



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working-class
Communities: Arts Council of Northern Ireland

20 March 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Basil McCrea
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Mr Bob Collins	Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Mr Nick Livingston	Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Ms Roisín McDonough	Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Ms Nóirín McKinney	Arts Council of Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: I welcome officials from the Arts Council. We are joined by Mr Bob Collins, chairman; Roisín McDonough, chief executive; Nóirín McKinney, director of arts development; and Nick Livingston, director of strategic development. I ask you to make an opening statement. Members will then follow up with questions.

Mr Bob Collins (Arts Council of Northern Ireland): Thank you very much for the opportunity to be present this morning and to engage with the inquiry. We not only welcome the opportunity to engage; we welcome the inquiry, which is an important step that the Committee has taken. Throughout, we will be happy to cooperate and offer assistance in every way possible, as you wish. I propose not to say a great deal, but to make some key points about the Arts Council's general position on the arts, and specifically on the topic of your inquiry. We will then respond to members' questions.

The underlying democratic principle that activates the Arts Council in general, and very much so in respect of the inquiry, is that the arts are for everyone. That is for a number of reasons. The first is that everybody has the capacity to engage in and enjoy the arts and, therefore, everybody should have the opportunity to do that to whatever degree is possible for them. The second key point is that everybody contributes to the public funding of the arts so everybody should be able to benefit from that investment.

Arts are a central part of people's lives and community life and, even though we live in changing times, there are some things that do not change. The arts are a sign of a society's maturity; they are a real source of innovation and creativity; they make a powerful statement about a place and a community;

and they offer a new perspective to those looking in from outside. From the dawn of time, self-expression has been the signature of human beings. For all those reasons, the essential underlying starting point is that the arts are for everybody. The related key principle is that excellence in the arts is for everybody: excellence in everything and for everybody. The Arts Council builds its approach to the area of the inquiry on a strong and sustained focus on and commitment to the twin principles of access and participation. Access is a foundational issue; it is more than simply a question of physical location, ease of attendance or the price of a ticket. Those things are important, but do not even begin to exhaust the real meaning of access. The fundamental issue is that the potential that the arts possess should not be enjoyed only by those who have the benefit of material resources, educational advantage or family tradition. The real challenge is to open our minds to the possibility of genuinely opening access to everybody. A lot of good work is being done, but we know that more can be done.

We amplified a number of key points in our submission to the Committee, but they are worth summarising very briefly at this stage. The first point is that the range of cultural and artistic activity and engagement by people in working-class communities is more complex and varied than is often at first thought, and certainly more than could possibly have been encapsulated in the time available for the research report that was prepared for the Committee. That is not a criticism of that report; it is simply an acknowledgement of some basic facts.

There is a proper focus on publicly funded arts, but to leave out of the equation people's engagement with non-publicly funded arts runs the risk of presenting a distorted and inadequate view of the extent to which people in working-class communities engage with the arts. People make their arts and cultural choices in disparate ways and from a vast array of possibilities. It is important that we respect those choices and attempt to present as full a picture as possible. There is a risk, which has to be avoided, of underestimating or undervaluing the cultural engagement of people in working-class communities. It is even more important to recognise the extent to which they do not have comparable access to certain art forms. Therefore, it is appropriate and important to look, in a very particular way, at publicly funded arts for the reason that I stated: everybody contributes, either directly or indirectly, to public investment in the arts. One of the central principles in this, as in any other area, is that everybody should have an equal opportunity to make their arts and cultural choices from the fullest possible range of options. That is part of the meaning of the responsibilities on the Arts Council as a public authority under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the disability and discrimination legislation. Those responsibilities are profoundly relevant in this context. We cannot — nobody has suggested that we should — make people's cultural choices for them. The point is that there should be an equal opportunity to make those choices from the widest range of options. That does not always happen, and that is a relevant consideration in the context of the engagement of people in working-class communities with the arts.

We try to adopt a multilayered approach to addressing this issue. It is about knowing what is happening, having a sense of a base from which we can evaluate future performance, and articulating this as a key policy issue, as we have in our strategic plan and annual business plans. The key issues of access and participation are starting points for us. We engage consistently and closely with the arts organisations that we fund to ensure that they, too, recognise the responsibilities that come with public investment.

We have developed, almost to the point of completion, a community arts strategy, which looks in a very particular way at how to deepen the engagement with the arts in individual communities. We have a range of sectoral strategies — for example, arts and older people; an intercultural arts policy; arts and children — that are designed to ensure that sectors of the population that could easily fall outside active engagement with the arts are remembered. That has direct relevance to your inquiry. It is important that we recognise that there are barriers and that there is a degree of inequality of access and engagement with the arts across a wide range of areas. That inequality is not confined to people in working-class communities. Recognition of those barriers is part of our central approach to alleviating that problem. There are barriers that are more acutely experienced by people in working-class communities. When we talk about working-class communities, we must think also about geography, because this is not just about people in urban environments; there are real issues that arise in respect of people who live in non-urban or rural areas.

People with physical and other disabilities face a particular challenge in their access to the arts. We have consistently addressed that issue with publicly funded organisations, and will continue to do so.

Some of the barriers to engagement with the arts that are most commonly cited, some of which are real and some of which are perceived, include lack of time, location of venues, lack of public transport and lack of information. Some people feel uncomfortable and out of place in certain arts venues.

We want to avoid a number of things. One is any sense that there is a phenomenon called "working-class arts" and a phenomenon called "middle- or upper-class arts". Another is that there is a form of artistic engagement that will do for working-class communities and that a more expensive form is necessary for everybody else. We take the view that the arts are indivisible. There is no conflict or mutual exclusivity between supporting excellence and those who have the capacity to give expression to that; and encouraging, in every way possible, people to fulfil their potential to engage with, enjoy and participate in the arts. That is an important issue because, too frequently, there is a concern or a perception that the arts are in some way elitist and that the kinds of artistic engagement that the Arts Council supports and funds is for the few rather than for the many. That is absolutely at variance with every element of the Arts Council's philosophy and policy, as well as its practice.

I do will not overburden you with figures, but let me mention two things. First, 74% of all Arts Council funding in the last three years has gone to the 20% most deprived super-output areas. That figure rises to 79% if we focus only on our Exchequer funding. Of our core client activities, almost half of all participation-based activities and almost two thirds of performances take place in the most deprived areas. Those are facts.

We place an obligation on our core-funded organisations to extend their activities to ensure that the arts can be accessed by all communities. There is a real and genuine commitment on the part of those arts organisations to do everything that they can to realise that. Some of that goes unseen; some of the depth of what is being done is not fully appreciated or, once experienced, can be easily forgotten. There is a challenge for everybody who is involved in the arts, for us as the Arts Council and for arts organisations, particularly those in receipt of public funding, to be more persuasive, explicit and clear in representing what is happening on the ground.

We also need to find ways to express more fully the point that I made at the beginning that the range of arts experiences that people have goes beyond what is publicly funded. It includes voluntary arts, choirs, church groups, amateur drama, people's engagement with film, and young people's increasing capacity through digital media not only to access a range of artistic activity that would have been inconceivable 10 years ago but to engage, as they do, in the production of material that could not have been dreamt of because of the way that technology has changed.

One of the challenges for us — we are looking at ways in which we can deal with it — is to reach beyond the phenomenon of social media to see how we can explore and exploit, in the best possible way, the potential of digital media to bring the arts to people who might not have had the opportunity to access them to the same extent previously. We wish to explore ways to persuade people of their own capacity, and the significance of that capacity, to create content through digital devices, whether they are in public libraries or those that they have themselves.

In that context, it is crucial to look at the issues of education and poverty. Education has a powerful role to play, and that is without burdening the education system with solving every one of society's ills or achieving every aspiration that anybody has for this community. There is no doubt that the imaginative capacity of children is dissipated as they advance through the education system, and their ability to perform and to realise the fullness of their own potential is not equally enjoyed. There are some who can, through their educational experiences, have enhanced engagement; there are others who cannot. We venture to suggest that that is a crucial consideration in the context of this inquiry.

The second reality is one of poverty. Poverty and education are inversely correlated, regrettably. That, too, has implications for people's capacity to engage with or to have access to the fullest range of cultural and artistic options from which to make their own independent, autonomous choices. The test is not that everybody engages with everything and that somebody is not fully in touch with their own artistic possibility if they do not like the kind of things that I like or that any one of you likes. The real test is that people can achieve and satisfy their own cultural aspirations and artistic possibilities by drawing on the same range of possibilities that are open to everybody else. The key challenge will be to ensure that people in working-class communities and people who are poor — they are not necessarily the same group of people — are not left without the same breadth of choice that is available to everybody else.

I want to make two brief points in conclusion. Roisín might want to add to this, and we will certainly respond to any questions that you have. I touched earlier on some of the Arts Council's sectoral strategies. The community arts strategy is a central part of that mosaic of sectoral strategies that the Arts Council has developed and is developing. A significant amount of our engagement is with people who are actively involved in the arts at community level, bringing the arts to people and developing people's capacity to express their own potential. That has great validity in itself.

That applies to every community, but it is of significant and central importance to the subject of this inquiry.

The area of older people and the intercultural arts strategy are of a piece with that. There is sometimes a sense that older people have to be introduced to the arts, which makes no sense because older people include everybody who has ever made a contribution to the arts in Northern Ireland — people who bought every poetry book, who wrote every poem, who participated in every drama production, who played in school orchestras and who sang in church choirs. Older people bring to their older years — we bring to our older years, I should say — a set of experiences, tradition, practice and engagement with the arts. The task of the strategy is to ensure that that is not forgotten and that their capacity to enjoy the arts as they get older is not diminished, but also to give people the opportunity to liberate some of the talents that they have within themselves that have not found expression through their life, for one reason or another. A key part of that strategy, as it is for the intercultural strategy, is to ensure that those who are in receipt of public funding and public policy generally recognise those audiences as absolutely central to the artistic output of everybody who is in receipt of public funding.

That is as much as I want to say by way of opening remarks. I reiterate our appreciation of the opportunity to be here and our readiness to offer whatever assistance may be relevant, as well as any further information and documentation that you may need over the course of the inquiry.

The Chairperson: Roisín, would you like to add anything at this point?

Ms Roisín McDonough (Arts Council of Northern Ireland): No, I am happy to deal with questions, Chair.

The Chairperson: In your opening statement, you said that excellence in the arts is for everyone. Do you think that there is perhaps a risk of dumbing down the arts in trying to reach a broader audience? Are there any risks associated with that?

Mr Collins: I do not think that it is remotely necessary that one should do that. Let me use an example from another area of life that touched us all recently. Regardless of whatever else may be happening in Russia, anybody who watched the winter Olympics and Paralympics in Sochi, or anybody who remembers, two years ago, the Olympics and Paralympics in London, will recall the way in which we were captivated, engaged and impressed by elite athletes performing at the absolute top of their game, literally and metaphorically. There is no need to urge people at that level to perform less effectively so that more people can get into the Olympics in order to ensure that everybody in the community can engage in sporting activity or enjoy sport. There is a parallel with the arts.

Any public policy in relation to the arts or public funding of the arts should aim to ensure that part of the outcome will be that the fullest potential that is available in Northern Ireland is given its fullest expression and that the innate ability that many people have can reach the zenith of its capacity. There is absolutely no contradiction between celebrating that type of excellence and ensuring, to the extent that it is possible, that everybody in the community, first, has their artistic and cultural choices respected, and, secondly, that nobody defines for them "This is the kind of the book you should read", as opposed to "This is a book you might like to read". They should have access to enjoy the arts to which they have contributed, and they should, to the greatest extent possible, be encouraged and given the opportunity to create whatever artistic output they can for themselves. Engagement with the arts is not satisfied by enjoying the performances of others. It will not be everybody's choice, any more than being actively involved in sport is everybody's choice, but I do not see a conflict between the two.

There is a risk in taking the view that the only way to spread is by thinning. I think that that is a false metaphor. This is like the example that I used from a previous life: that equality was a limited concept, and if I get more, there is less left for everybody else. In that sense, this is an unlimited good. However, it is not necessary to think remotely in those terms because excellence offers encouragement. Look at the increased number of youngsters who are running around with a rugby ball because of the performance either of the Ulster team or because of the Six Nations.

The Chairperson: You also said that there is a perception, whether it is real or not, that the arts are elitist. Your paper refers to the fact that we do not really capture the full range and diversity of arts activity that goes on in Northern Ireland, so people's relationship with the arts differs and what they perceive to be art is not necessarily what another person perceives to be art. That does not necessarily mean that you have to go to the Lyric or to the Grand Opera House on a regular basis to

be engaged with the arts, as art is around us daily. You can have an appreciation and involvement with the arts without realising it, and it adds a value and colour to your life that you are unaware of. Is there really a clear definition of "community art" as opposed to "art in the community"?

Ms McDonough: About four or five years ago, we made a submission to an inquiry that the Committee held into professional versus community arts. We were looking at a spectrum of activity that was underpinned by different principles and values at times. For example, when we look at our community arts strategy, we are seized by the definition that those who are involved in professional community arts practice, especially some of our wonderful infrastructural organisations such as the Community Arts Partnership, whom the Committee will be hearing from subsequently.

It is as much to do with the process and the authorship of the practice and the product that emanates at the end of it. It is the experience and the integrity of that experience that informs community arts practice in a way that they see as part of a wider community development movement in getting people to self-author and become masters of their own work in the sense of the particular piece of art or whatever practice they are engaged in. That is one set. That is part of the spectrum of a lot of activity that takes place at community level.

There are a lot of arts activity engagement opportunities at community level that are not necessarily community arts. Part of our submission to the last inquiry stated that there is a huge range of activity that occurs in local communities on a spectrum from the voluntary and amateur arts, which are huge in Northern Ireland and, which we have said, are not captured in the research, through to examples of excellent, highly professional practice, such as drama, the visual arts, public art or choirs. People are engaged in a huge range of activity. Our view and our orientation, as Bob articulated, is that we want to expand that and ensure that people have a broad range of engagements from which they can choose.

We are also very conscious of not wanting to restrict people's access to the arts in a particular community, because that would be wrong. We want to get people to experience the joy and value of engagement with the arts and the enrichment that it brings by bringing them out of local communities. We have wonderful venues and arts organisations, and we want to encourage that engagement as well; it is not just about what happens in a local community but about broader access.

The Chairperson: The Department's priority is to tackle poverty and social exclusion, and there is the challenge of the zero-based budgeting. How difficult has that been for the Arts Council and its core-funded groups?

Ms McDonough: Bob is the chairman, and he can speak about our approach to that. We have spoken to our arts organisations about the Minister's priorities through the language of access and participation, which is a frame of reference and a way of looking at what they do that they readily understand. That has been a good conversation; it is not one that they do not understand or are not comfortable with. In our submission, we say that virtually every organisation that we fund has, for a long time, had integrated into its core the principle of access and participation and outreach and engagement. That is what they do; it is not an optional extra.

We did the zero-based budgeting exercise, which was tough. We have asked our arts organisations, in light of the Minister's priorities, what more they can and should be doing. We have asked them to set targets for increasing access and participation to what it is they deliver, and we are working through that process with them. This is the final year of the settlement in advance of the funding decisions that we have made for 2014-15. We know that 2015-16 will be a tougher year.

Mr Collins: I want to make two brief points about that. First, we know as well as anyone the value of the public funding that we get and the significant trust that is placed in us as an organisation that receives public money at a time when money is scarce. We recognise that public investment does not take place in a vacuum and that there is an expectation of social benefit from public investment. That does not remotely erode the primary purpose of the allocation, which is the promotion of the arts. However, we do not hesitate or apologise, nor do the organisations that we fund take it amiss, when we say to them that in addition to what they do to create, develop and promote their art, they have to take serious account of returning to those people who contributed the funding the opportunity to have access in the wide sense about which I spoke earlier and to have greater participation. That is easier for some than for others, perhaps because of the more flexible nature of their art, but everybody has that responsibility, whether they are in a fixed building or they have implicit flexibility in the art form in which they engage.

As Róisín said, everybody recognises that responsibility; nobody demurs or cavils. Underlying that, as I said at the outset, is the issue of geography. Although a huge amount has been achieved with regard to physical arts infrastructure throughout Northern Ireland where nobody is more than 20 miles from a publicly funded arts venue, we should develop venues that are not traditional arts venues — the Happy Days festival in Enniskillen is a good example — and ensure that much is done to draw people in and bring the art out.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat. Thank you, Róisín and your team. You gave a very robust and passionate defence of the arts, and I concur with virtually everything that you said. The objective of the inquiry is to look at the accessibility and outreach of the venues and bodies. My experience of the arts would not recognise a class distinction per se across the board and, in fairness, your comparison, Bob, with the elite sports is valid, in that 99% of sports people will never be elite sports people. That is not to say that their value is any less. Likewise in the arts, some of the best artistic expressions that I have seen have been at music sessions in pubs, garage bands or whatever.

Being from a rural constituency, I suppose that I would talk about the distribution of funding and what is viewed as a disproportionate — not a differential or elitism — spend on what might be viewed as high arts. You know what I am saying. I have banged on in the past about the community festivals fund, which, on the face of it you would see as an all-inclusive rural/urban division; in practice, however, that is probably not necessarily the case. You said that 74% goes to the top 20 deprived areas, which is a very telling and welcome statistic. When people talk about a rural community, they often say that it is not really a deprived area. However, in my constituency, I have two wards that are much more deprived than any inner-city ward, and you can add to that accessibility, transport and all those other issues.

I welcome your admission about the barriers with regard to good practice that was shown by Derry during its City of Culture year. That is added to by the legacy issue that the Minister is rolling out, not only in Derry city but across the entire region, and she was in my constituency last Wednesday to do that. I am not being critical, but I see the disparity in funding for the likes of the Lyric Theatre, the Grand Opera House and everywhere else. You quoted the Verbal Arts Centre, which does very good work. However, it is still in an urban setting and not necessarily the most accessible venue for much of the community. Could I have your thoughts on a couple of those issues?

Ms Nóirín McKinney (Arts Council of Northern Ireland): Thank you for your question. I acknowledge that issue. When the Arts Council undertook its capital programme around Northern Ireland, it invested some £30 million in developing the infrastructure outside Belfast and Derry, and that was a very specific policy and target that we were proud to achieve. That is where we get the figure of a venue at least within a 20-mile radius of everyone in Northern Ireland. We are confident that there are no infrastructural cold spots in Northern Ireland now, and that has to be welcomed. That does not always get round the issues of access and transport that you highlighted.

However, there is still a less-developed infrastructure in rural areas. That is why we have programmes available to encourage those communities and to help organisations that may have less capacity to develop a local arts infrastructure. Our small grants programme is widespread across Northern Ireland and hits many rural areas. That is but one means. We also do a lot of work with locally based arts organisations where we have them.

Some areas are more developed than others; we have to acknowledge that. Newry, for example, has become a centre of excellence for children and young people through Sticky Fingers, which is a very dynamic organisation that runs a wonderful arts festival for very young people and which has ambitions to develop that. However, it is a slower start. We also have the Test Drive the Arts, whereby organisations are encouraged to bring people along so that they can experience the arts for the first time. Our premium payments scheme is there to help isolated communities and people in need to apply for additional costs, such as transport. However, we acknowledge that the rural infrastructure is not as well developed. The figures are stark.

Mr Ó hOisín: In fairness, I think that there should be almost positive discrimination to encourage that. Whether we like it or not, the vast majority of our population is rural and is more than 10 miles away from a venue or whatever paragon you put on it.

On the STEM/STEAM issue, there is important work to be done on education and the intercultural artistic programmes. More could be done on that.

Mr Collins: There are a few areas in life where more could be done. That is an evasive response, but I agree with you. STEM)/STEAM is very important. It is crucial, of course, that science, technology, engineering and mathematics are centralised in young people's educational and career planning. However, it is just as important that the arts be seen as a central part of what it is to be a human being and that its virtues and values be brought out.

Whatever our capacity for science, technology and numeracy, everybody begins life with an unlimited imaginative capacity. There is scarcely a child who has not given expression to that in the first 18 months of its life. That is simply part of what it is to be an emerging human being. However, we somehow contrive to switch it off or to discount it. That is not a critique of the education system. It happens in families. It happens to so many people. It is important to have the arts, in the widest sense of their meaning, centre stage.

On the earlier question, one of the things that I intended to say but did not is that none of the work that we are talking about can be done by any organisation acting on its own. It cannot be done by the Arts Council or by individual arts organisations on their own. There are possibilities available through partnerships and more close working between, for example, the Arts Council, museums and the Department of Education. However small the population bases, there are very few communities in Northern Ireland that do not have a school or a church that can be used as a venue, and they very frequently are. Almost every school is a publicly owned facility. There is potential for those venues to be used for exhibition purposes, for example. They are used, of course, but a great deal more can be done to reach out and bridge that evident gap. Urban centres have a magnetic impact, which they exert on a whole range of investment, not just the arts. I grew up in a very small village in Ireland, and, but for public investment in the wireless, as it was known then, and the library, the artistic experiences would have been fewer. At the same time, however, they were very rich experiences, because there was significant community involvement, through choirs, music and amateur drama. That happens in almost every community in Northern Ireland still. People are engaging in voluntary arts. Sometimes unsung and under-appreciated, they are opening up opportunities, developing audiences, providing outlets for talent and developing skills, which, in some cases, will go on to flower and be significant.

Mr Ó hOisín: Unsung, yes, and, in quite a number of cases, under-funded.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much for your presentation. Until September, I was a member of Belfast City Council. One of the most effective and best public servants whom I ever came across and had the privilege to work with was Damian Smyth from your organisation. I want to put that on record.

I listened very intently to your presentation, Mr Collins. I have a number of questions for you, given the remit of the investigation. How is your board appointed?

Mr Collins: Board members are appointed by the Minister following public competitions conducted under the guidance of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Mr Humphrey: Do you think that the current board, which you chair, is reflective or representative of the entire society in Northern Ireland?

Mr Collins: I am not sure on what axis you want to calibrate representativeness. It is the outcome of the public competitions that were held.

Mr Humphrey: For me, that is part of the problem. Many people in the working-class community, whether urban or rural, will, when they go through the public recruitment process that you talked about, be put off.

Mr Collins: I could not agree more.

Mr Humphrey: They will not know how to do it. I am not being critical of anyone when I say this, but, having looked at the board, I suggest that perhaps the working-class community is not sufficiently reflected or represented on the board.

Mr Collins: Nobody on the board is a representative of anybody, either of a class, a community or —

Mr Humphrey: I am talking about community.

Mr Collins: Nobody represents any community. However, you would need to be a well-established ostrich not to recognise that there is a serious issue with the composition of the boards of most public authorities in Northern Ireland. That is not because of any weakness of the individuals on the board, but because the appointment process is almost calculated to draw from a very narrow field: white, male, middle class and with experience of the public service. It is a fundamental difficulty and nothing to do with the Arts Council, in the sense that the Arts Council does not appoint its own board members. I know from communication with the Department that DCAL is looking at what it can do. However, it is an issue that goes much farther than that, because the complex structure of the appointment process is such that a whole range of people will be deterred.

Mr Humphrey: I agree entirely. I welcome your being so candid. It is not your fault; it is, nevertheless, a weakness, not just in the Arts Council but in recruitment to public boards. We end up with boards that are not reflective or representative of wider society in Northern Ireland. Indeed, in many cases, we get people who are very skilled at filling in the forms and serve on a number of boards; when they finish their term on one, they are then moved on to another. You said that some barriers are real and some are perceived. What does that mean in your experience and perhaps Róisín's experience?

Mr Collins: I think that what we were trying to say in that summary form was that when people were asked the reasons why they would not go to a culture or arts activity, lack of time and money were identified as significant issues. Sometimes, the assumption drawn from that is that cost of access to arts events is a barrier. Perhaps cost is not a barrier and people's practices are a reflection of individual preferences rather than a response to cost. If you look at the costs of going to events in the Odyssey or other musical or sporting events, you see that there can be costs associated with that which perhaps do not arise if you walk into the MAC, into a museum or into other arts or cultural venues to look at what is available. Trying to get a clear sense of what the actual barriers are is a complex and subtle exercise. That is why we refer to the notion of real and perceived barriers.

Ms McDonough: That is one of the reasons why Nóirín referred earlier to Test Drive the Arts. The people who had not felt as though they wanted to or could, or perhaps were a bit put off by the arts and felt that it was not for them, have had engagement with and experience of going to the arts. Through Audiences Northern Ireland, we are looking at how much repeat attendance there is as a consequence of that initial experience. Often, a volunteer will say, "Perhaps you have not thought about an art gallery, and it seems a bit daunting to go there. Come with me and we will talk our way through it". The perception that, "It is not for me" creates a barrier, whereas when people actually try something, they quite like it. The first step might be the problem.

Mr Humphrey: The Chair made the point earlier that, for many people in the community, their culture is something that helps to shape and mould them. They see it as their culture, but not as the arts. That is how I look at it. I think that there is a real problem. I remember being criticised by some in the arts establishment for saying that. Others — many more, I have to say — from across the community contacted me to say that they agreed with me. I have had conversations with playwrights. A while back, I had a conversation with Martin Lynch on the issue. He is one of the most eminent playwrights and he comes from my constituency, as does Gary Mitchell. Gary Mitchell makes the point:

"the Protestant working class perspective — the fact that they don't go to the theatre. They feel very much betrayed rather than portrayed by the arts in general, and that's why even I don't know the plays".

He was referring to a particular play. The key point there is that they feel betrayed rather than portrayed. Martin Lynch hoped to get young people from east Belfast, Sandy Row and the Shankill for his famous play 'The Titanic Boys'. He could not get those people, so he got people from west Belfast. I am not being critical. The same point could be made about Jonathan Burgess, the playwright from Londonderry. This needs to be addressed. I appreciate the work that the Arts Council is doing, and it is not just your job to resolve that problem, but this is one of the reasons why we are having the inquiry. We need to get working-class communities involved. Having spoken to Martin Lynch and Gary Mitchell, who comes from Rathcoole, also in my constituency, I know that this is a huge problem. I am speaking on behalf of my constituency, North Belfast, and, I have to say, being honest, from a unionist perspective. I have spoken to some of the people who contacted me. I know that you have been doing very good work, and I commend the work that you have been doing with the Spectrum Centre in the greater Shankill. I have had some complaints that mainstream funding from the Arts

Council is structured in such a way that community arts groups find it difficult to access it. Do you accept that, and, if that is the case, can something be done to make it more accessible?

Ms McDonough: I will take a couple of those points. In our submission, we said that £6-83 per person in Northern Ireland is given in annual funding to the arts. That is basically the price of a cinema ticket; and that is the modest resource that we have in devoted funds for distribution. Obviously, we have lottery funds as well, which enhance that figure. We talked about the pattern of distribution of our funding and where it principally goes. We are not here to over-egg any pudding. This is based on the Government's own assessment of the super output areas. We know that postcode location is not always a perfect match for where the beneficiaries come from. We understand all that, but it is the best method that Government has given us to arrive at that particular figure.

From my perspective, having been with the Arts Council for 12 or 13 years now, I know that it very self-consciously embarked upon a journey, quite some time ago, by which it wanted to alter and shift the historical pattern of its funding to engage and open up the arts to a greater degree than, perhaps, had hitherto been the case. That was self-consciously planned, including Nóirín's reference to rural infrastructural issues and the deficits there.

For the community arts, we have a very structured and, I hope, supportive ladder of progression, ranging from tiny little start-up grants for people who are not really sure what they want to do in a local area, through small grants, lottery project funding, and our annual funding programme. As has already been said, all the other programmes that we fund, including Reimaging Communities, the Arts and Older People programme, and the Intercultural Arts programme have strong roots and engagement. However small the amount of money there is, they are very firmly rooted in local community access to the responding programmes.

If we had more, we could do more.

Mr Humphrey: I appreciate that.

Ms N McKinney: Perhaps I could add just one comment? William, you said what a pleasure it was to work with Damian. That is a very welcome comment, and I just want to say that I hope, through your own experience, you have seen how our officers try to be as helpful as possible.

Mr Humphrey: Yes.

Ms N McKinney: I think that that goes across the board. Particularly with the community arts development officers and our small grants officer, everyone works at that level, and we will absolutely be as hands-on as we can to help organisations make application. I just wanted to say that.

Mr Humphrey: Just finally, during the presentation, you talked about core-funded organisations. You said that accessibility is encouraged. Is that benchmarked in any way so that, if there was a target for the next year or the second year of funding, its improvement is likely?

Ms McDonough: It is benchmarked.

Mr Collins: Benchmarking is more than encouraged. It is required.

Ms McDonough: It is a condition of the grant.

Mr Irwin: You are all very welcome to the Committee. Mr Humphrey has identified that some people in his community feel excluded. In the overall picture, in your opinion, do working-class communities feel more excluded from the arts than other communities? Sometimes, I think that exclusion is wider than that; it is not just the working class that feels excluded. Is it wider than that?

Mr Nick Livingston (Arts Council of Northern Ireland): We tried to highlight in our submission where we think there are groups in the population that are under-represented in the arts. That is perhaps the way I would put it. I draw your attention to the interventions and measures that we have established in recent years to try to address that. This morning we mentioned the innovative work that is done through the Arts and Older People programme. It is now into a second generation of funding. Lest we become witnesses in our own case, we have that inspected by an overseeing committee,

which is made up from other organisations that represent a broad cross section of older people in the community. That is quite an important point.

The second area that we touched on briefly is the work with incoming communities on the Intercultural Arts programme. Again, that is another area where we have identified, through the work that we did earlier, under-representation and gaps and activities that could be pursued to try to help that.

In his initial remarks, Bob touched on one or two other areas, particularly among disabled people in the community, whether they have physical, mental or sensory impairment. Specific activities are being undertaken to try to support that. Generally, we try to model most of our work on what is considered to be good practice. We try to be as proactive as possible in the pursuit of measures and interventions that will make a meaningful change to people's lives.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirleach. Thank you for the presentation. I commend you for your efforts to try to reach as many people as possible. Like most people, I believe that it is really important that everyone, or as many people as possible, have access to the special experiences that are not just a part of eating and drinking. You can just do something or get an experience that will lift your soul in some way, and I think that everybody should have the opportunity to have that. We have been talking about reaching socially deprived communities. I know about that from my own experience. I am from west Belfast and the community festival there has been running for well over 25 years. It has been a fantastic vehicle for allowing people access to different kinds of artistic experiences that they would not normally have, because that festival happens in the community. I am really happy that that festival has now expanded and reaches further. It no longer stops at west Belfast but reaches beyond it, into the city, and, for a long time, it has been going over to the Shankill part of west Belfast. That is brilliant.

The bit that disappoints me is that you get the programme every year and it is absolutely jam-packed. However, you can only do one thing at a time, and there are so many things that you cannot get to. In the end, you feel annoyed because it is there and you cannot do it. Would it not be better to spread it out over the year? Should arts not be funded in a way that allows it to be spread so that more people get the opportunity to do that and take advantage of those experiences? What you think about that?

Ms McDonough: We share the same frustration. We have a lot of festivals, and it is impossible to get to everything. Let me come to the substantive point that you make. I know that Féile an Phobail has other festivals that punctuate other times of the year, in the same way that the Cathedral Quarter has the Out to Lunch Festival and then the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival in May. We have talked about this before. I suppose that, on the plus side, festivals bring a concentrated focus. They draw your attention to something that is happening. You want to go to something because it happens at a particular time of the year, whereas in the background quite often there is much more. Think, in this instance, of an Cultúrlann on the Falls Road and other facilities which are open all year round, providing a routine programme.

There is a fair offering that people can engage with, either at a dedicated moment in the year or on a more extended basis during the course of the year. It is frustrating: every time I see a festival brochure, wherever it is from, I want to go but I cannot. Choice is a great thing.

Ms McCorley: It is that.

Ms N McKinney: If I can just add to that, Roisín is absolutely right in that festivals can bring a great focus, and I take your point, but I think that they all need to take stock every now and then. Belfast Festival at Queen's has been going for 50 years now, and it is just about to embark on a strategic review exercise, to ask where a festival of that scale is best located etc. It will look at the whole range, timing and so on, and the whole focus of the festival.

There is a new direction in festivals as well. I am a great fan of the niche festival, and we have got a fantastic new one in Northern Ireland in Enniskillen, the Happy Days Beckett Festival. It is a really fantastic model. Yes, it is highly specialised in a sense, but there is a whole range of activities, sports, readings, entertainment and comedy, all emanating from Beckett and his wonderful work. There is very clever planning for it. It is usually over the bank holiday weekend in August. It is a very good model of a niche or themed festival, and timing is also crucial. You can go and, if you have the weekend to spend, you can get to maybe 10 performances. So I think that they all need to take stock every now and then.

Ms McDonough: There is a festivals forum [*Inaudible.*] For example, Féile has been working in east Belfast, and festivals share knowledge and practice and try to encourage and help each other to develop and reflect on their growth. The east Belfast arts strategy that we have been involved in, and which is pertinent to this inquiry, is going to be launched this evening. We are seeing evidence of people sharing across the city, which is something that we encourage.

Ms McCorley: I was just going to ask how significant you feel community festivals are in breaking down community barriers.

Ms McDonough: Very. We recently undertook an analysis of how many festivals we fund. Some of them are dedicated festivals in their own right, and an organisation is established in order to run a festival, and many of them are community-rooted. Other organisations may be year-round organisations that have a festival as a bolt-on to their core activity. We have noticed a proliferation of locally rooted festivals across Northern Ireland that have flourished, and I think it has been an all-island phenomenon. People seem to love festivals, and a their focus and accessibility is very popular.

Ms McCorley: What do you think the impact of the withdrawal of the Ulster Bank funding from the Belfast Festival will be?

Ms McDonough: As Nóirín said, the festival is happening this year, and we are pleased about that. We are undertaking a strategic review in conjunction with Queen's. We have drawn up terms of reference for that. Not only has there been a diminution in the resources coming from the Ulster Bank but European funding, which the festival was successful in getting under the previous cultural programme, has ended. It got that funding for three years. Both of those issues have had to be addressed. But more than funding, as Nóirín alluded to, is that, after 50 years, I think that you have to reflect on a lot of issues there: is it more town than gown, or is it the other way round? How can it develop other partnerships? Should it continue to be located in Belfast and be called the Belfast Festival at Queen's? There are a lot of issues. Is there still a need for an international festival in, in this instance, Belfast? So, there are a lot of areas to be thought through and looked at. Is the current model the best one? Could it be located elsewhere and operate in partnership with others, making it much more rooted across all parts of the city? Those are all big questions that we have that we hope the review will deal with. No doubt, we or the festival organisers themselves will come back to the Committee to advise of progress on that.

Ms McCorley: I have one last question. I believe in bringing the arts and related programmes into schools so that you can influence children when they are young, regardless of what community they come from. That is key. What way do you approach schools that do not engage very well or do not have a very good record of engagement in the arts? How do you engage with them? Is it the role of the projects to go out, or is it the school's role to invite them in? What is the process? A concern is that you might have schools that do not bother to engage for whatever reason, and they might just be left out.

Mr Livingston: With the limited resources that we have, we fund a number of organisations that engage with young people. I absolutely accept your point about that being pivotal moment in the personal development of the child, their mental and intellectual acuity and their ability to engage and grow as young learners. So, it is a very important point.

There are a number of organisations that we fund that are doing spirited, engaging, interesting and very relevant work. The problem is that there are finite limits to what we can fund. Some of those organisations fall within the core group of organisations that are funded on an ongoing basis and others come in for project funding from time to time.

There is one thing that I will mention; it is perhaps a little a tangential but it is relevant. We have a new pilot starting with the Public Health Agency (PHA) shortly, which will test a number of assumptions, particularly among young learners who are at risk within society. That project will be rolled out over the next three years. So, that is another area where the arts could be effective as a vehicle, not just for engaging with young learners but for dealing with some of the issues that they confront.

Mrs McKeivitt: Thanks very much for the presentation this morning. In all of the presentations and all of the answers, the word "community" has been used, whether by elected representatives or you. Terms like "community challenges", "community engagement" and "community access" have also been used. In your submission, you welcome the Northern Ireland Assembly research paper that examines social inclusion in the arts in Northern Ireland. You say that it is:

"a good starting point for dialogue."

You say that it is based on publicly funded arts. You go on to talk about engagement with the non-ticketed arts and the voluntary arts, to which there are no references in the research.

Your submission states that your research, which was conducted independently by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), says something different. How important could that research could be in this investigation?

Ms McDonough: The basic point that we were making, and Bob's earlier reference made this clear, is that we were not criticising people in any way. We were just saying that it did not capture the full range of types of artistic activity with which people could engage. It drew on publicly funded arts, and the issue around ticketing is that there are, obviously, free activities, which do not require any tickets. Capturing data on who comprise the audiences for those activities is a lot more complex and difficult. We ask our arts organisations to try to capture beneficiaries, which we can only do through postcode location measurement instruments. Ticketing organisations obviously have the data-capture technology, and we encourage organisations like Audiences NI to analyse that data so that we know which postcode somebody comes from, what performance they went to and what they like. They can then use that to try to expand and diversify audiences, because it is really important to know who is not coming as well as who is coming. There are limitations to the data capture that are inherent in events that are not ticketed. We recognise those.

Nick, who is the director of strategic development, can speak better than I can about the general population level of attendances. NISRA carries out that research for us. When we look at the general population level and do a sample, we find slightly different evidence. Nick, maybe you would like to amplify that point.

Mr Livingston: There is a narrowness to the piece of work that you quoted. That is understandable, as it looked at activities that are transaction-based. When you, if you like, zoom out and look at the population as a whole and commission work that tests that at a population-wide level, you build up a much broader picture of the type of artistic activities that people are engaged in. It goes much beyond the piece of work that is based on the transactions. There is a limit to only using data that is based on transactions. It will not capture information on the vast array of other things that other people are engaged in.

Mrs McKeivitt: The non-ticketed events are probably my preference for an introduction to the arts for my family. You get that introduction when you go to that local drama group, and you know Joe Bloggs on the stage or maybe the children's friends are on the stage. That even goes as far as buskers on the street who introduce children who are walking past to music and the recognition of music. That is very important. I am not sure how you would go about measuring it, but to say that it does not exist, particularly in rural areas, is wrong. It is there. Knowing that those figures might not be included might be a problem. I recognise that.

I would like to thank Nóirín for mentioning the centre of excellence that is run by Sticky Fingers in Newry. We have seen that grow over the past few years in particular, and it is a really big thing. It has introduced not just children but their parents to the arts, and it would be something else if more of that could happen across the North.

Mr Ó hOisín: I want to make a quick point. I will maybe touch on what Rosie said about cultural fatigue over short periods. I know that you need a week off after the West Belfast Festival [*Laughter.*] The same argument was made about the City of Culture: that we would be cultured out over the year. However, because of the diversity of everything that was done there, we were not cultured out, and it brought us to a different level.

You talked about niche festivals and what have you. I have spoken at enough summer schools and winter schools — I have attended them all — and I always thought that they were very constricted. I am thinking of a festival that might be the future of festivals. It has poetry, art, music, dance, sculpture, philosophy and all the rest of it. It is all there. It is the Stendhal Festival of Art at Ballymully Cottage Farm in Limavady.

Ms McDonough: Good.

Mr Ó hOisín: That is my plug for it. I hope that it will get support.

Ms McDonough: Absolutely. That was why I was keen mention the Beckett festival as another example. There has been a whole-town investment in that festival, and it transforms the town for that week.

Mr Ó hOisín: I think that the Stendhal festival is something radical and new that will continue to be there. It might be the future of festivals.

Ms McDonough: We agree.

The Chairperson: We thank you for your presentation and for making your submission. Obviously, you are the first that we have heard from in this inquiry. If possible, could you maybe come back towards the end of the inquiry? There may be questions that come through from various other presentations that we may feel appropriate for you to discuss and explore with us a little further before we start to make our recommendations. If you would be happy enough to do that, we would welcome it.

Mr Collins: We would be very happy to do that. Thank you again for the opportunity. Before we finish, I want to refer to a point that Mr Irwin made. I think that it is important and that you might find echoes of it throughout your inquiry. That is people feeling distanced from or unreflected by the arts. It is testament to the fact that there can be an enduring power in some old-fashioned parodies, clichés and caricatures of the way life was, yet that was the case in most western societies; there was a distinction between high art and popular art, and the arts were the preserve of the few. It was a pretty universal phenomenon. However, the world has so dramatically changed. They are clichés and they are out of date, but they are powerful. There are very few people who would not be touched by music; there are very few people who cannot appreciate the quality of good cinema; and there are very few people for whom the power of a theatrical presentation can bypass them completely, whether that is in a local amateur drama group in a village hall or in a church hall. However, the people who provide the technical skills that enable some of those wonderful digital feature films to be made get their basic training in learning art in school and going to the Art College in Belfast. For those people who are in the creative industries in Belfast, their basic training is in a publicly funded arts institution.

People who appreciate music engage with the arts as much as anybody else. In the same way as we talk about people being blinded by science, it is not an accident that the term, if you will excuse it, "arty-farty" has gone into the popular lexicon. It was because it was distanced from people, yet people have no difficulty in enjoying really good output; they recognise it when they hear it or see it.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much.