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“Local and Community Arts”

Presented by the Association of Irish Musical Societies (A.I.M.S.)

Represented by

Feargal Cavanagh (National President) & Frank Foley (National Secretary)

The Association of Irish Musical Societies known as A.I.M.S., was started in 1965 as the governing body for musical Societies and has grown now to have in excess of 120 musical societies members, based throughout the entire island of Ireland. Within these societies we currently would have in excess of 14,000 members involved in performing or bringing to the stage, close to 200 different productions giving in excess of 800 live show performance every year, from full scale musicals Theatre productions, to Christmas pantomimes, and also concerts. This is giving us a total audience of half a million annually.

Whilst we are seen as an Amateur Arts Organisation, our many members societies stage our shows to a very professional standard, and with an average cost of €40-€50K giving us an overall spend of in the region of €8 Million per year. So, between all our member societies we employ Directors, Musical directors, and choreographers and many musicians for all our orchestras. Along with that employ many technicians also lighting operators, sound technicians, set builders/painters, costume suppliers, props, hair and makeup crews. Also, many volunteers involved in stage crews, Front of House teams, catering staff, so there could be in around 100 people working on every production with substantial amount of them doing this on a voluntary community basis.

Our A.I.M.S. societies perform in many theatres, Town Halls, Community halls and schools nationwide. Our societies are a vibrant and vital part of our communities, and for many young people throughout the country this is the first introduction to Musical Theatre and West-End Shows. In recent covid years we have certainly appreciated how vital Live Theatre entertainment is in the country we live in. Local and community arts such as Musical Theatre gives the opportunity for audiences to socialise, meet friends & family, get out of the house, have somewhere to go, switch off and be entertained. Whilst at the same time it is a chance for all members to do the same, but also to learn develop their talents and be educated, be it singing, dancing, acting, and wellbeing, all whilst making friends.

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Most societies rehearse a production for an average of in around three months, which in a lot of cases carries them through the winter months. Also, being part of and working as a group, in developing a person's acting, singing, and choreography, is especially good for the body and the mind and is very positive in regards to everyone mental health.

Our AIMS Member societies, perform mainly from September right through to Mid-May. These activities galvanise a community, and not just local communities, but neighbouring communities support each other in these activities, creating a complex web of social and cultural interaction and networking that is unique to Irish Society.

Our individual society members, range in age from infants to people in their 80's, we positively embrace and encourage all age groups, irrelevant of class, gender, orientation, religion or creed. We encourage all to join their local musical society and enhance their individual talent, be it onstage or whatever roll within the Musical society suits best.

We have been invited her today to discuss Local and community Arts and what can be done to enhance and further develop this throughout the entire country. AIMS societies cover the entire country From Buncrana in Donegal to Killarney in Kerry and everywhere in between. We have built up a network throughout the regional communities of individuals with the both artistic talent and organisational skills to continue to develop the Community Musical Theatre Arts sector. However, one issue which is a continual major issue for Musical theatre is creating the funds to keep every Society on the road. Whilst every society will have its paying audiences, and whilst all our cast are amateur, this is never enough to cover all the costs which, as mentioned earlier for most societies will be in the region of €40k -€50K, So every society relay on fundraising. We do realise that the Arts council state that it is not in their remit to support local community Arts, and they state that this is the remit of the local individual councils to support and assist local Community arts in their council area, principally through their Arts office. However, in practice this varies considerably for council to council without any one scheme being available to all, and also the amount of support that may be available in any one year. Any Musical Society cannot feel certain that funding will be forthcoming from year to year, this is a major issue for societies when they try to plan out and budget for their upcoming show and at the same time cannot be sure of what may be available in support schemes via the council. It would be quite usual that you could apply for grant assistance for a scheme that guidelines say you can apply for up to say €5000 and you actually get €1000. We do understand that it depends on how many apply and how much is available but still it leaves musical societies with serious uncertainties to cope with.

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All our Local community Musical Societies strive to bring to the stage musical theatre productions of the very best quality, and so it would greatly helped if dedicated funding can be ringfenced to provide reliable consistent funding to provide a less precarious path for Societies.

We are aware that just this year a new scheme that has come through the Local council called "The Community Recognition Fund" Funded by the Dept of Rural and Community Development. We are not be sure how many councils have implemented this funding programme, nor do we know if it is going to be available next year, nor do we know if there is an equivalent funding programme available for urban based musical theatre societies

Today I have the great honour of addressing you all as National President of AIMS. My job and the job of all involved in AIMS is to continue the development and enhancement of Local and community Musical Theatre throughout the country, and I hope that this committee can bring forward a programme for Local and community Arts which will support our member societies to in their work to bring the highest of standard of Musical Theatre within their local community society and throughout the country.

Feargal Cavanagh
Nat President A.I.M.S.

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