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A brief comparison of arts council strategies in the UK and Ireland

1 Context

This paper and associated table summarise in very brief terms some of the key differences between the strategy documents produced in recent years by the government arts agencies throughout the UK and Ireland. All have a broad similarity in setting out the intentions of the organisation in the two to five years ahead, along with a set of more detailed 'actions', 'ambitions', or 'goals'. Northern Ireland is the latest jurisdiction to set about renewing its arts strategy, with the draft 'Five Year Strategic Plan for the Arts in Northern Ireland 2013–2018'¹.

Beyond these similarities, there are some key contextual differences which would need to be borne in mind when comparing the five documents. For example:

¹ Links to each of the documents referred to in this paper are as follows: **Northern Ireland:** *Five Year Strategic Plan for the Arts in Northern Ireland 2013–2018* <http://nia1.me/1k8>; **Republic of Ireland:** *Developing the Arts in Ireland: Arts Council Strategic Overview 2011–2013* <http://nia1.me/1ka>; **England:** *The Arts Council Plan 2011–2015* <http://nia1.me/1kb>; **Scotland:** *Corporate Plan 2011–2014 – Investing in Scotland's Creative Future* <http://nia1.me/1k9>; **Wales:** *Building a Stronger Future for the Arts – Arts Council of Wales Plan 2009–2012* <http://nia1.me/1kc>

- The five documents each have slightly different intentions from the outset. For example, Northern Ireland's document is a 'strategic plan', while Scotland's is a 'corporate plan', and the Republic of Ireland's is a 'strategic overview'.
- Each of the strategy documents occupy different time periods, from just two years (Republic of Ireland) up to five years (draft Northern Ireland plan).
- While three of the strategies began in 2011, the other two were written and came into effect in 2009 and 2010, and therefore at different points in the economic downturn.
- Each of the organisations has a different remit. While Northern Ireland is most similar in coverage to the Republic of Ireland, Creative Scotland deals with the screen industries while the Arts Council of Northern Ireland does not, and England deals with museums and libraries in addition to the traditional arts council remits.

2 Key differences

The table in Annex 1 sets out some of the main differences between each of the strategy documents. The following section elaborates on some of these.

2.1 Financial details

Financial details are provided in some of the strategy documents and not others. For example:

Northern Ireland	No financial information is provided, and no details of funding offered.
Republic of Ireland	No financial information is provided, though the difficulties of the current financial context are acknowledged.
England	Brief outline of 'strategic funding', but no detailed breakdown.
Scotland	Detailed budget section, setting out Creative Scotland's income and expenditure across the three years of the strategy. Each of the funds offered to the sector are set out.
Wales	A top line breakdown of how the budget is distributed is provided, along with a financial strategy.

Table 1: Summary of financial details provided in arts council strategy documents

The documents from Wales and the Republic of Ireland make particularly strong references to the need to diversify and strengthen the funding base of the organisation and the wider arts sector in the context of a tough economic situation.

2.2 Creative industries

The creative industries are treated differently in each of the strategies. The draft plan for Northern Ireland contains a brief paragraph on the creative industries, but no future action is described beyond continuing to provide the Creative Industries Innovation Fund. Wales has a general high level target to 'support the cultural and creative industries to contribute towards the growth of our economy', with a particular focus on the digital technologies.

The Republic of Ireland document refers to the ‘creative and cultural industries’ briefly, but only in terms of exploring ‘the establishment of a partnership framework to develop these links’.

The lengthiest section on the creative industries, with the most thorough analysis and set of actions, is contained in the Creative Scotland strategy. There is a section dedicated to ‘Promoting and supporting industries and commercial activity based on the application of creative skills’, and particularly screen productions and video games, with a set of 12 associated actions.

2.3 Separate strategies for each sub-sector

Each arts agency deals with a number of artistic sub-sectors, such as dance, music, drama or the visual arts. Each of the strategies deal with this issue differently. For example, Creative Scotland draws on a set of creative sub-sectoral reports to present a summary and mini-strategy for each separate art form, with a timetable set out for future reviews.

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland refers to the exercise of conducting individual art form reviews, but does not present a summary of them in the draft strategy document.

2.4 Social inclusion and accessibility

All of the strategies deal with the issue of increasing accessibility to the arts, but they do so in different ways, emphasising different groups and techniques in each case. Northern Ireland is the only document to refer to specific sub-strategies addressing the inclusion of older people and those with a disability.

Northern Ireland	Marginalised groups are referred to, and explicit sub-strategies are described addressing older people, those with a disability, and ‘intercultural arts’. A ‘Community Arts’ section includes reference to the role which community arts projects can play in enhancing cohesion and building partnerships.
Republic of Ireland	The Arts Council states an awareness ‘that the arts are not part of the lives of some sections of Irish society’, and that they ‘will continue to invest in programmes directed at building capacity in the arts sector’.
England	The strategy states an intention to widen audiences in areas such as the north of England and London where there is low participation among some social groups. Also, goals and priorities include a focus on children and young people.
Scotland	Document contains a section on investing in access and participation. There are ‘actions’ set out in this section, such as, ‘To target communities with lower arts engagement... particularly older people and geographic areas with high levels of social disadvantage’. There is also a commitment to ‘continue to support the further development of work by artists from minority ethnic backgrounds, cultural organisations, and communities’.
Wales	A general statement is made about promoting ‘equal access to arts venues and events, artistic expression and participation in the arts’, but nothing more detailed.

Table 2: Summary of measures across the five strategies focusing on increasing social inclusion

2.5 Measuring success

Each of the five documents takes a different approach to gauging the success of the work of the strategy. For example, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland draft plan contains a set of 38 statements on the final page of the document which will be pursued in order to achieve each of the three 'ambitions' of championing the arts, promoting access and creating a resilient sector. These include some statements against which numerical measurement could be made, such as,

Fund the delivery of at least 10 new public artworks each year through the Re-Imaging Communities Programme;

Increase the proportion of arts activities delivered in the top 20% of most deprived Super Output Areas in Northern Ireland.

No further reference is made in the draft plan to the monitoring and research programmes which may be required in order to evaluate such actions.

Perhaps the clearest set of targets are laid out in the Arts Council of Wales strategy, which lists four simple measures, as follows:

- By 2012 we will be investing in a portfolio of funded organisations better able to succeed artistically and financially;
- By 2012 we will have increased levels of participation in the arts in Wales by 3%;
- By 2012 we will have increased our turnover with at least 10% of our income coming from new sources;
- By 2012 we will be amongst the top 50 best employers to work for in Wales.

The Arts Council England document describes measuring performance against a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), although these are not set out in the document itself. These indicators, it is stated, are 'a mix of quantitative and qualitative KPIs that will provide a detailed picture of our performance'.

By contrast, the Arts Council of Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon document does not contain a list of targets or measures of success.

Creative Scotland includes a number of actions, some of which are measureable, but these are generally distributed throughout the document rather than being drawn together into one set of targets.

Annex 1: A brief comparison of arts council strategies across the UK and Republic of Ireland

	Document type	Dates	Length	Terminology used	Financial breakdown	Key topics
Northern Ireland	Strategic plan (draft)	2013–2018	25 pages	'Mission', 'Ambitions' and 'Themes' defined; presented in the context of DCAL Corporate Strategy.	None provided. No specific funds are referred to.	Includes a lengthy introductory section outlining the achievements and contribution of the arts to date. Advocates a dedicated gallery for Northern Ireland, and making the Troubles archive accessible online. Continuation of the Arts and Older People strategy, and the Intercultural Arts Strategy. Describes a focus on disability, on voluntary arts, and on reconfiguring the relationship with local councils in the context of RPA changes.
Republic of Ireland	Strategic overview	2011–2013	14 pages	Defines a set of 'Guiding Principles', and then four forms of action: 'Financial Support', 'Partnership', 'Advice', and 'Advocacy'.	None provided, although the broader financial context is described: 'The range and focus of the actions to be taken in these areas are contingent on available resources'; 'The Arts Council recognises that the environment in which public funds are now allocated is very competitive'.	Acknowledges the role of private investment and the difficult funding context at present. This strategy is unique in offering an advisory role for the organisation, both in terms of it being able to provide advice <i>about</i> the sector, but also <i>to</i> the sector. Creative and cultural industries are referred to briefly, but only in terms of exploring 'the establishment of a partnership framework to develop these links'. The need to address public access and participation issues is emphasised.
England	Plan	2011–2015	36 pages	'Goals' and 'Priorities' defined; five year 'Plan' set within the context ten year 'Goals'.	Brief outline of 'strategic funding', but no detailed breakdown. A section is included on administration costs, stating an intention to 'cut our administration costs by a further 50 per cent by 2014/15'.	The document contains regional 'Area Plans': for example, diversifying the arts beyond the elite in London, enhancing the use of digital platforms in the Midlands and South-West, and tackling specific areas of marked low engagement in the North. Other goals and priorities include a focus on children and young people, the arts workforce and talent development, museums and libraries, international context, and digital innovation.

Scotland	Corporate plan	2011–2014	72 pages	'Mission' and 'Objectives' defined; document presents both a ten year 'Vision' and a three year 'Plan'.	Detailed budget section, setting out Creative Scotland's income and expenditure across the three years of the strategy. Each of the funds offered to the sector are set out.	This is a much longer and more detailed document than any of the others. For example, the document contains 12 lengthy sections on each art form, the challenges and opportunities facing each and the strategic interventions required. These derive from a series of industry reference group studies conducted in recent years. Investing in talent is a strong theme in the Creative Scotland strategy, with seven associated actions.
Wales	Plan	2009–2012	32 pages	Document divided into 'Vision', 'Mission' and 'Vales. Later in the document 'high level targets' and 'priorities' are set out.	Top line breakdown of how the budget is distributed, and a financial strategy. Clear statements are made that 'the arts in Wales are suffering from significant under investment', and that the body is not there to provide subsidies for activities which the market can sustain.	The document has a similar introductory section to the draft northern Ireland strategy summarising current services and past achievements. Particular priorities in Wales include diversifying and strengthening the funding base for the Arts Council of Wales and the sector in general.

Table 1: Summary of differences between arts council strategy documents across the UK and Republic of Ireland