



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working-  
class Communities:  
Spectrum Centre, Belfast

26 June 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working-class Communities: Spectrum Centre,  
Belfast

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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 William Humphrey  
Ms Rosaleen McCorley  
Mr Basil McCrea  
Mr Michael McGimpsey  
Mrs Karen McKeivitt  
Mr Oliver McMullan

**Witnesses:**

Mr Mervyn Bell	Spectrum Centre
Mr Bobby Foster	Spectrum Centre

**The Chairperson:** You are very welcome. We have Mervyn Bell, who is the general manager, and Bobby Foster, who is the programme manager. I ask you to make an opening statement, and then members will follow up with some questions.

**Mr Mervyn Bell (Spectrum Centre):** Thanks, Chair. It will be me doing most of the talking initially and then Bobby and I will take the questions together, if that is OK. Let me just get some water, because I know that I am probably going to need it.

First and foremost, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to make a verbal presentation to the Committee. The Spectrum Centre certainly welcomes the opportunity to do so and to add to our written submission. As you said, my name is Mervyn Bell and I am the general manager. I have been at the Spectrum for just over a year. This is Bobby Foster who is a programme manager at the centre.

We thought that it would be useful to give you some contextual information first on the Spectrum Centre itself. The idea for a flagship centre on the Shankill Road was the inspiration of the Greater Shankill Partnership. The partnership then secured funding from the Millennium Commission and the International Fund for Ireland in the late 1990s and the centre officially opened in 2001. It was originally conceived of as a facility that would focus primarily, although not exclusively, on young people, and the arts, culture and heritage would be essential elements of a varied menu of activity for young people.

For a variety of reasons, the centre could not be sustained as a youth facility solely and in latter years has developed into a facility with a core arts, culture and heritage offer, underpinned by a very strong

community development ethos and approach, serving all sections of the community, although we have a particular focus on children and young people, women and older people. The centre is also currently working with other organisations and individuals in the city council to contribute to the tourism agenda; again, trying to focus on cultural tourists. So, we are continually evolving and adapting, and we do not stand still.

The centre is a large building. I do not know whether people have ever been. There is a main auditorium, which can seat 300 people, two smaller meeting and conference rooms, a dedicated arts room and a fully equipped dance studio. In addition, the centre has seven shopfronts, two floors of office accommodation and a restaurant and cafe. You will see the importance of that in a minute.

As noted in our written submission, our mission is to provide a focused programme and facility for arts, culture, heritage and tourist activity in the greater Shankill area, enabling community development through engagement, participation, education or appreciation. We fulfil that through the goals and objectives we outlined in the written submission. We believe that that mission and those objectives are fit for the community we serve and resonate with the current policy drivers for the Committee, the Assembly and the Executive as a whole.

Our thrust of social inclusion and community regeneration are evidenced in our location and our work. I will move on to our core activity very shortly. As noted, the commercial property element of the centre is a core aspect of our financial strategy, alongside grants from a wide range of funders, specifically from the city council and the Arts Council, although in the last 12 or 18 months we have also drawn down project funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Community Relations Council, the Ulster-Scots Agency, Belfast Strategic Partnership and Lloyds Bank Foundation. That is only a few of the funding partners. In the current economic climate, both regionally and nationally, it is fair to say that we face continuing pressures and challenges, as, I suspect, most organisations do.

In terms of the central theme of the inquiry, I will give some additional contextual information, if that is OK. We see ourselves as a grass-roots organisation. We do not and would not envisage competing with some of the core arts and culture venues in Belfast city centre but believe that our location, ethos and approach of being at the very heart of the community is essential in fulfilling our mission and enabling the transformational power of arts and culture to be experienced by community members. The majority of our staff team are local to and drawn from the local community. The majority of centre users are the same. We feel that the importance and power of relationships cannot be understated in terms of drawing people in to activities and events and of allowing and enabling that first or sustained engagement in arts and cultural activity to happen. Again, that supports and underpins our grass-roots approach.

We offer arts, culture, heritage and, increasingly, tourist activities and events, through a wide, varied and ever-expanding programme, but we also focus greatly on community engagement and community development. Fundamentally, we do that by ensuring that our physical location is supplemented by relationships with the community and by relationships and networks with other organisations and groups within greater Shankill and, increasingly, with organisations and groups beyond the greater Shankill area as well. We are proactive in providing that rich and varied menu, but we are also proactive in opening up the centre as a community facility and resource. For example, we house Greater Shankill Partnership's Integrated Services for Children and Young People, Citizens Advice, Women in Sport and Physical Activity, Bryson Future Skills and a residents' art studio in our shopfronts. We are used by the likes of Olympus dance group, Shankill Area Social History group, Glenwood army cadets and Heel and Ankle Community Theatre Company; just to name a few of the community groups that are using the building.

Our written submission focused on three examples of how we have sought to translate all of that above context into practice, and we believe that we have done so successfully through the examples that we shared. Perhaps we have done a little less on the theory, research or discourse on the inclusion of different sections of a population in the arts per se. We hope to say a little more about that now in our verbal submission.

In the rest of our opening statement to the Committee, we want to elaborate on some of the key points that we made in our written submission and add some real and lived detail to the philosophy and context that we outlined. We have a core arts, culture, and heritage programme throughout the year. In the last 12 months, this has included the culmination of a creative writing project, which realised 11 public performances of a community play called 'Crimea Square'; continuation of dedicated arts groups for children and young people and for women; creative writing masterclasses with established artists, including Jo Egan, Moyra Donaldson, Martin Lynch and Heather Richardson; print workshops

with Seacourt Print Workshop; and music and singing workshops with Moving On Music. On the heritage side, it has included a range of historical exhibitions looking at Mackie's; artefacts and memorabilia around the cruise ship Canberra; the centenary of the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force; local history classes at Shankill Women's Centre and St Matthew's church; and work with local primary schools on World War I, including the creation of an information booklet for children to use.

From November of last year, we secured funding for a 20-hours-a-week arts development officer post, which was exactly what we needed as that has enabled a whole raft of outreach activity to take place. Most recently, this has included work with Edenbrooke Primary School parents' group and then with schoolchildren themselves looking at designing the creation of healthy-eating murals. Grove Day Centre, Clifton House Residential Home, Glenwood Primary School and Cavehill Primary School all accessed Open Arts gamelan, which is an Indonesian orchestra, and then worked with the Clifton nursing home around music and singing workshops. That arts development officer has been at the core of formulating those relationships and allowing that outreach activity to happen.

Partnerships and collaborations have also extended our core programme. As mentioned there, this has included those with Open Arts, which has brought the gamelan, the Indonesian orchestra, to the Spectrum for a two-month residency. It has included a range of workshops with schools and community groups and then a public performance. With Etcetera Theatre Company, there were two performances of its play, 'Tartan'. Spanner in the Works brought a performance of 'Diablo' on behalf of the Shankill Women's Centre. It is a play that focuses on human trafficking and sexual exploitation. It also had a performance of 'Popping Candy', and that was via DCAL's creativity month. We have worked with Verbal Arts Centre, which brought a public performance of 'Crows on the Wire', a play looking at the transition from RUC to PSNI. We have worked with Armagh Planetarium and had two school sessions, which, again, were part of creativity month. We have worked with Crescent Arts Centre so that we were able to participate in CityDance 2014.

Partnership work remains another developing area. We are working currently with an Cultúrlann on the Falls Road to deliver the flagship project of the Creative and Cultural Belfast fund. It is a project looking at the River Farset. We have an emerging partnership with New Lodge Arts, who you have just heard from, looking at developing a cross-community intergenerational project bringing young people and older people together, and we have a strengthening partnership with Conway Mill, working with a women's group in particular. These partnerships are crucial to the work that we do. There is a shared cross-community element and a shared affinity of location and approach, and we find those relationships crucial to what we do.

That has meant that we can attract and engage a very wide audience — a cross-section of the community but with a continued focus on children and young people, women and, increasingly, older people, but literally all members of the community. As part of our core funding from Belfast City Council, we have some targets to meet. For 2013-14, this included a target of having 13 artist or practitioner contracts, and we had 31 for the period. We had a target of 400 volunteer hours, and we managed to reach 548 hours. We had a target of 250 individual participants, and we had 636. We had a target of a total audience figure of 4,000, and it was the only one that we missed. We had 3,069 for that period.

All of that, hopefully, paints a very positive picture and conveys some of the enthusiasm, passion, energy and commitment that we have for arts and cultural activity. However, we are confronted daily with the pressures and challenges of delivering arts, cultural and heritage activity in a working-class community and, for the Spectrum Centre, in very much a Protestant working-class community. That gets to the essence of the Committee's inquiry, but as a small aside, we have a problem in using sweeping generalisations when it comes to working-class people and the arts. That has probably been raised and articulated by others, so we will not get into a great discourse on it.

We want to articulate some of the pressures and challenges that we face and how we try to counter them on a daily basis. First and foremost, an individual's or community's social upbringing, its previous engagement with arts and cultural activity, its recognition of the importance and value of the arts, almost as a part of the ethos or psyche of a working-class community, might not be there as readily as in other sections or other communities, so we have a challenge in how we bring people into an arts and cultural experience, if that experience is not already grounded in a family or community situation.

There is an issue of access to opportunity and for opportunities to be seen as accessible and, again, not the preserve of a particular section of the community. There are simple logistical issues of location, cost, advertising and programming and how that reaches into particular communities. There

are challenges in the choices that individuals or communities might make if faced with lower disposable income and how they prioritise using their income. Again, there is a perception about the value placed on choices that might be made, particularly if that choice is not to engage in arts and cultural activity. We know that that is made harder by the continuing impact of the recession, both on individuals and on organisations such as ours. Much of our activity is free at the point of delivery as a means of engaging and encouraging a community to engage.

We feel sometimes that there is an absence of strong role models to challenge social perceptions, which may be gender-based, around engagement with the arts in working-class communities. We are doing an awful lot of work with community members, and you will see that through the exemplar of 'Crimea Square', where we had two men and two women from the community writing a play, and we made a great effort to relay to the community that they were very strong role models that they should look at and aspire to.

There is, perhaps, an inherent danger in the politicisation of culture. Again, there is a need for us to convey and relay culture in its widest sense. There is a real challenge and pressure in being prepared to graft and put hard work in. For us, there is a need to get face to face with the community to engage, enthuse and involve. We do an awful lot of work to build up relationships to bring people into the activity that we offer.

I guess that there is something around the articulation of the value of arts and giving individuals the opportunity to experience this first-hand. We are absolutely delighted now that young people who have been involved in our young people's group, the Art Den, talk confidently and matter-of-factly about the MAC or Culture Night because they have experienced and have been involved in it. We see the transformational power of the arts on a community.

When we were delivering 'Crimea Square', we went to great pains to ask people to feed back. We got a range of feedback from people who had come in to observe and engage in the play. I will read two of the responses to give you an idea of what I mean by "transformational power". "Molly" said:

*"You all did something very special tonight. You expressed pride without arrogance and self-belief without judgement of others. Well done to all involved. It was class."*

A second person — there is no name on this one — said:

*"It is amazing what can evolve through a creative writing group and the telling of local history. It is great to see community actors and professionals coming together to create new drama."*

I assume that you have had a chance to read the written submission. 'Crimea Square' was a community play that marked 100 years of the social history of the Shankill Road. We were bringing arts and culture together in a pretty interesting mix. It was good that members of the public who viewed the play were able to recognise that and feed back accordingly.

Fundamentally, we seek to bring the benefits of participation in the arts to the greater Shankill community, individuals, and wider society. For us, it is as much about processes as products. Having an extensive programme, engaging people and producing artwork are all important, but, for us, they are almost ends in themselves. The processes are equally, if not more, important. Generating that interest and spark, enabling people to access activities and experiences for the first time, generating confidence, stimulating belief, sustaining interest, and people enthusing others are all qualitative outcomes that we see in our work.

I am reminded again of 'Crimea Square'. This happened just as I was starting in the Spectrum Centre. A member of the community who had been part of the creative writing group put together a promotional video to say to the public, "This play is coming. You have to come and see it." This person introduced themselves on the video very succinctly by saying, "I am Sally, and I am a writer." For us, that was a very powerful statement: she did not say that she was a member of a community or a mother or a grandmother; she said that she was a writer. She was probably able to say that only after being involved in something for two and a half years.

For our community, it is this investment of time and energy that brings rewards and enables and allows the community itself to address some of the pressures and challenges that I alluded to earlier. There are some immediate returns, but, equally, it is about investing in longer-term change. We believe that we are building solid foundations on which solid and long-lasting walls can be built. Processes, time and energy commitments and resources are all essential elements. We are not

looking at imposing art on a community. Instead, we are finding ways of building ownership so that this community makes and participates in arts and culture for itself.

Madam Chair, if I have a few minutes left, I will reiterate the recommendations that I made in the written submission. I just want to add a few more lines to it to conclude. We made recommendations from our perspective as a grassroots organisation working at the heart of a working-class community. We would like the Committee and the Department to actively encourage core and large-scale arts and culture venues to support the work of smaller community-based venues such as ours. We know that a variety of people have already made plenty of comment to the Committee on the larger arts venues. Our contact and engagement has been positive. However, a little bit of proactivity with us, as community-based organisations and a conduit to the community, would be really helpful. That could be through joint initiatives or joint projects right through to formal partnership arrangements.

We believe that there should be proactive, appropriate and sustained investment in community-based venues and activities. Having centres and projects in the heart of working-class areas is vital, but it brings a significant financial challenge, which I face daily. There should be an appreciation of the inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to pay. However, that should be tempered with an ability to produce a social return on investment, namely participation in arts and social activity and the personal and societal benefits that it brings.

There should be an acknowledgement that community-based venues are more likely to be in contact with working-class communities and more understanding of their needs, that they are ideally placed to provide a venue or activity that all the different members of the community can engage in, and, again, that they are a perfect conduit to more mainstream venues and activity. Finally, there needs to be a recognition that public, private or philanthropic sectors are investing in processes as much as products and that these processes are crucial to enabling and sustaining participation in the arts.

That concludes our opening statement. Thank you for your patience as I read through it.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you. That was very useful, and we appreciate it very much. I have had the benefit of attending a number of performances at the Spectrum Centre, including 'Crimea Square', which I highly recommend as a very good project based in the community. You could see the joy that those who participated in it got from it. The benefits were very obvious when I was there, and I congratulate you on that.

**Mr M Bell:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson:** The building is very impressive. It was obvious from the two presentations that we had today that you are based in a building, whereas in many respects New Lodge Arts does not have that luxury. You deliver very similar projects but in a different way. There are those who say that a building can, in many respects, be an inhibitor and a barrier. You have now opened it up very much around community development. Do you think that that has assisted you to break down barriers and to get people engaged in the arts, which, perhaps, they would not have done before?

**Mr M Bell:** Absolutely. One of the challenges that I was given when I arrived was to develop a community ownership that enabled us to continue to reach out. That is not to say that we have been there for 12, 13 or 14 years and not engaged with the community and not had people in. It has been a moveable feast through that period. One of our priority areas was to go out and be more proactive, and we have sought to do that. We also tried to get people in to see the building and appreciate its benefits and to ask them to use it. Although we put on an activity programme ourselves, we are also mindful that we can enable organisations to do it. If you ever go past the Spectrum Centre on a Tuesday night, be warned that the Olympus dance group takes it over. About 300 young women from five to 18 years of age come in during the evening, and that is what the building needs to be used for. We almost step back and say, "There you go; use the building proactively", which they do. It can be an inhibitor, but it is not an inhibitor if we open it up and enable as many people as possible to access it, and we are doing that.

The outreach element is crucial as well, and that is why I wanted to focus on it. We have some fantastic staff. We have Bobby and Sally, the outreach arts development officer, and they take their skills and talents out into the community. Sometimes that is about groups coming back in again and using the activity, but it is also about us using our skills and resources and being there. We are trying to make the centre the heart of the community, but we are mindful that people do not necessarily need to come to us all the time. We need to go out as well.

**The Chairperson:** It is only recently that you have had an arts development officer.

**Mr M Bell:** Yes, as a dedicated position. For the last two or three years, our main arts and culture funding has come through the project lottery strand of the Arts Council. We had a couple of posts that would have been more facilitation posts, but we did not have a developmental post, and we have had that since November. Even during those six to eight months, there has been a hugely noticeable change in what we have been able to do and the networks and relationships that we have been able to establish.

**The Chairperson:** Is that a temporary or a full-time post?

**Mr M Bell:** It is tied up with the funding that we draw down from the Arts Council. We have submitted our application for project lottery funding for 2014-15, and we shall hear in a couple of weeks' time, hopefully. We asked for the funding to be sustained for the post again. We are also looking at other foundations and trusts where we might be able to mainstream that post more readily. However, at the minute, it is linked into our Arts Council funding.

**The Chairperson:** How broad is your reach geographically?

**Mr M Bell:** Our reach is very much the greater Shankill area; we see that from the Westlink right up to Highfield, Ballysillan, and Glencairn. That would be our definition, although pieces such as 'Crimea Square' as a public performance enable people to come from across the Province. We did a little postcode analysis of that. We were probably getting 50% of the audience from BT14, BT15 and BT13 — our doorstep, in essence — but we were also getting people from across the Province and beyond. Visitors to the city were coming in and accessing the play as well. The partnerships and collaborations are also enabling us to move out. I am going to a steering group meeting tonight for the Creative and Cultural Belfast project. It is in conjunction, or partnership, with Cultúrlann, so we have a cross-community steering group coming together to drive that and hopefully deliver aspects of the project. That expands our reach into a different and new community for us. We have a core, but we are moving at the margins as well.

**The Chairperson:** You made it clear that you do not wish to compete with the city-centre venues, but you see yourselves as a conduit to the community. Do you have to make the approaches to those venues, or do they approach you?

**Mr M Bell:** In my experience, we have probably had to be a little more proactive in making links. I think that the organisations are happier to ask us to run publicity materials and to make sure that we are aware of what they are offering. For example, in our Arts Council bid this year, we put in a collaborative project with the MAC, but we approached the MAC to say: "Can we do something here? Can we work with you to put a submission in and secure funding to run a project where we will take members of the community down to the MAC to experience activity there?" That has been a bit more proactive. We have been pushing that. I do not know whether Bobby wants to add to that; he has a longer history with the Spectrum and he could judge better whether that picture has changed.

**Mr Bobby Foster (Spectrum Centre):** Four or five years ago, the Spectrum Centre had a negative experience of interacting with other arts groups when we were chasing the Ulster Orchestra to do a concert for primary schools. The orchestra was not available; its calendar had been made up and we were getting this, that and a wee bit of the other. Then, all of a sudden, when this question started to raise its head, we got a phone call, out of the blue, that the Ulster Orchestra wanted to come to the Spectrum Centre. Take out of that what you will. As soon as I picked myself up off the floor, I asked Mervyn when they were coming and what they were going to do. I think that they originally started with a full-day rehearsal on Sunday, with a choir of about 80 people, which was absolutely fantastic for the centre. However, as for being surprised at that booking, you could have blown me away.

**Mr M Bell:** They did some workshops with schools as part of Creativity Month. The pressure that we had with Creativity Month was that we were asked to utilise funding very quickly. We did our best to make that happen, and the Ulster Orchestra ran some sessions as part of working with schools in the greater Shankill and Collin areas. They came together as a collaborative performance at the end. So, as well as their own rehearsals they did a few workshops as well, which was great.

**Mr D Bradley:** Good morning. With the last group, New Lodge Arts, we discussed the relationship between the larger organisations — orchestras, and venues such as the Lyric and the opera house —

with local arts groups. They made a comparison between the social clauses that are built into large government contracts, such as those for the building of stadia and so on, where a number of apprentices and people who have been unemployed are taken on to work. Would such a model be useful to look at, regarding the relationship between organisations such as yours and, say, the Lyric, the opera house and the Ulster Orchestra? Built into their funding agreements there would be some provision for that type of arrangement.

**Mr M Bell:** Something like that would be very helpful. It needs to be trialled and tested to determine the outcomes; however, it would be very interesting to see. It is a tricky one. Do we expect a lot of people to go and access the bigger, mainstream venues? Would that happen? Perhaps we need to have a bit of foundation and grounding before there is an almost natural extension into more mainstream programmes. I think that we need, perhaps, to build up first; and if that means those organisations should come into communities and work closely with us, so be it. That would be good as well. As for expecting people just to access activities, I am not sure that is going to happen.

**Mr D Bradley:** What we had been talking about was rather than one-off visits —

**Mr M Bell:** More sustained activity.

**Mr D Bradley:** More sustained activity over one to two years. Thanks very much for that. The other thing that I was going to ask about was the community group theatre. How is it progressing?

**Mr M Bell:** Very well. There is a tremendous energy. Some of them were in last night on a creative writing class with, I should not mention his name, but Martin Lynch was in the building last night.

**Mr D Bradley:** We have heard of him. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr M Bell:** I suspected that was the case. Just seeing the energy and the passion and trying to feed that and fuel that is our task at the minute. There are people who are champing at the bit to do another play and desperately wanting to write a play and finding the ways in which they can increase their knowledge and skills to do that.

**Mr D Bradley:** When you get to the stage where you are ready to produce another play, do you use a local director or do you bring in a professional? How does that work?

**Mr B Foster:** For 'Crimea Square', they brought a professional in purely for direction and to keep the community, writers and actors on a balance. They also had professional actors, which, at the end of the day, was the right blend of newcomer with experience. If you are a football manager at all, that is the sort of team that you want to send out. England take note. *[Laughter.]* 'Crimea Square' was an absolute blow-away success; there is no doubt about it whatsoever. They have had a few offers to take it on the road. It used everybody. We had Marie Jones and Martin Lynch. We did a thing on the suffragettes where Marie Jones came along, and we had a couple of esteemed doctors from Queen's University talking about women's rights. In our area of the Shankill, people had never given much thought to looking at the suffragette movement and stuff like that. It was a real eye-opener because we got people writing short stories about the suffragette movement, which was a break in to the arts. If you give them the right sort of drive to do it, they will break into the arts without knowing that they are participating in the arts.

**Mr M Bell:** There is a danger in looking just at participation; we need to think about arts involving members of our community as creators as well. The fact that members of the community are attending creative writing classes, writing plays and poems and getting some of the accolades that their work richly deserves is fantastic. It is not just about engaging and being a participant; it is turning that on its head so that people are beginning to create. For 'Crimea Square', some young people acted as interns in stage management, and they are now going on to bigger and better things. That is the community development aspect. We are not just there as a venue; we are there as something that can build skills and confidence and an attitude in members of the community.

**Mr B Foster:** Just a quick word on that. Mervyn has been here for a year, and I have been there since 2004, hence the lines. To be honest, I had a negative experience with the Arts Council, and he knows me well enough by now to know that I call a spade a shovel, and I make no bones about it. When we came up with what we thought were quite solid artistic projects, they were passed after an amount of hurdle jumping. We were then told that it had to be a facilitator registered with, or



acknowledged by, the Arts Council. That is fine, and I understand that there has to be a framework built around that for things going forward, but it stifles a lot of young people trying to break into that circle. That was one of the most frustrating elements of working with the Arts Council in a working-class, unionist area that I found in all the time that I have been at the Spectrum. There were some fantastic projects that went to the wall over it. You will probably slap my hand when I go out of here.

**Mr M Bell:** Absolutely.

**Mr D Bradley:** Now that Mervyn is in place, would it be possible to reactivate some of those?

**Mr B Foster:** Yes, absolutely. We were just discussing a primary-school scheme for Belfast that will encourage primary-school children of years 6, 7 and 8 to become writers through storytelling. We are not letting that cat out of the bag, because we know that you all have communities, so we will hold on to that one.

**Mr D Bradley:** Copyright?

**Mr M Bell:** Absolutely.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Thank you very much for your presentation. Dominic has covered a lot of what I was going to say, but you mentioned the skills base and what can be achieved. In my opinion, the social skills base and what you offer through your centre could open doors for the youth and maybe the women that use your centre.

You also championed and listed your achievements, one of which being your volunteers. How does the centre go about recruiting volunteers or getting them in to deliver programmes? Once you get them in through the door, is there a certificate of achievement offered to, say, a young person beginning to build up their CV? What opportunities are given there? We do all have our own communities, and we are all looking for ideas on how to introduce opportunities into our communities.

**Mr M Bell:** When looking for volunteers, we just get a minibus and go and pressgang people, club them, take them in, and make them volunteer. *[Laughter.]* No, we do not. We use a range of tactics and approaches; we have people who have come into existing groups and we see that they have ability, skill and confidence and we encourage them to go a little bit further. We have a book club that is run solely by a volunteer. We give them the room, she produces the fliers, she chooses the books, they link with the Crescent; she does all of that. She was a member of the women's art group for a couple of years, told us that she enjoyed it and asked what else she could do.

We had somebody in recently who wanted to run dance classes. They were born and brought up in the area, moved away and now want to give something back. Through the course of the play, we had parents coming in with their children who then stayed and asked whether they could sell programmes or whether they could do something else; they were asking what they could do to help. We do not have a formal volunteering programme; we tend to let opportunities emerge.

It is interesting, this year, in that we have included in our Arts Council bid an attempt to trial an Open College Network qualification. We want to establish a more formalised community volunteer programme. As a result, we can look at a case where somebody is working over a sustained period, say a couple of hours a week over a 12-month period, to see how they can produce a portfolio that we could then accredit so that they could have some certification at the end. We have a pilot project that will look at delivering that. You are right: the danger is that a volunteer could come in and that would be all well and good for them and for us, but if nobody is capturing that and the wider benefits, particularly for young people who might not aspire more academically, then it would be a missed opportunity. We are looking at trying to plug that gap as well.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** How does the Spectrum Centre see the formal partnership agreements that you mentioned at the end of your presentation being achieved?

**Mr M Bell:** That goes back to Dominic's point in that there has to be a willingness with bigger organisations to enter into that arrangement, either with a range of organisations or through picking a particular organisation and choosing to partner it. The formalities of a partnership agreement are pretty straightforward: what they are putting in; what we are putting in; what we are trying to achieve;

and where the impetus for that is coming from. There may need to be a call or a challenge to the bigger organisations to help us.

**Mrs McKevitt:** Who will take the lead?

**Mr M Bell:** I would more than happily take the lead, as long as there is a willingness and an open door and as long as we would not invest an awful lot of time and energy that would not produce an award. There are plenty of other things on the to-do list.

**Mrs McKevitt:** Thanks very much.

**Mr McMullan:** Thank you very much for your presentation. It was very interesting. One thing that caught my interest was your talk on cultural tourism. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

**Mr B Foster:** I usually handle the cultural tourism, as I have worked along with Belfast City Council. We have produced a guidebook to the Shankill. You do not really need a tour guide as such. You open the book up. It will give you a little tour. It takes you around and explains the various parts. The sections in it are called "The inside story". You get the inside story on the lower Shankill estate and the murals therein; Woodvale Park; the Shankill graveyard; the peace wall; Crumlin Road Gaol, and places like that. It can be quite busy in the summer. I am doing tours with Syracuse University from New York, the university's London campus, and a wide range of Southern Irish groups who come in through either Coiste or EPIC and are not necessarily interested in a political tour but would like to hear the social history and get the cultural tour of the area. That is where I step in and fill that void on behalf of the Spectrum Centre. I guide them around the Shankill on somewhat of a two-hour walking tour.

**Mr McMullan:** Do you get any help from the Tourist Board with that?

**Mr M Bell:** To be honest, we have not asked the Tourist Board yet. We probably do not have a formalised product with which to do so. It is interesting that, again, we have a network of people coming together in a couple of weeks' time to see how we can put together a more cohesive product. That is probably when we would go to the Tourist Board.

I am struck by the number of people who come on to the Shankill Road. As I said to Bobby outside, I came into the office yesterday and a couple from Switzerland were standing outside in the rain trying to get their bearings. We got them sorted out. A couple of French people came in afterwards. People either get off the tour bus or walk up. They are fascinated by the fact that we say, "Go and see where John Hewitt was born" or, "Come and have a look at some of the prints that we have got from William Conor", who was born and brought up in the Shankill area. There is a sudden realisation that, although they came to see certain elements of our most recent history, we are now offering them a wider menu. That is what we are trying to harness.

The project with an Cultúrlann to create a cultural Belfast is based around the River Farset. The river is pretty much concreted over, but it is obviously the river that gives Belfast its name. In that project, we are also trying to add that tourist element to see whether we can bring people out of the city centre. Obviously, we should harness the socio-economic — particularly the economic — benefits in the community.

**Mr McMullan:** Earlier, you said that the majority of people who come to you are from the greater Shankill area. One of the groups from east Belfast looked at the postcodes of those who were coming to their performances. The majority were working-class. They said that middle-class people tended to go into the city centre more than to something on their doorstep. Do you find the same thing?

**Mr B Foster:** My experience goes back further than Mervyn's. One question that we are always asked is this: is the car safe? I have been there since 2004, and we have yet to record one incident of anybody's car being damaged at any time or in any way connected to the Spectrum Centre or its activities. So, there was a minimum attending, but since their mind was put at rest, the number has risen — not by an awful lot, but it has risen. There is still the problem of how to attract people from outside our area. I think that other communities would suffer as much in the west and north Belfast geographical area. People tend to look at the news that is attached to the areas.

The Spectrum Centre has been breaking down barriers. There is no doubt whatsoever about that. One of the greatest things that we were able to do in the past four years — again, Mervyn missed it — was to turn our main hall into a TV studio, and we invited TG4 up. TG4 did the Irish language version of 'Gladiators'. It was not groundbreaking drama, but we had guys standing outside the Spectrum Centre having a smoke and talking in Gaelic, and it did not make a blind bit of difference to anybody. We had a small audience up from Southern Ireland to watch that. So, we are breaking down those barriers.

**Mr M Bell:** Oliver, it is probably something to do with the product that we offer — certainly for plays.

We did a postcode analysis for 'Tartan', 'Diablo' and 'Crimea Square' and found that split. We found that the majority of the audience were from the immediate community but not exclusively so. People were prepared to travel from other parts of the Province or the city to watch something. 'Tartan' was about the gangs in the 1970s. It was a fusion of what it was like being a young person then, set against the backdrop of the music, the culture and the political situation. 'Diablo' was based around human trafficking and sexual exploitation, which struck a chord with a lot of groups. They wanted to see a hard-hitting play and hear an officer talk about what the PSNI is doing on the ground. We found that it depends on what you put on, but all those played to full houses, which was fantastic. The product will bring people in.

**Mr McMullan:** Do you have a programme for the disabled?

**Mr M Bell:** We do not have a specific programme.

**Mr B Foster:** I am working with Action on Hearing Loss. We are looking at bringing it to the centre later this year. That is in its early stages, but it is a giant leap forward in what we do and who we work with. Arthritis Care holds its weekly meetings there, and other less-abled people come to other events. In fact, the Olympus dance group has a disabled section as part of its dance programme. It has its own room and partake — even up to the display, which is held on the last two nights in May. There is certainly more to be done, but we are starting to reach out to the likes of Action on Hearing Loss, and probably to people who have sight problems, for instance.

**Mr M Bell:** The residency programme with Open Arts was a real eye-opener for me. Its orchestra was made up of people with physical disabilities and learning difficulties and disabilities. It was fascinating to watch them operate as instructors and work collaboratively with the groups.

I do not think that I alluded as much to the work that we are doing with older people. We have a fantastic collaboration with Hemsworth Court, which provides sheltered accommodation for older people with dementia. We are taking activity to Hemsworth Court, and Hemsworth Court is coming into the centre. That is proving to be a very positive piece of work.

**Mr McMullan:** Thank you very much for that. I did not realise that you had so much going on. Quite honestly, I knew nothing about you until today.

**Mr B Foster:** One of the new ideas is the creation of reminiscence boxes, which will act as triggers for people with dementia and Alzheimer's.

**Mr McMullan:** I was thinking more about people with special needs or young children with Down's syndrome, autism or challenging behaviour.

**Mr M Bell:** Absolutely. That is a piece of work that we need to look at.

**Mr McMullan:** Congratulations.

**The Chairperson:** I call Mr Humphrey, who is no stranger to the Spectrum Centre.

**Mr Humphrey:** That is right, Chair. Thank you very much for your presentation. I should declare two interests. I am a former board member of the partnership and chair of Shankill Tourism.

I have been asked to ask a question for Mr Hilditch, who has had to go to another meeting. He put the same question to New Lodge Arts. How does Spectrum rate the assistance, interaction and support from the established, high-end, well-known arts organisations?

**Mr M Bell:** We have already alluded to that. There is a contact, and there is, and has been, joint work. My impression is that, over the past 12 months, I have been doing more of that. The proactivity has come from my side, certainly in the submission that we put to the Arts Council on the collaborative programme with the MAC. We went to its outreach officer and made the initial comments and suggestions. Fair play to him, he picked up on them, and we have been able to run with them, but the impetus certainly came from us.

It is interesting. That has made me think about established organisations, of which there are probably a few. We have got a tremendous track record with established individuals, and there seems to be a willingness from individuals to come back to work with us. The creative writing masterclasses that we have just finished off included Martin Lynch and Joe Egan, both of whom had no qualms about coming. We did a series of interviews with playwrights. We had people such as Christina Reid, Lucy Caldwell, Stacey Gregg and Marie Jones, all of whom are very established authors in their own right and who had no issue coming and working with us. They worked with a relatively small group for maybe an hour or two.

**Mr Humphrey:** I think that he is talking more about the Arts Council, the MAC, the Lyric and others who will put money in, rather than actors, writers or playwrights.

**Mr M Bell:** The impetus is probably more with ourselves than the established organisations, but at least there is an open door, which we are working on. In my time, however, I have not been approached by places such as the Lyric or the Grand Opera House about collaborative projects.

Our relationship with the Arts Council is probably different, in that it is a core funder. In the past, we had core annual funding, but that is not the case now. So, annually, we seek funding from the Arts Council, and, touch wood, we will get something for this coming year. In saying that, within the past six months, we have secured funding through its older people programme and through its small grants programme. The small grant is a very interesting one. We are setting up a Saturday morning arts clinic workshop for aspiring, emerging or established artists in the community, and resident artists in the studio will deliver those sessions. I am very much about upskilling people who have that interest. There is that groundswell of that community stuff. So, William, the relationship with the Arts Council is probably slightly different as it is a core funder, although we take a lot of expertise and experience from our community development worker.

**Mr Humphrey:** A couple of weeks ago, the Committee was in Coleraine, and we heard from the guy in charge there that it is years since his group got direct funding from the Arts Council. Last week, we heard a slightly contradictory position from the East Belfast Partnership, which said that there is a problem with people in east Belfast crossing the bridge to go into the city centre to the main theatres, arts centres, and so on. We heard from New Lodge Arts this morning that the same applies to it working in north Belfast as to you working in north and west Belfast.

You mentioned some of the barriers in your presentation. What are the barriers to our young people accessing the arts? We had exemplars and heard testimonies from two young people from New Lodge, who basically said that, had it not been for the work that they have been doing through New Lodge Arts, they would not be involved to the extent that they are. They also said that that has given them confidence.

**Mr M Bell:** We did not hear the submission, but I suspect that we would probably concur with what they said. I spoke to the young people who are part of the young people's group, and they talk very confidently about going to the MAC, being involved in Culture Night and being to the Grand Opera House. It runs off the tongue very easily and very readily. So, there is a great confidence, and they have been there and been exposed to it. I asked them how that happened, and they said that it was because artists, staff and the programme had taken the young people there as part of the overall programme. They had not gone there of their own volition. Part of the reason for that was, "It is a long way to go. Mum and dad will not let us go into the city centre. We do not know what is on offer. It is a big building that looks a bit scary, and we are not sure whether we want to go inside". There is a raft of reasons, not a sole reason. Once they had the confidence and were encouraged to go in, it became less of an issue, and they were then prepared to do that under their own steam. The knowledge of what was on offer, the imposing nature of the building, the perception that they had about the MAC and not being able to pick information up readily in the community were all factors that were prohibiting them from doing it readily.

**Mr Humphrey:** This inquiry was established in the autumn, and there has been some criticism of it by journalists and key protagonists in the arts world. What have your experiences been with the DCAL family? Bobby, you said that could not get the Ulster Orchestra to come to the Spectrum and that it made the contact. What have your experiences been since we started talking about this?

**Mr M Bell:** Since the inquiry started, there has not been a great difference. There has been no noticeable difference in other organisations coming to us.

**Mr Humphrey:** From the DCAL family.

**Mr M Bell:** Obviously, the Ulster Orchestra has been in. We had a flurry of activity as part of Creativity Month, for which there was encouragement and enablement. Armagh Planetarium and Cinemagic were in as well. We have managed to secure some funding to work with integrated services to put some IT equipment into one of the areas. However, our relationship with the Arts Council has been maintained and is the same as it was prior to the start of the inquiry.

**Mr Humphrey:** No discernable improvement.

Bobby, you and I come from the Shankill. My argument has always been that the people in our community see their culture as culture.

**Mr B Foster:** Correct.

**Mr Humphrey:** They do not see their culture as the arts necessarily. Do you agree?

**Mr B Foster:** Yes. You have to ask whether there is art in culture or whether there is culture in the arts. We do very simple programmes with children. There are elements within every community that would direct culture one way or another. To produce the pure culture, you ask children, "What does culture mean to you? Give us a picture, give us a story". They say, "What do you mean, Bobby?", so you sit them down and talk them through the basics of what a culture is: it could be dance, music, film or photographs. Then, you get some very surprising results.

You have to take them out of the bubble in which other people are driving them and saying, "This is your culture". It could be mum, dad or the big lad on the corner, but it does not really matter. The issue is bursting that bubble and getting kids to understand that their culture is art and that art is in their culture. Whether that takes the shape or form of a photograph or a banner, it does not really matter: it is art. I have yet to meet the person who can define "art".

**The Chairperson:** You said that young people speak very confidently about going to arts venues and so on. Are the barriers different throughout the generations?

**Mr M Bell:** Yes. There are different barriers, and they are probably experienced differently. I am thinking of the women's arts groups who would have said, "It is not for us. We will look out of place. Should we go or not?" That fear and misconception or preconception are probably the same.

**Mr B Foster:** The community that I come from was a very industrial community, and we were seen as such. Therefore, art really was not for us. It was a BT9 thing, if you pardon my expression. It was highbrow. Quite a few younger people from unionist, industrial communities broke those shackles off during the 1960s.

The nationalist communities embraced the arts a lot more than the unionist communities, because of the definitive tie of the latter to industrialisation. It was as simple as that. Unionist communities saw their lives as spending the day in the factory and the night at home or in the local pub. Going to an opera or a play would not have crossed their mind for a minute. In many ways, peer pressure did not allow people to break out of that. That is changing. Quite a few people go to the Grand Opera House and think nothing of it. However, I grew up on the Shankill in the 1960s and 1970s, and would I have gone to the Grand Opera House? Not this side of Christmas.

**The Chairperson:** Those were different times.

**Mr B Foster:** Absolutely.

**The Chairperson:** Going into the city centre at that time was very different as well.

**Mr B Foster:** We have come on leaps and bounds, with people openly talking about going to see a play or a show. It is a huge shift, of earthquake size. That was previously not the done thing in unionist, industrial communities; it is as simple as that.

**Mr McGimpsey:** Thanks for the presentation. I congratulate the pair of you on the progress you are making. I am interested on what impact you are having on young people. In areas such as the Shankill, just as in areas such as Sandy Row, young people are our future, and they are so easily led astray. It is so important that we get some sort of impact. How do you think you are making an impact on young people? What are the lessons that you think make an impact on young people? How well does the education system respond to you, particularly at primary- and secondary-school level? How are schools working with you to give you a chance to show young people what their potential is and what their future could be, as opposed to, as you say, what is being mapped out for them, by perhaps previous generations or, as you say, the big fella on the corner?

**Mr B Foster:** I go around the primary schools, and we have produced two activity books. One is called 'The Shankill at War', which looks at the Belfast Blitz's impact on the Shankill and what you would have seen or heard. It was passed by three principals to make sure that it was classroom-friendly and tied into something that the kids could relate to today. For instance, there is a page full of groceries, and the child is asked, if he or she were going to Tesco or Sainsbury's with mum, how many of those grocery items exist. They then pick out what they can identify from then to now.

We recently finished a Great War activity book, which has elements for colouring in. I do not mean any disrespect whatsoever in any shape or form, but there are groups within communities here believing that the First World War consisted entirely of the battle of the Somme, with nothing before or after it. That activity book shows children, particularly primary-school children, the bigger picture. Through that, as I go through schools, we introduce them to Great War poets such as Graves, Service and Sassoon. Therefore, you are introducing them to the arts at an early age, teaching them poetry and getting them to write stories.

The primary schools that I have visited so far — Black Mountain, Forth River and Springhill — have been fantastic. They threw the classroom open and told us to go ahead. We bring artefacts with us. We bring some old helmets and a deactivated .303 rifle so that the children can feel the weight of it. A lot of what we found with children learning about their own community is that sometimes mammy or someone in the family sets little Tommy or Jill on their knee, and yesterday's fairy stories evidently become tomorrow's prejudices.

It is a case of straightening the story out from the word go with the likes of the activity books and facts, and, in sitting down and talking to pupils at their level and not over their heads, we move forward. Everybody has a part to play. For instance, the window of the Spectrum Centre is done up for the World Cup. The mannequin in the window — not by accident — is coloured and represents Pelé. Kids do not see the coloured mannequin — they see Pelé — and that is another small step forward for our community to accept people from outside. We all have a part to play in this game of life.

We work with the schools and give them the bigger picture instead of that snapshot that they get in their own communities of how things are. I deal with cultural questions as opposed to the unionist history and stuff like that. You would be amazed at some of the answers on the questionnaire that we did some six or seven years ago: "Who did the Ulster Division fight at the Somme? Was it a. the Germans, b. the Irish or c. someone else?". As far as the kids were concerned, it was the Irish, so that had to be straightened out. That was done, and I would be a lot more confident handing that question out to younger people today. So, we are moving forward.

**Mr McGimpsey:** Good.

**Mr M Bell:** There are some bits there about the impact. You asked about lessons learned. Some of the key lessons are about developing and building relationships, certainly with primary schools. When we go in and deliver something, we ask for their evaluation and comments. In essence, we follow through on what we do. It resonates with and complements the curriculum. We are not just going in and offering what we want to do. What we do supplements what is being delivered in schools, all of that is crucial. You get much more opportunity to engage with schools if they know what we are delivering, how it fits, and what the children and young people are going to get out of it at the other end. That has all been crucial.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you both for your presentation and for taking questions this morning. It has been very interesting. I am sure that, if there is anything that we need to follow up on with you, you will be able to forward us the necessary information.

**Mr M Bell:** By all means. If it is OK with the Committee, I will leave the yellow folder. There is a range of materials that we have produced to give you an additional flavour. It saves me carrying it back as well.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much.