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The Creative Citizens Programme: Local Government involving citizens in arts development

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INTRODUCTION

The research presented here is part of an on-going study being conducted through partnership between Queen's University Belfast (QUB), Voluntary Arts Ireland (VAI), and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council's (MEABC) Culture, Leisure, and Tourism Service. Each partner has come together with the shared goal of developing a greater understanding of how local government in Northern Ireland might work to sustain and develop cultural infrastructure, specifically through building understanding of the cultural interests, activities and needs of local citizens. What has been learned thus far has implications for sustaining and developing not only the investment already made in the physical cultural infrastructure of local areas, but also in making stronger connections with the intangible infrastructure—networks, ideas and skills through participatory knowledge exchange. This policy briefing summarises these findings and concludes by indicating their relevance to key reforms currently underway within local and executive levels of government.

CONTEXT

Northern Ireland government reforms provide new scope to develop greater awareness of the cultural rights, interests, and engagement of its citizens. Yet, despite the relationship of arts and culture to strategic government priorities like health and well being, economic development and building a cohesive society evident in executive level strategic public policy documents, our research shows that consideration of the arts and culture within Community Plans at local level has been varied and inconsistent to date. It is likely that the reason for this variation is, in part, due to unclear articulation and understanding of the public value of arts and cultural participation.

Like elsewhere in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, this obscurity is arguably based on the way in which arts and cultural participation is defined in Northern Irish policy and practice. NI's Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure explicitly acknowledges ambiguity regarding how arts and cultural participation is defined, stating, "arts and culture can mean many things to many people…there is no single definition …and probably cannot be" (DCAL, 2015, p13). Nevertheless, and with a focus on that which is publicly funded, DCAL concludes, "a significant number of citizens are not engaging with arts and culture" (DCAL, 2015, p. 13). Within the sector, there is a hierarchy of practice that positions the professional arts as separate from arts in education, community arts, commercial arts and amateur and voluntary arts rather than as part of a collective, wider cultural ecosystem (Warwick Commission, 2015; Jancovich and Bianchini, 2013; Evans, 2001). These

interpretations in both policy and practice risk neglecting the rich diversity of creative, cultural and artistic practices currently taking place and experienced everyday in our society (Miles and Sullivan, 2012).

This neglect is further compounded by the way in which government collects and analyses data on arts and cultural participation. Mechanisms typically measure participation based on return on financial investment (O'Brien, 2013). Such valuations assert the importance of participation in arts and culture as based on a market-driven approach where creativity and the consumption and production of arts and culture are rooted in, and accountable to, an agenda based on economic and social stability (e.g. tackling poverty and social exclusion, promoting tourism, hiring of venues, purchasing of tickets). What typically result are policies and practices, which imply that those who are not engaging in publicly funded forms of arts, creative and cultural activity are at some sort of deficit. Equally ignoring everyday forms of participation, such an interpretation restricts the possibility for more democratic approaches for understanding and nurturing the cultural life of local communities (Gilmore, 2014).

Local authorities are a unique site in which to consider these issues. As their support for arts and cultural provision is not statutory, they make 'voluntary' commitment to resource and support arts, culture and creative activity and infrastructure, often through the discretional authority of public servants (Durrer, 2015). In Northern Ireland, reforms have granted them new, relative institutional freedom in devising, developing and implementing choices and actions reflective of the value they place on the cultural life of local communities (DOE, 2015). Community Planning is one mechanism for involving wider, democratic participation in this process. This paper examines a case study in which a local authority Culture, Leisure, and Tourism Service is attempting to build understanding *with citizens* of its community's artistic, creative and cultural life. The lessons thus far learned are applied to this context of new local government responsibilities (in addition to Gilmore, 2014; see Stevenson and Blanche, 2015; Jancovich, 2015 and Melville and Morgan, 2015 for similar discussions within England and Scotland).

CASE STUDY

This research is based on the *Creative Citizens* programme, a public facing, festival-like programme held between March and June. It was initiated in early 2014 as a pilot project by the Arts and Development Service of Ballymena Borough Council (at that time) in partnership with Voluntary Arts Ireland[i]. In their involvement with *Creative Citizens*, each organisation sought to:

- Encourage and further advance active involvement in creative cultural activity
- Give local people the chance to explore the value of creative citizenship;
- Develop audiences for arts, cultural and creative activity; and
- Re-design spaces and services engaging with local and regional arts in a new and exciting way.

The Arts and Development Service of Ballymena took a different approach from its usual practice in developing *Creative Citizens* 2014, which will be explored further below. The resulting learning gained by individuals within the Council and Voluntary Arts Ireland prompted a continuation of the programme in March - June 2015 as part of Voluntary Arts' new *Our Cultural Commons* initiative. Launched in October 2014 with Arts Development UK[ii] *Our Cultural Commons* encourages communities to engage in reimagining the cultural life of their area by forming new collaborative networks and building on local cultural assets.

On the island of Ireland, this process has comprised:

- Collecting and sharing evidence (stories, examples, case studies) of collaborative practice aimed at sustaining and developing local cultural infrastructure;
- Hosting and facilitating discussions within different localities regarding ambitions and challenges for sustaining and developing local cultural infrastructure;
- Supporting localities in bringing these matters to consideration at national level in terms of policy, structures and financial support; and
- Roundtable events and discussions with voluntary arts organisations, community sector professionals, local authorities, academia, and arts and cultural organisations within individual localities

By exploring cultural assets, investigations have emphasised surveying what local places have, rather than what they might lack. These assets have been interpreted in a broad way, inclusive of the publicly funded arts but emphasising the notion of cultural expression in its broadest sense. It extends an understanding of arts, culture and creativity beyond official, state-supported and market-oriented cultural products and enterprises to include localised, everyday cultural activities and knowledge: the skills, creativity, ideas, physical facilities, finances, people and partnerships, that exist in a locality.

In March 2015, just prior to the establishment of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, Queen's University Belfast joined VAI and Ballymena Borough Council in exploring *Creative Citizens* as an action research project within *Our Cultural Commons.* In its continued development—now extended to the new super council area of Mid and East Antrim—*Creative Citizens* was aimed at enhancing knowledge regarding:

- How local citizens understand and currently engage in creative activity within the area; and
- How that relates, or not, to the existing arts and cultural infrastructure (tangible and intangible) and local authority provision in the locality.

The development of each *Creative Citizens* programme has started with the question 'What are you doing that is creative?'. The programme's four-month duration and the range and reach of activities involved are a result of the responses received. This 'creative' question was sent out through media outlets, face to face conversations between citizens and staff, and a public call to individuals and organisations from a range of sectors across the Borough (Ballymena in 2014 and MEABC area in 2015) including local arts groups, health, education, business, churches, sports and community organizations. A full programme of activities were identified from the responses, ranging from venue based performances to community and sector based activity. A series of partner programmes were also established including events with organisations such as the Inter Ethnic Forum or a land art project as part of the annual Agricultural Show in the Borough.

Planning began in September of each year with programmes taking place from March to June of the following year. In 2014, a series of 150 events with over 50 local groups reached 20,000 people as either attendees or participants (one third the population of Ballymena). This figure reflects a significant increase in engagement from the previous festival year (2013), in which the programme was developed solely by the local authority as a professional arts programme. In 2015, *Creative Citizens* reached over 12,000 people.

Each year also saw the complementary programming of one major artistic feature devised by the MEABC Culture, Leisure, and Tourism Service. 2014 saw an Artist in Residence Programme with artist Donnacha Cahill whose large-scale sculpture project addressed a range of issues including how the use of art might reimagine town centre spaces. The artist's work and activities took art into non-traditional arts spaces around the Borough, such as public car parks, bus stations, and into factories, and included an online presence in partnership with local Press. A highlight of the 2015 programme was the inclusion of the Methodist Arts Collection of modern paintings of Christian art owned by the Methodist Church in Britain. This collection was exhibited at The Braid Arts Centre with nine local churches and the Ballymena Inter Church Forum also displaying one painting each. Each church devised and hosted their own public event in conjunction with their display. They also played an integral role in establishing a new Arts Ambassador programme for MEABC, which led to 126 local people who had little or no experience of arts engagement volunteering to serve as guides for the Collection when on display in the Braid.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: CO-PRODUCED ACTION RESEARCH

In its initial stages, this study has focused on the working practices of the *Creative Citizens* programme. The work presented here reflects a research period from March 2015 – September 2015. A co-produced approach has been employed to the action research project, *Creative Citizens*. Linked to a tradition of reflective practice (Schön, 1983) and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), action research is an ongoing, flexible process of applied research that joins practice-based "action (change, improvement) and research (understanding, knowledge)" (Costello, 2011, p6).

Still ongoing, this process has involved:

- Literature reviews of evaluation and publications associated with both the 2014 and 2015 *Creative Citizen* programmes as well as NI policies involving the arts and / or local government
- Review of academic literature regarding issues of cultural participation, community development, and arts development;
- Semi-structured interviews with staff members of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (5); as well as
- Interviews and a focus groups with *Creative Citizen* 2015 participants involved in the Methodist Arts Collection aspect of *Creative Citizens* 2015 (5, including 1 business representative); and
- Observation of *Creative Citizen* activities

The research has also been informed by additional semi-structured interviews conducted by QUB with arts officers (8) from eight other Northern Irish local borough councils in order to contextualise local government practice in relation to arts and culture within Northern Ireland.

Of considerable importance to the study has been the exchange between the co-researchers (QUB, VAI, MEABC). The approach has allowed for individuals from different fields of practice (arts development agency, academia, and local government) to share knowledge that typically remains internalised within the daily practices and experiences of the individual, the discipline and professional peer networks (Durá et al., 2014).

Co-production of research has taken part in the following ways:

- Scoping of an initial research question and determination of sample;
- Evidence gathering and data collection as detailed above;
- Analysis. Research interviews and focus group discussions directly related to *Creative Citizens* were transcribed and collaboratively analysed (Lassiter, 2005);
- Dissemination of initial findings (proposals to conferences and in other fora); and
- Development and design of future research

INSIGHTS FROM THE RESEARCH

This section details some of the insights thus far reached from our initial study of the 2014 and 2015 *Creative Citizen* programmes. Areas of learning indicate the relevance of arts, creative and cultural activity to the everyday lives of citizens. Further demonstrated are possible methods for participatory engagement between public servants and citizens; approaches for understanding citizen perspectives, needs and interests; and capacity building within local authorities that resonate with the new requirements of Community Planning (DOE, 2015).

Rethinking the relationship between public servants and citizens

Creative Citizens began with a personalised invitation from public servant to citizen that facilitated new engagement between public servant and citizen

Creative Citizens started from a place of positive value, rather than deficit.

- The nature of the invitation highlighted an opportunity to ‘celebrate’, rather than to develop the artistic, creative and cultural activity of all who responded to the ‘call’
- While the option for learning and development regarding art forms and styles that individuals felt were unfamiliar to them was available and availed of, it remained optional

Participation by public servants and citizens appears to be motivated by mutually perceived value

- *Creative Citizens* addressed programmatic needs and challenges being experienced by the Culture, Leisure, and Tourism Service of MEABC
- It appears to have addressed some business development needs and interests for those involved in the Ballymena Town Centre Development Team who participated in the research
- It appears to have addressed personal interests of general participants who participated in the research and made links with other activities or networks with which they were familiar

Approaches to arts programming and leadership are changing

- The required output of a public-facing programme, like *Creative Citizens*, creates a facility to begin exploring new mechanisms for working with others in a way that is suited to the timeline / requirements of local authority practice / structure
- The responses to the *Creative Citizens*' call received by MEABC's Culture, Leisure, and Tourism Service team has fostered greater awareness that the structures for the service currently in place may not be relevant to the whole of the community.
- The programme has thus led the Arts and Development Officer within the MEABC Culture, Leisure and Tourism team to rethink their approach to programming and service development.
- As a result, the MEABC team is looking to develop a 'Community Programmer' aspect of service provision and capacity building where members of the community will be facilitated to develop and lead activities with different mechanisms of local authority support.
- The programming practice of the Arts and Development Officer and the way in which she leads is changing. Facilitative approaches to leadership, sharing of expertise (from the community to the local authority and vice versa) and an emphasis on community life in programming are being explored. This alters the perspective of local authority practice as autonomous over citizens to being a process of exchange with citizens (Shaw and Meade, 2013).

Redefining what is understood as 'culture', 'arts' and 'creativity' in policy
The openness of the question posed by *Creative Citizens* and the invitation to share assisted local authority staff involved to take a broad interpretation of artistic, cultural and creative activity that included activities in churches, garden clubs and on farms.

Benefits to this approach include enabling the Culture, Leisure, and Tourism Service to build a database of new contacts and begin mapping broader artistic, creative and cultural activity in the borough. This information contributes a more evidenced-based picture of a sense of place (Gilmore, 2013) required for regional development in both *Community Planning* and the *Regional Development Strategy* for Northern Ireland.

Re-imagining our perception of local infrastructure as cultural
Creative Citizens was perceived by all who have participated in the research as taking arts to non-traditional arts spaces. What has resulted is new ways to consider how local infrastructure (tangible and intangible) is cultural (see also Melville and Morgan, 2015). It indicates:

- Flagship dedicated arts venues are part of the local cultural infrastructure not the whole of it.
- Social, voluntary, religious, and professional networks are important assets within our local cultural infrastructure
- Ideas are the currency which enable diverse networks to converge for a common purpose and to begin to integrate disjointed provision
- Involving citizens in shaping and delivering a programme has the potential to enliven a cultural commons - with a common sense of ownership and shared rights and responsibilities (Hess and Ostrom, 2007)

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY LESSONS

In line with other research in the Republic of Ireland and the UK (Stevenson and Blanche, 2015; Melville and Morgan, 2015; Gilmore, 2014; Shaw and Meade, 2013), initial study of *Creative Citizens* uncovers that a variety of arts, creative and cultural activities are important to a community's everyday experiences. However individually this activity may occur, it makes up a community's "cultural existence" (Wilson, 2014, np). As a result, considering local citizens' engagement in a variety of arts, creative and cultural activity is an important aspect of understanding how to foster localised, democratic participation. This finding and the approaches and methods employed in the *Creative Citizens* programme have relevance to the Community Planning process:

- Welcoming a broader understanding of what makes up local cultural infrastructure to include network, skills, ideas as well as the built environment creates potential for a more sustainable local cultural ecosystem and community
- Making connections to networks, physical infrastructure and services already familiar to people broadens the potential inclusion of diverse citizens in public service development
- Starting with questions about what we have, rather than what we feel we lack can promote positive, value of our local community assets while still extending awareness of what is further needed
- Investing in allowing key public servants the time necessary for engagement with citizens can foster meaningful participatory knowledge exchange
- Being open to participatory knowledge exchange between public servants, partners and citizens means being open to distributing powers and expertise between public servants, partners and citizens
- Recognising that the distribution of power and expertise during such exchanges will likely shift, depending upon the activity involved, provides opportunities for reciprocation of learning (Shier, 2001)
- Creating a tangible idea that enables a range of personal, organisational, and community motivations to be realised in 'real time' can provide different pathways of involvement for citizens, public servants and partners
- Creating the pathways for citizens and partners to opt in at their own level can allow for different intensities of commitment to participation that may be more appropriate for different situations and contexts (Shier, 2001)
- Ensuring support (capacity and people, not just funding) is in place for citizens to continue to develop as creative leaders themselves increases the potential of the sustainability of what has been developed

More research is needed to fully understand the range, reach and process involved in a programme like *Creative Citizens*. What we have learned thus far demonstrates the potential of valuing the cultural life of communities for fostering meaningful knowledge exchange and participation between citizens, partners and public servants. We are planning to embed action research within *Creative Citizens* 2016 in order to better understand who the programme is engaging, how and to what potential impact. We welcome the opportunity to share learning and practice with researchers, policymakers, citizens, arts and cultural practitioners and local authorities to understand how such approaches may function in different contexts, including the implications within executive level policy (i.e. Department for Communities and the current *DCAL Strategy for Culture and Arts, 2016-2026*) and in light of the recent CAL Committee Report on the *Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working Class Communities*.

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[i] Voluntary Arts is a charity- based organisation aimed at promoting and increasing participation in cultural activities across the UK and Republic of Ireland. They work with policymakers, funders and politicians to improve the environment for arts participation and provide information and training to groups and individuals taking part in the voluntary arts sector. voluntaryarts.org/

[ii] Arts Development UK is a charity-based membership organization made up of local authorities and the creative industries in England and Wales. They provide individual and organisational members networking opportunities, advice and support for promoting and developing local arts services. artsdevelopmentuk.org/

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