

Statement

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Chair – Arts Council

Joint Committee on Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht

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Introduction

I met with the predecessor of this committee in June of last year as part of the process leading to my appointment as Chair of the Arts Council.

Since that date the Council has undergone significant change – my early tasks as Chair included overseeing the appointment of three new board members as well as the recruitment process for a new Director.

I'm pleased to be accompanied today by Maureen Kennelly who took up her role as Arts Council Director last April.

Impact of Covid

We are now all working in a very changed world.

The Covid-19 crisis has impacted hugely on jobs and livelihoods in the arts sector as well as undermining the financial viability of many arts organisations.

With the first lockdown last March – months, and in some cases years, of planning for events simply ended overnight.

'Arts & entertainment' remains one of the sectors most affected by the Covid-19 restrictions.

A recently commissioned Arts Council report from EY shows that in 2020, the decline in economic activity in the arts sector will be approximately -55% compared with -11% in the Irish economy as a whole.

Latest CSO data shows a 67% decline in economic activity in the sector.

And yet against this hugely challenging situation, artists have responded to lift all our spirits.

The public response to, and engagement with, the work of artists online has been overwhelmingly positive.

The value of the arts has never been more evident to each of us as citizens and as human beings.

Short-term response

At the outset of this crisis, the Arts Council fast-tracked payment to almost 450 organisations – and asked them to prioritise payments to artists with whom they had hoped to work.

With freelance artists also in mind, the Council focused on getting bursary decisions made quickly and funds distributed, across all art forms.

Despite repurposing current and future spending plans, the Council – with a 2020 budget of €80m – did not have the firepower to offer a medium-term response to the crisis, especially as much of that money was already allocated.

Arts Council Budget

Like other organisations including the National Campaign for the Arts, the Arts Council worked to ensure the arts was elevated in public policy considerations and in the allocation of public expenditure.

There was extensive engagement with the political and governmental system to make the case for additional funding.

Following discussions with the last government, and then minister Josepha Madigan, the Council received an additional €20m in July.

And with the support of the current government – and the new Arts and Culture Minister Catherine Martin – a further €5m was received in the summer months, bringing the Council's 2020 budget to €105m.

The budget day decision to increase the Arts Council's budget to €130m for 2021 was a welcome and historic decision.

I said on budget day that, 'Money doesn't solve every problem', but this was an important endorsement of the value of artists and the challenges they face.

Financial Challenges

As Chair of the Arts Council I am working on the assumption that the Covid-19 crisis will continue through 2021 and into the first quarter of 2022.

Restrictions will continue to impact severely on creative practice and public engagement with the arts.

Two points illustrate the demands that the Arts Council faces:

- To the end of August last, the Council received requests for €152m in financial support from individual artists and arts organisations – and that figure will hit €200m by year end;
- There has also been a 56% increase in funding applications so far in 2020 (against full year averages for 2017-19).

Emergency Stabilisation Funding

The Council has provided Emergency Stabilisation Funding for key organisations in the national and regional arts infrastructure.

All these organisations are household names and are essential for local communities to engage with the arts and for artists to show and display their work. They include the Belltable in Limerick, the Everyman in Cork and the Pavilion in Dun Laoghaire.

This emergency stabilisation support from the Arts Council will prevent closure by the end of 2020.

But, with ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, they will still face a challenging 2021.

This is the seriousness of the situation that the Arts Council is dealing with as we plan for longer term sustainability as part of the ongoing response to the Covid-19 crisis.

Artist Bursaries

In dealing with the crisis, the Council has also given priority to increasing the number of bursaries to individual artists.

Bursaries are an excellent way to allow artists the time and space to create work. Demand has always significantly outstripped available resources.

At this time of crisis, a bursary is a vital policy response to support livelihoods.

We can provide more specific detail to the Committee but, by the end of the year, the Arts Council will have:

- Provided direct funding to 1,200 individual artists who otherwise would have been without work.
- Funding to 750 different organisations including festivals, venues, production companies and resource organisations, which has significant impact on 2,000 directly employed staff and on a further 20,000 artists.

- Some 1,100 awards have been made to artists and arts workers to fund their professional development;
- And the past month, over €16m in funding has been allocated across the sector – in the next few weeks a further €7m in project awards will be distributed.

Covid-19 Restrictions

In responding to the Covid-19 crisis, the Arts Council remains committed to its current strategic plan, *Making Great Art Work* as well as two key policies in respect of 'Pay the Artist' and Equality, Human Rights and Diversity.

The staff of the Council – who have worked tremendously hard in recent months – and the board are committed to the two main objectives to the current strategic plan: the role of the artist and public engagement with the arts.

We will be able to provide the Committee with more detail on plans for 2021, which will continue to be a tough time for the arts sector, notwithstanding the welcome increase in state funding.

As I mentioned at the outset, I was appointed Chair of the Arts Council in June 2019 – and in the months that followed I had the privilege of experiencing all that is good about the different art forms in Ireland.

Returning audience engagement – and protecting the livelihoods of artists and arts workers – is the challenge consuming the Arts Council in its role as the development agency for the arts.

In that regard, I would ask those in government, tasked with examining the Covid-19 restrictions, to re-open the doors of galleries and arts centres.

These are well run, safe spaces, with an ability to professionally manage numbers.

Having attended indoor performances at the Kilkenny Arts Festival in August and the Dublin Theatre Festival in September – which operated under strict safety procedures – I have the same ask for theatres: please open their doors.

In moving from Level 5 restrictions, the value and importance of in-person engagement with the arts must be recognised.

ENDS