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## Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

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**'Quality of Life: Inclusion and resilience in community cultural development in Northern Ireland'** Dr Matt Jennings (Ulster University), with Prof Martin Beirne (University of Glasgow) and Stephanie Knight (University of Glasgow)

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#### INTRODUCTION

In March 2015, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) cut grants to some arts organisations by 40-100%, in order to manage an 11% reduction from the Northern Ireland Executive (NIE) in its 2015/16 Budget (ACNI 2015). This was despite a high-profile ACNI campaign, calling on the NIE to preserve existing levels of arts funding (estimated at 13p per capita per week), already significantly lower than in other parts of the UK ("far less than the 32 pence per week spent in Wales", Litvack 2014, online). Following previous cuts in public and NGO spending in Northern Ireland, these reduced the financial support available to the community arts in Northern Ireland. In these increasingly precarious conditions, how can community-based artists survive?

UK government policies for arts and culture proclaim the economic and social benefits of the creative industries. The capacity of arts workers to work flexibly, collaboratively and independently is increasingly being promoted as a model for new workplace relations. Yet there is limited understanding of the financial and social implications of such a model. This briefing surveys working conditions within the arts sector, drawing on interviews with freelance artists from a range of disciplines and backgrounds. All of these artists contributed to the Derry/Londonderry UK City of Culture 2013 programme. They work with community and voluntary groups, schools and health agencies, enhancing the lives of young people, older people and people with disabilities. They support wellbeing, peacebuilding and social development in the region. They are driven by their commitment to working in the arts with communities. Yet much of their work is underpaid and insecure. They are dependent on public funding and alternative sources of income for survival. Many work voluntarily, depending on contributions from participants to sustain projects. These findings match wider research on cultural workers internationally, but have specific ramifications within the context of Northern Ireland, raising concerns for cultural inclusion and policymaking within the new Department of Communities.

This research is part of a broader project examining the capacity of artists in Scotland and Northern Ireland to cope with recent and current models of funding and evaluation. It investigates the individual strategies adopted by artistic workers to survive financially, psychologically and creatively. The aim is to develop a clearer understanding of the measures by which artists can sustain their practice (or 'stand their own creative ground'), while continuing to support themselves and their communities.

#### METHODOLOGY

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This briefing is based on the findings from an ethnographic study of a core group of 18 community drama, dance, music and visual arts practitioners in Northern Ireland. Originally from Australia, Matt Jennings has been living in Derry/Londonderry and collaborating artistically with many of these practitioners for over 15 years. We have been conducting formal research on the topic since early 2012: holding semi-structured interviews with selected artists; emailing follow-up questionnaires; conducting participant and nonparticipant observation of practice; and delivering or participating in seminars on arts management and cultural policy. Matt Jennings has also been active in consultation for individual arts organisations and the arts sector as a whole, meeting with political representatives and bodies such as the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), the City of Derry and Strabane District Council (CDSDC) and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) of Northern Ireland, as well as the now defunct Department of Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) which were largely subsumed into the new Department of Communities in 2016.

## **CONTEXT: Community Arts, the Peace Process and UK City of Culture 2013 – ‘Legenderry’**

For the artists participating in this research, the wider political context and related funding policies have been crucial in both supporting and constraining their creative work with communities. Since 2010, there has been a shift in policy towards economic regeneration and public health, but previously community relations and peace building were the key priorities. Local, national and international bodies have funded arts projects intended to address conflict and sectarianism in Northern Ireland, with varying degrees of success, since the beginning of the ‘Troubles’ (Maguire 2006; Grant 1993; Neill 1995). Prior to 1998, grassroots community-based artists and theatre-makers had been at the forefront of providing hope and sustaining local economies (McDonnell 2010; Maguire 2006; Grant 1993). These sectors were united through a cultural strategy of conflict transformation following the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998. The Peace Process provided opportunities for arts organisations, communities and individuals to develop new collaborative work and support cross-community relationships (Jennings 2009, 2012; Jennings and Baldwin 2010).

After 1998, the Peace Process drew down an unprecedented level of funding for social development and conflict transformation in Northern Ireland, particularly from the European Union, which invested over €2.2 billion in the region between 2000 and 2006 alone (Commission of the European Communities 2008, online). Significant amounts of this funding were spent on community arts projects, although the exact amount is impossible to calculate as money was allocated and accounted for according to policy objectives, rather than modes of delivery (Jennings 2009; 2012). In Derry/Londonderry, community arts and other forms of cultural activity became a significant driver of the local economy, increasingly linked with tourism.

In 2013, Derry/Londonderry hosted the inaugural UK City of Culture (UK CoC). This event represented a significant turn in the cultural strategy of Northern Ireland – away from centrally funded social development and peace-building programmes and towards corporate ‘re-branding’, tourism promotion and Public Relations approaches (McDermott et al, 2016). In the run-up to this event, promotional material rebranded the city as ‘Legen-Derry’, a move designed to generate a ‘step change’ whereby the city could tell a ‘new story’ (McDermott et al, 2016). A celebrated promotional video for the city’s bid featured Seamus Heaney, calling on the viewer to ‘hope for a great sea-change on the far side of revenge’ (‘Voices’ 2010, online) Through this rebranding, creative industries were promoted as a means to transform post-conflict society and regenerate the economy (Boland et al, 2016).

The expectation in the city, bolstered by the ambitions stated in the original bid document, was that this event would provide substantial funding for local artists and arts organisations (Boland et al, 2016). However, the UK CoC title supplied no specific external funding mechanisms. This condition was significantly different from the European Capital of Culture designation, which provides EU grants to support the event (Boland et al, 2016). As such, it entailed a 14-month UK cultural programme being delivered, with no specific inward investment from the UK government, by one of the poorest cities in the UK, at its own expense. In 2012, 41.5 % of the population under the City of Derry and Strabane District Council was recorded as ‘economically inactive’ (including 30% of citizens aged between 16 and 64) (DETNI 2016, online).

For the CoC project, most of the public funding was made available from public bodies within Northern Ireland. For instance, £12.5 million was granted by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFM DFM) in June 2012. Various other funding streams provided support for the programme; but throughout the event, local businesses, community groups and political representatives expressed disappointment and frustration at “the inability of City of Culture to immediately increase employment rates” (McDermott et al, 2016, p. 622). In 2015, three years after the CoC, the rate of ‘economic inactivity’ among the population of Derry and Strabane is still as high as 41.6%, including 32.9% of people aged between 16 and 64 (DETNI 2016, online). While this cannot be blamed solely on the UK CoC programme, neither could anyone claim that the event has delivered a legacy of substantial economic improvement.

According to Boland et al (2016), it was always unlikely that the CoC event would deliver significant economic development in the region, in the context of the global economic downturn and national austerity policies: “In truth, CoC was never realistically going to be a panacea

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for deep seated and entrenched socio-economic problems in a deprived and peripheral economy” (p.14). As the official evaluation report on the Derry/Londonderry UK CoC event states: “If a major event of this nature is expected to have a major impact on the local economy, it needs to be part of a broader strategy with supporting investment” (Derry City and Strabane District Council 2016, 61).

While the economic impact of the CoC may have been disappointing, the cultural impact of the event seems to have been encouraging: “there is clear evidence of genuine transformative change regarding image improvement and civic pride; enhanced community relations and sense of unity; intercultural dialogue and cultural exchange; cross-community attendance at events; increased tourism and spend; shared and depoliticised spaces” (Boland et al, 2016, p.14).

## IMPACT ON LOCAL ARTISTS

During the CoC, substantial amounts of funding were spent on flagship performance events directed by prestige international artists, such as Hofesh Schechter and Frank Cottrell Boyce, and including large casts of volunteers drawn from local community groups (Boland et al, 2016; McDermott et al 2016). Meanwhile, locally-based artists found themselves struggling to get paid work.

It was during the year of the City of Culture – where I had no work for four months. At all! And that has never happened in all the years that I’ve been at it. I’ve always had something.

Freelance actor/arts facilitator, interviewed 12 May 2015

Every locally-based artist interviewed for this research reported that, from 2010 to 2013, they were frequently asked to work for no pay or low pay for events associated with the UK CoC, usually with an appeal to local loyalty or the enticement that the experience would enhance their CV. When local artists were contracted for payment, they sometimes experienced long delays before they received payment.

In some cases, it was more than a year that people hadn’t received their payments; in many cases, despite repeatedly supplying the relevant information...we seemed to be passed through all the various levels of administration, but verbal and written promises were broken about payment coming through.

Freelance writer/community facilitator, interviewed 13 May 2015

Artists with 10, 20 or 30 years of experience, embedded in their communities for years, found themselves struggling to survive. While most of these artists did get some paid work during 2013, all of the interviewees declared that they experienced periods with no paid arts work at all during the following year, for periods of up to 3 months.

The big noticeable funding cut was after the City of Culture...Definitely for that year after the City of Culture year, work was just so hard to get. There was nothing...January, February and March [of 2014] it was just absolutely dire. There was just no work at all.

Freelance dancer/teacher/facilitator, interviewed 13 May 2015

**TABLE: ARTISTS’ PERSONAL RESPONSES TO PRECARIETY SINCE 2013**

ACTIVITY	NUMBER (/18)
Working outside of community sector	18
Working on multiple projects simultaneously	18
Working for low pay/no pay	14
Relying on Partners or Parents	12
Working in other parts of Ireland & UK	12
Working in other disciplines	9
Regular yoga/martial arts practice	5
Working outside the arts	4
Receipt of welfare/tax credits	3

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Since 2013, some of these artists have moved out of their homes, relying on parents or partners for accommodation and financial support. Some have turned to working outside of the arts to support themselves – in 2015, one freelance artist, who had been working continuously as an artist and teacher from 2009 to 2013, gave up her arts career altogether to work in catering. Most have been travelling for work outside of the region, both short term and long term, particularly in Dublin, England or Scotland. 15 out of 18 artists interviewed in 2015 stated that they were commuting to other cities or countries for paid work. All reported that dozens of their peers have already migrated permanently, usually to England, Australia or Canada. While individual artists might have many reasons for migrating, working further afield or changing careers, the loss of this skilled workforce presents a collective problem for social regeneration policy, peace-building and community cultural development.

Over the years, these artists had built up the specific expertise and relationships of trust with arts organisations and community groups necessary to deliver these kinds of projects. In 2013, they were often drafted into UK CoC projects, whether paid or unpaid, because of their ability to recruit and inspire local participants. Though these artists have been able to survive for long periods with low levels of remuneration, and their capacity to travel for work may be seen as one aspect of their 'resilience', their long-term departure would be a significant loss to their communities and the arts sector as a whole. Surprisingly few are dependent on welfare or tax credits; but the three interviewees who do receive some kind of welfare subsidy were the only ones who were not planning or considering a permanent move away from Northern Ireland.

### THE ROLE OF THE 'ARTIST'

While committed to community arts practice and the groups with whom they work, all of the practitioners interviewed prefer to be identified as artists first and foremost, rather than community development workers. They have been asked to meet social and political funding priorities, but primarily they want to create art:

Alternative art practice lies outside the framing that we are given by bureaucratic and political practices...The question is, how do we value and what kind of values do we bring to the input and the creative process?

Dancer/Choreographer/Artistic Director, interviewed 18 May 2012

These artists engage in the work because they believe that art itself is intrinsically important. When asked "why are you still doing this, when it is so difficult?", frequent responses included because it is "so worthwhile", because it is "fun and enjoyable", because it creates "beauty", because it is "challenging" and because "it makes life worth living". The value of accessible arts practice was seen as particularly significant in the context of Northern Ireland:

I think that what is special about Northern Ireland – it's the arts. And without that, and without how accessible the arts are here, what is there left really?

Freelance dancer/teacher/facilitator, interviewed 13 May 2015

While valuing art 'for its own sake', these practitioners express a passionate belief in the value of working in communities:

There is the sheer enjoyment, the commitment, the energy, the passion. The skills base and the wealth of talent that there is in this area is unparalleled, to me, in any other community area. And every time you take your 'cynical self' down to do some work or be involved in a project, the sheer joy in it and the energy and enthusiasm is renewed – which is why we are all still doing it.

Freelance writer/community facilitator, interviewed 13 May 2015

Apart from the peace-building programmes discussed above, these community artists in Northern Ireland have worked with other groups, such as school groups, people with disabilities and health issues, older people, young people, prisoners, police officers, migrant groups and so on. However, most of these efforts have taken the form of short-term projects:

Working with the adults with learning disabilities, I only had 10 weeks to work with both groups from scratch, to come up with all the aims and objectives throughout and to follow through with I was going to do, right up to a performance with a live audience - theatre, lights, sounds the whole shebang.

Freelance Drama Facilitator, interviewed 22 May 2015

Some interviewees expressed anger about the 'use' of art – the utilitarianism whereby art is reduced, in some sense, to a form of social work or public relations. Steve Batts, Artistic Director of Echo Echo Dance Theatre, succinctly described the fundamental error in trying

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to deploy the arts as a 'lever' for social development: "Art is not a lever and people cannot be levered" (interviewed 18 May 2012). While many artists have been uncomfortable operating as 'levers' for social policy, they have become even less happy at being abandoned to an uncertain fate, as those levers are removed. Some of the more established artists expressed a general sense of demoralisation emerging since the decline in public funding:

I think one of the biggest changes has been a huge mood swing – a loss of confidence amongst community artists...A feeling of powerlessness – a feeling that significant achievements that have been made by the community arts have not been recognised.

Freelance writer/community facilitator, interviewed 13 May 2015

While public funding of the arts may have been problematic in terms of instrumentalism, reliance on funding has left artists vulnerable when that funding has been reduced or withdrawn. The emphasis of funding regimes on short-term and outcome-oriented programmes has limited opportunities for artists to develop sustainable models of support or alternative sources of funding (Jennings 2012). In order to be available to work on multiple projects, limited in time, freelance practitioners can be constrained from generating their own long-term projects.

These artists have been coping with unreliable sources of income, juggling seven or eight projects at a time, followed by months with nothing. When they work, they can work up to 80 hours a week, 7 days a week, managing 6 or 7 projects simultaneously. This makes it difficult to focus on any one project and the needs of the groups with which they are working. One interviewee was running a project for children with learning difficulties on Thursday mornings, a project for older people on Thursday afternoons, and running a private cross-community youth theatre company on Thursday evenings. Frequently, numerous projects have to produce a public performance around the same time, in line with public funding cycles. Artists accept these conditions because they don't know when the next job will come along or whether they will be able to pay the bills next month. They are a workforce that has been continuously engaged in precarious situation. They have become an artistic precariat.

Has work become precarious? Well, yeah (laughs)...because you panic. Everybody I speak to that works in this field feels exactly the same... You can't make long-term plans because of the nature of the work. There is so much instability and I understand why so many people can't handle that. I'm not ready to give up on it just yet.

Freelance Actor/Writer/Drama Facilitator, interviewed 12 May 2015

### RESILIENCE/PRECARITY

There are different definitions and categories of resilience, including: personal resilience, in terms of psychological and physical well-being; economic resilience, in the capacity to support oneself financially; and community resilience, the capacity to maintain cohesive and secure societies.

Macpherson, Hart and Heaver define 'personal resilience' as 'the capacity to do well despite adverse experiences' (2015, p.2). In a literature review of over 190 books and articles on the topic of resilience, they assert that arts participation can significantly increase the capacity of a person 'to feel safe, commit to a group and belong, develop their learning, cope with difficult feelings, help others, develop self-understanding and foster a sense of identity' (ibid p.4).

In relation to financial resilience, artists can be resourceful at securing their livelihood within challenging economic circumstances. According to a study by Green and Newsinger (2014), numerous artists and arts organisations in the East Midlands of England, working with disabled children and young people, have demonstrated admirable economic 'resilience' since 2010. They have found alternative funding streams and diversified sources of personal and organisational income. However, their client groups and participants have suffered from a reduction in services and programmes. While artists might be able to find other means of support, the beneficiaries of community arts practice can lose out.

For freelance artists, these two aspects of resilience converge. The ability to 'cope' emotionally with adversity, or retain a sense of identity, is challenged by the ability to support oneself financially as an artist or in arts-related activities. For practitioners working in communities, while their work may improve the 'resilience' of their participants, their own capacity to thrive might suffer in the process. In this sense, a focus on 'personal resilience' and 'economic resilience' can undermine the potential for 'community resilience'.

Global workforces, under neoliberal economic restructuring, are now subject to a process of 'precarization' (Lorey 2015; Butler 2010). There are no more 'jobs for life'. Job security is in decline. Pensions, health insurance, holiday pay, sick leave, maternity leave and pay equality are all at risk – most of which have rarely, if ever, been available to artists (at least in the English-speaking world). Increasing awareness of 'precarization' as a global phenomenon has led people to investigate the means by which artists have managed to cope

with extreme precarity throughout their careers. But the contemporary fascination with the 'creative industries' and artistic workers, at the level of management studies, has been subject to critique from political economists such as Frederic Lordon:

A number of recent studies and sociology of work discovered in the figure of the artist a pertinent metaphor, and even more than a metaphor, a common model, for those employees reputed to have personal qualities of strategic importance to the company, notably 'creativity'...this limit-point of employment, has been turned into a general model for the overall project of neoliberal normalisation.

Lordon 2014, 123-125

While we might be able to learn broader lessons from the capacity of the freelance artist to cope with long-term precarity, due to their commitment, flexibility and resourcefulness, we should also heed the warnings when they themselves cannot survive. A base level of security and subsistence is the foundation of all entrepreneurial creativity.

## ADAPTATION – COMMERCIALISATION AND COLLECTIVISATION

Projects that used to be publicly funded are now charging fees. This can sustain the artist or the organisation, but excludes financially disadvantaged participants. Organisations, artists and participants engage in fundraising activities, such as bake sales, charity raffles, and crowdfunding campaigns. These steps have saved projects that would otherwise have perished; but in disadvantaged communities, it means asking the people who have the least to give the most.

Arts organisations are also turning towards corporate sponsorship and investment, with some success. However, commercial investment is more attainable with state support. Sustainable economies - particularly in terms of job creation, quality of life and a cultural offer for attracting international business and talent - rely on statutory bodies for infrastructural development. In 2016, the arts sector demonstrated the highest levels of economic growth, out of all the 'creative industries' in the UK (including advertising and architecture). The Arts Council England recognised this by providing new funding streams, such as a "new fund...specifically for individual artists to "develop their creative practice" (Hutchison 2016, online).

While sponsorship and user-pays schemes are typically suggested by the 'business model' of the arts, the tradition of community arts suggests an alternative approach – pooling resources. Greater Shantallow Community Arts and Echo Echo Dance Theatre, for example, provide studio space at low cost (or no cost) for groups and artists who cannot afford to hire rooms elsewhere. Many of the artists involved in this research have shared their personal income and resources with colleagues. Several have subsidised community projects out of their own pockets, including paying transport and child care costs for community participants. Again, this stretches the meagre resources of people who are already struggling.

Some cultural initiatives have begun to support collective activity without recourse to specific public funding. The #Derry Creatives group is an interdisciplinary collective who meet monthly, engage in social media campaigns to pool resources and support each other's arts practice. They recently participated in the international Fun Palace event ("there is no austerity of creative people", Fun Palace website). However, the group is led by staff from subsidised organisations, such as Voluntary Arts Ireland and #Brand NI. You can do something with nothing – if you know somebody else who has something.

## CONCLUSION – A PRECARIOUS FUTURE & POLICY OPTIONS

In Northern Ireland, there is an increased atmosphere of anxiety in the arts sector and society in general; particularly in relation to the potential impact of changes to welfare and further cuts to public spending.

Further cuts to public services could have a disproportionate impact in Northern Ireland, where 28% of those employed are in the public sector, 35% of the population have no tertiary qualifications and 27% of the population is economically inactive (DETNI 2015).

Perhaps the biggest uncertainty pertains to 'Brexit' – the departure of the UK from the EU - which at this stage has no clear policy framework. The outcomes of the eventual strategy could have a serious impact on the stability of peace in Northern Ireland, as well as its economic prosperity. In this context of intensifying 'precarization', artistic collectives may provide one possible model for survival. At the very least, there is no doubt that there will be a need for collaboration and creativity. Yet international examples provide a range of possible options for cultural policy makers to support such collaboration:

- In **Australia**, 'Community Cultural Development' workers are community artists directly employed by local authorities. In 2001, these were the most precarious and lowest paid arts workers; by 2011, after professionalization within local government, they were the most secure. Median personal income doubled, while overall government expenditure on community arts programmes was reduced (Throsby and Zednik 2011)

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- In **France**, under the 'Intermittents du Spectacle' system, the state matched the earnings of regularly employed freelance artists, reducing the overall costs of arts subsidy to the state (Chrisafis 2012)
- Universal Basic Income (UBI) model - £10-15k a year stipend for established freelance artists. This could be an expansion – and simplification - of the current ACNI system of multiple project-based Individual Artists' grants. Alternatively, it could be funded directly by the Department of Communities, as a pilot for a broader UBI programme to replace the current welfare system. **Scotland, Canada, Netherlands, Finland** and now **India** are all conducting trials on UBI in specific sectors. India, in particular has identified a potential for UBI to decrease significantly overall welfare expenditure (Schjoedt 2016, online)

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