



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Arts Council NI Briefing on ASOP
Funding 2010-11**

22 April 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Arts Council NI Briefing on ASOP Funding 2010-11

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr Declan O'Loan (Deputy Chairperson)
Lord Browne
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Billy Leonard
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Raymond McCartney
Mr David McClarty
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Ken Robinson

Witnesses:

Ms Rosemary Kelly)
Ms Róisín McDonough) Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Ms Nóirín McKinney)
Ms Lorraine McDowell)

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff):

I welcome Rosemary Kelly, Róisín McDonagh, Nóirín McKinney and Lorraine McDowell from the Arts Council to today's Committee meeting. I hand over to Rosemary to make a statement to the Committee and to introduce her colleagues.

Ms Rosemary Kelly (Arts Council of Northern Ireland):

I am Rosemary Kelly, chairman of the Arts Council. I am sure that Committee members know

Róisín McDonough, the chief executive of the Arts Council; we are joined today by Lorraine McDowell, the director of operations and Nóirín McKinney, the director of arts development.

On behalf of the Arts Council, I am very pleased to be here today to address the Committee. I am conscious that, since we were last here, the Committee has two new members, the Deputy Chairperson Declan O’Loan and David McClarty. I offer them my congratulations on their appointment.

It is my task today to explain the decisions taken by the board of the Arts Council at its recent annual funding round meeting in February, with respect to one of the Arts Council’s core funding programmes: the annual support for organisations programme (ASOP). I am aware that the Committee has received a written briefing, but it might be helpful if I provide an overview of the strategic drivers in the council’s decision making. ASOP is designed to meet some of the core costs that our arts organisations face, including salaries, rent, heat and light. It is worth emphasising that although ASOP is an important programme, it represents only one aspect of the council’s overall funding package of which organisations can avail, such as lottery and creative industries funding.

As a public body, the Arts Council is acutely aware of its duty to ensure that all the public funding that it awards supports government objectives, specifically those outlined in the current Programme for Government (PFG), which aims to make Northern Ireland a peaceful, fair and prosperous society by growing a dynamic and innovative economy. The council believes that the arts have a vital part to play in realising that ambition; ASOP is rooted in that ethos and the delivery of its strategic artistic direction lies in the council’s Creative Connections, which is a five-year plan for developing the arts, 2007-2012. The plan aims at placing arts at the heart of our social, economic and creative life, and it is fully aligned with the corporate strategy of the Department and the Minister:

“to protect, nurture and grow Northern Ireland’s culture capital”.

We are pleased to play our full part in assisting the Minister and the Assembly in achieving those important goals.

The Arts Council’s five-year plan flows from the Programme for Government and the ministerial and departmental corporate objectives. One part of the delivery of the five-year plan is ASOP funding. Before I speak in detail about ASOP funding, I wish to give the Committee

some sense of the rest of the strategic infrastructure that supports the decision-making process. Having put in place the five-year plan, the council embarked on a programme of work to review all art forms and specialist areas. As a result of that overarching five-year plan and the multi-layering involved, we conducted a strategic review to consider specific art forms critically, how we deliver on them, and how we might improve that to ensure maximum potential for growth in the arts sector. Reviews of drama, dance, opera and visual arts have now been completed. The action plans are in place, and implementation is under way. Reviews of music, youth arts and community arts will be undertaken this year. Those reviews also help to inform our overall funding decisions, including those in ASOP.

We must take into account layers of wider strategic issues when considering specific funding decisions and, indeed, particular programmes. We are about halfway through the life of the five-year Creative Connections plan, and the Committee may also like to know that we have just completed a sector-wide consultation process. During that consultation, we asked artists and arts organisations about the continuing appropriateness of our plan. We were pleased to note that it has stood the test of time and that it continues to command broad support for its objectives and mode of delivery, in spite of the challenging economic environment in which we operate.

The Arts Council takes a balanced, strategic overview of the sector. We do not believe that we should simply maintain an historic pattern of funding but, rather, that we should consolidate what is good and plan a critical path for development, thereby ensuring that we are constantly striving for improved quality and value for money. That is at the heart of all our art form reviews. Indeed, it is even more vital in the present financial strictures. We were deeply disappointed, on behalf of the communities, not to have received the expected financial uplift this year. However, we do not intend to sit back and say that nothing can be done. In fact, all our planning, reviews and targets for development in the sectors are more vital than ever. That work will ensure that we are poised to take advantage of the upturn when it comes and that we will deliver strongly for the cultural capital of Northern Ireland.

I now turn to the final stages of ASOP funding. I hope that I have painted a picture of the long and intricate process that takes the form of many lengthy deliberations over months. That work ensures that we have the right framework within which to protect the core elements of the arts infrastructure in an uncertain budgetary climate.

I think that the Committee has a copy of our routine funding criteria. In addition to those criteria, each application is assessed against certain values, the first of which deals with strategic importance in the context of the overall ASOP portfolio. The second examines the artistic activity levels of the organisation making the application as well as the centrality of the arts in an organisation's aims and objectives. We sometimes fund organisations for the arts part of a programme only, which is otherwise widely varied. The third value deals with geographic spread in the context of the overall ASOP portfolio; for example, are we, as far as possible, touching communities across Northern Ireland? The fourth value examines the levels of previous and current capital investment. We seek to protect public money that the Department and the Arts Council invest. The fifth value is the level of cross-border, national and international activity and promotion. The final value is the risk associated with either funding or not funding.

Fortunately, in recent years, we were able to utilise well the modest uplift that we received in year one and year two of the comprehensive spending review to stabilise the arts sector and, indeed, to achieve some modest growth and admit a few new clients. However, this has been a deeply difficult period for everyone as we battle our way through the economic downturn.

As the Committee is aware, this is the final year of the comprehensive spending review settlement. We had planned for an expected uplift of £1.5 million, but, instead, it came in at £400,000. In addition, we lost our Department of Education budget of £200,000, which had helped to support our traditional arts sector. Therefore, as the Committee might anticipate, the value of application requests far exceeded an available ASOP budget of £9.9 million. Indeed, we received 118 eligible applications, which totalled £13.2 million.

Tough decisions had to be taken, and an enormous amount of time, effort and sheer commitment was put into the process. It is always an exacting process, but it was particularly difficult this year. However, having completed the task, the board is confident that it took the right decisions when looked at in the round. I hope that I given you a sense of what that round looks like. It is worth noting that if we had received the anticipated uplift of £1.5 million this year, by and large, we could have met the assessed request from the sector as a whole. I say that with some confidence, because, after the first sift of the assessment process by our arts officers, which took place before the budget reductions were announced, the officers proposed recommendations of approximately £11 million.

Finally, I shall give you some sense of the key areas that we could safeguard. Importantly, we were able to protect the public money that was invested by DCAL and our own capital investment in Derry/Londonderry and Belfast. We also helped to stabilise the Ulster Orchestra, and we were pleased to admit four new clients to ASOP: POBAL, the Ulster-Scots Community Network, Camerata and New Lodge Arts, all of which produce work of real benefit in helping to meet some of the priorities.

That concludes my opening comments. The chief executive and her team are present, and we will all try to respond to your questions. I thank you again for the opportunity to address you directly.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, Rosemary, for the presentation. It goes without saying that the Committee supports the creation of a larger cake for the arts; that is a given. We still want a say on how the existing budget is distributed. Did some of the recommendations in our inquiry into funding for the arts factor in your thinking on the current ASOP round? For example, recommendation 8 states:

“We recommend that the Arts Council increases the level of funding which goes to community arts organisations.”

Did that feature in your thinking?

Ms Róisín McDonough (Arts Council of Northern Ireland):

Yes; of course it did. It had a bearing on the strategic thrust of the Arts Council’s budgetary allocation. I have attended this Committee on several occasions and explained the support that we give to grassroots and community-based arts organisations across the totality of our funding programmes. That is why it is important that our chairperson stressed that ASOP is but one moment in a funding year. Although we appreciate that it is important, the distribution of funding across the whole year and the various programmes that comprise that funding year show that funding for community arts organisations has, broadly speaking, been increasing consistently, particularly over the past five to seven years. We are happy to furnish the Committee with those facts and figures if members wish.

The Chairperson:

Given that the ASOP programme is the majority of the Arts Council’s yearly funding, are you not underplaying its importance?

Ms McDonough:

It is a very significant programme; it is almost £10 million this year. There are other lottery project funding programmes, such as Awards for All and the Start UP programme. In addition, we distribute the creative industries innovation funds; we are also involved with the Cultural Olympiad and the Legacy Trust. We are very keen on those opportunities and have promoted them. They are open to all, including local community arts-based organisations.

The broad portfolio of ASOP has to look across the entire arts sector. As our chairman said, the council takes a balanced strategic overview in which community arts have fared well over the years, and rightly so. We are very proud of that. However, there are other funding opportunities that are focused on community arts-based projects.

Ms Lorraine McDowell (Arts Council of Northern Ireland):

The figures seem to show that community arts have dropped from £933,000 to £907,000 in one year. However, one must look at the ASOP portfolio overall, and, as we have argued on previous visits to the Committee, there are other community arts organisations that sit in other portfolios in the ASOP programme. The total support through ASOP for what we consider to be community arts organisations went up by £200,000 in the 2010-11 period. That takes into account the Crescent Arts Centre, the Playhouse, the Northern Ireland Piping and Drumming School and other organisations that we consider to be community arts deliverers. Therefore, there is an increase overall of £200,000 to the community arts sector.

Mr McCarthy:

Thank you very much for your presentation. We acknowledge that it is difficult to ensure equality across the board when dishing out money from a limited budget. There is full support for the Ulster Orchestra and the Lyric Theatre. Why did the Arts Council award the Ulster Orchestra an extra £150,000, particularly since the ASOP budget had been cut by £265,000? The same applies to the Lyric Theatre, which received £146,000.

Ms McDonough:

The capital programme upon which the Lyric Theatre has embarked and the artistic development of the theatre itself require extra resources; we knew that, as did the Department, when we agreed to support the capital programme. The Lyric Theatre has ambitions to be a proper repertory theatre that tours Northern Ireland. To do that, it needs almost a doubling of its resources.

Compared to building-based repertory theatres across the water or in the Republic, it is hugely underfunded in that respect.

With the advent of the new capital build project, there was a wonderful opportunity for the Lyric Theatre to rise to that challenge. It required more money. Although it may seem strange to those who are not involved in the arts that more money is given to a client when it does not operate from a building — in fact, the building will not be open for another year — it is required because it has to plan, gear up its staffing structure and programme activity for when the new theatre opens. That requires extra resources, which are carefully documented in the business plan. Those arguments were made powerfully and persuasively.

Therefore, although there is an uplift in 2010, we anticipate that a further uplift will be required during the coming year when the theatre is open. The amount may seem significant to the Committee, but it is relatively modest, given what the theatre needs compared to comparable repertory theatres. Although we will not be able to meet the entire request that the Lyric Theatre believes that it needs, we hope that we can, at least, go a significant way towards helping it to become a wonderful repertory theatre.

Ms R Kelly:

Not everyone may wish to spend an evening listening to orchestral music. Nevertheless, it is an internationally accepted fact that part of a society's positioning is how it looks from the outside. The Ulster Orchestra is part of Northern Ireland's positioning as a confident and creative place where people might want to do business and invest. It attracts attention to Northern Ireland for all the right reasons.

The Ulster Orchestra has international standing; it has been invited to play at the 2010 proms in the Albert Hall in London. Northern Ireland is fortunate to have such an orchestra, and creating an orchestra of that standing nowadays would be extremely difficult.

Due to the economic downturn, however, the orchestra's players have been on standstill salaries for about 18 months. Of course, there are risks in that because, nowadays, players are much more flexible and willing to move than previously. We have benefitted enormously from the fact that, in the past, players would come to the Ulster Orchestra, move their families, and live and teach here. You could argue that people in Northern Ireland deserve to be able to go to a

concert locally and hear an orchestra of that quality.

It is a sign of the times that audience numbers are falling across the board for all the reasons of which we are aware. Sponsorship is extremely difficult to obtain. We work closely with Arts and Business and with all our major clients to improve how they achieve sponsorship; however, it is extremely difficult at present. Philanthropy in Northern Ireland is — I was going to say almost non-existent — very low and extremely hard to come by.

Therefore, for all those reasons, we have supported the Ulster Orchestra through the past difficult year. I must say that we do not know what is ahead in the coming year.

Mr K Robinson:

You referred to “stabilising” the Ulster Orchestra. Is that the context in which you are trying to stabilise it?

Ms R Kelly:

Yes. We have tried to stabilise the orchestra for the current year, because it has had financial difficulties for months. It has done everything possible to reduce its costs and to bring in extra revenue. It was a question of stabilising it during the current year.

Mr K Robinson:

Therefore you have stabilised it for the interim. Is it likely that you will have to continue to provide it with some form of stability in future? Is that sustainable?

Ms McDonough:

The orchestra operates with about a month’s reserves. Therefore, when we say that we are helping to stabilise it, we mean that in the sense that it will keep its month’s reserves and meet its ongoing liabilities and costs. We know that orchestras are expensive and that the Ulster Orchestra probably receives one of the lowest levels of funding in these islands; comparatively speaking of course. The orchestra is about the £2 million threshold, and costs, like everything else, will rise. Our chairman spoke about the difficulties of raising alternative sources of funding. The council is, therefore, conscious of the difficulties that the orchestra will face in the coming years, and that will be part of our conversation with it.

The orchestra is acutely aware of that; it has a new board and has looked at various governance issues. It is considering the possibility of internal restructuring. As one would expect from any business, it always has to look at what can be done in changing circumstances. It is hard to say that we are optimistic, but through continuing dialogue we will be keeping a close eye on the orchestra.

Mr K Robinson:

That is the point that I am trying to probe. You have stabilised the orchestra and helped it over the interim problem. The problem will not go away, so you have to address the core.

Lord Browne:

Was that additional money linked to an obligation on the orchestra to reduce costs? Can the Arts Council be sure that the additional money will be spent wisely on delivering a better experience for the audience and not used for administration and staff costs? I am glad to hear that you are looking into that.

Ms McDonough:

Absolutely. Under Sir Des Rea's chairmanship, Alan Lennon and John Hunter undertook a businesslike review of the orchestra to see where savings could be made. Not savings in the sense that the orchestra needs less money, but where the money could be better re-profiled to support the orchestra, the number of concerts and the capacity to tour, strengthen educational outreach work, and give a better audience experience. That is at the forefront of their minds. David Byers, the orchestra's chief executive, is leaving in September. That is timely, and it has been appropriately grasped to undertake such a review. The council is in regular dialogue with the orchestra.

Mr McClarty:

I am one of the two newbies to whom you referred. However, I am not without experience in the arts, particularly the performing arts, and I know the difficulties and challenges that face the arts world. Your briefing states that, for 2010-11, the council's priorities are dance and drama, in line with the reviews of those art forms, and that a review showed that opera required funding to set up a new company. Will you explain the rationale for providing a particular art form with more money just because it has been the subject of a review?

Ms Nóirín McKinney (Arts Council of Northern Ireland):

The council has been systematically reviewing each art form, and each review threw up different needs in respective sectors. It is not always about additional resources. Our review of visual arts, for example, exposed developmental issues, not a need for a huge injection of funds, with the exception of studio provision for individual artists.

The reviews of drama and dance, however, found those sectors to be critically under-resourced, and that is why we made them priorities under various funding programmes. The council feels that it has done much to stabilise both sectors, particularly dance, although there are residual issues with drama.

Even with three years' concerted prioritization of those art forms, the council feels that they have not yet been critically stabilized.

Opera is a relatively small arts sector in Northern Ireland with only two companies in operation, both of which are based in County Down: Castleward Opera, which was coming into its 25th year and Opera Fringe, which is a much younger organisation.

The independent review suggested that the model of provision for opera in Northern Ireland was outmoded and catered for only a small part of the population; it also suggested that there was a much greater appetite for opera in Northern Ireland that was not being met by current provision. The review recommended that the best way to stabilize and develop opera here, to meet audience appetite and to develop the art form through training and education was to develop a new model. It characterised that as an opera hub or a new organisation to develop the art form.

The Arts Council was swayed by that argument, and the evidence for it was presented clearly. However, instead of entirely adopting the model outlined, the council endeavoured to build on the best that the two organisations had to offer, including the history and legacy of Castleward Opera and what it had done in a semi-professional mode over the previous 25 years. The council consolidated all that in the new organisation, bringing on board some board members from both companies and carrying forward some of the initiatives that both companies had undertaken in the past. However, that involved cost. The sector had been relatively underdeveloped and underfunded, and the funding for Castleward Opera had not significantly grown over the years. The council estimated the cost of establishing the new organisation at £100,000.

The council has established a new organisation on a more consolidated funding basis. The evidence was that that was needed to create a much wider remit of training, education and development and for opera in Northern Ireland to develop professional standards. That was the basis of the decision.

Mr McCartney:

I thank the witnesses for their presentation. I note from the briefing paper that 118 eligible applications were made for ASOP funding and that 98 were approved. That is quite a high percentage of successful applicants.

With respect to those who did not receive the award that they sought and those who had their awards reduced, the Committee received a briefing paper from the Community Arts Forum about the award process. It seems that, in some instances, the moderation panels denied funding after the awards had been approved by arts officer. What role does the moderation panel play in ASOP?

Ms McDowell:

Each application is assessed by the relevant art form officer who makes a recommendation that is presented to a moderation meeting. Those meetings are attended by all the art form officers and the directors and chief executive of the Arts Council, and it considers the council's funding in the round. The meeting examines and interrogates each application to justify the original recommendation, establishes which applications best meet the council's strategic funding priorities and decides how much funding is to be recommended for presentation to the council. Value for money is also considered.

Mr McCartney:

Is that done in conjunction with or in the absence of the relevant groups?

Ms McDowell:

It is done in the groups' absence. The meetings comprise art form officers and the directors of the Arts Council.

Mr McCartney:

I say this without prejudice, but one of the groups said that no minutes are taken at that meeting.

Ms McDowell:

Minutes do not exist in the same way as the set of action points that you have here. A spreadsheet records requests, recommendations and final recommendations to the Arts Council. The moderation minute is the comment on the assessment summary that goes to the Arts Council. Therefore, there is a minute of each moderated recommendation. The minutes do not exist as one document, but there is a minute on every single individual document.

Mr McCartney:

Can the moderation panel overturn a recommendation of the arts officer?

Ms McDowell:

Yes; there is a justification for that.

Mr McCartney:

Twenty groups were not funded. Was that due to a lack of funding, or was it because those groups did not meet the criteria?

Ms McDowell:

All those groups met the criteria. Otherwise, they would not have been brought to the council in the first place. The fact that only 98 of the 118 eligible groups were funded was dictated by a lack of funding.

Mr McCartney:

Is there any temptation to slice everyone's funding so that every group gets some? Why would that not be a consideration?

Ms McDonough:

As our chairman said earlier, we have a set of strategic priorities. We are looking at the matter. To simply salami slice everyone's funding to an equal degree would result in some programmes not being able to be delivered, even if the cuts were relatively small.

It is important to stress that we have identified a dedicated pot of lottery money for organisations that we think are worthy of funding but for which we simply did not have enough money. We can never promise anything, but we have made it clear that those organisations will be prioritised in the allocation of the pot of money that we have set aside. We are hopeful that many of the organisations that were disappointed because they did not get anything from us, rather than those whose funding may have been reduced by a small amount, will be accommodated under that pot of money. The Arts Council took that strategic decision.

Ms R Kelly:

I take your point, Mr McCartney. However, we decided some time ago after much debate, including debate with the Executive, that salami slicing would have been the easy way out. If it is accepted that there is a need to continue to develop, difficult decisions have to be taken along the way.

Mr McCartney:

That is why you are making the decisions and I am sitting here asking the questions.

Ms McDowell:

The organisations that were rejected and asked to apply to the project fund have all done so. That deadline has now passed.

Mr McCartney:

Are the groups given good feedback?

Ms McDowell:

Yes.

Lord Browne:

As a Committee, we have a duty to encourage people not only to attend arts events but to

participate in them. The Programme for Government contains a target to increase participation by 2% by 2011. The visual arts receive 11% of the ASOP funding, which is much more than goes to community arts, traditional arts, festivals and so on. How does the prioritisation of visual arts tie in with the Programme for Government target to increase participation by 2%?

Ms McDonough:

The PSA target was set by the Department. As we are not a direct service deliverer — that is, we do not put on performances ourselves — we pass the target on to arts organisations, which deliver the programmes of activity and/or performances. It is really only through our arts clients that we can try to deliver the target on participation and attendance. As I have said at Committee before, I am not sure that that is a particularly meaningful target. There are wider considerations that bear upon people's ability to attend or participate in the arts and to grow that. Indeed, our chairman referred to some of the considerations that make it difficult for people, such as the economic downturn.

That is the broad issue with the PSA target. We are in discussions with the Department about establishing a more meaningful target by which we, as a public body and, in turn, artists and arts organisations can be judged.

As regards the visual arts, the Arts Council is charged with developing, promoting and encouraging appreciation and understanding of, and engagement in, the arts. You are absolutely right to alert us to that. We have to support a wide range of arts forms. Some people are particularly interested in the visual arts. Others are interested in orchestral work, which may not be everybody's cup of tea. Some people like to go to theatre, whereas others prefer to participate in a workshop or class at the Crescent Arts Centre or in their local community. We are charged with providing a balanced range of activity, of which the population can avail themselves when they see fit. Nóirín will speak about growing the visual arts audience.

Ms McKinney:

As I mentioned, that was a key issue that came out of the recent review of visual arts. We have some wonderful galleries that are, by their very nature, venue based, so they have overheads such as staffing and running costs. That sometimes has quite heavy resource implications. It is undoubtedly a challenge, for all sorts of reasons, to develop the audience for visual arts.

One of the challenges is intellectual access. I think that barriers to accessing the visual arts still exist, because some people perceive it as less accessible and a little more intellectually challenging. Although venues and the products on offer are free for the public to enjoy, much capacity building remains to be done in order to make people feel comfortable about coming in and having a sense of ownership and engagement with the visual arts. A number of different barriers to access exist that do not relate to costs, which is a factor that affects other arts forms.

We specifically set ourselves the challenge of working with Audiences NI, and that was a challenge for Audiences NI too. How does an organisation that does not have a box office base to do data analysis in order to target isolated groups engage with, and develop, its audience? It is difficult to capture the overview of why people are not actively participating. However, it is a challenge that we will not shy away from. The development of the visual arts is a priority for the Arts Council in the coming year.

Lord Browne:

To go off on a tangent, I come from Belfast and have always had a soft spot for the Festival of Fools. Will you explain why that festival is not receiving any funding? It brings entertainment to the people of Belfast as well as those from surrounding areas. I have always been attracted to the Festival of Fools, although I am not saying that I am a fool. Is there any reason why that festival did not receive funding this year? I must declare as interest as a member of Belfast City Council.

The Chairperson:

As a rural representative, I welcome that question. I have a good perception of the Festival of Fools.

Ms McDowell:

The Festival of Fools application was rejected within the ASOP portfolio. However, the festival organisers were told to apply for lottery funding, which they have done. The festival that is starting next week is funded by the Arts Council. It was granted £40,000 worth of lottery funding last year. The organisers received funding to put on this year's festival, and they have applied for lottery funding to fund next year's festival.

Mr O'Loan:

Welcome to the Committee. Although I am new to this Committee, I have a long-standing

interest in the arts, and I am pleased to be involved in these discussions. I wish to ask you a bit more about the tension — if it is tension — between attendance and participation and the support for those two aspects. One of the PFG targets for the Arts Council is to increase the percentage of people attending arts events by 2%, and ASOP is stated as the delivery vehicle for that target. However, the specific delivery strategies for achieving the PFG target of increasing participation by 2% are programmes such as Re-imagining Communities and support for individual artists and community arts. I understand that most of your funding, the £9.9 million to which you referred, goes on ASOP funding, and community arts get only 9% of ASOP. Does that not indicate that the council's funding decisions are skewed towards attendance rather than participation? I realise that you have already made some reference to that issue.

Ms McDonough:

When we give out ASOP funds we ask all the funded organisations to report on participation and attendance rates. We do that through an instrument called our regularly funded organisations (RFO) survey. The organisations make biannual and end-of-year returns, reporting on activity from a previous year, as there will obviously be a time lag. That information is collected and aggregated to establish activity levels, be they in participation or attendance.

We do not place that burden on other organisations that we fund from different programmes, including Re-imagining Communities, lottery project funding and Awards for All. We ask only our ASOP-funded clients to report, because the PSA targets set by government relate to that Exchequer funding, rather than lottery and other sources. We collect that information over time. In statistical variation, however, 2% is often within the margin of error. Therefore, that may not be the most meaningful target.

In addition, we measure through the general population survey every two years. That survey is done independently by a polling organisation that looks at who in the overall population attends and participates in the arts, and their socio-economic background, gender, geography and so on. That is at the macro, Northern Ireland-wide level. We also do that for our regularly funded organisations under ASOP. We can then chart variations in the overall population and see whether there is any connection or relationship with, or correlation between, the RFO survey and what arts organisations do. We look at whether the trends are, broadly speaking, similar, or whether there is significant variance.

Mr O’Loan:

A practitioner working in the area of the Re-imagining Communities programme recently told me that he was very concerned about funding cuts to that programme because he knows from experience that the programme is making a big difference in local communities.

Ms McDonough:

I agree absolutely, and the Arts Council has been vigorously asking for support for that programme from across the party political and ministerial spectrum. I was in the Lincoln Courts area of the Derry City Council district yesterday, looking at where a fantastic piece of public sculpture had been created and a paramilitary mural taken down. The whole community turned out, and in my experience, wherever I go the entire community turns out for the unveiling of art work with which they have been involved, and of which they feel ownership and are hugely proud. Such engagement with an artist is just fantastic.

The Arts Council has made an application under Peace III. We have been shortlisted, and an economic appraisal is being done. We have also been talking to the International Fund for Ireland to see whether it will make a contribution. I am sure that when people at the political and ministerial level see me coming to talk about Re-imagining Communities and ask for extra resources, they probably get a bit fed up. It is a wonderful programme, and we really do not want to lose it because it touches people at a moment in their lives and in the life of their community, which is a very powerful engagement for them creatively in the arts.

Mr O’Loan:

We are a region of only 1.75 million people. You referred to the relatively small patronage and business sponsorship of the arts compared with many other places where that happens on a very big scale. Does that not mean that for high-level art forms we need to operate on a bigger scene than merely this 1.75 million population? That seemed to come up in the criteria that you listed earlier — I do not know whether its being the fifth criterion indicates any relative level of importance — so is that not something that we need to push more? If we are to achieve the levels of funding in the high-level arts that we want, we have to find ways of operating outside this narrow frame.

Ms McDonough:

I agree absolutely. Many of our arts organisations are doing that. To take the example of the

Lyric Theatre, people have looked to the United States, significant donors and philanthropic foundations, thereby going beyond the confines of individuals who have high net worth in Northern Ireland but whose potential importance may not yet have been tapped sufficiently. That requires the longer term building of a relationship.

Our arts organisations, particularly those that have been involved in the capital development programme, recognise that because they are of that scale and have some capacity, they need to spread the efforts that they make to lever more funding from beyond Northern Ireland, and they have done so with some degree of success. However, as everybody knows, it is tough in the United States. It is tough everywhere given the worldwide recession in which we find ourselves. People are ambitious and entrepreneurial in good measure, which is encouraging for us in the Arts Council to see. We want to build on that with Arts and Business and others.

Mr McCarthy:

What can the Arts Council do to encourage more life in Belfast at the weekend, particularly on Sunday afternoons? We hear continually about visitors who have nothing to do. Why can your clients not open their doors for people to see the visual arts? The Cathedral Quarter is a fantastic place, but it is absolutely dead on Sunday afternoons.

Ms McKinney:

I absolutely agree. I feel very sorry when I see tourists wandering about like lost souls on Sunday mornings, waiting for the shops to open. That is a very depressing spectacle. We very much welcome initiatives from Belfast City Council. For example, the late-night opening scheme has been a fantastic success and a wonderful pilot. I have been in venues on Thursday evenings when the doors open and 300 people come in. We need initiatives like that. Sadly, that was a pilot. It has not as yet been extended to Sundays. We need more resources to do that. There will obviously be resource implications for the organisations, such as staffing and other overheads, if they open on Sundays. They cannot do it for nothing. We need more of a partnership approach with other Departments and other bodies because it would be a key tourism incentive. We need to try to get Belfast City Council to continue that pilot.

Mr McCarthy:

Here is looking at you.

Lord Browne:

We are doing our best.

Ms McKinney:

It has been a huge success. The organisations would love to mainstream it and be able to open on Sundays. Our funding situation is known: we have distributed everything that we have. Initiatives like that come at a price, and we need those partnerships with other Departments and councils across Northern Ireland. If the Committee could help us with that, it would be most welcome.

Mr K Robinson:

I could do a commercial and recommend the Theatre at the Mill in Newtownabbey, but I will not. People who were in Belfast city centre last Sunday would have been entertained by the Indian Mela at St George's Market. It was colourful and there was lots of dance, movement and vibrancy. I commend Belfast City Council for hosting that event.

Nóirín, I want to return to your comment that even though visual arts are being put on and are free in some locations, folk are not going and that, perhaps, an educational process is needed. Can I turn that around on you to some degree? How is it that commercial ventures can put on shows by Raymond Gubbay and André Rieu, who is coming in September, in the Waterfront or the Odyssey and those shows will be absolutely sold out? People will be fighting to get tickets.

Are they putting on events that we are failing to put on through publicly funded art in its different forms? Are we putting on events that the public do not want? It may not be a matter of educating the public; it may be a matter of looking at what the commercial world is putting on and seeing whether we can, perhaps, emulate some of its popular and, obviously, financially successful events.

The Chairperson:

If you do not mind, Ken and Billy, I want Billy to ask his question now and, then, both questions to be answered together.

Mr Leonard:

I need to ask two or three quick factual points. Will that sully things up?

The Chairperson:

The questions must be answered compositely. I have to do time management, Billy.

Mr Leonard:

You commented about a group that is not getting funding for its festival but that gets funding from elsewhere. Does the Ulster Orchestra get more money from elsewhere in your budget?

Ms McDowell:

It would not get more money regularly, no.

Mr Leonard:

Does the Lyric Theatre get more money from elsewhere in the budget?

Ms McDowell:

Occasionally, as part of our drama funding.

Mr Leonard:

When we talk about differences, we seem to lose sight of global figures, such as £2 million to the Ulster Orchestra and £800,000 to the Lyric Theatre. I believe that the Ulster Orchestra was told that its funding would be cut. There was talk of this and that. Then, suddenly, it got an increase.

Ms McDowell:

The Arts Council never communicated that to the Ulster Orchestra. There was no such communication. Although it appears in certain documents that are doing the rounds, the orchestra was never warned that there was a potential cut in funding. The Arts Council did not make that statement to the Ulster Orchestra. We spoke to the orchestra to see whether it had made any public statement to that effect; it had not.

Mr Leonard:

Those are the quick points on which I wanted clarification. I do not want to be adversarial. However, given what you said about funding for the Ulster Orchestra, and that there is only one

month's money in the kitty, so to speak, there is real worry that the drain will continue. We are getting into tighter times financially. Your review of community arts is yet to come out, and when it comes out, money will be even tighter.

My main question is about the perception that funding is still quite elitist. There are dangers with regard to where funds go and the medium-term sustainability of that. Funding will continue to be elitist while community arts suffer. I would like to hear your reaction to that.

Ms McDonough:

The critical question is one that our chairman posed in her opening remarks, which is whether Northern Ireland wants to have an orchestra, or to have half or two thirds of an orchestra. As we have said, the orchestra is pretty much pared back to the bone, notwithstanding my earlier remarks about business efficiency and all of that, which every organisation must continue to monitor.

If we do want an orchestra, the cost will be over £2 million. We know that because we have funded the orchestra for many years and watched not how it has grown — in fact, quite the opposite — but, in many ways, how it had to reduce the size and scale of its operation when it used to and was able to tour. Regrettably, the costs of doing that have been prohibitive.

My second remark focuses on the concept of elitism. Sometimes that concept has a pejorative aspect; elitist activities are seen as being not for most people, but for someone else. I would posit that having quality and excellence is another aspect to elitism, which is what we have with the Ulster Orchestra. It is a high-quality, excellent product and the ambition of the Arts Council and the orchestra — which I am sure is shared by everyone in this room — is to make the orchestra, and orchestral music generally, as accessible as possible. That will include building on the considerable body of work that the orchestra already does in schools, through its educational outreach programme and its impromptu small-scale concerts in shopping centres and so on. The Arts Council wants to continue to grow and nurture that.

People living in ordinary communities should have the opportunity and be encouraged to come and listen to an orchestral concert, and the popularity of the programming over the past year or so has proved that it is increasingly accessible. There are always difficulties in the perception of orchestral music and the council fully appreciates that; however, we should try to break down

those barriers.

The Chairperson:

And Ken's question?

Ms McKinney:

What the chief executive said broadly answered Ken's question.

Mr K Robinson:

Yes; it did.

Ms McKinney:

The orchestra is an excellent example. If the arts were commercially viable, state funding would not be required, but they are not. Poetry does not make money. Drama, which can sometimes engage in very serious issues, and opera are not commercially viable at the box office. Some art forms are becoming more commercially viable, but that does not mean that, as a society, we do not have a right to access other, less popular art forms. The challenge is not to make the programming more populist every time so that the people will come and pay for it, but to present it and try to bring people along to benefit from the experience.

Mr K Robinson:

Sorry to interrupt you Nóirín, but is that not the point? People are willing to pay good money to go and see more commercial operations, which would indicate that there is an interest. Once they are through the door is there some way that we can lift them through to the other art forms that you have just described?

Ms McKinney:

I think so. Again, that will be done through audience development, availing ourselves of opportunities and providing information on what else is available in the area of music and drama, to let smaller organisations ride on the back of that success. We need to make inroads with those who pay for tickets in the Grand Opera House and the Waterfront Hall on a bigger scale.

The Chairperson:

I thank the team from the Arts Council for their participation today.