

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

Wednesday 27 November 2019

My name is Conor Falvey, Assistant Secretary in charge of the Culture Division of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. I am accompanied by my colleague John Kennedy, Head of the Cultural Schemes Unit which has been examining the matters under discussion today at the behest of Minister Josepha Madigan TD. On behalf of the Minister, I would like to thank the Committee for their interest in this matter and for the opportunity to present to the Committee on this subject today. The Department is aware that the Committee has engaged with other stakeholders on this topic in recent weeks.

The Department, directly and through its agencies, contributes substantial supports to night time cultural activity on an ongoing basis. Some €189m is provided in the Department's Vote in 2019 for culture purposes. This funding supports cultural activity in the evenings through bodies such as the National Concert Hall, through support from the Arts Council for our theatre sector including the Abbey Theatre, the Gate and Druid, and through events such as Culture Night. Work presented at regional theatres and arts centres is in many instances developed with the support of the Arts Council and indeed performed in facilities developed with capital support from the Department. I recently attended the opening of the French Film Festival at the Irish Film Institute. The support of the Arts Council for the Festival was acknowledged on the evening as was the capital support from the Department for the IFI.

The topic of night time culture has of course a wider dimension reflecting broader creative pursuits which is constantly evolving. This has been of growing interest

in light of a demand for a more varied night time creative landscape and recognition of the cultural, economic and social value of Ireland's evening experiences. It is also building on the back of movements across Europe such as Museum Night and, for example, the appointment of a "night czar" in London.

On April 17th, Minister Madigan hosted a symposium to investigate the possibility of creative nightlife and cultural activity at night time as an alternative and complementary option to Ireland's existing rich night time experience. Since then, the Department has engaged further with key partners to develop an approach to support a sustainable and forward looking infrastructure to facilitate the development of after hours cultural events. The Minister has proposed a number of measures to deliver on these objectives.

Firstly, she is establishing pilot projects to identify how a night time culture initiative might work in local settings. To this end, the Department has thus far written to two local authorities, Dublin City Council and Cork City Council, to establish groups comprising representatives from the local authority, local creative nightlife sector, policing, transport, and artists and/or creative workers. The purpose of these groups is to consider and collate what supports and impediments are currently impacting on opportunities for creative and cultural activity at night, in different settings, and what would be required locally to develop, promote and encourage late night culture. These groups will also consider the appropriateness of appointing local Night Time Commissioners. We have asked that the local authorities concerned progress the establishment of these groups as soon as possible.

Secondly, in parallel to this process, the Minister is establishing a national forum comprising the Department, the Arts Council and other Government Departments with key roles in terms of supporting night time culture and creativity. This

forum will consider matters arising from the operation of the pilot local groups which could require a national policy or legislative response, which would, in turn, be referred to the relevant Department or agency for consideration.

Thirdly, the Minister will engage with local authorities and arts groups with regard to a mapping exercise of existing venues and civic spaces which may be suitable for night time cultural events to identify both gaps and opportunities, building on work carried out previously in this area.

Finally, and flowing from these engagements, the Minister will develop a National Night Time Cultural Policy, which will complement existing initiatives and supports. This Night Time Cultural Policy will, in turn, give consideration to the appointment of a Night Time Commissioner to oversee the implementation of recommendations and outputs arising. Any decisions in this regard will of course be a matter for the Minister and the Government in due course.

The key issue will be to identify those factors that are having an impact on the opportunities for artists and creatives to develop and present creative work for the benefit of all, to ensure that these issues are brought to the attention of the relevant agencies and bodies concerned, and that progress on responding to these issues is monitored. There will no doubt be some complexity in these matters – the issues that have been highlighted in Dublin in recent months are being experienced elsewhere. A key objective will be to distinguish between the natural ebb and flow of venues and events based on changing tastes and to identify those factors which are impacting on the overall level of activity. It is also the case that many of the agencies and bodies concerned will of course be attempting to balance sometimes competing demands. In this context, it is worth noting developments such as the recent decision of Dublin Bus to introduce a 24-hour service two routes - the 15 and 41 - from next month.

The Minister considers that there is a genuine opportunity to create an environment in which night time culture can thrive, with the beneficial knock-on effects of increasing the night time economy, expanding the reach of our cultural offering and ultimately helping to create a society with wider night time options focusing on the arts, wellbeing and the broader human experience.

In addition, the Department has had discussions with the Arts Council, the Office of Public Works and some local authorities to consider possible short-term and longer-term approaches to the issue of the availability of artists' spaces in general in Ireland.

In conclusion, the Minister, on behalf of the Government, is committed to identifying ways to effectively support greater opportunity for night time cultural and creative events. She welcomes the engagement of the relevant local authorities, and, of course, of the Committee. The Department will be pleased to receive any output from the Committee's deliberations on this issue.