



Building a stronger  
performing arts  
community in Ireland.

Opening Statement & Submission to  
**Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media**

**Development of local and community arts and the role of local government in  
this process**

9 November 2023

## Theatre Forum - Opening statement to the Joint Committee

### Context

Theatre Forum would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission. As the national resource organisation for the performing arts with member arts centres, venues, theatres, concert halls and galleries as well as theatre, dance, and opera production companies and freelance artists in all parts of the country, arts centres and venues are where our members overlap with and support the work of local and community arts organisations.

The aim of Project Ireland 2040 is to construct Ireland for all. By 2040, the one million additional people living in Ireland which will require enhanced cultural, and social amenities, regional connectivity as well as improved environmental sustainability.

Achieving the NDP's specific priority *to enhance arts and culture centres* depends in no small way on maintaining the built arts infrastructure that supports the good work of the amateur and community arts organisations represented here today.

### Considerations in local and community arts policymaking and funding

**Capital investment** in a nationwide network of arts centres has been key to developing the arts in Irish localities. That network includes some newly designed as arts centres while others are repurposed or extended older buildings, initiated, and funded by local authorities and various capital schemes.

Every Local Authority Arts Office prepares its Arts Plan and works with arts organisations and artists to support artists and co-create, co-produce, and co-present art and arts events in its locality. Such local authority **programme investment** responds to rights of people in every community and locality to enjoy and participate in the arts which reaps artistic, civic, social and community benefits.

The 2003 Arts Act asserts the Minister's responsibility for formulating cultural policy which informs the Arts Council's strategy, Local Authorities operate to the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, CCMA and their own Council agendas while Creative Ireland and more recently, Shared Island initiatives, make demands of arts centres.

**Historical investment patterns have resulted in a mixed funding ecology for arts centres with each authority having its own governance, financial and management relationship with the arts centre or centres in its area. Today, Theatre Forum asks the Committee whether the capital and programme funding structures which require frequent and multiple applications from arts centres, already operating to capacity, could be better organised and co-ordinated.**

### Sustaining the infrastructure

Arts Centres give communities access to participate in the arts and culture where they live. While Ireland's built arts infrastructure is an asset, much of it is also deteriorating. To achieve the NDP aim of social cohesion underpinning strong sustainable economic growth, we ask that a coordinated **capital investment** plan is devised to maintain and operate Arts Centres to the highest sustainability and access standards, reconfigure them as excellent live performance and production hubs and ensure that they meet the current and future needs of communities. Arts organisations are ideally placed to lead by example making the transition to an energy efficient low carbon economy by taking

action to reduce their carbon footprint and overall environmental impacts as well as influencing their communities.

**Theatre Forum asks this Committee to take the opportunity to align NDP and arts and culture policy, to draw together capital and programme investment plans that support all arts centres and venues working to enrich life in communities and localities. Take the opportunity to rebuild the arts infrastructure addressing climate and environmental issues and to build it better, more sustainably, accessible to and inclusive of all communities.**

## **Sustaining Arts Organisations in communities**

Arts centres, venues, theatres, and galleries are at the heart of their communities, working to improve celebrate diversity in their programmes, activities, and events. They are spaces close to home where community projects can expect professional production and presentation of their work from drama to musicals, dance to panto, visual arts to circus and are a touchstone for connecting communities. Their ability to grow and develop, to support and engage with their communities should be supported with the necessary resources of longer-term funding planning to produce work in, with and by communities and go beyond the limitations of sporadic projects in an annual funding cycle. My own experience of the Ramor Theatre in Virginia and Townhall Cavan demonstrates this.

The role of the Local Authority in funding, control and management arts venues, centres, theatres and galleries is particular to each organisation. There are over 70 venues and arts centres in all parts of the country in addition to 34 Local Authorities with Arts Officers and Offices with at least one venue or arts centre in every area. Each operates on its own bespoke model of Arts Council, Local Authority, box office and other earned income.

**Regardless of why these individualised arrangements have evolved, we ask the Committee think about Arts Centres as our cultural asset, the key arts ‘channel’ to communities, a vital arts focal point in cities, counties, and towns. Finding and promoting an interpretation of the 2003 Arts Act that makes multi-annual funding or service level agreements between Arts Centres and their Local Authority the norm rather than an exception would underpin the development of local and community arts.**

## **Sustaining Artists**

Finally, we would urge the Committee to examine the initial results of the Basic Income for the Arts pilot scheme. The one-third less pay gap for musicians and artists compared to all other sectors identified in First Music Contact and Theatre Forum’s most recent Pay & Conditions survey suggests that the roll-out of Basic Income for the Arts is a necessity if artists and musicians are to emerge from their first encounters with the arts to continue working in the music industry and performing arts sector, and go on to have sustainable careers in our communities.

Thank you.

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## Key points that Theatre Forum address to the Joint Committee

### 1. Context

Key considerations of member groups in relation to the development of local and community arts and the role of local government in this process and specifically in relation to the following themes:

- Developing the arts in Irish localities
- Key considerations in local and community arts policy making and funding.  
This submission examines some of the key local and community policymaking and funding considerations from the perspective of the arts infrastructure, arts organisations, and artists.

### 2. Key considerations in local and community arts policymaking and funding

Just as the policymaking environment for the arts sector, including and maybe especially for local and community arts, the funding structures too are complex, requiring frequent and multiple applications from organisations and artists that are already operating on scarce financial resources and capacity.

### 3. Sustaining the Arts Infrastructure

This Committee has an opportunity to align NDP and arts and culture policy, to draw together a capital and programme investment plan that supports the local and community arts and its infrastructure to continue to enrich life in communities and localities. This is also a timely opportunity to rebuild the arts infrastructure addressing climate and environmental issues and to build it better and more sustainably for the benefit of arts organisations and artists and their communities.

### 4. Sustaining Arts Organisations and Artists

There are over 70 venues and arts centres in all parts of the country in addition to 34 Local Authorities with Arts Officers and Offices with at least one venue or arts centre in every area. Each operates on its own bespoke model of Arts Council, Local Authority, box office and other earned income. Regardless of why these individualised arrangements have evolved, we ask that you think about Arts Centres collectively as a cultural asset, the key arts 'channel' to communities, a vital arts focal point in cities, counties and towns nationally. Working through the Arts Council and the CCMA partnership, finding an interpretation of the 2003 Arts Act that makes multi-annual funding or service level agreements between Arts Centres and their Local Authority the norm rather than an exception would be another big step to ensure the future financial viability of Arts Centres

### Basic Income

The one-third less pay gap for musicians and artists compared to all other sectors makes roll-out of Basic Income for the Arts a necessity for artists and musicians to survive.

### Arts Funding

There's a strong argument that increased arts funding, especially bursaries musicians and artists pay closer to the national average to artists, is needed on two counts. As musician and artists' hourly earnings are probably even lower than national data suggests and the lowest of all sectors, ongoing CPI increases are going to further separate the music industry and performing arts with low pay and poor conditions from all other sectors. Increases in pay, fees and bursaries are essential to retain the talent on which IBEC's Experience or Dream economy and the 2040 National Plan ideals of vibrant communities rely.

## 1. Context

Theatre Forum would like to thank this Committee for the opportunity to make a submission about the development of local and community arts.

Looking to our future, the aim of Project Ireland 2040 is to construct an improved Ireland for all. By 2040, there will be approximately one million additional people living in Ireland. This population growth will require hundreds of thousands of new jobs, new homes, enhanced cultural, and social amenities, enhanced regional connectivity and improved environmental sustainability.

Project Ireland 2040 seeks to achieve strategic outcomes, building around the themes of wellbeing, equality, and opportunity. Two Project 2040 outcomes seem most relevant to the development of local and community arts:

- Strengthened rural economies and communities.
- Enhanced amenity and heritage.

Achieving these strategic outcomes depends in no small way on the continued and successful development of local and community arts:

*Plans for investment in culture and heritage recognise that high quality infrastructure is critical for a vibrant heritage and culture sector and that investment in our cultural heritage underpins social cohesion and supports strong, sustainable economic growth. In terms of regional objectives, specific priorities are to enhance arts and culture centres throughout the country, develop the sustainable tourism potential of our culture and heritage infrastructure and improve Ireland's outdoor recreation infrastructure and natural heritage.*

### **National Development Plan.**

In line with the National Development Plan's Strategic Investment Priorities 2018–2027, we suggest that investment in and support for the arts infrastructure, arts organisations and artists is an investment in enriching the lives of local communities.

*The quality of life in our regional towns and villages will play a key role in delivering a balanced regional economy as envisaged in the National Economic Plan. The Taskforce believes that all across Ireland, there are spaces which can, with imagination and a well-funded capital improvement programme, be adapted to allow live performances in a safe environment, adhering to public health guidelines, and enriching life in our towns and villages and cities.*

### **Life Worth Living, The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce**

As the national resource organisation for the performing arts with member arts centres, venues, theatres, concert halls and galleries that make up the arts infrastructure, arts organisation members including theatre, dance, and opera production companies as well as freelance artists and art workers in all parts of the country, Theatre Forum's membership reflects some of the diversity in the performing arts ecology. While there are considerable overlaps with commercial and amateur arts organisations, this submission is submitted on behalf of the professional arts organisations and artists that comprise the organisation's membership.

**Key considerations of member groups in relation to the development of local and community arts and the role of local government in this process and specifically in relation to the following themes:**

- **Developing the arts in Irish localities**
- **Key considerations in local and community arts policy making and funding.**

**This submission examines some of the key local and community policymaking and funding considerations from the perspective of the arts infrastructure, arts organisations, and artists.**

## **Key considerations in local and community arts policymaking and funding**

### **Policymaking and funding considerations**

Arts and Culture policy is determined by the 2003 Arts Act. That Act asserts the Minister and Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media's responsibility for formulating cultural policy, currently set out in the Department's 2021-2023 Statement of Strategy.

As the independent state body, the Arts Council has an advisory role to the Minister as well as responsibility for developing the Council's own strategy guiding its own investment priorities in the funded arts sector including awarding annual funding to Arts Offices, Arts Centres, and arts organisations across the country. The Arts Council funding allocation is decided and awarded in the annual Budget and distributed based on applications by arts organisations, including arts centres and production companies, and artists.

The 2003 Act also sets out the role of local authorities to 'prepare and implement plans for the development of the arts within their own functional area'. This gives the country's Local Authorities a developmental supporting a wide variety of other public art initiatives and through partnerships with festivals, venues, artists' resource agencies, other local authorities as well as the Arts Council. Local Authority arts funding is discretionary under the Act and decided by each Council annually. Distribution of funding to the arts office and arts organisations in their area is made based on Arts Office plans, annual applications and occasionally, 3-to-5-year service level agreements with key organisations including arts centres. Other initiatives such as Shared Island one and Creative Ireland Creative Communities programme deploy creativity and funding at a national and local level to achieve other political, well-being, social cohesion, and economic success objectives.

The resulting policy environment is one of policy and direction being set by the Department which, in turn, informing the Arts Council's own strategy as well as those organisations that the Council funds. Local Authorities operate to the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, CCMA and their own Council agendas. For what is a small sector, there is considerable complexity in the policies and strategies that govern the local and community arts environment.

### **Capital Investment**

Recent decades have seen the development of a nationwide network of arts centres which has been key to developing the arts in Irish localities. Many arts centres were initiated and funded by local authorities and supported through various capital schemes. Some are newly designed as arts centres, built within the last thirty years, while others are repurposed or extended older buildings.

### **Programme**

Local authority investment in the arts responds to rights of people in every community and locality to enjoy and participate in the arts. This investment reaps artistic, civic, social and community benefits breaking down educational, physical, geographic and socio-economic barriers that exclude people from the arts. A Local Authority Arts Office prepares its own Arts Plan and then work with arts organisations and artists to support artists and co-create, co-produce and co-present art and arts events in its locality.

Support provided to arts centres by local authorities has been critical to developing the arts at local level. However, historical investment patterns have resulted in a mixed funding ecology for arts centres with each authority having its own governance, financial and management relationship with the arts centre or centres in its area. For programme expenditure, arts centres built under the

auspices of local government usually receive funding in excess of Arts Council funding from their local authorities.

Programme support provided to these arts centres by local authorities and the Arts Council has been critical to ensuring that a stable and viable network is maintained. Many arts centres now directly support artists and the production of work with experienced people dedicated to supporting artists, audiences and communities.

**Just as the policymaking environment for the arts sector, including and maybe especially for local and community arts, Theatre Forum would emphasise to the Committee that the funding structures too are complex, requiring frequent and multiple applications from organisations and artists that are already operating on scarce financial resources and capacity.**

*Note that various labels including Arts Centres, Arts Venues, and Theatres are used in this submission. They are mostly interchangeable other than in the context of Arts Council strategy where Arts Centre is the preferred term.*



## Sustaining the infrastructure

As our population grows and in the last year disperses, there is an obvious need to maintain, upgrade and enhance existing Arts Centres to ensure citizens have access to the arts in their own areas. In its own community, the arts centre takes on various roles in response to the needs and desires of the community. In line with the National Development Plan's Strategic Investment Priorities 2018–2027, we suggest that investment in Arts Centres enhances the value of this important cultural asset and is an investment in giving communities access to participate in and enjoy the arts and culture locally.

### Capital investment

The quality arts and culture infrastructure described in the Plan needs to be built on strong foundations. While the country's built arts infrastructure is an asset, it is also deteriorating. To achieve the NDP aim of social cohesion underpinning strong sustainable economic growth, we ask that a coordinated capital expenditure plan is put in place to maintain and operate Arts Centres to the highest sustainability and access standards, reconfigure them as excellent live performance and production hubs and ensure that they meet the current and future needs of artists and communities.

*The quality of life in our regional towns and villages will play a key role in delivering a balanced regional economy as envisaged in the National Economic Plan. The Taskforce believes that all across Ireland, there are spaces which can, with imagination and a well-funded capital improvement programme, be adapted to allow live performances in a safe environment, adhering to public health guidelines, and enriching life in our towns and villages and cities.*

**Life Worth Living**, The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce

Significant capital investment will also be needed to upgrade arts centres to the sustainability and accessibility standards required of the country's arts and culture buildings. Arts organisations must be supported to further reduce their own Green House Gas emissions and contribute to the decarbonisation of the Irish economy. Some have made inroads already, but all are ideally positioned to act to reduce the carbon footprint of their own organisation as well as the overall environmental impacts of the performing arts sector. Arts organisations are ideally placed to lead by example making the transition to an energy efficient low carbon economy by taking action to reduce their carbon footprint and overall environmental impacts as well as influencing their communities.

Led by the Department, there is an opportunity to support arts organisations with a policy framework and resources, including capital investment, to show how climate and environmental issues can be addressed by making changes to their own buildings, working more sustainably as well as being spaces from which artists and communities.

**This Committee has an opportunity to align NDP and arts and culture policy, to draw together a capital and programme investment plan that supports the local and community arts and its infrastructure to continue to enrich life in communities and localities. This is also a timely opportunity to rebuild the arts infrastructure addressing climate and environmental issues and to build it better and more sustainably for the benefit of arts organisations and artists and their communities.**

## **Sustaining Arts Organisations and Artists**

Local authority and Arts Council investment in the arts reaps artistic, civic, social and community benefits. It works to break down educational, physical, geographical, and socio-economic barriers that exclude people from the arts. It's used to support organisations and artists to make work of excellence through funding, and through collaborations and development programmes in communities, localities and a range of different settings.

### **Arts Centres serve their communities**

Arts Centres are at the heart of their communities. They can improve access for all, be inclusive and celebrate diversity in their programmes, activities, and events. The ability of Arts Centres to grow and develop, to support and engage with their communities, should be supported with the necessary resources: longer-term funding planning, capital investment and funding to produce work in, with and by communities. Arts centres, venues, theatres and galleries are the visible part of the arts infrastructure for communities and audiences around the country. Working with a host of public and private sector partners as well as local groups, they are spaces close to home where community projects can expect professional production and presentation of their work and an important touchstone for arts engagement connecting communities.

Importantly, arts centres around the country are also workplaces for artists and ideally positioned to offer quality work opportunities to artists and arts workers in their own locality. Investment in the sustainability and accessibility of the arts infrastructure, especially arts centres, means that arts organisations are well-positioned to offer artists and arts workers quality work opportunities as part of sustainable careers in the arts.

Arts Centres face tough financial challenges, maintaining financial stability in the short-term and sustainability in the medium to longer term. However, the current financial model of not-for-profit arts organisations including arts centres is typically pieced together from mostly annual applications to a variety of funders plus earned income, mostly from box office with some limited philanthropic support. As a result, arts organisations are increasingly squeezed with higher costs, especially energy ones, higher risks and associated costs of mitigating them with reduced ticket sales income.

Longer term and planned funding commitments to Arts Venues would enable them to better plan projects and programmes, deepen engagement with artists, audiences and their communities and foster collaborations with communities of interest that continue beyond the limitations of sporadic projects in an annual funding cycle.

### **Arts Council**

Looking ahead, a multi-annual approach to Arts Centres funding will promote longer term planning and commitment to artists' residencies and projects, longer-life community projects and partnerships and provide resources to develop audiences and arts participation in communities. The Arts Council's multi-annual funding pilot scheme for arts centres started in 2022 is a big step in the right direction of enabling Arts Centres to adopt a strategic and longer-term approach.

### **Local Authority**

The role of the Local Authority in funding, control and management arts venues, centres, theatres and galleries is particular to each organisation. While this does take account of local contexts, it has also led to inconsistencies in funding and resource commitments from Councils, which is not conducive to the vibrant and sustainable local and community arts envisaged in the NDP.

**There are over 70 venues and arts centres in all parts of the country in addition to 34 Local Authorities with Arts Officers and Offices with at least one venue or arts centre in every area. Each operates on its own bespoke model of Arts Council, Local Authority, box office and other earned income. Regardless of why these individualised arrangements have evolved, we ask the Committee think about Arts Centres collectively as a cultural asset, the key arts ‘channel’ to communities, a vital arts focal point in cities, counties and towns nationally. Working through the Arts Council and the CCMA partnership, finding an interpretation of the 2003 Arts Act that makes multi-annual funding or service level agreements between Arts Centres and their Local Authority the norm rather than an exception would be another big step to secure the development of local and community arts.**

## **Sustaining Artists**

As our population grows but also disperses, there is an obvious need to maintain, upgrade and enhance the arts infrastructure to ensure artists can work in their own locality and community. The Minister's introduction of the Basic Income for the Arts Pilot Scheme is probably the most significant and welcome development in decades. It can directly reduce to the precarity experienced by artists and arts workers in their working lives, enabling them to have sustainable careers in the community in which they live.

### **Key Pay and Conditions Survey 2023 findings**

#### **Pay gap widening**

Considering the Consumer Price Index (CPI) increase of 7.8% in 2022 compared to 2021, a fall of 1.8% in average weekly earnings in the arts and entertainment sector means that artists and musicians are being left further and further behind. Contrast this with the uplift of 10.8% in the public sector and an average of 2% increase in the private sector. It appears that pay for musicians and artists has become detached from everyone else in the private sector with public sector pay out of sight altogether.

#### **Employment conditions worsening**

Low pay rates, working hours, poor conditions, few benefits, no pension provision, and with housing and healthcare unaffordable, earning a living as a musician and artist is impossible without significant personal sacrifice, a systemic problem that is having career, financial, personal, and health repercussions for too many people in the music industry and the performing arts.

#### **Basic Income having a positive effect**

There is some welcome evidence in the qualitative responses that Basic Income is having a positive impact on recipients, offering basic security in an otherwise precarious career.

#### **Basic Income**

The one-third less pay gap for musicians and artists compared to all other sectors makes roll-out of Basic Income for the Arts a necessity for artists and musicians to survive and to have sustainable careers in communities nationwide.

#### **Arts Funding**

There's a strong argument that increased arts funding, especially bursaries musicians and artists pay closer to the national average to artists, is needed on two counts. As musician and artists' hourly earnings could be even lower than national data suggests and the lowest of all sectors, ongoing CPI increases are going to further separate the music industry and performing arts with low pay and poor conditions from all other sectors. Increases in pay, fees and bursaries are essential to retain artists and realise the 2040 National Plan ideals of vibrant communities rely.



### **Theatre Forum**

Established over 20 years ago, Theatre Forum is a national performing arts membership organisation with more than 280 members. Roughly half of these members are organisations and half of that number again are arts centres, theatres and venues.

### **Representatives**

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