental health and emotional wellbeing whilst assisting speech and language development." (Sure Start NI Project Lead for Speech, Language & Communication)

We hope that the Committee might find this information useful and Replay Theatre Company is happy to provide further information on any of the points raised.

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