

# **COVID -19 Committee 2 July 2020**

## **Opening Statement**

**Katherine Licken**

**Secretary General**

Cathaoirleach, Committee Members

I very much welcome the opportunity to meet with the COVID-19 Committee this morning. COVID-19 is having a devastating impact on the arts and culture sector. The Department has been engaged in an ongoing wide ranging consultation with stakeholders from across the sector since the commencement of the crisis. This engagement – with national cultural institutions, the Arts Council, Screen Ireland, advocacy bodies, resource organisations, theatre companies, and individual arts practices and artists – has been fundamental to assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the Sector, and making effective interventions to help the sector. More recently this has extended to the commercial for-profit sector with whom we are currently engaged and from whom you heard such eloquent testimony on Tuesday.

During these difficult times culture and art have provided a way to show a community's sense of place while allowing people to express their creativity and resilience during these difficult times. Bringing people together even when we have to stay apart, inspiring and sharing: these are the powers of art, the importance of which has been even made more evident during COVID-19.

It has been encouraging to see the surge in people accessing cultural content online during COVID-19 - from virtual visits to museums and galleries, streaming of films and even community arts groups via social media - showing its fundamental role as a source of resilience during difficult times and ultimately the high quality of material being made available on-line to the public.

The Department supported a number of initiatives to ensure the public had access to quality cultural and creative online content. “*Culture Ireland’s*” innovative Ireland Performs series of 120 online performances, in partnership with Facebook, was delivered in April and May to a global audience of 750,000; while the Other Voices Courage

programme, included a number of performances from our National Cultural Institutions, which reached audiences of over 2.7million with 1.15 million live views. The Creative Ireland programme also delivered a number of initiatives which provided creative opportunities for the public, working with Healthy Ireland, or through local authorities in the delivery of Cuinniú na nÓg. Critically, all of these initiatives also provided opportunities for paid work for artists and creatives when few other opportunities were available.

In terms of the challenges facing arts organisations, there were a number of immediate responses. The Arts Council quickly assured funded organisations that funding remained available in 2020 and that it could be drawn down sooner. This was intended to help tackle cash flow challenges posed by the cancellation of events and to minimise the impact on artists who might otherwise not have been paid. In terms of other supports, individual artists has access to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and where they struggled to access these supports, the Department provided helpdesk support to individual artists to ensure that they fully understood the supports available. This practical assistance flowed from

engagement with arts organisations and proved to be of real, practical support to people in the sector, who were experiencing a crisis in terms of immediate income

Whilst the impact of COVID-19 for some aspects of the cultural sector can be quantified in terms of the number of institutions or sites closed or the loss of revenue for cultural and creative industries, other facets of culture are harder to gauge. The Department is currently conducting a survey to evaluate the continuing impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the sectors supported by the Department and to better understand the on-going experience of organisations and individuals impacted by the crisis. The information will help to inform the on-going policy response of the Department to support the sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Officials are also analysing the recent reports by the Arts Council Expert Advisory Group and National Campaign for the Arts and the recommendations outlined and we are pleased to report that a number of these have already been achieved.

Drawing on all of the feedback received in the early phases, there was evidence that while the actions of the Arts Council

had addressed the immediate impacts on arts infrastructure - venues and organisations - additional measures were necessary to sustain venues and organisations and to support freelance artists in development of their work. This issue of sustainability was critical to the announcement on 16 June of an additional €25 million to support the Arts and Culture sector this year. The funding will include bursaries and commissions to artists and arts organisations, and resources for museums and culture workers as they prepare for the re-opening of society. A total of €20 million will be allocated to the Arts Council bringing its allocation this year to €100 million. A further €5 million will be available for other measures, including securing the future of key cultural and museum spaces and facilities throughout Ireland, and the production of high-quality digital art and on-line performances.

Outside of these sector specific supports, cross-Government measures are also playing an import role. These include:

- the extension to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment until 10th August 2020; and
- the cross-sectoral economic supports have been put in place such as; the wage subsidy scheme, increased

unemployment benefits, the state credit guarantee scheme, working capital loan schemes, enterprise support schemes and deferrals of tax liabilities, VAT, social contributions and local authority rates.

The Department in cooperation with the Department of Taoiseach is also convening a meeting of relevant representatives from the public and private sector to discuss how to protect and sustain the arts and culture sector through the COVID-19 recovery and beyond, recognising that the issues faced by venues as well as artists in an era where mass gatherings are restricted, are unique and will be problematic for quite some time. That process of engagement is now underway with a view again to assessing what measures will impact positively on the sustainability of the sector and help people to get back to work. The commercial sector has a strong track record in operating profitably for many years and we will work with the sector and Government to ensure that viable industries are sustained into the future.

In conclusion, the Department will continue to engage with affected stakeholders, to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on the sector and to seek to introduce effective supports. The

Department's key objective for the Arts and Culture sector has been and will continue to be to make the most effective use of available resources to sustain the sector through this challenging period. The views of the Committee will be a valuable contribution to this process and welcomed by the Department.

Go raibh mile maith agaibh.