



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.