

26 June 2020

Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

Leinster House

Dublin 2

Ref; Submission of Ealaín na Gaeltachta to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response.

Dear Aileen,

Please find attached submission of Ealaín na Gaeltachta to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response.

If you have any questions, I am available at 0872588656

Best Wishes,

Mícheál Ó Fearraigh

Development Officer

Údarás na Gaeltachta

Submission of Ealaín na Gaeltachta to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response.

June 2020

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Ealaín na Gaeltachta Ltd. welcomes the the invitation to make its submission to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response.

Ealaín na Gaeltachta Ltd.

Ealaín na Gaeltachta, a partnership between Údarás na Gaeltachta and The Arts Council, was established in 1997 for the development of the Native and Contemporary Arts of the Gaeltacht. Ealaín na Gaeltachta, a subsidiary of Údarás na Gaeltachta, provides services and grant schemes that support the development of arts organisations and sole artists. They help to provide training and mentoring support, and also help to support initiatives that help to build and strengthen the capabilities and the infrastructure of the arts in the Gaeltacht.

The company is implementing a Strategy Plan for the development of the arts in the Gaeltacht from 2018-2022, which has been agreed to by the governing board of Ealaín na Gaeltachta and by The Arts Council.

As well as this, the “Cuisle” programme is administered by Ealaín na Gaeltachta and funded by The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht for the systematic development of activities in the native arts for youth in the Gaeltacht.

More information about our work is available at www.ealain.ie.

The View from the Ghaeltacht

Response of the Government and The Arts Council thus far

It is good news that €20 million extra has been approved for the Arts Council to help rescue the arts sector from this emergency and we would be hopeful that an appropriate share of this funding would go towards the Gaeltacht arts.

We welcome the report made by the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response on the impact of Covid-19, and the comprehensive research on which it is based, and we support the recommendations that are made in the report.

We felt that the approach of the Arts Council was strong from the start, they decided to stand by the support that they had promised, and the grants were released early to enable the arts sector to plan accordingly. Even though we were concerned with putting complete emphasis on online events for some of the special support schemes, we are happy that it is now understood that this is neither sufficient nor suitable for the sector in its entirety. We also praise the work of the national resource organisations for their support work and for raising and presenting the sector's voice at this time.

Impact on Festivals, Artists, Arts Centres and Theatre

The arts sector in the Gaeltacht is dependent on community. It is the artists, the arts centres, galleries, theatre, and the festivals that create employment all over the Gaeltacht and that provide entertainment, challenges, wonder and food for thought for the community. They are more or less intertwined with each other with regard to the promotion of the arts in the Gaeltacht.

The arts **festivals** are the infrastructural centre of the arts in the Gaeltacht, promoting art of a high standard. They exemplify the lively community of the Gaeltacht that sustains good company, economic growth and public participation. Festivals that are held all year round especially in peripheral areas in which there is a gap in the physical infrastructure. They are recognised as a strategic vehicle to promote the arts and the language in the Gaeltacht in addition to the Gaeltacht arts centres.

Ealaín na Gaeltachta supports more than 20 Gaeltacht arts festivals every year. Investment in them benefits the employment of artists and of arts organisations, the income of arts centres, theatres and community centres, the growth and development of tourist affairs and local and national economic affairs not to mention the local community, the national community and the international community who are inspired and rejuvenated by these festivals. To date this year, 13 of these festivals have been cancelled and there is every chance that more of them could be lost between now and the end of the year. There are few Gaeltacht areas that this is not impacting.

Many Gaeltacht and national **sole artists** depend on the seasonal Gaeltacht festivals for their profession, and for the development of their practice. (e.g. through commissions, interdisciplinary projects, concerts, workshops, sessions, networking). With almost every Gaeltacht festival cancelled and every arts centre closed this year this leaves a big void for artists in every field of art. The seasonal employment for musicians is gone entirely with the cancellation of gigs and sessions during national and international festivals and because of the lack of regional tourism, the opportunity that existed for musicians to find extra employment, as well as to exchange and sustain musical richness through delivering music and other events.

"Everything stopped. My entire income disappeared. I'm practising now preparing things online. We are talking about things for the start of 2021 now but it's still not clear." – Gaeltacht Irish Dancer.

“I have lost 3 months worrying about “online presence” instead of giving myself creative mental space, I will be missing out on 4 exhibitions from March to October, regular income from art workshop has been lost, the opportunity to collaborate with other artists has been lost, the opportunity to find a bigger work space has been postponed because of worries about rent” – Gaeltacht Visual Artist

“It’s impossible for an Irish language writer to make a living. It’s hard to prove [to the relevant Departments] what little money you could survive on [while trying to apply for COVID supports]. Rather than solely commission, I would be depending completely on social welfare support for this period.” – Gaeltacht Writer.

“A Tour, Gigs and an International Festival, up to 10 events [cancelled]. Up to €15,000 lost since March. Pressure put on me to do a lot of free gigs for charity. We are going towards an age of Health Vs Occupation. There is a need for clarity for earning money as an artist here and there. Will we have to pay it back?” Gaeltacht Singer.

There is a big void in participation in the arts now in rural Gaeltacht communities, with the closure of the multidisciplinary **arts centres**, such as Áras Éanna on Inis Oírr, Ballyvourney Cultural Centre and Áras Inishglora in Belmullet, primary centres for cultural activities in their regions. Commissions, productions, exhibitions and projects, which were strongly supported, have been left to waste without the opportunity to show them to the public. Income has been lost by the artists, free stage and technical teams and the centres have lost income from door fees.

The importance of the centres as community resources was shown to the Gaeltacht clearly during this period – their expertise and their ability to respond creatively by providing art of a high standard to the local community, the Gaeltacht community, the national community and the international community online in time of need, and their ability to provide employment and support to Gaeltacht and national artists. The absence was recognised in these areas where there is currently no arts centre.

A majority of the small number of Gaeltacht arts centres are small centres and their vulnerability was shown to us as well. They have no opportunity to follow the suggestion of the Theatre Forum to split the staff in half in case somebody contracts COVID-19. It’s hard to split a staff of one person, or one and a half people. With less than 100 seats in most of the centres, it’s certain that a complete reimagination is in question, with implications for human resources, production costs, insurance etc. to put on live events again. It needs to be stated clearly at this point that the level of funding of these centres isn’t viable and that a substantial increase needs to be made to consolidate the essential resources of the arts centres in the Gaeltacht.

Covid-19 had a big impact on the affairs of theatre and drama in the Gaeltacht, between professional practice and community practice. Even though a very small number of artists benefitted as part of the Abbey Theatre’s project *Dear Ireland*, this is a disastrous time for the majority of them. We and our partners University of Ireland, Galway and An Taibhdhearc had to postpone an international conference on minority language drama. The **theatre company** Fíbín showed that there is now significant uncertainty with regard to planning for the future of the company. They have lost the opportunity to be on the programme of the Galway International Arts Festival, an opportunity they had gained for the first time ever, they have cancelled seasonal employment contracts, and have lost direct ticket sales of up to €100K due to the cancellation of productions and tours. Even though the company have shown their capability and imagination with a plan for a ‘drive-thru’ drama in August, they are looking for a complete remoulding of their methods of work at the moment.

Impact on the film industry and broadcasters

There is a strong relationship between the film and broadcasting sector in the Gaeltacht and the world of the arts. It is a source of employment for Gaeltacht artists as well as another stage on which to share their work locally, nationally and internationally. It links the wider community, the Gaeltacht arts community and the Irish language community together, which are always separated from each other as separate communities. It is of immense importance that support for this sector continues.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, television and film production companies in the Gaeltacht have been hit in many ways:

- Productions that were planned for Summer 2020 have had to be cancelled
- It is challenging to schedule the productions that have been cancelled or new productions in the uncertain climate that we are in
- Production companies had to let employees go, on both a short term and long term basis.
- Where an employer was able to keep employees employed, they had to be put to work on new projects e.g. research work or development work – often without the help of funding.
- Networking events and training sessions were cancelled or were needed to be held online

There is no doubt that the virus has had a negative impact on this sector and producers are worried about how they will survive and what is ahead of them in the challenging months ahead.

The Impact on Young People

‘The Arts inspire a talent for imagination and creativity in young people, and these are the values and skills that the next generation should have. If it is not apparent to young people that their culture and creativity are being invested in or valued, when it comes to the next generation, there will be no language or culture to acquire.’

–Co-ordinator of the Native Arts for Young People Programme

When the schools closed, the classes and the activities in the native arts in the Gaeltacht as provided through the programme *Cuise* ceased. Every effort was made to continue with online classes by use of technology such as *Zoom* and *Google* in the classroom and social media. These classes helped to create continuity for young people with their music, singing and dance teachers etc. and for those with a reasonably strong broadband connection at home, it was an effective and worthwhile solution. In many cases, however, young people did not have a strong enough broadband connection at home to use this service and there were also a lot of tutors without the skills or facilities to provide such a high-quality service in the long term.

Online classes are a short-term solution to the problem but in the long term, a lot will be lost through this work method. The traditional arts are living, lively and energetic arts, and the social experience and community events are the greatest support for the acquisition and enrichment of language and culture. Without concerts, exhibitions, music sessions, social evenings, festivals and many more events besides, the next generation are in danger of losing an important opportunity to absorb real culture, to experience the creative flow and the cultural wealth that bring them together as a community – something that cannot be achieved in a virtual classroom.

National Strategy for the Irish Language Arts

The Government policies *The 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* and The 5-Year Action Plan for the Irish Language recognize the key role that Irish language arts are a central feature which contribute to the Irish language to being passed on to, and acquired by, the next generation.

To that end, with the support of Creative Ireland, the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht is currently developing the *National Strategy for the Irish Language Arts*. A working group comprising various organisations, including Údarás na Gaeltachta, Ealaín na Gaeltachta, TG4, Foras na Gaeilge, The Arts' Council and Creative Ireland, is directing this work, and a group of consultants from the University of Limerick and Mary Immaculate College are carrying out the work. The consultants have completed the research report and a draft strategy should be available at the beginning of July.

Spatial and Demographic Planning

From our experience of the last crisis we know that emphasis was placed on investment in the arts' sector in large cities country-wide and every effort was made to keep the infrastructure in those places intact.

A review of such an approach is advisable now. The transition to working from home during Covid-19 has made it clear that a remote-working approach is realistic. The Gaeltacht, with a workplace network called Gteiceanna (digital hubs) as developed by Údarás na Gaeltachta, is ready for this new approach, but the rich cultural and arts heritage is one of the greatest factors in attracting innovative and creative people to live in the Gaeltacht.

The aim of the Arts Council strategy '*Making Great Art Work*' is to invest in high quality arts in the community whilst taking into account the desires of the Spatial and Demographic Planning. It is really important that this planning is reviewed and that the importance of securing investment in the culture and arts of the Gaeltacht is acknowledged. This will ensure that there is a strong arts infrastructure in the Gaeltacht areas to go along with the investment in remote working.

Fundamental condition

It is envisaged that Covid-19 will impact public spending in the short and medium-term. It is imperative that this does not happen with regard to the Gaeltacht arts sector. As is the case with the arts sector in general, we have not yet fully recovered from the economic crisis yet. Since 2008, during which time investment in the Gaeltacht was drastically reduced, a lot of the infrastructure has ceased and the rest has been reduced.

Covid-19: The approach of Ealaín na Gaeltachta Teo.

Ealaín na Gaeltachta is made up of a team of three Arts Facilitators and a Co-ordinator of the Traditional Arts for Youth programme, who work on the ground all over the Gaeltacht, developing strong working relations with arts organizations, Gaeltacht communities and Gaeltacht artists. This approach has stood to us throughout this period. We understood quickly the impact that Covid-19 has had and continues to have on the Gaeltacht arts sector. As a result, we took the following steps to support the sector:

- a review of our support schemes and claims system in order to provide early support to organizations and artists who had been promised funding
- a change to the timetable of schemes, moving forward deadlines with a view to closing any income gaps for artists
- the transfer of the budget from cancelled events to additional supports for artists
- the provision of support and training for online events
- the movement online of the Cuisle programme
- the further development of opportunities for future initiatives, including those that were postponed
- the provision of ongoing advice to the sector
- acting as a link between the national resource organizations and the Gaeltacht
- the movement online of our applications and claims system insofar as is possible

“The relationship with Ealaín na Gaeltachta is a strong and special bond in the ecology (of art)” – a Gaeltacht artist.

Unfortunately, neither we nor any other group can turn the tide of Covid-19 unaided. The virus has had a disastrous impact on a range of arts in the Gaeltacht, especially when one considers that this is usually a really busy time in the sector. Arts events, festivals, concerts have been cancelled and the arts and the entertainment centres have all closed their doors.

Recommendations

Ealaín na Gaeltachta supports the recommendations made by the Special Advisory Group to the Arts Council. In addition to that, in the specific context of the Gaeltacht, as outlined above, we make recommendations under the headings below. The recommendations have been divided into those that are *immediately* necessary and those that are *necessary to cultivate viability and resilience for the future*.

1. Priority to be given to live events for the community

2. Young People

3. Support for artists

4. Support for art infrastructure

5. Professional training and development

6. A national approach

1. Priority to be given to live events for the community

Immediate

- 1.1. It is essential that a significant share of the increased support is made available to facilitate the return of initiatives and community-based arts events in the Gaeltacht areas, with the particular aim of reviving, renewing and developing basic links and the participation of the community, young people and especially vulnerable people and communities in the wake of Covid. This support is for festivals, arts centres and organizations, artists and first and foremost, the community itself.

To cultivate viability and resilience for the future

- 1.2. The continued support and funding of festivals, arts centres, organizations and initiatives and artists of the Gaeltacht through Ealaín na Gaeltachta and other support organizations.

2. Young People

Immediate

- 2.1. The maintenance of the level of funding in its entirety for the Cuisle Programme to ensure that the programme of work is completed and if necessary, adapted to an approach where the use of technology supports the promotion of language-based traditional arts amongst young people.

To cultivate viability and resilience for the future

2.2. Additional funding with the aim of not only providing classes but also of facilitating a high-level art experience through which young people can collaborate with each other and with their communities at a personal, social and artistic level in such a way that young people are not cut off from the cultural arts.

3. Support for artists

Immediate

3.1. It is necessary that a significant share of the increased support is made available to Gaeltacht artists to help them to continue to practise their art, to create new work, to be active artistically in their communities and to be part of the community movement through Covid and beyond.

The cultivation of viability and resilience for the future

3.2. The provision of a Basic Income [Universal] and/or the extension and improvement of the Job Seekers' Allowance for Self-employed Artists in order to support a wider range of artists.

4. Support for art infrastructure

Immediate

4.1. The provision of emergency funding for arts centres and organizations to ensure that they re-open their doors and develop an arts programme that will benefit the artists and the community alike.

The cultivation of viability and resilience for the future

4.2. The securing of additional investment in the Gaeltacht arts centres to make them viable for the benefit of the Gaeltacht communities.

4.3. The bridging of disastrous gaps in Gaeltacht art infrastructure with the investment of capital, and the continued funding for the largest arts centre in the Munster Gaeltacht.

5. Professional Training and Development

Immediate/ The cultivation of viability and resilience for the future

5.1. The continuation of training, counselling and mentoring supports as well as the provision of means by which the sector, the centres and the individual artists are able to tackle technology and online training.

6. National Approach

Immediate

6.1. Ealaín na Gaeltachta supports the recommendation made by the Expert Group to the Arts Council to establish a Cultural Revival Taskforce. Even though we agree on the importance of having an integrated, national approach we strongly recommend the recognition of the diversity of the contexts in which the arts operate, the context of the Gaeltacht, the Irish language and the rural areas. We recommend that the Gaeltacht art sector participate in the Taskforce.

6.2. The agreement on the importance of increased and continuous investment in rural art infrastructure in the context of the impact of remote working on spatial and demographic planning.

The cultivation of viability and resilience for the future

6.3. We recommend that the development of the National Strategy for the Irish Language Arts is continued and that it is ensured that the issues and questions of viability that have been raised through the lens of COVID be taken into account, that the Strategy is agreed with the sector and that the appropriate funding is provided to implement said strategy.

Parting words

We cannot afford to let things drift now that the arts are just recovering from the last economic crisis. There is a value and a particular fragility to the Gaeltacht arts sector nationally and the cultural landscape of the Gaeltacht needs to be a continual focus and there needs to be a dedicated approach to rescue and develop the Gaeltacht arts for the generations to come. It is of utmost importance to ensure that significant, ongoing support is given to the Gaeltacht arts, so that they survive Covid-19 and that the potential of the arts with regard to the enrichment and health of cultural, social and economic life in the Gaeltacht is further enhanced.

“Take great care of the young and the old

With God’s help, we will all come through this.”

- a young Gaeltacht artist (16 years old)