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Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working-
class Communities: Minister of Culture, Arts
and Leisure

1 May 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 Dominic Bradley
Mr David Hilditch
Ms Rosaleen McCorley

Witnesses:

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín	Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mrs Angela McAllister	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

The Chairperson: I welcome the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Carál Ní Chuilín; and Angela McAllister, head of arts from DCAL. You are both very welcome.

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Thank you. Good morning.

The Chairperson: Unfortunately, Minister, we do not have a quorum to make decisions but we do have a quorum to take evidence from you. Hopefully we will have a full meeting, and further members will arrive throughout the briefing. You should make your opening statement and we will follow up with some questions.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you, Chair, members and Committee staff. As I said to you outside, given the nature of the quorum today, if there is a need to come back or provide any further information on the statement or the questions that will follow, I am happy to do so. DCAL staff are happy to do that as well.

I thank the Committee for its inquiry into the inclusion of working-class communities in the arts. The Committee will be aware of DCAL's written evidence, which was provided on 12 March this year, and, with members' indulgence, I will expand on that today.

I welcome the Committee's interest in inclusion in the arts as it is an issue of very real interest to me as Minister. The arts clearly contribute to the economy, the environment, education, and health and well-being. I have often said, and I firmly believe, that without the arts we would have a dull and insipid society. The arts are not a luxury to be enjoyed by an elite few, they should be enjoyed by all who wish to enjoy them regardless of community background, age, gender, disability, race, sexual orientation, political opinion or income level. As Minister, I want everyone and all communities to have equal and beneficial access to the high-quality arts provision that our organisations offer. I believe that accessing and participating in the arts is a social justice issue.

According to the findings from the continuous household survey research exercise, adult participation rates in the arts were 31% lower in the most deprived areas. Attendance rates were 77% and again were lower in the most deprived areas. The research also confirmed that participation was lower among those who had never worked, had no qualifications or had a limiting or long-term illness.

I know that there is some very good arts provision, and I see that provision daily. I believe that arts organisations can get smarter in reaching out to communities and in going into partnerships with organisations such as schools and community groups to find a broader path to equality and access for all. That is where my Department can help a very willing arts community.

A recent example is DCAL's support for the Ulster Orchestra in piloting an innovative approach to social inclusion in deprived areas. The approach was inspired by the world-renowned El Sistema model, which uses the inspirational dynamics of orchestras to promote learning and participation. An example of that is that children from primary 2 classes in the Good Shepherd Primary School in the Colin area of west Belfast, and in Malvern and Wheatfield primary schools in the greater Shankill, had a series of workshops and worked with the Ulster Orchestra players to prepare themselves to become musicians. It involved the children making their own papier mâché and cardboard violins, but the basis was to learn the autonomy of the instrument, how to act together in an orchestra and the basics of rhythm and melody. The children then joined the orchestra in a community performance in the heart of each area to inspire family and friends and, indeed, the wider community.

The Ulster Orchestra now works with those schools and those children and will be working over the next year with real instruments in the classroom. DCAL not only provided funding for that pilot programme but played a key role in connecting the orchestra to community groups in those areas and linking into the wider activity in the community.

I have also taken action for communities in the north-west by providing two neighbourhood renewal areas that support the delivery of cultural strategies and the development of the cultural life of communities there, and that will provide greater opportunities for those communities to participate in a wide range of cultural and educational activities.

The economic impact of the arts and culture is beginning to be documented in a number of reports. In respect of tourism and increased expenditure, this has added to income generation. I will continue to make strong arguments for funding for the arts, as I firmly believe that investment in music, dance, theatre, creativity, literature, creative industries, to name a few examples, can transform people's lives and outlooks.

Many art forms have a lot to offer in improving confidence and communication skills. That is particularly important among young children from low-income families. In 2011, a report by the Cultural Learning Alliance concluded that students from low-income families who take part in the arts and activities at schools are three times more likely to get a degree. Participation in the arts can also build up character capabilities. Research has shown that children from deprived backgrounds are more likely to lack self-confidence. A fear of failure among those children can hold them back educationally and socially. Therefore, participation in the arts builds confidence and spurs individuals on to try new things and pick themselves up if they fail. No doubt, that can be said for sport as well.

After-school film clubs, an initiative by NI Screen, offers children from schools in disadvantaged areas the opportunity to view and discuss films of their choice that they might not normally have the opportunity to see. At the heart of the initiative is the belief that film broadens their minds and contributes to a creative expression among people. Some 269 primary schools benefited from the initiative in 2013, and it will be extended to 2014. Film clubs are held on school premises after the normal school day, which has proven to be a helpful resource for working parents in respect of the potential not only to reduce childcare costs but to provide participation in the film industry. The MAC also offers the Den as a dedicated space for children and young people to be creative and get involved in the arts. The Den offers an opportunity to meet other young people and learn more about working in the creative industries and gain valuable experience for future careers.

The arts can provide the inspirational launch pad for young people and others into careers in creative industries. The work of the DCAL learning centres, managed through NI Screen, blends artistic expression and the use of digital technology skills. Those creative skills are the core foundations for many creative enterprises such as animation, visual effects, film and television production. As the Committee is aware, the Executive's draft innovation strategy has recognised the importance of creativity and the potential for arts in a cultural base to support education and lifelong learning.

DCAL is committed to establishing and nurturing a creative industries pipeline from which more creative people, creative ideas and creative businesses can emerge and flourish. The key to that is making better communications between arts-based activities, community engagement initiatives and the support available to grow fledgling ideas and dreams into creative careers and new businesses. Links between, for example, music projects in local schools and communities and careers and business support are available through government programmes such as Generator NI, DCAL's music business support programme and Invest NI.

So, the role of the arts and creative learning in supporting creative industries will be a key theme for a creative industries conference that I am holding on 14 May in the city of Derry. On 11 June, the DCAL learning award ceremony will take place to profile innovative approaches to education and lifelong learning being taken forward across the DCAL family. There has been, and, to some extent, there still exists, an attitude that high arts are not for everyone and that they are for the intellectual and economic elite. That is a perception that some had in relation to the Ulster Orchestra, and, hopefully, through the example that I have just mentioned members will be able to ascertain that that is changing. People may also want to know that the orchestra runs a number of initiatives to ensure increased access to the arts for all members of the community. For example, its Hear our Voice programme, through the orchestra players, works with marginalised and excluded community groups.

The Lyric has done excellent work and is really keen to outreach to communities. Its super saver initiative makes performance tickets available to community groups for just £5.00. DCAL's work is focused on the twin strands of equality and excellence. Those are spread across all our work in arts and culture. I am committed to harnessing the transformative powers of arts and culture to deliver on the cross-cutting priorities of promoting equality and tackling poverty.

My Department sponsored a Christmas pantomime ticketing initiative and made free tickets available for shows in the Grand Opera House, the MAC and the Lyric over the 2013 festive period. The initiative was piloted across the Belfast area to individuals and community groups in socially deprived areas who would not otherwise have had the opportunity to attend a pantomime. The event was highly successful, with 93% of attendees stating that if it was not for the initiative, they would have been unable to take their children to performances mainly for financial reasons.

Arts is also used as a way of outreach. There are other examples that I want to use, and there are many that I do not have time to give. Participation in the arts can also be seen in the use of care homes in the community to help older people cope with isolation and loneliness. One good example of that is NI Screen's digital film archive outreach. Its outreach programme remains hugely popular, with 59 presentations delivered to almost 1,700 people between April 2013 and March 2014. Notable recent activity included a series of sessions in County Fermanagh as part of a project designed to tackle isolation among older people in rural communities.

The arts are also being used in our hospitals, introducing a reassuring human dimension to clinical environments, and in local neighbourhoods, driving the many successful neighbourhood regeneration programmes, for example, the re-imaging programmes, which are enabling residents to rebuild their communities. The re-imaging programmes are an example that is at the heart of communities. Again, they are mostly in working-class areas that are seeking to renew and reclaim the public spaces that belong to the wider community as a whole. The aim of the funding is to encourage local communities to work creatively with artists in tackling issues and to connect the arts to areas not usually associated with them.

More generally, the Arts Council's public arts programme is designed to support the commissioning of new art for public spaces throughout the North. A wide range of media and art forms are embraced as public art. They include painting, sculpture, photography, installation, video and new media, temporary works, crafts, and applied arts. Applications that involve community participation and associated activities, which contribute to the growth of arts in the community and reflect the diversity of our society and culture, are particularly welcomed.

As I said earlier, although time is not limited, there are loads of examples I could give. I have given a few such examples, but I want to mention not only the City of Culture, which we have covered extensively, but the partnerships promoted and developed with the cultural programme for the World Police and Fire Games last year. I appreciate that I have given you only a few examples, and that there are many others. Without prejudice, anyone who listens to this session or reads the report of it should not feel that because they were not mentioned that I do not value or appreciate them; I do. We have been, and will continue to be, aspirational in our approach. I believe that truly outstanding

results will emerge from the SMART realistic and achievable targets. The passion and energy required is there. DCAL will continue to build on its excellence and success in repositioning itself as a Department that can not only support, partner and collaborate with others, but which will have an outcome through delivery. That is what most people want.

DCAL also delivers targeted public resources to sectors and groups in our society facing the greatest pressures. That is where culture and arts will come in. Culture, arts and leisure are important facets of sustainable economic growth, as well as vital levers for the promotion of equality and participation. There are many ways that the arts sector and culture more generally can be used to achieve those aims, whether it is through job creation, the delivery of educational skills and initiatives and outreach work. Without further delay, I thank the Committee again for giving me the opportunity to make a short presentation. It is over to you for questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. Thank you for the detailed paper. What do you consider to be the barriers to inclusion?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am from a working-class area, and I still live in a working-class area. One of the barriers would have been finance. There are still financial barriers, but there are also psychological barriers. I did not live too far from great iconic buildings like the Grand Opera House and many others, but I did not feel that they were for me. However, I was privileged enough to grow up in a musical household and was lucky to be reared against the background of BB King and other greats.

I participated in the arts, and I think that participation in the arts is a very subjective exercise. A barrier certainly would have been the money, and we would not have had the money to go to pantomimes or plays, but we had books, the radio and records, and I was lucky to grow up in a family with a very open mind.

The realistic position for many families, particularly from deprived areas, is that a lot of the barriers to the arts are financial. Some of them are also still psychological.

The Chairperson: It has been well documented that, since you became Minister, you have not attended a theatre production in a theatrical venue. Was that a conscious decision?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It may be well documented, but it is not factually correct. I have attended productions in a theatrical setting. I was at one last night. I have also attended productions such as community based plays and as part of a recent children's arts programme in the MAC. Again, I would say that participation in the arts is subjective. I also go to a lot of concerts and gigs. I go to galleries and photographic exhibitions. Like many others, I participate in the arts daily. It is about how we describe our participation in the arts. I find it very subjective.

As the member and other members will know, DCAL has 11 arm's-length bodies. Although the arts are very important, there are many other demands on my time, and I am very keen to ensure that my time is spread out as equally as possible to give value and status to the events that I attend.

I find it amusing that there is a perception that, unless you go to the theatre all day every day, you have no interest in the arts.

The Chairperson: You outlined a number of excellent programmes that are going on in communities. However, there are also incidences in which an expectation was raised in those communities. Those involved were very much like the circus that comes to town, raises expectations and then leaves. They tick the box to access the funding but do not leave a legacy. Is that not an issue that needs to be addressed when funding some of those projects?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have spoken to a few theatre companies, and they are quite happy to perform in, for example, An Cultúrlann, the Spectrum Centre on the Shankill, or on the stages of the Lyric, the Crescent, the MAC, the Grand Opera House or wherever else. They are just as happy performing in those local venues as elsewhere. When they are performing in those areas, they are not only really keenly aware that it is their job and ambition to leave us with an inspiration, a thought or an emotion, but they would be absolutely delighted if their performance encouraged others to get involved in the arts.

The legacy is, again, subjective. Tony Devlin's play, 'Man in the Moon', which is primarily about the impact of suicide and suicide prevention, was staged in north Belfast at the weekend. I spoke to

parents at a sports event on Monday evening, who told me how the play had impacted on them. It is not that they did not have the information; they just got it through a different medium.

Is there a need for more investment in the arts so that people from all communities can be inspired to become artists, creative thinkers and performers? Absolutely. However, it is not fair nor true to say that there is a conflict and a contradiction between needing better investment, particularly to bring the arts to areas that do not normally get to see them, and artistic excellence. There is a need to try to support those areas. The example of the pilot project with the Ulster Orchestra in schools is leaving a legacy, but that is an obvious gap and it is my duty to make sure that those gaps are closed. I do not want anyone thinking that people involved in arts, particularly the performing arts, are happier on a stage in one of the bigger theatres than they are in a community setting. That is not the case.

The Chairperson: I accept that to be the case. However, there is sometimes a difficulty whenever they move into community and people become involved for a very short period of time. There is probably an excitement and a buzz around that at that particular time, but there is no lasting legacy, such as support coming in after that or pathways being created for young people who have developed a talent or have been discovered in some way so that they can move forward and get involved in those careers.

Ms Ní Chuilín: There is an example in my constituency of North Belfast, going into west Belfast. I do not want to talk too much about Derry or be disrespectful to the City of Culture, but those areas still face huge challenges, particularly around interfaces, vulnerability to the criminal justice system, poor mental health and a lack of employment. The work that the Ulster Orchestra and many others have done, including plays in the Spectrum Centre and Cultúrlann, and a play about legal highs called 'Pop Candy', bring not only an educational value and awareness but an expectation from young people, who maybe looked at films and harbour ideas of wanting to be an actress or an actor, that they can do it. When it is linked to partnerships with the community and education, and when many other stakeholders are involved, the sustainability of those projects is greater. There is also a greater expectation because the participation, or the opportunity to participate, is increased as well. You are right: the worst thing you can do is bring something in, raise expectations and then walk out and leave people worse off than they were originally. That is not what any of us want.

We are looking at pilot schemes, such as the one delivered by the orchestra and many others, to see what works and what we can build on. We can also look to see where the gaps are. We then need to target the funding. When we say "target the funding", that is not taking funding off people receiving it at the minute; it is actually additional funding. I want to give additional funding to the arts, but I am going to do it on the basis of need. I am getting under the skin of that need to make sure that people tell me what is needed and what has worked, and to make sure that we also look at how communities, schools, companies and artists are involved, and then we will take it from there.

The Chairperson: I also make the case for rural communities in the absence of others who are not here. There is always very much a focus on Belfast and Londonderry. There are pockets of deprivation elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely. Half of the Arts Council's funding for older people was outside the two cities. That is the way it should be. The Arts Council's capital investment programme states that no one should be 20 minutes away from an arts venue. However, let us be honest about it: there are gaps in areas from the top 10% of the most deprived and rural communities. We need to do our best to make sure that those gaps are closed rather than widened.

Mr Hilditch: I want to take up with you where you are at. Looking through the notes today, a lot of it was Belfast-centric or about the City of Culture. That is not being too critical because, obviously, those are the two main venues and they are not totally out of the road from everybody, to be fair. I asked you before, Minister, about trying to develop something along the lines of Culture Night in a more provincial way. You said that you would take that onboard. Culture Night is obviously a great experience for people and families. Anyone within a 30-mile radius who has an interest will probably make their way into Belfast for that. Has anything happened with trying to get that sort of cultural night theme out to other towns?

Ms Ní Chuilín: In fairness, you were not the only person to raise it. I think that people looked particularly at what was happening with Culture Night in Belfast and wanted some of that. That is a good thing. They also looked at the events around Derry, and they wanted some of that as well. Members are aware of the north-west and Limavady, Dungiven, Strabane, Coleraine and all the rest. I

have met groups and culture providers from other parts who are keen to explore the potential, maybe in September, of looking at how their town, village or community can have, or partner up with, cultural activities. I think that it would be brilliant if we could have culture nights right through the month of September; but people are not asking for me to go the areas, for example your constituency, and say, "There needs to be stuff in Carrick. There is your money. Just go and do whatever it is". As I said to you before, I think that we have a great opportunity through RPA and the work of local government, along with some of the cultural providers and the community groups who are bursting and champing at the bit to get out and do this stuff. I am looking forward to seeing the plans, and I actively encourage people to come forward with initiatives.

Mr Hilditch: One of the successes has been the Community Festivals Fund reaching out. Could that be worked in tandem with themed guidelines in relation to how that money is spent?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The theme is community festivals, and it is really up to the applicants to define what they consider to be a festival. I am loath to get involved in prescribing what is a festival and cultural activity. I think that that is the wrong road to go down. So, it is loose and open enough for people to come forward with how they feel they could celebrate a culture night or get involved in festivals. I think that what is needed, maybe even through that fund and other opportunities, is more coming together and more connections and partnerships, for example around the provision of a culture night or a festival as part of a cultural programme and cultural offerings.

As we spoke about earlier, maybe we need to think a bit smarter about what money is there, what else we need to do and how we can get other sponsors and other investment in. People are very proud and very staunch about the Community Festivals Fund, and they all want more of it. What that more of it looks like has yet to be seen, and I am keen to see what those plans may be. We have great cultural programmers across the entire North who have been willing, and are willing, to engage further with communities and partnerships to try to develop further cultural activities.

Mr Hilditch: As part of the Backin' Belfast campaign, there was a scheme for free tickets for communities. Even the Committee has work to do, because our responses were very Belfast-centric. Could that be expanded by the Department to try to get into the more provincial towns by providing free tickets to some venues? I take it that it was a success in Belfast.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It was a huge success in Belfast. We had 93% participation. I have no doubt that it was a huge success in Belfast. I put the investment into the Backin' Belfast campaign because some of the protests around flags were putting people off coming into the city.

We needed to make sure that people who normally would not have availed themselves of an opportunity to go to a pantomime around Christmas time had the opportunity to do so in the worst month of year when belts really get tightened. I am sure that you are making the point that those people are not based exclusively in Belfast or Derry. The Backin' Belfast campaign was not primarily about finance but was about getting people into the city to spend money, if they had money, and making sure that people who did not have money to spend still had the opportunity. So, I am keen to have a look, but it has to be based on identified need. Part of the cultural offering of people coming together for a culture night may involve doing something around Christmas.

Mr Hilditch: On a different theme, the Re-imagining Communities project through the Arts Council was about taking away the old murals from gable walls that are not wanted any more, and that has been successful. Is it planned to continue that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It had been successful, and I think that the plans are —

Mrs Angela McAllister (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): It will continue for the next three years.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, particularly with the European funding. Again, there was an attitude to go outside Belfast because the programme had been so successful in Belfast. I am sure that the member will be happy to hear that. I am sure that everyone will agree that some brilliant work was done in Re-imagining Communities, but that some of the murals have been replaced by murals that people claim that they do not want. We need to look to expand how the community can be empowered to replace those murals yet again.

Mr Hilditch: I have certainly seen people getting involved in that way through interventions at grass-roots level.

Ms Ní Chuilín: We had discussions with some of the artists involved in Re-imaging Communities. I thought that they provided a beautiful art form. It is subjective, but I enjoy graffiti art, although it is seen as antisocial behaviour here. However, the Re-imaging Communities programme gave people a pathway into employment that they would not otherwise have had. Those artists also went beyond the artistic integrity of simply putting up a mural. They were involved in engagement with the communities, outreach, community empowerment and partnerships with others. There is a big sense of civic pride in having those murals replaced and a big sense of civic disappointment — even grief — when the new murals were replaced by unwanted images. So although the fund has been extended, there is much more work for us to do. I think that all political representatives face greater challenges now than ever before.

Mr D Bradley: Maidin mhaith.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Maidin mhaith, a Dhoiminic.

Mr D Bradley: Tá fáilte romhat go dtí an Coiste. Go raibh maith agat as an chur i láthair; bhí sé an-suimiúil ar fad. Thank you very much for the presentation, which was very interesting. You say that you are not inclined to put any less value on a performance in a community setting than in one of the big cultural institutes such as the Opera House, the Lyric, the MAC, and so on. I see what you are getting at. I have been a member of several local drama groups. They have not invited me back for a while. I wonder why. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is obviously nothing to do with your performance in the Assembly, Dominic.

Mr D Bradley: It was probably because of my last performance on the boards rather than at the Assembly.

I accept what you say, but, at the same time, it is a special experience to go somewhere such as the Lyric, particularly the new Lyric, or the Opera House. The MAC is a smaller venue. Given that it is a special experience, I am keen that more people from rural communities go there. I was interested in what you said about pantomime tickets and encouraging people who may not otherwise be able to go to attend. Is there any way that we could extend that to other venues?

One problem is that people do not have the confidence to go on their own. Sometimes, they do not have the means to travel on their own. The combined cost of a ticket and travel is prohibitive. One way to encourage more people to attend bigger venues might be ticket concessions, help with transport and a scheme whereby community groups could go as a group. I am not saying that those bigger venues are in any way better than local venues, but, as I said, it is a special experience because of professional performances, the size of the venue and the technical advances that can be brought to a show, which local groups cannot do.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I want to be clear, and I will use a sporting context. I have a son who is a mad hurler. Although he plays on excellent pitches in Belfast, I am sure that his goal is to play at Croke Park. So why should children, young people and artists not aspire to tread the boards at the bigger venues, with all their equipment and infrastructure? I have no issue with and fully understand that.

Belfast has particular challenges, one of which is poverty. That is not to say that other areas do not have citizens who are not impoverished or experiencing hard financial times. I would be keen to see what other arts venues across the North do, particularly around Christmas time, if there were opportunities for that scheme to be extended. I am not saying no, but I need to see evidence of the activities.

You are 100% right. If, for example, someone from your constituency wants to go to Belfast, what is putting them off is money. For a lot of people, particularly in rural areas, it involves transport costs, parking, the price of tickets, getting something to eat and getting home again. You could be looking at £100 even before you buy a programme. I appreciate that. I encourage arts venues to look at partnerships, which also applies to David's question about festivals. Smart thinking on collaboration enables greater participation, and I want to see what that looks like.

Mrs A McAllister: Are you aware of the Test Drive the Arts NI initiative by Audiences NI, whereby free or concessionary tickets are made available to community groups? That might be something to think about.

Ms Ní Chuilín: However, even if free tickets were made available, Dominic's point is that if, say, there were 50 tickets for the Grand Opera House or 20 tickets for the Crescent and someone lives in Newry and does not have the bus fare, the tickets may as well not be free. It is relative. Even if 50 tickets were available in Armagh or wherever, we need to make sure that access and participation are not prevented by people not having the money in their pocket to go there in the first place.

Mr D Bradley: As I said, some people do not have confidence individually, and they would feel more confident and relaxed about going to an event as part of a group.

Research states that early engagement with the arts is more likely to blossom into a lifelong attachment to the arts, and I think that that is true. I want to ask you about the link between your Department and the Department of Education. I have seen some of the plays on legal highs, bullying and litter that you referred to being performed in schools. At one stage, there was a touring group that was funded by the Arts Council. When I was at school, it was called Interact, but it has probably been through a couple of name changes since then. I do not know whether it is still in existence.

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are a few, Dominic. There are still some partnerships with the Department of Education and with the Department of Health. Through the extended schools programme in the Department of Education, some schools are in partnership with theatre companies, because there is value in that. When children are involved in the arts — particularly the performing arts but also with music or dance — it is about building self-esteem and confidence. When that happens, there is no question that it stands us all in good stead.

The Replay Theatre Company recently staged a production in partnership with the Department of Education and the Department of Health. The company works particularly with children with disabilities, severe physical disabilities and special needs. I had the privilege of going to a performance in Tor Bank to see Replay and what it does. It is absolutely exceptional. Although some of the children may have profound disabilities, you can see that there is engagement and stimulation through that engagement. That has helped and supported schools, parents and carers. Plays such as 'Pop Candy', which is about legal highs, plays that deal with bullying, 'Man in the Moon', which is about suicide prevention, and many others that we could mention individually all have a value. Children and young people, and not so young people at my age, are involved in telling stories that communities feel are relevant to them. They have personal experiences, which will touch a chord.

They are examples of where we can make connections and sustain them. From an economic point of view, it will provide work for performers and companies, and it has the added value of having an impact on children's life skills and lifelong learning, which we need to invest in constantly. Well-rounded children will be well-rounded adults.

Mr D Bradley: It starts an engagement with the arts at a young age.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely.

Mr D Bradley: It is good that pupils can see performances in their own schools. They are then more likely to become interested in the arts.

In the Chamber on Monday or Tuesday past, I asked you about the strategies for Irish and Ulster Scots. Will an arts strategy be built into that? I know that you received comments about the arts in some submissions.

Ms Ní Chuilín: They are all built into the strategies. The Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge work with a lot of groups that are involved in bands, performing, storytelling, oral history projects and music. They are all there. I was delighted with the responses to the consultation. I feel that the consultation is more robust and richer for that feedback. Irrespective of the Irish-language and Ulster-Scots strategies, I do not think that any organisation can say that it works purely on one theme or sector. Although it might be their primary function, all others have had a great opportunity to creep in and become firm friends, for want of a better description. The arts are not invisible in those strategies. Both the Irish language body and the Ulster-Scots Agency have power in maintaining and sustaining aspects of the arts. I will go back to the discussion that we had moments ago; when children and

young people go through those sectors and avail themselves of all those services and facilities, it will help them in their lifelong learning, life skills and, particularly, their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Mr D Bradley: Will the arts aspect of the Irish-language and Ulster-Scots strategies be bolted on to the Arts Council's work?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is primarily about Departments, so that is my responsibility. Indeed, I have seen, even going back to Bamford or Investing for Health, that the Arts Council and many others are very good at responding to the public's needs. I have no doubt that the Arts Council, museums, libraries, sport or any other members of the DCAL family will not be slow to react to needs, particularly when there is a government-led strategy.

Mr D Bradley: I was going to ask you about the importance of a first-class venue for the arts. I mention Newry, but I have raised that with you once or twice before.

Ms Ní Chuilín: You have, and you have got it on record again, Dominic — maith thú. *[Laughter.]*

Mr D Bradley: I have no doubt that it is still at the front of your mind.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Grainne was involved in the Small Size, Big Citizen citizenship programme in Newry.

Mr D Bradley: Yes, and Sticky Fingers.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes. That all-Ireland programme was done with European money and some departmental money. Not only did they look at citizenship and access to the arts as something to which we are all entitled rather than being a luxury, but they identified that, in order for people to feel valued as citizens, they need to have access to good public services. That includes good arts venues. Grainne and others, including you and my own colleagues, have raised the issue of good access, particularly in Newry. So the issue has been raised and will continue to be raised. It is not a question of not wanting to do it: it is a question of public finance. Certainly, those discussions will develop. As members will be aware, even if it means looking at budgets and identifying needs and requirements for the next CSR, we need to look at where the gaps are. I will say it again: those gaps need to be brought forward, based on identified need.

Mr D Bradley: My wife runs a choir that is based in our sitting room on Sunday evenings. I would like the sitting room back some time. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Ní Chuilín: I would like to go to your sitting room on a Sunday evening.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirigh. Go raibh maith agat, a Aire, agus fáilte romhat. It was a very interesting presentation, and I believe that the younger that children are exposed to the arts, the more likely they are to get involved, develop an appreciation, develop their potential and become more rounded individuals who are more successful in their lives. I was very interested to hear about the pilot Ulster Orchestra project. Is it intended to roll that out in other schools?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is intended that it will roll out. Although the children made their own instruments, such as cardboard violins, it is intended that, with the Ulster Orchestra, we will bring instruments into schools and other areas. Even people who are involved in the arts will agree with a lot of what has been said today. They see at first hand the impact of their delivery on young people of all ages and from different backgrounds. That is what keeps them going. They want to see their work not only sustained and valued but maintained beyond the mandate from one Minister to another. We need the arts to be embedded in each of our comprehensive spending reviews on the same level as any other public facility. We need to see more of the arts being brought to communities and communities being brought to the arts, not just as pilot schemes but as a way in which we all access the arts for particular sectors.

In some creative hubs, particularly around west Belfast, and in some of the primary schools that I mentioned such as Good Shepherd, Malvern and Wheatfield in west Belfast, not only do you have a willing and captive audience but you have schools, community groups and partnerships. Those

partnerships have been with bodies such as the Ulster-Scots Agency and many others, and they are really keen to make sure that this moves from a pilot scheme into a more mainstream activity and that there is a role and a respect for each sector of the arts. In this case, it is music, but there are digital and creative industries, poetry, sculpture and photography. As we saw with the iPad scheme, the children who had access to iPads experienced better engagement within a matter of days. I have no doubt that, when there is greater exposure to music and to all forms of art, that will have a lasting and enduring legacy. That needs to come with investment. Although those pilot schemes are very valuable for pointing out what some of us already know, they also need to point out where the gaps are that I mentioned previously, which will help to inform future CSRs. It is crucial that we do that.

Ms McCorley: I want to develop some of the themes that people, including you, have been discussing such as the gap between working-class communities and communities that are more inclined to be in poverty and giving them access to the arts. It is about trying to bridge that gap, and I believe that there is a two-way process involving the arts and the higher arts. There is value in big theatre companies, orchestras and opera companies coming to the community, and people can then find out whether they are interested and might enjoy those arts. People might then be more likely to attend such events, if they can afford to. The schemes that allow people to do that are really good. I have had the benefit of seeing how that works well in west Belfast, because I have seen, in a local community hall, plays that have been performed in the Waterfront Hall and the Opera House. They work well in all those venues, so that is proof that a performance does not have to be in a particular venue. It can be anywhere, and the more of that that we encourage, the better.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Angela gave an example of the work of Audiences NI and Test Drive the Arts NI. To put it crudely: we have seats that we need to fill. Companies and arts providers have a real challenge in trying to make the books balance. Unfortunately, at times, much of the focus is on administration and bureaucracy, and people just want to get on with their business. However, Audiences NI, Test Drive the Arts NI and others are really keen that they have full houses, regardless of the setting. The challenge for us is on how to get people to those venues, which is where partnerships with the community — transport schemes, schools and sporting clubs — comes in. They look at how to get older people, for example, to the arts. At Christmas, they got older people into Belfast city in order to avail themselves of tickets for the pantomime, and got them back home again. That was a really good collaboration, and there is nothing to say that it cannot work. Good competitive ticket prices are also available. All the arts venues — in fairness, I do mean all of them — are really keen to look at concessions and competitive ticket prices that do not prevent people from availing themselves of the arts, including the Lyric, which was mentioned earlier, and the Ulster Hall. In that way, they bring plays and performances to the community in their own settings. At times, we will have to make additional investment to increase participation. However, it is also true that the artists themselves, the companies and the arts providers are keen to try to get more people into their venues, and they want us to be imaginative and creative about how we collaborate with them. That is what we are doing.

Ms McCorley: It is really good to see that. The arts cover such a huge number of disciplines that have many aspects. Nobody is interested in all of them. Some people will have niche interests, and others will have broader interests. However, I thought that there was an unjust and unfair attack on you by journalists, who said that, because you were not at a particular event, it meant that you were not interested in the arts. That was a very ignorant comment. It showed that those journalists did not understand fully what the arts encompasses.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I appreciate that.

Ms McCorley: I have a final comment. My experience is that things are getting better, but we are lucky to live in Belfast, where so much is happening. I appreciate that people who live in rural areas do not get the same opportunities, and we must find ways to change that. I want to flag up the Cathedral Arts Festival, which starts today. It has an excellent programme: there are free activities, activities for children, families and enthusiasts of different branches of the arts. It is a fantastic programme, and I commend it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sure that the people who are involved in the festival will be happy to hear that. That is an excellent example — there are many others — where there is something for everyone, clichéd as that phrase is. A lot of hard work and honesty has been put into ensuring that no one can lift a programme and say, "There is nothing in that for me". That does not happen overnight or by accident. The festival is trailblazing by including good collaborations and making sure that there are events for families, because that has always been a challenge. I am delighted, particularly as it is in

my constituency and on my doorstep. It is five minutes from my house, so I have absolutely no excuse for not attending.

Mr Irwin: I apologise for not being here for your presentation. I arrived late as usual.

There is a real challenge here, which the Chair touched on a couple of times. The focus is mainly on Belfast and Londonderry. It will be a challenge to reach out to rural Northern Ireland.

The community festivals fund has been very successful. It has delivered and supported many events across Northern Ireland. Will you outline the likely long-term future of the fund?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The community festivals fund will be with local government for a very long time. As I said, I am keen to make sure that the funding is not only sustained but built on. One of the best opportunities that we have to achieve that is through the RPA. Although there will be fewer councils, that does not mean that the need will be less. Local arts have the power to generate a local economy. Hospitality is one example of that, and there are others.

Funding festivals is one way to ensure that there are SMART targets. By that I mean that such funding can be used to access and lever in other funding for festivals. However, we also see it in the context of being an economic driver. I do not think that all councils have done well, and there is a challenge to use festivals funding as an opportunity to bring more money in a borough and local area. That also means that they and I may have to consider additional investment. As a result of the RPA and the collaborations that artists and providers started some time ago, we need to see that there are opportunities, at local and central government level, to have an outcome for people involved in arts festivals and cultural offerings. The festivals fund is one example of that that needs to endure.

Mr Irwin: I welcome that. The fund has been successful and can be built on.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I absolutely agree, and when it is done with partnerships, you not only get better sustainability for the here and now but better long-term sustainability. The nervousness and anxiety of many councils over sustainability is having an impact on their forward planning for artists, festivals and the overall provision of cultural offerings in communities.

The Chairperson: I will follow on from Mr Irwin's comments about the community festivals fund: I had a positive experience in my constituency of finding a pot of money that has led to community capacity building. Groups that would never before have had the opportunity were able to do something local and bring people out who would not previously have had that chance. I am very much an advocate of the fund, and I hope that it has a long future.

The Committee is constantly reminded that, per capita, expenditure on the arts in Northern Ireland is much less than that in other jurisdictions. I know that budgeting is clearly an issue, and it will be even more so in regard to welfare reform issues, and so on. How do you square the circle when people are critical of spending more on the arts while we have hospital waiting lists?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not accept welfare reform as a given. I totally oppose welfare cuts. I believe that, after you cut welfare, which is the easiest target, you then start to look for the next cuts. I will totally resist the arts budget being seen as an easy cut, as I will resist welfare cuts.

I understand that there will always be a challenge, particularly for Ministers, to provide a rationale for spending in each of our areas. However, I have always said, and I will continue to say, that people are kept well by their participation in and access to the arts. It keeps people out of hospitals. It keeps people off waiting lists, because, when you are mentally well, you are physically well. It may not comfort people who are on a waiting list for an operation or an appointment, but, frankly, the Department of Health needs to take that on board and challenge it.

The arts are not just something that people do if they have nothing else to do. The arts are a way of life. The arts are an economic driver, and it is about time that we started to appreciate the potential of the arts and artists to generate our economy rather than see them as something that people do in their spare time or as a luxury. The arts are an employer as well as something that people access to make them feel good. Yes, the budget will be stretched and continually challenged, but I will continually fight the corner for the arts because they need greater investment. If you pick on the arts, who is next? The disabled? People who are gay? People who are vulnerable through mental ill health? I am just not prepared to consider that.

The Chairperson: No other member has indicated that they wish to ask a question, so thank you for your time. Obviously, this is a big weekend for the Department, with the official opening of Ravenhill.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely.

The Chairperson: We look forward to the official opening of Windsor Park.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your time. No doubt, we will be in contact if there are any further questions. I am sure that you will be willing to answer those.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I restate our willingness and eagerness to come back. I am sure that, when you look at the Hansard report, there will be other questions that people will think of after we have left the room. I am more than willing, as are DCAL officials, to come back. Whatever the intention of the inquiry was initially, I know that the outcome will be completely different. I look forward to seeing the findings. I also look forward, with members who are here, to going to Ravenhill and, hopefully, to the opening of Windsor Park and Casement Park. Finally, I wish Malcolm a happy birthday. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Happy birthday, Malcolm.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I had to embarrass him. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson: Thank you.