

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

Written evidence from Voluntary Arts Ireland

Executive Summary

Voluntary Arts Ireland welcomes this inquiry into inclusion in the Arts of Working Class Communities. We believe it is important to understand barriers to inclusion in the arts in order to be able to improve access and participation.

We note from our research and others that there is no relationship between working status and likelihood of participating in the arts in an amateur/voluntary capacity. It is also likely that that even in the most marginalised communities there will be a level of arts participation activity developed by citizens themselves, usually under the radar.

What may be the case is that the range of activities, the reach within communities and how the activities connect with professional and community arts activities are not maximised. It may also be the case that we are facing new or different barriers to inclusion than in the past (for example access to broadband and digital tools) or that the barriers are the same but now faced by different communities. The answer may not be as simple as it once was.

The arts sector as a whole should seek to understand current barriers and crucially what working class communities want. We should also seek to involve them in shaping their own creative lives.

Specific Recommendations:

1. Commission research to help answer the following questions
 - (a) *Which are the communities that are currently most excluded from arts participation?*
 - (b) *Have the barriers to inclusion in the arts changed?*
 - (c) *Which social issues can the arts be effective in addressing?*
 - (d) *What is it that working class communities want in terms of arts participation?*
2. Pilot new collaborative creative projects – one in an urban working class community and one in a rural working class community
3. Set up pathways between the amateur and professional arts encouraging leadership amongst our professional arts organisations
4. Support existing arts groups within working class communities through capacity building and training. Self-governing and self-organising groups are very sustainable if nurtured.
5. Invest in good quality broadband and access to digital creative and social tools so that working class communities can play a full part in both accessing the arts and organising their own.

1. Background to Voluntary Arts Ireland

- 1.1. Across the UK and the Republic of Ireland there are approximately 63,000 voluntary arts groups, regularly involving more than 10 million people participating voluntarily in creative cultural activities: this activity is, and will continue to be, a critical part of both the bedrock and the grass roots of the cultural life of our communities.
- 1.2. Voluntary Arts Ireland was created in 2001 to provide a universal voice for the voluntary arts across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We provide information and advice services, undertake lobbying and advocacy work and deliver, and support the delivery of, projects to develop participation in creative cultural activities.
- 1.3. Our support is particularly focused on those creative citizens who - beyond their own participation and beyond any remuneration - give their time to make such activity more available within their communities (of locality and interest) and to improve the quality and range of those opportunities and activities.

2. The accessibility of the arts in Northern Ireland to working class communities and key challenges and barriers to the involvement of those communities in the arts

Accessibility

- 2.1. An analysis from our Facts, Figures, Futures research (<http://www.voluntaryarts.org/2011/12/16/voluntary-arts-the-state-of-the-sector-northern-ireland-republic-of-ireland/>) into the voluntary arts sector outlines the following:
 - *People in the A, B and C1 socio-economic categories are twice as likely to take part in voluntary arts groups as those in groups C2, D and E.*
 - *People in socio-economic groups C2, D and E do participate but access a narrower range of art forms.*
 - *44% of the groups providing data drew 75% or more of their members from groups D and E.*
 - *There is no relationship between working status and likelihood of participating in voluntary arts groups.*
- 2.2. A scoping study by the Third Sector Research Council (<http://www.voluntaryarts.org/2012/01/18/grassroots-arts-activity-makes-%E2%80%98significant-contribution%E2%80%99-to-civil-society/>) into “The role of grassroots arts activities in communities” also states:

What we found at the outset was a picture of amateur arts that was very different to the archetypal stereotypes of a middle-class, mainly rural, conservative and 'disorganised' set of activities. Grassroots arts groups may be amateur, but they are certainly not amateurish. They cut across divides of class, ethnicity, generation, gender and culture. There are thriving groups in both urban and rural communities. They exist in poor as well as affluent areas and are characterised by their diversity. Voluntary Arts, the UK based network for the amateur arts, has a membership which represents over 140 different arts forms: from beading to orchestras: from dance groups to informal art classes.
- 2.3. It is important to note that voluntary arts groups in general are set up between peers with a shared interest. This can mean that individual groups can be exclusive and

lack diversity. However, as many groups will be set up by peers within working class and other communities (for example Black and Minority Ethnic communities) the overall sector has a very broad reach and is inclusive of many.

- 2.4. With the advent of significantly improved venue provision and over the past number of decades, a greater level of wider community development which includes arts provision it would be fair to say that the arts have been brought closer to communities in a geographical sense. From our own research we also know that voluntary, self-organising and self-sustained arts groups exist all over Northern Ireland. It is likely that even in the most marginalised communities there will be a level of arts participation activity developed by citizens themselves, usually under the radar.
- 2.5. It is also evident that there is a broad mix of backgrounds involved in voluntary arts groups and a significant proportion of participants/members are coming from working class communities. In relation to local authorities and arts producing venues and organisations in the community and professional arts sectors we can also see a wide range of targeted interventions in hard to reach and special interest communities.
- 2.6. It would appear that although accessibility to the arts is not perfect in Northern Ireland it has clearly improved. What is less clear is whether or not the arts provision always engages effectively with the various communities it seeks to serve. The barrier may no longer be that there is simply no provision in an area or within a community (of interest as well as place) but that avenues for citizens to participate in their local venues or activities are too narrow.

Challenges and Barriers

- 2.7. When considering the barriers to inclusion in the arts it is important to be clear about the perspective we are looking from. Significant life challenges such as poverty, illness, addiction, homelessness and the lack of time due to these challenges present barriers to many things including the arts. The arts can make a contribution to supporting solutions for some of these but are unlikely to be the main solution.

Relevant barriers to inclusion in the arts that we have noticed– if your life situation is reasonably stable (although by no means an exhaustive list) are:

- There is a steady creep towards urbanisation with much of the provision centred in bigger towns and cities – affecting rural areas in particular where access to public transport is limited.
- Access to suitable transport not always consistent. If you have a disability for example you may also need to travel with a friend or family member which can mean doubling the cost
- Access to good quality broadband– most information and communication is now delivered online. If you do not have access to this many opportunities will pass you by.
- The lack of digital skills – with art increasingly involving digital production participation can be hampered if you have not developed these skills
- Fragmented connections between grass-roots groups, local authorities and the professional arts sectors which often lead to poor promotion of events/activities and less participation by citizens

- The trappings of art forms – so the performance/exhibition traditions and language rather than the art itself – are often significant hurdles

2.8. When we consulted with the various member associations that helped us form the Voluntary Arts Ireland Association Forum (for example the North of Ireland Bands Association, Northern Ireland Photographic Association, Ulster Association of Drama Festivals etc.) one of the key challenges their members face is the lack of suitable and affordable space to carry out their activities. This flies in the face of the fact that we have more local venues than ever before. Is it the case that faced with the need to generate enough revenue to keep their doors open venues very often price small groups out of the market and lose distinctive local programming? Are the requirements to be a part of an artistic programme set at a point which excludes groups with less organisational capacity (for example 2-3 year lead in times to be considered for an exhibition space)?

2.9. There are, of course, examples of good practice where schemes to involve local groups in a strategic way help alleviate this problem. For example in the Braid, Ballymena there is the Ballymena Arts Partnership made up of local groups and when possible space is made available to them at no cost. The partnership also helps the local authority put together its artistic programme and promote it. Voluntary Arts Ireland is currently collaborating with Ballymena Borough Council and the Braid on a new programme called Creative Citizens which seeks to build on this (<http://www.thebraid.com/whats-on-specific.aspx?s=Arts%20Centre&dataid=1038643>). This type of model is on a much more sustainable footing.

3. The outreach activity of arts venues and bodies with respect to how they make a meaningful contribution to social inclusion within working class communities; including the degree to which they can help tackle particular social issues

3.1. Wider social issues such as social inclusion within communities are complex issues that require a range of interventions. The arts, however, do have a strong track record in helping to improve social inclusion, social cohesion and individual and community wellbeing. Again the scoping study by the Third Sector Research Council into “The role of grassroots arts activities in communities” states:

So what did we find in terms of the impact of grassroots arts in communities? Well again the picture is rich, complex, and largely ignored. We found outcomes from participation in amateur arts at three levels:

- **For individuals:** *the benefits of involvement included reported increases in personal confidence and social skills. There were also direct outcomes in terms of physical health and mental wellbeing – arts based activities for many (particularly older people) was seen as important in meeting new friends and making social connections beyond their usual circle. These relationships overcame their sense of isolation and promoted health and resilience at times of crisis. More than this, it was evident that participation in amateur arts promoted the development of a range of new skills: from improved literacy and numeracy, to using social networks to promote grassroots arts activities.*

• **For groups:** *grassroots arts played a key role in sustaining and promoting community identity. Grassroots arts had been seen as instrumental in reviving interest in the Gaelic language and culture at a time when it had been 'given up' by the mainstream, funded, arts organisations. The arts was a way of maintaining cultural heritage, connecting different generations, and sharing that heritage with 'different others'. We also found a thriving refugee and migrant amateur arts community.*

• **For communities:** *here we found it harder to really gather hard evidence. Yet clearly grassroots arts groups play a major role in local economies and beyond. We found evidence of amateur arts groups raising substantial amounts of money not only for local, but also international, charities. There were arts groups who, through the payment of room hire, were crucial to sustaining village halls and community centres. Still others supported professional artists by hiring them as conductors, teachers or producers for annual events and shows. For young people in particular, the amateur arts appeared to be a route into employment in the creative industries.*

3.2. Further evidence from a Civic Conversation hosted by Voluntary Arts Ireland and the RSA in September 2013 entitled “UK City of Culture, what are we learning?” suggested that one of the main impacts of the City of Culture year in Derry/Londonderry was civic pride (<http://www.voluntaryarts.org/2013/10/01/uk-city-of-culture-what-are-we-learning-a-report/>). From our perspective one of the signs that social inclusion is being addressed in a community is a sense of a healthier civil society – more civic engagement from all sections of the community, voluntary groups being formed, positive celebrations of civic life and involvement of citizens in local decision making. The arts are interesting in that they are both central to civic life and can act as disruptive commentators from the fringes. However, their contribution to a healthy civil society often goes unnoticed.

3.3. Generally speaking there is a danger that arts groups and organisations view outreach and social outcomes as elements that are additional and separate from the delivery of art itself. This is a long standing tension between the intrinsic and instrumental value of the arts. If we reframe this to look at the arts from the perspective of (a) art and (b) people it's easier to see that one cannot exist without the other. Excellent art should nourish the art form itself and society as a whole. And it should nourish them both in a variety of positive ways. A good example of this would be People United (<http://www.peopleunited.org.uk/>) – who through the arts act as a catalyst for kindness.

3.4. The arts also have the capacity to provide diverse communities with a voice – to highlight their achievements and issues and help give them a place in society. This is particularly effective in hard to reach and marginalised communities. Very good examples of this can be seen with Epic Award Winners Foyle Haven Arts Collective – a creative writing project that gave the homeless and those struggling with addiction a voice in print and on stage (<http://blog.epicawards.co.uk/2013/12/foyle-haven-arts-collective/#sthash.p3WQzNzL.dpuf>) – and Stroke Odysseys - a musical exploration of the experience and feelings of all those touched by stroke in Derry/Londonderry (<http://www.wall2wallmusic.org/2013/10/city-culture-hosts-local-stroke-community-performance/>)

- 3.5. In formulating arts outreach programmes arts organisations often gives less space to understanding what it is that working class communities want in terms of arts provision and participation. The drive to introduce communities to the programme or venue the arts organisation itself is running is important but will very often not connect with the creative activity already developed by local citizens. Notable exceptions to this type of breakdown would be the Axis Ballymun in Dublin (<http://www.axis-ballymun.ie/>) and Platform Arts in Easterhouse Glasgow (<http://www.platform-online.co.uk/>) where the lines between the programme, the venue and the community are completely blurred with one influencing the other.

Recommendations.

1. Commission research to help answer the following questions

- (a) *Which are the communities that are currently most excluded from arts participation?*

The inquiry uses the term “working class”. We would see this as shorthand for disadvantaged or hard-to-reach communities. There may be differences to consider depending on if the community is in a rural or urban context. However, do we know where these communities are and what their individual make up is?

- (b) *Have the barriers to inclusion in the arts changed?*

It may be the case that we are facing new or different barriers to inclusion than in the past or that the barriers are the same but now faced by different communities. The answer may not be as simple as it once was. 25 years ago when Northern Ireland was less diverse many disadvantaged communities were primarily catholic and in urban housing estates. Since then a major effort has gone into providing additional manpower and resources to address this inequality. Have we now reached the point where there is more disadvantage in protestant urban housing estates? Or is there more disadvantage in rural areas? What about Black and Minority Ethnic Groups? It is worth noting that attempts to bring arts activities to marginalised communities have tended to reach women and children, but not men. Do we need to identify the specific barriers that men face in participation in the arts?

- (c) *Which social issues can the arts be effective in addressing?*

There is no doubt that the arts can make significant contributions across a range of social issues but it is not a panacea. It would be helpful to have more robust data on where it is most effective. Where we see good evidence as already mentioned is in helping to improve social inclusion, social cohesion, individual and community wellbeing and providing a voice for marginalised communities. However, where else is the evidence strong?

- (d) *What is it that working class communities want in terms of arts participation?*

It is a fundamental tenet of Voluntary Arts that we attempt to find out what people want and then try to provide it. We have no preconceived ideas about what might be good for people, but rather we try to encourage people to make their own decisions. We also feel strongly that it is important to have as broad a sense of what constitutes creative cultural activity – the hugely varied means by which people channel their self-expression. For example, crafts such as knitting, embroidery, home brewing, gardening and cooking. We need to widen not narrow our focus.

2. **Pilot new creative projects** – one in an urban working class community and one in a rural working class community that require professional, community, voluntary and local authority arts venues and providers to collaborate together with the aim of building a sustainable and inclusive model of local cultural infrastructure.

There is an opportunity with the Review of Public Administration and the forming of new local authority areas to re-imagine local cultural infrastructure. The main issue at the moment is fragmentation and lack of joined up action. Professional, community, voluntary and local authority arts venues and providers do not come together often enough to share information and experiences, or to collaborate on new initiatives. By piloting some initiatives that require more active collaboration and engagement a best practice model could be developed and shared across Northern Ireland. Fortunately Voluntary Arts Ireland is embarking on one such project with Ballymena Borough Council and will share findings with the committee in due course.

3. **Set up pathways between the amateur and professional arts encouraging leadership amongst our professional arts organisations**

If we accept that members of working class communities are already organising and developing their own arts activities then perhaps the question should be how do we connect that with the wider community and professional arts venues and programmes? How do we include the creativity and energy of creative people in working class communities and allow them to shape and influence the work of our major arts organisations?

The Royal Shakespeare Company has a programme called Open Stages in which it engages with amateur theatre groups and ordinary people involving them in their productions:

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Performances

We believe that Shakespeare, and the art of theatre making belongs to everyone, not just to watch but to perform – that Shakespeare is not simply the province of the Oxbridge director, the University Academic, the GCSE/A level student, or the trained professional actor.

Open Stages demonstrates and develops the idea that Shakespeare is, and has always been, the people's playwright, by engaging with, supporting, developing and celebrating the work of amateur theatre makers. For many, amateur or community theatre is their first, sometimes only, experience of Shakespeare and of theatre in general. With the strategic input of professional practitioners we can help make this experience an exciting and memorable one, an experience that will kindle a lifelong love of Shakespeare and the theatre, without destroying the unique community experience of great amateur theatre.

Open Stages already connects to the Lyric Theatre in Belfast – can this model be utilised by other organisations in other art forms and encouraged through specific funding streams.

4. **Support existing arts groups within working class communities through capacity building and training.** Self-governing and self-organising groups are very sustainable if nurtured.

5. **Invest in good quality broadband and access to digital creative and social tools** so that working class communities can play a full part in both accessing the arts and organising their own.

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