

## Written submission to the DCAL Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working Class Communities

1. This information is submitted by Mervyn Bell (General Manager) on behalf of the Spectrum Centre. The Spectrum Centre is an arts, culture and heritage facility/venue based on the Shankill Road, Belfast.
2. The mission of the Spectrum Centre is to provide a focus, programme and facility for arts, culture, heritage and tourist activity in the Greater Shankill Area; enabling community development through engagement, participation, education or appreciation.

Our goals are:

- To establish and sustain the Centre as a recognised venue for arts, culture, heritage and tourist activity
  - To enable and ensure that activity is driven and informed by the community itself
  - To work through collaborative partnerships with other groups, agencies, professionals and community members
  - To provide a clear and accessible programme of activity
  - To maximise the commercial potential of the Centre and re-invest income in core programmes
  - To contribute to the life and operation of the community through activities which promote reconciliation, build aspiration, stimulate social awareness, nurture creative skills, and build an appreciation of arts, culture and heritage.
3. The Centre is based within the heart of the community and seeks to engage and enable the participation (in arts and cultural activity) of the community specifically within the Greater Shankill Area.
  4. With specific regard to the outreach activity of arts venues and bodies, the Spectrum Centre has a record of collaborative and partnership work at city-wide and more localised levels. This includes, periodically, collaboration with core Arts venues (MAC, Crescent, Lyric, Grand Opera House). For example, the Spectrum Centre was a partner and delivery venue for the City Dance Festival (22 February 2014) organised and coordinated by the Crescent Arts Centre; the Centre hosts a 'Book Club', again organised and coordinated by the Crescent Arts Centre; and the Centre has housed rehearsals and workshops/sessions with local schools by the Ulster Orchestra (March 2014) via DCAL's Creativity Month initiative.
  5. The Spectrum Centre believes that these core, large arts venues and organisations are best placed themselves to submit evidence on their outreach activity and the impact of activity in addressing the barriers to greater inclusion in arts and cultural activity by working class communities.
  6. The Spectrum Centre believes that a more proactive and formalised partnership between centres/organisations like the Spectrum Centre and core/large-scale arts venues/organisations would continue to build on good work to date and further enable the

breath of individuals and groups within working class communities to more readily access arts activities, events and opportunities.

7. With regard to ascertaining the key challenges and barriers to the involvement of working class communities in the arts, the Spectrum Centre believes that other submissions will cover this adequately. The Spectrum Centre would urge caution though in the use of global terms ('the arts', 'working class communities') and in determining, quantitatively, what constitutes 'participation'.
8. Rather the Spectrum Centre would like to submit three examples of good practice. All culminated in the sustained participation of members of a working-class community in arts activity. All examples provide indicators of how to enable inclusion and participation in the arts.
9. In 2011, the Spectrum Centre offered access to community-based creative writing classes. A small group of participants indicated a desire to continue after the formal classes finished. This was facilitated. Having been enthused by their experiences, very quickly an idea emerged from this smaller group to write a play. Again this was facilitated within the broader programme of offer within the Spectrum Centre and supported by various funders. This strand of work would involve 4 community members and one playwright/director engaging in a creative process over a 2 year period - from the origins of an idea through to the actual scripting of a play which charted 100 years of the social, economic, physical and political history of the Shankill Road. The material for the script was obtained through personal experience and reflection and through the acquisition of oral and social histories from a very wide and varied cross-section of the immediate community. Further funding was secured to perform the play across an 11-night run. A community cast (auditioned following community call-outs) of 35 was engaged (varying ages, gender, situations and experiences) which was augmented by 4 professional actors and a fully professional stage crew. The play performed to a combined audience of 1300 people (more than half of whom were drawn from the immediate Greater Shankill community). The feedback was resoundingly positive and the play received the Belfast Festival Audience Award.  
Evaluation with playwrights, cast and crew supported audience feedback. The playwrights remained shocked and proud (in equal measure) that they had been able to write a play, have it performed professionally, with overwhelming critical acclaim, and on a subject which was tremendously emotive and important. Cast members, after two preview shows, grew in their roles and took much from the experience – both in terms of being part of, in essence, a professional production, but also from being able to work alongside experienced and acclaimed actors (Martin McGuire, Matthew McIlhenney, Marie Jones, and Jo Donnelley). We were able to pinpoint a number of reasons that the project worked – in enabling 4 people to move through a creative process, in enabling 35 people to be part of bringing those ideas to life, and in enabling hundreds of people from working class communities to access and engage in an artistic performance. These included: facilitating access to the opportunities in a safe location amongst peers; that this was an idea which emanated from the community itself and which was responded to and facilitated positively; that community members, at all stages throughout the process, were encouraged, enabled and resourced;

that the whole project truly captured the imagination of the community; that the cast was drawn from the community, with an opportunity to work alongside professional actors, to perform 'their own' work; that there was a considerable investment of time, energy and soul by/of the community (this was a project owned and shaped by the community and not one being done onto them); that the process and performances were acknowledged and supported; that the project was able to move at the pace of the community members involved; and that there was recognition of the time, work, and effort that went into creating a unique experience and product.

As a result of the project a Community Theatre Group has now been established – comprising core members of the community cast – which is now committed to enthusing and recruiting others within the community. Additionally the Spectrum Centre is about to deliver a series of talks and interviews with renown playwrights and authors alongside a series of four creative writing master classes. The project has sustained interest and engagement, and allowed the Spectrum Centre to offer additional opportunities and events.

10. In 2013 an idea was floated with members of the Spectrum Centre Arts Den (young people) and the Women's Art Group to create a family Halloween Arts and Crafts Festival in which group members would be trained and supported to become workshops facilitators. The creation of peer educators within the community. The idea was met with interest and funding for the project secured from Belfast City Council.

Having been recruited in the peer educator/peer facilitator role, 21 young people and adults worked together over 6 sessions to be trained in delivering a range of Halloween themed arts workshops; to learn from established artists on working with groups and on working with different age ranges and abilities; and to test out their skills before the Festival on a willing group of volunteers from a local youth club.

These sessions led up to a Saturday afternoon family festival (originally planned for the Shankill Graveyard but re-scheduled to the Spectrum Centre itself because of incessant heavy rain) at which 170 members of the community (children young people, parents and grandparents) participated. There were a series of workshops on offer through which participants could make Halloween decorations, decorate a pumpkin, or make a spooky sound track. Again, participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

As well as being able to deliver activity to a large number of participants, the feedback from the peer educators was incredibly positive. They appreciated the opportunity to work with children and young people and said they had learnt much from this inter-generational dimension; they felt that they had increased their skills; they now felt very confident in delivering activity to others; they felt safe within the venue; and they appreciated the support from/of knowledgeable artists who shared Centre's community engagement and community development ethos.

As a result of their experience the adults want to continue with peer education roles in a voluntary capacity. This became a key element of bids for activity with older people. The bids, to Arts Council and Belfast Strategic Partnership, have been successful ensuring a 12-month programme of arts, culture and heritage activity and events to older people in the community – with a key strand of deliver through the peer education volunteers. The resource has also enabled us to offer the volunteers additional training and support. They

are now very much advocates of the benefits of engagement in artistic activity (as well as in volunteering and peer education).

11. On 7<sup>th</sup> March 2014, The Spectrum Centre was delighted to host a performance of the play 'Diablo', written and performed by Spanner in the Works Theatre Company, as part of activities to mark International Women's Day.

This is a controversial hard-hitting play about human trafficking in Northern Ireland. 'Diablo' was written by Patricia Downey with the aim of raising awareness of human trafficking, and quite bluntly, to save lives. Spanner in the Works Theatre Company has a core aim of providing challenging productions that deal with difficult, hard-hitting and controversial subject matters.

The Centre's main auditorium was full – seating an audience of 250 people. The play was augmented by talks and inputs – notably from the Women's centre and from the PSNI Serious Organised Crime branch.

If success is measured in numbers, then this collaboration between Shankill Women's Centre, Spanner in the Works, and the Spectrum centre was a resounding success.

If we accept that art can challenge and confront, then equally this was a success as a large audience (of men and women) had the opportunity to engage in a subject that is uncomfortable and unpalatable but which challenges everyone to consider what they can do, in their own lives, to address discrimination and oppression.

12. Conclusion.

The Spectrum Centre operates to facilitate the engagement of primarily, but not exclusively, working class community members in arts, culture and heritage activities, events and opportunities. It does this with success with a key factor being our location in the heart of the community and that our staff team (our delivery team) is drawn from this same community. Enabling engagement and participation is not without its challenges and some programmes have not worked – but we use this to learn and to improve. However, our commitment remains one of opening up experiences to the community, of enabling them to appreciate the benefits that art and culture can bring, and in doing so ensure our work complements and supplements wider neighbourhood renewal and urban regeneration initiatives.

In a community where daily choices on using scarce personal resources bring their own challenges and pressures, we are minded to ask the Committee to note that this community may not readily invest their own resources (and money) in the arts as easily as other communities might – but that we can assure a social return on the investment that is made be that public, private or philanthropic.

The Spectrum Centre offers a number of recommendations as set out below which it would also ask the Committee to consider.

13. Recommendations

- For the Committee and Department to actively encourage core and large-scale arts/culture venues to support the work of smaller community-based venues.
- That this support could/should embrace joint initiatives and projects through to formal partnership agreements.

- That there should be proactive, appropriate and sustained investment in community based venues and activities
- That there should be an appreciation of the inability or unwillingness to pay – but that this should be tempered with an ability to produce a social return on investment, namely participation in arts and cultural activity and access to the personal and societal benefits this brings
- That there should be an acknowledgment that community based venues are more likely to be in contact with working class communities, more understanding of their needs, and ideally placed to provide a varied menu of activity which all/different members of the community can engage in
- That there needs to be a recognition that public, private and/or philanthropic sectors are investing in processes as much as products – and that these processes are crucial in enabling and sustaining participation in the arts.

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