



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working-  
class Communities: Lyric Theatre

18 September 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

### Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working-class Communities: Lyric Theatre

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)  
Mr Dominic Bradley  
Mr David Hilditch  
Mr William Humphrey  
Ms Rosaleen McCorley  
Mr Basil McCrea  
Mr Michael McGimpsey  
Mrs Karen McKeivitt  
Mr Oliver McMullan

**Witnesses:**

Mr Philip Crawford	Lyric Theatre
Mr Ciarán McAuley	Lyric Theatre

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Ciarán McAuley, who is the CEO of the Lyric Theatre, and Philip Crawford, who is the creative learning manager. You are both very welcome, obviously, to our Committee meeting. Thank you very much for hosting us this morning. We are very privileged to be here. Please make your opening statement, and members will follow up with some questions.

**Mr Ciarán McAuley (Lyric Theatre):** Thank you very much for your kind words. You are all very welcome. It really is good to have the Committee at the Lyric Theatre. Thank you for having us here to speak to you today. You have just been introduced to me and Philip Crawford, who runs our award-winning creative learning department.

The Lyric Theatre is Northern Ireland's only full-time producing theatre. We are the largest employer of professional theatre practitioners in the region. We welcome over 80,000 in audiences a year, of which nearly one third are young people under the age of 25. A further 40,000 people simply visit the theatre to take part in our creative learning programme, to have lunch or coffee in our cafe or to attend tours or business events.

Approximately 39% of our audience comes from the greater Belfast area and 61% from the wider region. BT code analysis of the Lyric's audience data demonstrates a real city-wide impact, with fewer than 10% of bookers coming from the BT9 neighbourhood just behind us, in which we are located. A programme of national and international touring productions widens the theatre's reach even further. The theatre sits at the intersection of four super output areas, two of which are in the upper quartile of super output areas when ranked by multiple deprivation. You only have to look out the window to see Annadale Flats across the road or the lower Ormeau Road just down a bit. We receive £1.1 million in public subsidy, and that is a third of our total income. The rest we earn from ticket sales, bars,

catering, confectionery, sponsorship and corporate hospitality. Our public revenue funding is 33% lower than the average amount granted to similar theatres in the UK and Ireland.

Our commitment to widening access is evident in our proactive engagement with our social inclusion agenda, and we provide professionally led outreach programmes to help to remove the barriers to participation in and enjoyment of the arts for people in disadvantaged areas of the city. Youth drama classes, festivals, student placements, study guides and practical workshops are just some of the other ways in which thousands of young people get involved with the work of the Lyric each year. Recent achievements on our stage include plays starring Kenneth Branagh, Simon Callow, Rob Brydon, Conleth Hill and Adrian Dunbar. Lyric productions have attracted nine award nominations in recent years, and the theatre itself was shortlisted for the Stirling prize for architecture. In 2012, we won the Northern Ireland tourism award for outstanding contribution to tourism, and just last month we became the first arts venue in Northern Ireland to be awarded five-star visitor experience by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

We welcome this inquiry into inclusion in the arts of working-class communities in Northern Ireland. The easy conclusion that some will come to is that it is ticket prices to theatres that are prohibitive. That is overly simplistic. Making theatre is expensive, and ticket prices are set not to make a profit but to allow theatre to break even, covering the cost of making theatre and closing the funding shortfall. Granted, ticket prices at the higher end of the range might be prohibitive to some, but it is our opinion that price is not the only barrier preventing some people attending theatre. Even in cases where we have offered heavily discounted or free tickets, groups are unable to come or those invited remain unwilling to attend. The reasons are varied and complex. In one case study, offering free tickets to students in the immediate vicinity of the theatre in Stranmillis failed to generate any significant uptake of the offer. In recent years, our work with schools has taught us that it is often the cost of transport or the unavailability of staff willing to take on extracurricular activities that prevent people from attending. Similarly, having spoken to community groups who do not avail themselves of our community ticketing scheme, we are repeatedly told that the barrier is not the ticket price but the cost of transport. In response, we have funded the provision of buses to transport people from low-income and socially deprived areas to the theatre. Edenbrooke and Ballynahinch primary schools and New Lodge arts groups have all benefited from the community ticket subsidy.

The Lyric Theatre operates a range of programmes designed to remove some of the economic barriers to the arts for working-class communities. In the last three years, we have awarded over 5,000 tickets through the community ticket scheme to local community groups. Groups like Donegall Pass Community Forum, An Drochaid, Sandy Row Community Forum and the Divis Youth Project are just some of the groups that have benefited from tickets priced at just £5. That is a discount of up to 75% off the full face value. We are the largest contributor of tickets to the Test Drive the Arts scheme, which is operated by Audiences Northern Ireland, and over the last three years we have issued 6,400 tickets at 100% discount to people who have not previously attended at arts event at the Lyric Theatre. That equates to almost 18 tickets a day or 40 tickets a week. Combined, we have subsidised over a quarter of a million pounds' worth of tickets to help people to access theatre. That equates to 25% of our annual Arts Council budget.

We operate a number of smaller programmes that make tickets available at heavily reduced cost or zero value. These schemes are designed to remove the economic barrier to attending theatre by providing entry either for free or at a cost equivalent to or cheaper than a ticket to see a film in a multiplex cinema. They help tackle social isolation and improve mental well-being by providing the beneficiaries with a socially inclusive activity during which they are exposed to theatre of the highest professional quality.

Aside from tickets, our creative learning department undertakes extensive work across Northern Ireland, including in areas of social deprivation. For example, our theatre school and summer school bursaries, previously funded by Belfast Harbour, provide 100% funded places on our theatre school for children aged seven to 18. Like discount ticket schemes, these bursaries are designed to remove the economic barrier to participation and ensure that anyone can benefit from the training provided by the Lyric, irrespective of background. Beneficiaries work alongside other paying participants in group activities, making friends and developing confidence and feelings of inclusion.

It is not all about price. In a social and economic impact study of the Grand Opera House in 2004, a survey of the general public found that many people in lower socioeconomic groupings did not consider the theatre as something that "people like me" do. The report by the Arts Council states:

*"important as a barrier is the sense of live theatre as an activity that is not within some people's entertainment or social repertoire."*

Often, the barriers to theatre are perceived rather than real. For people who have never been to a theatre, there may be perceptions of elitism or a fear of the unknown. Simple questions like what to wear and where to sit will not enter the minds of a regular theatre-goer, but, for those who are new, can create a barrier that might prevent them from attending. In the last few years, we have embarked on a series of orientation workshops to address the perception of some that theatre is not welcoming and something that they are not naturally inclined to participate in. We recently worked with 15 pupils from Rosstulla special school in Jordanstown and residents of a hostel in the lower Ormeau area. We hosted a tailored visit to the theatre for them. The visit included meeting some of our employees, receiving a tour of the theatre and some basic information about what happens during a performance. These programmes allow the participants to become familiar and comfortable in the theatre and demonstrate that they are valued as visitors to the venue and have as much right to be here as anyone else.

Our project with the Chest, Heart and Stroke Association initiated a drama project. The Lyric's creative learning department provided a facilitator and writer to work with the participants for 10 consecutive Monday afternoons at the Lyric. The group then attended a performance of 'The Seafarer', and, for some, that was their very first experience of live theatre. In summer 2012, a group of 16 17- to 19-year-old budding actors from a variety of backgrounds spent three weeks working towards the staging of 'Oedipus the King'. The actors were fully supported by our creative, technical and stage management teams, and two of their performances attracted 220 people.

Our collaboration with the Northern Ireland Prison Service involves us working with young males currently housed in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre. The project is designed to help develop their social skills and contribute to their eventual reintegration into society. Our mental health project involved working with 10 young adults currently resident in Beechcroft residential unit at Knockbracken. The eight-week course involved the participants exploring their perception of their treatment, followed by workshops with 30 teenagers exploring their perception of mental health issues. We recently worked with residents of the Fold Housing Association from the Beersbridge Road and the Falls Road.

Just last year, we collaborated with other partners to help deliver a project entitled 'Crimea Square'. The project, led by the Shankill Spectrum Centre, involved participants recalling and celebrating the last 100 years of life on the Shankill Road. As part of the project, we provided professional voice and acting tutors to help the participants to prepare for their performances. The project continued with us bringing the cast of 15 to our productions of 'Brendan at the Chelsea' and 'Forget Turkey!'. The group has been so successful that it has now established its own theatre company.

The best way to tackle this perceived barrier is to prevent it from ever being created or established. That is where our work with young people is critical. Our work with the primary and secondary school sector allows us to introduce children and young people to the idea of participating and attending theatre at a very early age. An example of this is our Pat and Plain project. Pat and Plain is a series of six plays written by Dan Gordon and commissioned by the Ulster-Scots Agency. The project was delivered as part of the Lyric Theatre's creative learning programme in association with the Ulster-Scots Agency, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Foras na Gaeilge and National Museums Northern Ireland. Over the four years of the project, we worked with almost 2,000 children and 336 staff from 42 primary schools across Northern Ireland. Collectively, the schools gave 130 performances to an audience of over 13,000. It was streamed live on the internet so that the grandparents of newcomers — the children of first-generation immigrants — were able to see their grandchildren participate in the production from the comfort of their own homes in whatever country that was. Each play was published and continues to be provided free of charge to schools that did not take part in the project. We received a box set of all the plays just yesterday, and that will be distributed to every school in Northern Ireland.

In 2012, we won the TMA award for cultural diversity. We came ahead of competition from theatres from across the UK in areas like Birmingham, Leeds and inner-city London. Our Lyric summer school is offered during a five-week period of July and August, and, each year, 300 young people work alongside theatre professionals in acting, prop-making and scenic design workshops. The programme is sponsored by Belfast Harbour and Lloyds TSB, and provides funding for bursary places for young people from low-income families.

These projects and many more besides introduce people to theatre at a young age, before the barriers are created. Whether they return after a short time or a long time, their abiding memory will be of feeling welcomed and included and, often, central to the activity in which they were participating. Furthermore, the parents and family members who attend performances at the end of the projects see those results in their children and, hopefully, feel as welcome as their children in the theatre.

Our primary school projects based on the great famine last year were in collaboration with National Museums Northern Ireland. We worked with eight schools in areas of multiple deprivation. This was a DCAL Claire's Award-winning project that involved 200 projects working on theatre skills, attending the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, filming their work and then all coming together for a screening at the Ulster Museum in front of an invited audience of parents, children and VIPs. This autumn, another project with the RSPB and Libraries NI will see us working with 10 schools from across areas of multiple deprivation.

Some of our work involves encouraging young people to consider a career in theatre. Our work with the Creative and Cultural Skills Creative Choices programme has seen over 200 14- to 16-year-olds visit the theatre to receive workshops and presentations about making choices relevant to their future career. However, tackling exclusion is not confined to the area of creative learning or subsidised ticketing. It is about ensuring that the theatre is relevant to a community. In the past, we have been accused of programming plays for one community or another or putting on plays for the middle class.

In 2013, as part of the celebration of the 400th year of Belfast's city status, we staged our Tales of the City season. This season included a series of plays written by working-class playwrights about working-class communities. Plays like 'Mixed Marriage', 'Love, Billy' and 'Weddins, Weeins and Wakes' told the stories of ordinary people from working-class communities in Belfast. There have been many more productions over the years with similar appeal. Plays like 'Dockers' by Martin Lynch, 'Pumpgirl', 'What the Reindeer Saw', 'A Night in November' and other plays by Marie Jones appeal to working-class communities. Part of the work is ensuring that programming has a broad range of appeal. The Lyric has adhered and continues to adhere to that ideal.

In terms of good practice, looking across the UK and Ireland there are some excellent examples of schemes being operated by theatres around the regions that are designed to remove the economic barriers to audiences. Examples include the National Theatre's Travelex scheme. That scheme, sponsored by Travelex, allows the National Theatre to offer a substantial number of discounts for just £12 as opposed to £50. A major sponsor in Northern Ireland could facilitate a similar scheme here. Some theatres situated in areas of high deprivation offer heavily discounted or free tickets to residents in their immediate vicinity. Examples include the Islington First scheme, which is run by the Almeida Theatre, and First Fridays Free, which is run by the Lyric Hammersmith.

Across the world, there is an increasing popularity of increasing access to audiences by streaming live theatre productions into cinemas. Examples include NT Live, run by the National Theatre, and the Met Live, run by New York Metropolitan Opera. With some investment in technology and additional production costs, these events could be rolled out here in Northern Ireland, allowing live theatre staged in Belfast to be broadcast directly into the heart of working-class communities throughout the Province. We are already in the process of examining how these examples of good practice can be rolled out in Northern Ireland and are happy to examine how we might participate in schemes that operate across the sector rather than on a venue-by-venue basis.

While it is often said, it remains true that increasing funding will help improve the outputs of arts organisations in tackling social exclusion and improving access for people from all backgrounds. Funding increases allow ticket prices to be kept at an affordable level and support many of the creative learning projects outlined above. Years of underfunding have left organisations under-resourced and overstretched. They are achieving great things with little funding, but this cannot be sustained in the long term. It is death by a thousand cuts. The recent cuts requested by the Department have seen some of our education work cut already. Things are likely to get worse in the years ahead.

We recommend that per capita funding for the arts is increased to bring it into line and parity with England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. We also recommend that consideration is given to how we can better provide access to theatre for young audiences of primary age and how the transport problems can be solved. The problem is particularly acute for those outside the greater Belfast area or in working-class rural communities. We recommend that consideration is given to cross-departmental funding structures, where arts organisations such as the Lyric can easily access

revenue funding from outside DCAL for activities that provide benefits more closely associated with other Departments such as Education, Social Development and Health.

Ultimately, it comes down valuing the arts and appreciating how they are relevant to everyone, irrespective of socioeconomic background. It is difficult to imagine how a society can be expected to value the arts if that message does not come, first of all, from the Government and leaders in society. This inquiry helps with that, and I welcome it.

It is more relevant than people imagine. I repeatedly hear of the wonderful successes of the film and screen industry in Northern Ireland, such as 'Game of Thrones', 'The Fall', 'Line of Duty' and, more recently, 'Dracula Untold'. They are all very welcome, but, please, let us not forget that the industry has been built upon actors, writers, directors, designers, technicians and stage management who, for over 60 years, have learnt their craft in places like the Lyric Theatre. To put it in economic terms, the production line fails if we do not invest in the raw materials.

In conclusion, let me repeat that the Lyric Theatre welcomes the chance to contribute to the inquiry. However, we fear that there is a perception that organisations are failing to make the arts accessible to working-class communities. I believe that, through this submission, I have demonstrated the wealth of work that is being undertaken to make them accessible to everyone. We are committed to continuing our work. We will support increasing it. Thank you for listening.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Thank you very much, Ciarán. Thank you for the presentation. You said that, in the past, there has been an accusation against the Lyric that it is primarily for the middle classes, be that through the programming that you have had. Was a conscious decision made that you would change your programming in order to counteract those accusations? Obviously, it is quite notable in the presentation that you say that less than 10% of the total bookers are from BT9 and the rest are from further afield. Was that a very conscious decision that was made by the theatre?

**Mr McAuley:** No, it was not actually, because we have always been programming like that. I just think that the perception has been created that we have not been programming like that. Last year's season was actually designed around celebrating Belfast's 400th year of city status. It was not developed to deal with any perception. It is always something that we are mindful of when we are programming as to who we will appeal to in the programming, but we do not necessarily set out to try to change a perception because we know and we are confident in ourselves that the perception is wrong and that we are programming across the broad spectrum of the community.

**The Chairperson:** OK. You mentioned, and you referred to it towards the end there, the reduced funding and the impact that that is already having on your education programme. Can you maybe give us a bit more detail about that and what you anticipate the impact will be of further cuts?

**Mr McAuley:** I will pass over to Philip to talk about the creative learning aspect. Certainly, with the funding cuts that we have been asked to make, the impact is across the organisation. One of the last things that we tried to look at is creative learning because we know how powerful and important it is and the impact that it can have on people's lives. We tried to protect it as much as possible, but, inevitably, when you are asked to make a 5% cut halfway through a year, there is not a lot of scope to avoid cutting something. So, yes, we looked at overheads and maintenance costs. We looked at everything right from the top to the bottom and, unfortunately, in some cases, jobs. I will ask Philip to explain the area in the creative learning department that is being cut this year and the project.

**Mr Philip Crawford (Lyric Theatre):** I have an allocation and a certain budget that are very tightly attributed to various projects, so when Ciarán asked me to effect that 5% cut, I had to identify projects that would go. We had some money set aside to bring children in from right across the Province to see a production called 'Skyhawk' which is coming up next month. We have had to abandon that. We have tried to get some private funding to cover that. It is a shame. It was £1,000 of tickets for maybe 200 children who could have been here to see that show free of charge. We will not be able to do that now.

We also had a project running with a mental health theme. We were in the process of having that scripted and then putting it on as a performance by teenagers. That now looks like it is not going to happen, which is a shame given the figures for mental health issues in Northern Ireland. We would have tried to do an online resource and some workshops in schools related to one of the productions on the Danske Bank stage, as Ciarán said, for rural communities and getting access out there. That looks like it is going to bite the dust as well. So there are very specific effects from those cuts.

**Mr McAuley:** I think that it is fair to say, though, that despite those cuts that we have made there is still a huge amount going on with our creative learning department. We have not cut it all; we have just taken a few pieces off the programme.

**The Chairperson:** Has that affected any other parts of the programme that would have been looking directly at social inclusion?

**Mr McAuley:** At this stage, no, it has not; not this year. It is very difficult as a producing theatre to effect programming cuts in a year, because you effectively programme a year in advance and enter into contracts. Where it might have an impact is when we look at future programming. As I say, we try to avoid it as much as possible.

**The Chairperson:** At this stage, have you made any representation to the Minister?

**Mr McAuley:** We have made a representation to the Arts Council, which, I believe, is collating that and making a joint representation to the Minister for all of its funded bodies.

**Mr D Bradley:** Thanks very much, Ciarán and Philip, for the presentation. It was very informative. You are obviously very active in ensuring that the Lyric is as inclusive as it can be. I was wondering whether you have, at any stage, looked at what is being done elsewhere in the world — on the island, in Britain and further afield — and what is happening there from the point of view of the larger theatres engaging with the type of communities that the inquiry refers to?

**Mr McAuley:** Absolutely. If I pass to Philip at this stage, he will talk about some of the organisations that we are already working with from other regions of the UK and good practice.

**Mr Crawford:** We work a lot with the Royal Shakespeare Company, which has very well-developed strategies, particularly because it is so centralised in Warwickshire and has got to provide outreach. We have looked at that. Recently, we have negotiated a deal with it for live streams. I do not know whether any of you have been to see any of those live streams from the National and the RSC in QFT and the Omniplex at Dundonald. I had a great meeting with the head of education — curiously, in the Canal Court Hotel in Newry — and negotiated that deal. We can now offer schools a live stream of a show in Stratford into their classroom. I was excited about that, because teachers constantly complain to us. They say that ticket prices are impossibly prohibitive. Transport is a really big problem for schools. So, too, is just getting kids out of school and their missing other lessons. So I was able to respond to that on the basis of what we had learnt from the RSC by saying, "OK; you do not need to come out, miss classes and all the rest of it. We will give you that right into the classroom". They had David Tennant online. They were able to talk to him and all sorts of things. So they are going to do that. There is another one coming up next month. That has been really exciting. It is not the same as coming into the theatre, but any of you who have seen them will know that there are added bonuses, such as seeing actors' reactions up close. It has been great talking to them.

We work a lot with Theatre Clwyd in north Wales. We are working with the Abbey Theatre at the moment on a project that it is bringing up from Dublin, 'Sive'. We had one of our interns in Cork yesterday training for that, so that she can now go out. We are doing a workshop for the Heel and Ankle Community Theatre Company on the Shankill Road and a couple of schools.

We have also looked at things that are going on in America. One of my facilitators who worked with our young actors has travelled over there. I was over there last year with another production that Dan Gordon had written. We were just talking to them about how they work their outreach. Even our just going there to pick up a lot of the skills that are on offer excites me beyond belief. We have about three facilitators who have done courses right across the world at their own expense. They come back here on a Saturday afternoon, and we get that distilled down, delivering it to young actors in Northern Ireland. So we are very much trying to get the influence of other people. We are only three years old in creative learning, but I try to get out a couple of times a year to talk to people and see what I can learn from what they are doing and good practice in other places.

**Mr D Bradley:** I have just one other question. I notice on the letter that we got from the Arts Council that Aisling Ghéar is performing 'Makaronik' on 24 October. Do you have much contact with Irish-language theatre in the North here and further afield?

**Mr McAuley:** Through Aisling Ghéar mostly. Again, as I said earlier, when we are programming, we do not do so to hit a particular community because of comments. Actually we try to always get a broad range of programming to meet communities. We consciously work with Aisling Ghéar and bring them in because it is not an area that we are experienced in but it does a very good job and is leading its field. Last year, we had a company — I cannot recall its name — from Dublin, I think, that did an Irish language piece in the Naughton Studio. It was very well attended by local schools. So, yes, it is something that we do.

**Mr D Bradley:** Are you aware that in Galway there is a dedicated Irish language theatre, An Taibhdhearc? It might be interesting to contact it and look at what it is doing to see whether there is any sort of cross-fertilisation that could take place there.

**Mr McAuley:** Absolutely. That is a good idea. Thank you.

**Mr Crawford:** We have a couple of projects from creative learning, if I might add. For the Pat and Plain series, we had two of the six scripts translated into Irish, and we ran those in two of the Bunscoils. My intern last year was an Irish speaker, and we did the project on the famine in a Bunscoil just off York Street. Chris went in there and delivered the whole workshop. That was good.

**Mr McMullan:** Thank you for your presentation. I found it very interesting, and you have done a lot of work. One thing I see there is that community groups are invited to apply for tickets, but they must be a registered charity. How are we reaching out to community groups that are not registered charities?

**Mr McAuley:** They have to be a registered charity to provide some degree of control that the ticket discount is not used by anyone who says that they are a group of people. I will need to check this, but I think that, in the past, groups have come to us and said they are not a registered charity, but we have looked at them closely enough to find out that they are a genuine group that is not trying to chance their arm and have given them discounted tickets. I do not know of examples, but I am sure that there have been cases where we have allowed communities to benefit from tickets and they have not necessarily been a registered charity.

**Mr McMullan:** I was only thinking that that would be off-putting for a lot of groups as soon as you put down that they need to be a registered charity. A lot of smaller community groups cannot afford to be a registered charity. You can look at their constitution. That is the way that funding bodies do things. They ask for a copy of your constitution when you are applying. Maybe that is something that you could take on board.

When you give out bursaries for young people from low-income families, how do you determine that they are from low-income families? Are you taking the Noble indices for deprivation levels of areas, or what?

**Mr Crawford:** We use information from tax credits. We use organisations like Gingerbread. We used to use schools, but actually it is a difficult call for a teacher if I say that we can offer two bursaries and he has to choose two. I am really keen that the bursaries go to deserving children but also to people who will use them. Sometimes you give them out and they maybe come along to one day out of six. We often pick children up and try to get that element of progression. We had a couple of kids who came along to the summer school, and we try to follow them up by providing bursaries to the theatre school. Sometimes, through schools, people will ring up and ask. Facilitators of ours who work in community settings will identify children as well.

You are right about that putting off community groups. A lot of the groups that Ciarán is talking about are made up of people who might just ring the box office, but a number of them ring us, so they do not have to be registered community groups. Very often, I get a group of enthusiasts who say that they want to start up a theatre company. This morning, straight after this, I am meeting somebody from the Glen Road who has just emailed yesterday and asked whether the Lyric does anything for people who have never been to the theatre. Maybe I should not confess this in front of Ciarán, but I have never said to anybody who wants to come to the theatre that they cannot come because of the ticket price. I subsidise the ticket price from the creative learning budget so that they get in. One of the greatest joys of my work is welcoming people in here who have never been before.



**Mr McMullan:** Finally and quickly, do we use the education board transport when schools are closed? That is a suggestion for transport to take groups in. I did not see that in the report, and I do not say that as a criticism, but it could be something that —

**Mr Crawford:** Do you mean when the schools are closed?

**Mr McMullan:** That fleet is sitting there not working, and it could be something that you could look at as another way of getting people there.

**Mr Crawford:** Obviously, that would be for community groups, not schools.

**Mr McMullan:** Yes, community groups.

**Mr Crawford:** Yes, that is a good suggestion.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Thanks very much for your presentation. I appreciate the way that you are working and how you are trying to reach out to as many people as possible, particularly those who have not been to the theatre, and I commend that. You mentioned two local areas — the Ormeau Road and Annadale — which are areas of high deprivation. How successful have you been in reaching out to people from those areas, given that they are on your doorstep?

**Mr Crawford:** We have had a few groups in, and a few are due to come in, including a senior citizens' group from the Annadale Housing Association. We had a representation from a group on the Ormeau Road that wanted to put on a play. They have asked for support to do that, and I am happy to provide, like we did for the Shankill Road group, the acting movement's resources for that. We had a good group of young people from a hostel in the Markets area who came in through Test Drive the Arts.

I had a revelation one day: I suddenly thought back to the first time that I walked into a gym, and, as you can probably tell, I am not the most familiar with that setting. You walk into a gym, and these guys look really at home and as if they know what they are doing. I suddenly thought that that is how somebody feels if they have never been to the theatre. They walk past here, and they see people who seem very at ease. There are trays of drinks along the shelf and all the rest of it, and they ask themselves, "What is going on?". So I thought that what we need is something to break that down, and we brought the hostel group in. We have had a few school groups in, and some boys have come down from Hydebank.

It is really an orientation thing to break down that barrier and say to people that it is OK. We do it from a slightly different angle. We do it from an employment point of view so that it is not patronising. Rather than, "This is how you book a ticket", we turn that around to say, "OK, if you worked in the box office, this is what you would have to do to issue a ticket". So we talk about that. We go upstairs and explain that, if you worked in the bar, you could not serve 200 people in 15 minutes. We explain that people order a drink and are given a ticket, and then we do that. We take the group on a tour and then they come back and collect their drinks. We basically break it all down: where are the toilets, how do you find your seat, where do you buy programmes. It means that, when they come to the theatre, all that pain is taken out of their experience.

With our facilitators, I love going off around Northern Ireland, and, when I do that, I can say, "OK, I've come to see you, will you come back and see us?" I think it is really important that the person who has invited them is there at the front door to greet them and say, "Come in." It gives me a real buzz to think that there are people up in the café bar — young offenders from Hydebank or the kids from the hostel who can have all sorts of issues — sitting and feeling at home in the Lyric Theatre, and maybe there are more of them in the café that day than there are people from BT9.

**Ms McCorley:** You said that one third of your audience is made up of young people under the age of 25. How would you encourage more young people?

**Mr McAuley:** Through the creative learning programme. We try to get their interest at an early age through various programmes. It is also about show programming and choosing shows that appeal to them. For example, we have just finished a show called Punk Rock, which had seven actors representing kids from lower sixth at a school and addressed the issues that they were dealing with in preparing for their mock exams. Sometimes it can be artistic programming for that age group. It can

be our Christmas programme. For example, Sleeping Beauty will run for four weeks at Christmas and will bring in young people and school groups. There are a number of pieces during the year that would particularly appeal to families or young people. Also, when we are not programming it ourselves, we will work with other organisations. An example is the Belfast Children's Festival, which comes to us in February and March each year and brings in a lot of younger people.

It is really about getting a mix of creative learning programming, artistic programming of our own and working with other organisations.

**Ms McCorley:** Mr McMullan was talking about a way around the transport problem, and it seems a shame that transport is a barrier to people coming to the Lyric, even when you are making free tickets available. Have you had any discussions with Translink to see whether it could come up with some creative ideas? For instance, if free tickets were made available through schools, they could include a free ride on the Stranmillis bus from the centre of town or something like that.

**Mr Crawford:** It is more the school groups that have problems with the logistics of getting a class onto public transport rather than a coach. We just beg and appeal to people.

**Ms McCorley:** I know what you mean.

**Mr Crawford:** We say, "Come on, we're giving them the tickets. Can you do something to get them here?" One of our greatest supporters has been Belfast Harbour. It has been really helpful.

**Ms McCorley:** If schools, for whatever reason, are not able to organise a group, what about individual pupils who would love to take up the opportunity? What about allowing some facility so that individuals from whatever number of schools might be able to come along in their own wee group?

**Mr Crawford:** Yes.

**Mr McAuley:** We have had relationships with Translink, and we ran projects with them. We have not had anything recently. Our most recent correspondence with Translink was to make an appeal about late-night transport, particularly for rural communities. If you come from anywhere further north or east than Ballymena, the last train leaves Belfast at a time that does not allow you to catch a show at the theatre and get to the station in time to get home. It is not easy simply to change your schedule to allow transport to leave later at night, but we could probably do more work in that area.

**Mr Crawford:** There are some fantastic teachers who will make sure that they get their pupils home. I know one teacher who will take them home in the car or pay for taxis. When we say prohibitive, there is a school in north Belfast whose budget for the entire year for five years of drama teaching is £150. That includes printer ink, which, as you probably know, is the biggest article on the list.

They have a brilliant principal. I walked in to meet her, and I said, "I'm Philip Crawford; Lyric Theatre." She fairly directly said, "I'm sure you have empty seats in the Lyric Theatre some nights, do you?" I said, "Yeah, we do." And she said, "Well, would it not be better that my boys were sitting on them?" So, we do tend to contact them, and the teacher is great, saying, "Don't you worry. I'll get them there." That's great.

**Ms McCorley:** It is good to hear that there are those attitudes around. In terms of level of interest from the public and the types of shows that you put on, where do works by local artists feature in comparison with, say, Shakespearean works or whatever?

**Mr McAuley:** I wish, having worked in this industry for 12 years now, that I had the secrets as to what attracted an audience to a theatre, and I don't. Unfortunately, it is not as simple as saying it is a local playwright, because, as you rightly said, it could be a Shakespeare play. It could be 'Hamlet' that will attract schools because that is what they are studying. Equally, when you put on a play by Marie Jones, it can do very well but another one the next year does not do so well. There is no —

**Mr D Bradley:** Get a band.

**Mr McAuley:** There is no — Pardon me?

**Mr D Bradley:** Get a band, and you are guaranteed a full house.

**Mr McAuley:** Yes. It is a question that I am completely unable to answer. There is no trend that says that local playwrights do any better than national playwrights or that historic plays do better than modern plays or vice versa. It is sometimes just down to pure luck or chance.

I will give you an example. During the World Cup this year, we were showing 'Can't Forget About You', by David Ireland, our playwright-in-residence. We had it last year in the Naughton and it sold out, and we moved in into the larger auditorium, and it ran through the World Cup. Thursday night is our quietest night and because there was no World Cup match on a Thursday night, our audiences went up. So we can compete against everything, whether good weather, the World Cup or the Olympics. Everything competes against theatre. It is not always just whether it is a local playwright or not.

**Ms McCorley:** Thank you.

**Mr Humphrey:** Thank you very much for your presentation and your hospitality here. The very first time that I went to the theatre as a child, outside going to pantomime, was to the old Lyric to see 'Macbeth', which I was doing for O-level English. It was just the nature of 'Macbeth' that it was probably going to be a good experience or a bad experience. It was set in a First World War context, I think, and I remember that Joe McPartland was in it.

I am interested, obviously, in the work you are doing in outreach. I am on the board of governors at Edenbrooke Primary School, so I am aware of the work you have been doing there. I went to see, along with the chair, 'Crimea Square' last year. Out of 'Crimea Square', the Heel and Ankle Community Theatre was formed, and I have been to a number of things they did. Some of those actors were then involved in 'Tartan' last year. I am impressed with the outreach that you are doing, because it suggests that there is a problem. I do not mean that it is a problem that is absolutely confined to your organisation, but it clearly is an issue of reaching out to working class communities or households where there is less disposable income. I appreciate all the work that you have been doing there.

When we were at the MAC, part of the presentation showed a ripple out effect from the centre of Belfast of where the MAC's patrons come from geographically and the percentages for County Down, County Antrim and whatever. Have you anything like that to show where the patrons that you are attract are from and how regularly they come?

**Mr McAuley:** Yes, we do. We have postcode analysis. We work with Audiences NI to analyse our data and see where our audiences come from. We are able to see exact postcodes and break it down. That is why I was able to give the statistic about the greater Belfast area and outside of that and the BT9 statistic. It is something that we look at. In the past, we have run projects that have been targeted at areas where we get a very low return. It is within our strategic plan that we try to increase audiences from those low attendance areas each year. It is part of the very essence of what we do. It might be through Philip going out to a school or community group or inviting a group in. It is not always an easy job, but we are aware of where we need to do better.

**Mr Humphrey:** Ciarán, you mentioned in your presentation that you would recommend this facility being given funding parity with those in other parts of the UK and the Irish Republic. I am aware that, prior to the cuts, funding for the arts in Northern Ireland was less than that in other parts of the UK and the Irish Republic. What is the knock-on effect of the new round of cuts that you are facing?

**Mr McAuley:** If you can imagine it, we are a business that works every year to just break even. We struggle to get a budget that just breaks even. Within that, what happens is that you set out your target income line because you know what it is going to cost to run the organisation, employ the staff and run the building. You programme your shows, and you have an idea of how much the shows are going to bring in or of how much you are going to invest in shows, and you set a target. If there is a show that I expect to fill 60% of the house across its run, and that show does not do well for whatever reason — whether it is something that we do or do not do, or whether it is something outside like the World Cup or good weather — there is no fat in the budget, and it suddenly becomes a loss and a hole. We do not programme to make a £50,000 surplus that we can then eat away at. We work from

zero, and it all goes down from there. For an organisation that has always been struggling to meet that zero line to now be told, "You are going to get £50,000 taken off that", it is a struggle. It comes off everything. It comes off bottled water, it comes off staff, it comes off creative learning and it comes off cutting the grass and collecting the leaves. It comes off everything.

**Mr Humphrey:** So, in a sense, every production is a risk.

**Mr McAuley:** Yes.

**Mr Humphrey:** It has a cost, but it also has an opportunity cost because, if you do it and it is a flop, you know that there could have been something else there in its place. How do you minimise the risk?

**Mr McAuley:** First of all, you programme what you think is going to appeal to an audience. As I explained, I still do not know what that is; nobody does. However, you sit down and you think, "OK, what is it that we think will appeal to our audience? Who do we cast in it, and how do we market it?". You also set yourself what feel like achievable targets. There is no point in saying that we are going to sell out this show if your average is 60% or 70%. From there on, it is just hard work to get people across the door, and you hope that it works.

Unfortunately, you are more exposed to losing money than to making more money. You have a limit to the number of people who you can bring in because you have only so many seats in the auditorium, but you have a whole lot that you can lose out on if they do not attend. So, you are more exposed to the losses than the gains.

**Mr Humphrey:** I welcome what you said about the money and support that you have received from Belfast Harbour, which is obviously a very wealthy organisation. However, in Northern Ireland, we need more support from the private sector. You mentioned Lloyds. I hosted a reception for the Lloyds Bank Foundation at Stormont the other night. It is doing good work, but there are just not enough companies and private organisations doing that sort of work. I think it is a cultural thing here. It is much more of a regular thing in America, not just with this type of work but in general.

I was in council when it agreed the money for the Lyric, and you also got funding from the regional Government. Do you agree that this is a regional facility? What other support, especially with RPA coming on stream, do you expect to get from other councils? Have you been speaking to other councils about them supporting you as well? Somebody coming from Lisburn or Castlereagh could use this facility as well as anyone who lives in Belfast city or within the new Belfast boundary.

**Mr McAuley:** The difficulty is that we would be going to councils that have their own arts facilities that take priority over anything that they might consider funding for the Lyric. It is something that we have never done. I could imagine the arguments that would be put up against it. I think that it is certainly worth considering —

**Mr Humphrey:** Equally, you have some councils that take little or no interest in the arts and put little or no money into them.

**Mr McAuley:** Yes, that is true. There might be an opportunity there to say, "Look, you do not have an arts facility in your council area. Why do you not fund an opportunity for people to come to the Lyric?".

**Mr Crawford:** I suppose the regional thing comes under my ambit in that I am very aware of outreach and getting it outside Belfast. We have a group of 16 young actors, at least half of whom are from outside Belfast. We have young people travelling from Derry/Londonderry, Omagh and Enniskillen on 8.00 am buses on Saturdays. They are getting the benefit of that and then taking it out there. Sometimes you are limited. Last month, Belfast Harbour gave me £5,000 to bring in 500 kids from 10 schools in areas of multiple deprivation. However, they said that the schools had to be in east and north Belfast, so that is different. However, there are other projects that we can take out there. Pat and Plain, which we did in Edenbrooke, as you know, went out to every county in Northern Ireland. We try to get that outreach out there, and we have quite a lot of school groups from outside Belfast coming in to see shows and things. I hope that they get the benefit of it.

**Mr McAuley:** Occasionally, when we can and can afford it, we also tour our professional productions. We try to go around the regional venues and provide the Lyric product out in different rural communities. Now, touring is an expensive business and adds an extra bill to the ordinary costs of

producing theatre. However, it is something that we feel obligated to do and that we feel strongly that we should do. We probably just do not do it frequently enough.

**Mr Humphrey:** Finally, returning to the cuts, you have spoken to the Arts Council, which administers the money for the Department. What feedback has there been from the Arts Council to date in relation to the cuts?

**Mr McAuley:** We received some positive news at the tail end of last week that the Arts Council is going to absorb the first 2.1% of cuts; that is very welcome. It is going to meet that from within its own budget and core funding. So, that is its initial response. We have not yet had any response specifically to our proposals of what cuts we would make within our organisations. However, any absorption of those cuts by the Arts Council is very welcome.

**The Chairperson:** Has the Arts Council indicated how it is managing to do that?

**Mr McAuley:** I do not know the detail of it, but I am sure that it would be able to provide that.

**The Chairperson:** It might be quite interesting for the Committee to follow up on that one.

**Mr McGimpsey:** I am sorry that I missed most of your presentation, but I was able to pick up the gist of it. I will begin with participation and working with young people and communities. I represent South Belfast. Rosaleen mentioned that just a couple of hundred yards away is Annadale. I was at a meeting in Ballynafeigh last night. Part of our issue is that we have about 70 youngsters with no youth club or anything like that. I am just wondering about the connections that you are making. If you cannot reach those sorts of youngsters, how are you going to reach out right across Northern Ireland? What is your mechanism? What are you doing there? You are not registering particularly highly on the radar in places like Ballynafeigh and Annadale flats or in other working class areas of Belfast that I represent, such as Sandy Row, Donegall Pass, Taughmonagh and Belvoir. So, it is about the initiatives that you are taking to reach those people, particularly young people. I was interested in what I heard you say in answer to William. As the Opera House does, you can identify where your customers come from by their postcodes. I would be interested to see where your customers are coming from, to see how successful you are being. Again, there is a perception that there is a certain type of customer who comes here and that you are not really expanding your audience base as we expect you to or as you should be.

The second point is that you are getting £1.1 million in public subsidy. What is your total income? How much is that as a percentage? I remember that, in my days in DCAL, we had the argument about newbuild. When I was the Minister, I doubled the arts budget from £7 million to £15 million through the Arts Council, which was to manage it. That was supposed to be the be-all and end-all. We talked about keeping that marching on with inflation. However, the concern then was that we had a menu for the MAC, the Lyric, the Opera House and the Crescent Arts Centre, and, if we were to build all those new buildings, would be spending all our money on upkeep and maintenance. Where are you on your income? If you are getting £1.1 million in public subsidy and moneys from the public — from Belfast Harbour or wherever, God bless them — how much of that is going on building and how much is going on what you are looking to do at the sharp end, which is the delivery? First, will you give us some sort of picture of where your audience is and whether you are reaching out where we anticipated that you were going to? Secondly, because public subsidy is part of your income, how much of it is spent on actors and productions and how much is spent on maintaining this building?

**Mr McAuley:** I do not have the exact figures for you here, but I can tell you —

**Mr McGimpsey:** I understand that.

**Mr McAuley:** I will take your last question first. The £1.1 million is about one third of our total income budget. We make about another £1 million in ticket sales and earn the other £900,000 in sponsorship, bar and cafe revenue, tours and corporate hospitality. The stage productions cost about £1 million to put on. So, you can imagine that, if we get ticket sales of £1 million and it costs £1 million to put on productions, we do not make a lot of money in shows. Producing theatre does not make any money. I do not know the exact figure for the employment of artists or what we invest in that, but we are a theatre that tries to increase what is very low pay for theatre practitioners and artists. We work with Equity to try to push that up and make sure that they get a fair living. That is the financial part, although I do not have the full detail here.

As for making an impact on the community, I know that we have worked with the Ballynafeigh residents association —

**Mr McGimpsey:** That covers Annadale and Haywood and those sorts of places.

**Mr McAuley:** Phil can probably better explain how we access community groups like that. It is not always easy. As a physical space and a producing theatre, we are not like a community organisation that is fleet of foot and best positioned to work on the ground with communities. What we can do is make our facility as accessible and open as possible and create opportunities for them to come in. I will hand over to Phil to talk about some of the ways that we get into those communities.

**Mr Crawford:** We start off with the schools, sowing the seeds of an interest in theatre. We look at the ranking of areas of multiple deprivation, anomalies and all, and try to get in. You asked about how certain amounts of money are spent. That pot of £5,000 from Belfast Harbour will all be spent —

**Mr McGimpsey:** Is that all that it gave you?

**Mr Crawford:** Is that all? That is a lot.

**Mr McGimpsey:** Five grand from Belfast Harbour.

**Mr Crawford:** We are one organisation that it funds. I am very grateful for that. Every penny of that will be spent on getting 500 kids from 10 schools in areas of multiple deprivation in here. We go into the school and provide a workshop for them on the drama aspects. In fact, that one focuses on an appreciation of the differences between life here and in the Gambia. Given the current issues around racism and all the rest of it, we reckon that is money well spent. We go in and do the workshop, and we pay for the transport. We bring them in here, and they see the show. We have worked with Libraries NI, which is going to put displays in the libraries that are local to those 10 schools. We have teamed up with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), which is also sponsored by Belfast Harbour, to do a workshop on the ornithological aspects of the book. For a teacher, it is a fantastic thing.

To get back to the point, however, I hope that we sow the seeds of an interest in theatre. Unfortunately, there is just me and an administrative assistant, so while I would love to be involved in more community groups, to some extent I am relying on trying to get the word out there and then asking them to ring. If you have contacts in those areas who are interested in theatre, please ask them to ring and get in touch, and I will do whatever I can.

**Mr McGimpsey:** The problem is that they do not necessarily know that they are interested.

**Mr Crawford:** Exactly; and that is where trying to sow the seeds in schools comes in. We have a group of senior citizens coming over who want a tour of the theatre. It is brilliant that they have asked around to come in and do that. As you can understand, with the best will in the world, I cannot get out to everybody. If they are interested, I try my best to respond to as many people as possible when they get in touch with us.

**Mr McGimpsey:** The Lyric is the only producing theatre in Northern Ireland. That is a very valuable resource. It seems to me that your main funder for this is the Arts Council; it should be your champion for this. We will be talking to the Arts Council in due course about where the Lyric sits in all this, but it is the body that has to prioritise. I welcome the news that it is deferring the first part of its cut, but, when it is prioritising, I would have thought that this theatre should have been a high priority because of its unique position. How do you make the argument for that? It is along the lines that we have been talking about here; it is about making those connections so that the Lyric has an audience and a cohort of people who are arguing on its behalf so that the theatre is not seen as an ivory tower sitting on the riverbank doing its own thing but as integral to local communities and life in Northern Ireland. I would be interested to see where the Lyric's audience is coming from. That is one of the key issues.

**Mr B McCrea:** Philip, what is your job exactly?

**Mr Crawford:** I am the creative learning coordinator; someone mentioned the word "participation". I run that department, involving outreach and engaging with communities, schools and amateur theatre groups and so on.

**Mr B McCrea:** Is there somebody else who does marketing?

**Mr Crawford:** Yes.

**Mr B McCrea:** We were talking about how difficult it is to know what makes a theatre production a success. How do you get feedback as to what worked and what did not and why?

**Mr Crawford:** For the productions?

**Mr McAuley:** The biggest indicator is bums on seats, to put it crudely. It is the number of people you get across the door. It is about looking at reviews and audience feedback —

**Mr B McCrea:** How do you get audience feedback?

**Mr McAuley:** Well, you ask your audience. You simply contact them and ask them whether they enjoyed the experience.

**Mr B McCrea:** How do you contact them?

**Mr McAuley:** You cannot do it all the time — you could if you had somebody dedicated to it, but the resources we have available to us do not allow us to do that. Occasionally, we go out to a particular audience to find out whether they enjoyed the show. It may be through Philip's department; if a group such as a community group comes in, we would ask those people specifically, but on other occasions it is simply because people contact us and tell us that they liked or did not like a show.

**Mr B McCrea:** How many of the people who come to the theatre will come to every show in a season?

**Mr McAuley:** A very small percentage. The vast majority of people would come to see a show once every three years, if that.

**Mr B McCrea:** It strikes me that theatre is an individual experience; that is the difference about theatre. You are talking about being up close and personal with actors and things like that. How do you get individual champions to support the work of the Lyric?

**Mr McAuley:** Individual champions in terms of just going out into the community and broadcasting the message of the theatre?

**Mr B McCrea:** I was just thinking as I was listening to the points that were brought up with others about why it is that people do not go to the theatre. Why is it that you are not engaging with me as a citizen?

**Mr McAuley:** Are you asking why we are not engaging with you?

**Mr B McCrea:** Yes. I come from Lisburn, and, as William was saying, I am as entitled to come down to regional facilities as anybody else, but I was hardly even sure of where the Lyric was. That is why I was bit late in getting here. How do you engage with people who might be interested but need a wee bit more encouragement?

**Mr Crawford:** If we come across a group of people who are doing that — obviously, I cannot go round saying to people, "If you would like to come to our front-of-house workshop, I will book you in". It is about getting people in —

**Mr B McCrea:** I am not being negative in this, but a couple of points came up. Rosie brought up something that I thought was quite interesting. I am not sure that you are working hard enough about transportation, if that is the issue. From my point of view, it would be useful if there was a bus that took you to the train or the bus station, so then you could go out and do other things. The problem, if you are coming from a bit further out, is how you get home or how you get parked.

You talked a bit about buses and Translink, but what about taxis? Have you approached the likes of Value Cab or someone like that to say, "Listen, here is how we can try to make it an experience"?

**Mr Crawford:** I know that my budget would not lend itself to providing taxis. Approaching a taxi service to say —

**Mr B McCrea:** I suspect that, given that most of their revenue in Belfast comes from Thursday, Friday and Saturday, taxi companies would have capacity to offer discounts to theatregoers on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

Can you tell me a bit about your friends' scheme?

**Mr McAuley:** Working in the industry that we work in, and with the funding that we get, there are priorities. Unfortunately, there is a whole list of things would be really good to do to allow people to come to the theatre that we just cannot look at because we do not have the manpower, facilities or money to do them. There is a long list, including a couple of suggestions that you have just made.

I agree that there may be an opportunity to work with taxis. We work closely with Fonacab, which sponsors us, and there may be an opportunity there, but I am not entirely sure that taxis would be the form of transport that people from socially deprived areas would take to get to the theatre. It could be a wrong assumption, but it is something that I would consider.

**Mr B McCrea:** I think that a lot of people from socially deprived areas take taxis into Belfast or wherever. I would not assume that they would not be able to use a taxi.

**Mr Crawford:** I do not think that we were implying that they would not be able to use a taxi, but if you are asking people to pay for a theatre ticket, I cannot imagine that even a 25% discount on a taxi will help them to get here —

**Mr B McCrea:** Here is the issue: picking up on what I was talking about when you were saying about the drinks all up against the thing, and you do not really know how it works and all of that, it seems to me that the way to look at it would be to get a friend to bring a friend, to have people go with someone who knows a bit about it. I am again not sure that you have the resources focused. It is not criticism; I am just saying that I think there is an opportunity to focus on those people who already know how it works and for them to bring friends, because then they can guide them around. I just wonder whether you have anything like they do in rugby grounds or other places, such as season tickets or buy one, get one free or anything like that?

**Mr McAuley:** We have, in the past three months, launched season tickets, which have three strands; gold, silver or bronze. We have different nights; we have popular, peak nights, which are Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, where your ticket is £24.50. We then have off-peak nights, which are Tuesdays and Wednesdays and Sunday and Saturday matinees, and then we have what are called previews. Just before a show opens, we run it for three or four days before it opens, but it is a full production. There are three pricing levels and the gold, silver and bronze can be used against those.

For example, if you spend £100 on a gold membership, you will get to see five performances for the price of four. That is effectively a 20% discount. However, the real secret is that if you buy a bronze ticket, which only costs you £60, you can use it on Thursday nights, so you can get £120 worth of performances for £60, which is a 50% subsidy. If people are clever enough and use the ticket the right way, they can get a 50% subsidy on all their shows. The idea there, as you mentioned, Basil, is trying to get people to come, not once every three years, but to five shows in the year. If you can do that, suddenly, it is a game changer.

**Mr B McCrea:** I have one last question. It was brought up by some other members as well. The cash numbers that you talk about seem remarkably small. You told me at the start that you had a 5% cut to make halfway through the year in your budget. What is a 5% cut in your budget, in real terms? In absolute terms, what was the cash reduction that you had to make?

**Mr McAuley:** It was £51,000.

**Mr B McCrea:** I am sure that other members will agree that that is a really modest sum, in terms of government expenditure. Mr McGimpsey raised the point that, if you are only getting £5,000 from the harbour commissioners, that is modest.

**Mr Crawford:** I think we might live in different worlds.



**Mr McAuley:** In terms of government expenditure, it is a tiny sum; in arts expenditure, it is huge.

**Mr B McCrea:** As I have just said to you, the information that I picked out of your presentation surprises me. I was surprised when you were talking about making cuts of £1,000 for Skyhawk. These are really modest sums of money and I think that you have to find a way of communicating that in absolute terms. The margin between doing some really good stuff and not doing it is so small. I am not sure that, until today, I got the message that that is the case. You might want to think about how you influence people in those terms. When you talk about going through the Arts Council to make representations to the Minister, there is a danger that you will get lost in the summation of big numbers. I just think that you should look at that.

**Mr Crawford:** So, your point is that we should go to them and say: Look, it really would not take much, from your point of view, to make a huge difference to us?

**Mr B McCrea:** I think so, and I stress that you need to be looking more towards individuals in communities. Mr McGimpsey talks about Annadale, or whatever it is, and I talk about Lisburn. If you can get somebody who is already on your side, they will go out and bring other people to you.

**Mr Crawford:** I always hope that every person who comes in here, everyone whom I introduce to the Lyric, will go out and tell somebody else about it. You are talking about somebody who already knows how the theatre works. I am afraid that I am passionate, and a lot of my work is about, getting those who have no connection —

**Mr B McCrea:** How many MLAs, out of the 108, do you think will have been to the Lyric Theatre?

**Mr McAuley:** I would guess that it is quite a low percentage.

**Mr B McCrea:** I think you should ask them.

**Mr Crawford:** They have been asked.

**Mr B McCrea:** I think that there is work there. I am only taking them as an example. They are opinion formers, they have connections and there will be other people who will go as a result.

Anyway, the point —

**Mr Crawford:** Should we ask them to come or ask them if they have been?

**Mr B McCrea:** You need to differentiate your audience. We are sympathetic, or at least I am. The challenge that you will face is that budgets are not going to be increasing any time soon. You are going to have to find more income from somewhere, and even corporate donations are hard to find. I think that you have to put resources, although they are scarce, into how you mine your existing people. I will finish on that point because, I am sure that the Chair has other things to do. However, I enjoyed the presentation and I am keen to learn more. You can invite me to whatever it is that I should be at.

**Mr Hilditch:** Thank you for the presentation; it was very interesting. I take it that you live, basically, from hand to mouth and that there are no reserves within the organisation? Is that what you are telling us?

**Mr McAuley:** We built up reserves during the period when we were closed, so we have some reserves to absorb any deficits that we make. However, each year you use those, you run lower. Reserves are there to absorb the bad years, but you hope that you have a couple of good years to follow the bad, so that you can keep reserves topped up. However, we work hand to mouth.

**Mr Hilditch:** So, £51,000 is a substantial amount for you.

**Mr McAuley:** It is a huge amount for us.

**Mr Hilditch:** You have been asked to find savings in this current year. Has it been flagged up to you that there may be further cuts this year? Do you believe that that is —

**Mr McAuley:** The Arts Council wrote to us and said that the 2.1% cut was due in July and that we are to expect a further 2.3% cut in the October funding round but should prepare for 5%. They asked all regularly funded organisations above a certain level to prepare for a 5% cut. That is what we are responding to.

**Mr Hilditch:** OK. So, that has been flagged up.

**Mr McAuley:** Yes.

**Mr Hilditch:** Basically, in your work relating to this inquiry you will see that impacting directly.

**Mr McAuley:** Yes, absolutely.

**Mr Hilditch:** That is the clear message that we need to take away.

**Mr McAuley:** There is nowhere you can go that will protect anything in the organisation at a level of £50,000.

**Mr Hilditch:** OK. You mentioned Travelex in the presentation. Have you looked at that across in London?

**Mr McAuley:** Yes, absolutely. It is a very successful scheme at the National Theatre whereby they are able to discount tickets at £12. Unfortunately, it needs a huge sponsor like Travelex to be prepared to fund it.

**Mr Hilditch:** Is that purely on tickets or is there transportation involved in that?

**Mr McAuley:** It is just on tickets, but then the National Theatre is right in the centre of London and transport is much easier in central London than it is in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Hilditch:** Maybe I am looking at this too simplistically, but, if you are telling us that the tickets are not really the problem as such and you charge them at their value and then take that money and offset it against transport, from a layperson's point of view is that too simplistic a way of looking at how you could develop something?

**Mr McAuley:** No, it is not. One of the things that we have been thinking is that, occasionally, to attract people to the theatre, you discount tickets, so you might give a two-for-one offer. It would actually be, in some ways, cheaper to say, "Well, why do you not pay full price and we will pay for the bus?". Unfortunately, that requires a huge amount of organisation because I could go to Cushendall, Glenavy or wherever it might be and say —

**Mr Hilditch:** Cushendall is a lovely place.

**Mr McAuley:** Yes. We could provide a bus, but of course then, suddenly, you have to get those people together.

**Mr Hilditch:** I am just wondering what routes you have tried in that regard; charging the full price and then using that to offset the cost of transportation.

**Mr McAuley:** It is something that we have had in mind, but we just have not got round to scaling up to be able to do. If you can find people in rural areas who will get a group of 40 people together to come on a bus, it really helps.

**Mr Hilditch:** OK. Thank you. Chair, the rest of my questions have been answered.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Thanks for your presentation. It was interesting. In fact, it opened up a lot of discussion in all areas this morning. I would like to concentrate on one. Philip, you talked about opening the doors of the theatre and sowing the seeds and that it would give young people, old people and community groups from all sorts of creed or class an introduction and interest in the Lyric Theatre.

Communication has been talked about, as has transport and the difficulties around it. You have explained the pricing and all of that. I have one simple question: is the Lyric Theatre on social media, maybe with a friends' group? So, if you have your 500 children who have been sponsored so kindly by Belfast Harbour coming in and you are gathering data for them, do you ask them to befriend the Lyric group and they are then able automatically to go into a friends' private group? You are able to say, "Do you know what? Next Thursday night, we have tickets at half price and you can get this bus or that bus." It costs nothing other than for a member of staff to sit down and do that. It goes out to loads of people and not just to those who are socially deprived, but ones who are maybe from rural areas. There is deprivation there as well. Do you know what I mean? It goes right across the whole of the North.

**Mr Crawford:** My group of trainee actors have their own private Facebook page. They are above 18 years of age. Once we go below 18, I would just be a little bit more wary about making contact directly with primary-school pupils or secondary-school pupils and all that sort of thing, but teachers of that age group do that. As far as I know as a former teacher, Facebook is not something you want to get involved with in communicating with pupils and all of that sort of thing. Certainly, teenagers come. There is a big group. We do most of our marketing through Twitter.

**Mr McAuley:** We have over 14,000 followers on Twitter. I do not know how many we have on Facebook; I think it is over 10,000. We have a YouTube channel. We have an Instagram channel. We are on LinkedIn. So, we fully utilise social media. We send our messages out by social media. That will include everything from a tweet this morning about this meeting taking place through to other groups who come in to tweet about our shows, sending out videos of our actors in rehearsal and sending out photographs. There is a constant message going out.

Often, the problem is in sending out too much messaging by social media because people become immune to what you send out or they switch off because they constantly see your messages. What we try to do is get the balance right. It is about trying to create a relationship with our customers and providing them with information and material that is different from what they see on stage. For example, people love to see what happens backstage, so a photograph of an actor putting on their makeup is something that they would not usually see. Small things like that can really make a difference to capturing their imagination. The problem is converting it into a sale. That is the challenge.

**Mrs McKevitt:** Gathering the data is a problem as well. You need to know whether Joe Bloggs is availing himself of free access to the theatre and you are planting the seed for him to come in future. If he does come every three years, is he coming back? It is about how you are able to measure the benefit from it and your success in giving him an interest for life. Once somebody goes to the theatre, they either love it or hate it and they come back. I come here to the Lyric and have enjoyed many a show. I love it, and it is a great asset to have. I am from Newry; your efforts should not be concentrated solely in the Belfast area. How are you storing data so that you can ask customers, not just us on the Committee, whether they are coming back?

**Mr Crawford:** The people who come to our courses are given a standard questionnaire at the end and we get feedback from them. That includes parents who come to summer schools. We then know if they come back to courses. We have email addresses for all the people who participated and we market the next course according to that information. That is how we do it from a creative learning point of view.

**Mr McAuley:** We have one piece of information from the Test Drive the Arts scheme, which issues tickets to people who have not been to the Lyric. The average return from Test Drive the Arts — from people to whom we provided tickets — is £8 to the business. That might be because they buy a ticket for the next time, they buy a drink at the bar, pay for a programme or whatever it might be. We have established that there is a net return to the business from giving out the tickets through Test Drive the Arts. Where we are able to measure it, we do so, but sometimes it is not easy because you do not necessarily have that relationship with the customer that allows you to say to them, "OK, you were here two weeks ago and you will be back next year" because they might have booked through a parent or a friend or might have come as part of a group. It is not always as easy to know when they are coming.

**Mrs McKevitt:** The programme that Mr Humphrey mentioned — the one he took part in when he was first introduced to the theatre — was an education programme.

**Mr McAuley:** He mentioned the Scottish play, which is very bad luck. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr B McCrea:** Particularly today.

**Mrs McKevitt:** How many educational programmes are you involved in each year with schools, should it be 'Blood Brothers' at GCSE, for example? How many of those are performed in the Lyric Theatre every year?

**Mr Crawford:** There is usually one that is on the curriculum, but of course that is for students studying English. Any play, in a way, is good for drama teachers because they are looking at the structure of the piece and all that.

This year, our Skyhawk production, which is visiting from north Wales, is specifically written for Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. I would like to think that, every year, we have at least one production that is particularly focused towards schools and that we would provide some sort of workshop material for schools and either go out and deliver it or support it.

We have a group of young actors aged between 18 and 25 for whom we provide training. At the moment, I am looking at various ways to get more mileage out of that. I want to be able to say to schools that, if they bring their A-level drama classes to see it, I will go out, as the director of the piece, with some of the young cast into the schools at a time when they are having their classes and talk about how we put the programme together.

We usually have a primary school-devised project that goes out into schools. We would normally have a secondary school production on the Danske Bank stage, for which I provide support, and there would be a number of peripherals. Anything that I can draw off from the programme for the Danske Bank stage, I try my best to relate to schools or community groups and so on.

**Mr McMullan:** We are in the middle of the three main universities here. Do you get much feedback from them? We said that some teachers do not push it in schools, but here we have teachers who are being trained and who will be out there teaching. We should get that ethos into them.

Secondly, there is a grant every year, which goes around the community networks in rural areas, through which community groups can get £100 towards transport, which can be used any time throughout the year. It is a token that is worth £100 to community groups for transport. That is, perhaps, something that the community networks could help you out with. That could attract some groups to you because it is £100 off their transport.

**Mr Crawford:** I am interested that you mentioned PGCEs. One of my major challenges is in connecting with teachers. I do not know if any of you are former teachers, but I was, so I can criticise them. They are a nightmare to try and get in touch with. I now have contacts in the PGCE department at Queen's, up in the North, and I am putting in a Trojan horse. I have got a former actor who is going in to tell them what the Lyric creative learning department can do. From my point of view, that is great, as one teacher goes into schools and contacts hundreds of pupils. If we can sow those seeds and get them interested that is probably going to be a cheaper, most cost-effective and effective way of getting the message into schools.

**Mr McAuley:** It is also fair to say, Oliver, that we work quite closely with Queen's. We have actually just finished a project with it and, during the summer, some students worked with us on a programme and learned technical theatre through Queen's and the Brian Friel Theatre. We also work with the regional colleges and are involved in developing a programme that will see us working with Belfast Metropolitan College and the North West Regional College to provide students with a live brief. So, for example, we will give them a show and ask them whether they would like to stage-design it, design the costumes for it or do the marketing for it. So, it will provide them with a real live project that they can work on. Where possible, we try to work with the higher education institutions as well and keep that relationship. So, it not just at primary and secondary levels but right through the tertiary level as well.

**Mr McMullan:** I must congratulate you on the amount of work you are doing. It is phenomenal.

**Mr McAuley:** Thank you.

**Mr Crawford:** Can I just say that there is an open invitation if anybody ever wants to come in and sit in a class or just see what happens? We in creative learning are not quite as precious as professional actors are about viewing the rehearsal process. If you ever want to watch a rehearsal of what we are doing next term or our classes on a Saturday, I would be delighted to welcome you. We can work something out; that would be brilliant.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** I propose that Mr McCrea be nominated to go on behalf of the Committee.

**The Chairperson:** And report back.

**Mr B McCrea:** I was nodding in great support of you and now you have just stuck one on me.

**Mr Humphrey:** Are you suggesting that he has the potential to become a great actor?

**Mr McAuley:** We do our best. Very quickly, on a more serious point — it is quite funny — as well as working with schools and colleges we do professional development for actors and teach them technical skills. Phillip referred to it earlier, but one of the most popular courses that we run is a stage combat course. The reason why it is the most popular course is because people come and become licensed as stage combat practitioners, which allows them to work as extras on 'Game of Thrones'. It is interesting how some of the work that we do —

**Mr B McCrea:** Nominate me for that one.

**Mr Crawford:** DEL paid for a place on it. We had a guy who had been unemployed for quite some time. That course upskilled him to be employed in that and he managed to get through it. It is a totally different group of people than you would expect to see. It is quite scary. They have long beards and hair and big tattoos, but it is great to see another group of people who would not normally be involved in theatre.

**The Chairperson:** I am very conscious that we have run over our time, but that is a clear indication of the interest that members have had in your presentation. Finally, what recommendations would you like to see in our inquiry report with regards to inclusion?

**Mr McAuley:** I sort of touched on it at the end. We always say funding. We sound like that we are griping and we know that the funding cuts are getting worse. However, in the time it has taken us to have this conversation, the Health Department has spent what we get as an arts sector multiple times over. The sliver of funding the arts sector gets is tiny in the big scheme of things. You referred to that, Basil. It is a very modest sum, and £50,000 makes a huge difference to an organisation like ours.

A recommendation from me and this organisation is a call for the Committee and everybody else to support the idea of looking at how we can support the arts a bit more with funding and try to stop that sliver being cut. It is death by a thousand cuts, and I realise that it is a very difficult fight to take on. Hopefully, with Culture Night tonight, the public will take up that fight and promote how important the arts are.

The other thing is to support that idea of introducing people to theatre at a very young age and encouraging the education sector to get the schools and the kids out. My children attend a primary school in Whiteabbey, and I do not think that they have ever been taken to a professional play. That is very difficult to understand. If they are not doing that in the school that my children are at, how many other schools across Northern Ireland are not sending their children to see professional theatre? If we do not capture their imagination at a young age, it is very difficult. Those barriers go up, and suddenly we are fighting to bring them to theatre in later years.

**Mr Crawford:** If I can just add, theatre is so much more than coming to watch a play. There is a lot we can do to develop confidence in interview skills and all that stuff that feeds into real life. We have our feet on the ground with a lot of those people and are helping them in various ways to get a job or be more confident. It is not just about passively watching a play.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Thank you very much. Thank you for your time.