

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN CHOISTE COMHAIRLIÚCHÁN POIBLÍ AN TSEANAID SEANAD PUBLIC CONSULTATION COMMITTEE

Dé Máirt, 22 Meán Fómhair 2026

Tuesday, 22 September 2026

Tháinig an Roghchoiste le chéile ag 10.30 a.m.

The Select Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Frances Black,	
Pat Casey,	
Garret Kelleher,*	
Conor Murphy,	
Fiona O'Loughlin.	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Senator Garret Ahearn.

Seanadóir / Senator Maria Byrne sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Culture and Arts Infrastructure: Discussion

An Cathaoirleach: We have received apologies from Senators Garret Ahearn and Cathal Byrne. Senator Kelleher is here instead. I warmly welcome Senators, witnesses and visitors to the first public hearing of the Seanad Public Consultation Committee on the topic of culture and arts infrastructure. On that note, I congratulate Senator Black for bringing the topic forward.

These public meetings are the next part of a process which began in February of this year with a public call for written submissions to the committee. Submissions were received from individuals, interested groups and organisations across Ireland. After reviewing the submissions, the committee divided them into four core themes: artists and practitioners; community and voluntary groups; interesting models; and local authorities and State bodies. This meeting is an engagement under the first theme of artists and practitioners. The other themes will be discussed at our next three meetings in October.

On behalf of the committee, I wish to once again thank sincerely those who sent in submissions and have engaged on the topic to date.

All submissions have been considered by this committee's members and will contribute to the committee's final report.

I welcome our witnesses to the Seanad Chamber: Ms Siobhán Cleary, composer and founder of the Evlana Ensemble and Sinfonietta and Ms Ciara Kavanagh, who is manager of the ensemble; Ms Aoibhie McCarthy, director of Sample-Studios; Ms Niamh O'Donnell, director of the Irish Theatre Institute; Mr. Eunan McKinney, voluntary director of public affairs, and Dr. Michael Nielsen, both from the Sligo Jazz Project; and from Pallas Projects-Studios Ms Eve Woods, curator and programme producer, and Mr. Gavin Murphy and Mr. Mark Cullen, co-directors. Ms Woods's mother Siobhán has not arrived yet but is due to arrive in the Gallery. Representatives from Praxis: The Artists Union of Ireland have not yet arrived. We will welcome them when they do. From the Improvised Music Company, I welcome Ms Caitríona O'Mahony, general manager, along with Mr. Kenneth Killeen, artistic director; and from the NASC Venue Network we have Ms Louise Donlon, chair, who I am very familiar with, along with Mr. Fergal McGrath, director. I welcome all our witnesses to today's meeting. I thank them for engaging with the committee in its consideration of this important topic. Each organisation will have a maximum of five minutes for their opening statement. We will then have a general discussion and answer session.

Before I call the witnesses to make their opening statements, I welcome Senators Conor Murphy, Garret Kelleher, Frances Black, Fiona O'Loughlin and Pat Casey. They are all members of the committee. I invite Senator Black, our rapporteur and the person who recommended this topic to the committee, to outline our consultation on culture and arts infrastructure.

Senator Frances Black: I welcome all our witnesses. I am delighted they have all been able to join us. There is no doubt the work they do in their communities as cultural practitioners, facilitators and organisers is absolutely vital, not only in bringing joy, life and colour to cities, towns and villages across the country but also in maintaining a resilient social fabric in this country, which is so important. I do not need to tell any of our witnesses the value that cultural

activities bring to our society. I look forward to hearing their views and perspectives going forward.

Some of them might know that my own background is in music. I know the magic that can ripple outwards when songs are sung and shared and how they can envelope everyone in a room and bring people into that room. Music and art are for the soul and we always have to keep that in mind. I have been around that magic since I was a child. It has been a central part of my life. I am still amazed at the force it has to bring people together, to bring us all into the present moment and make us feel that deep emotion. It makes us feel human and that connects us all. That force is intrinsically dependent on having physical spaces where those experiences can be shared. Those moments simply cannot happen if there are no rooms for them to happen in. That is what brings us here today.

I pay particular tribute to my colleague, Robbie, who works with me in the office. He is so passionate about this. I wish he was here. He is outside. It is so important to give him credit because it really is his passion. This is not only about music but all disciplines of art and culture that require space. Unfortunately, arts communities of all kinds are facing huge challenges in increasing that infrastructure and creating the spaces where we feel that connection and cultural communities can flourish. Art and culture need space not just to thrive but to survive. Communities need security in their space. Without that security, faced with a constant state of precarity, cultural organisations and practitioners are terribly inhibited in what they can achieve. They cannot build for the future or grow sustainably. This is evident across the submissions we have received that were made to the public consultation.

We all know that the world is becoming increasingly isolating and individualised. Technology and social media are fundamentally changing how we socialise. It is easier than ever to conduct your entire social life and consume culture from your living room without even having to meet someone face to face or to go to a cultural venue.

In this context, cultural practitioners need more support than ever and the phones in our hands are vying for the same attention that cultural organisations are. While culture and art may not be a panacea to all of the problems that are emerging from a modern world where loneliness and isolation are increasingly prevalent, I believe it provides a powerful antidote to some of them and that the State has to recognise this and match this recognition with meaningful investment and initiative.

The submissions made to this public consultation offer many wonderful ideas of how to do that, including greater use of publicly-owned buildings and vacant State infrastructure for sustainable cultural use; reform of cultural capital funding schemes to be more inclusive and recognise the circumstances of cultural organisations matching the ambition of the sports capital scheme; greater consideration of the ongoing operational costs for cultural practitioners and organisations; and addressing the profound lack of suitable workspaces for artists and cultural practitioners of all types.

It is worth dwelling on a few ideas a little further. A move to multi-annual funding rather than the current cycle of short-term grants would allow cultural organisations to plan properly, to invest in their premises and to offer real security to the artists and staff who depend on them.

Local authorities also have a critical role to play here through their development plans and planning frameworks in protecting existing cultural spaces from being lost to other uses and

ensuring that new venues and workspaces are designed into our town and city centres as they are built and renewed, rather than added as an afterthought.

We have seen in other jurisdictions how a statutory duty to consider cultural infrastructure at the planning stage can make a real practical difference on the ground and I also point to the importance of joined-up thinking across Departments so that culture is never treated as a footnote but is factored in from the outset whenever public buildings are being repurposed or new developments are being planned and none of this is beyond us. What is required is political will and a clear recognition that investment in cultural infrastructure is not a luxury but a foundation stone of a healthy and connected society.

By engaging directly with practitioners on the front line of cultural provision, as well as the State bodies responsible for supporting and facilitating that cultural activity, I hope this committee can produce some meaningful policy proposals informed by lived experience of those on the ground that can begin to address the desperate situation so many arts communities find themselves in regarding assessing cultural infrastructure. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Senator Black for her comprehensive overall view. It was remiss of me not to welcome Denise Kelleher and Mark Doyle, who put in all of the work to organising everyone to come here today. I thank them for their input. We will be hearing and seeing a lot more of Denise and Mark in relation to all the work they do for this committee.

Before I call on the first witness, I must draw the attention of the witnesses to the matter of privilege. The evidence of witnesses physically present is protected by absolute privilege pursuant to the Constitution and State. This means that they have an absolute defence against any defamation action in legal proceedings for anything they say when giving evidence to the committee. However, they are expected not abuse this privilege and it is my duty as Chair to ensure that it is not abused.

Witnesses should note that only evidence connected with the subject matter of the meeting should be given. All witnesses and members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity.

Each witness will have five minutes. We will try to keep to time, so when the five minutes are up, I will hit the gong and ask the witness to wind up. The witnesses can stay sitting.

It is easier for everyone to stay sitting. We will start with the first witness. I call Ms Siobhán Cleary from Evlana Ensemble and Sinfonietta.

Ms Siobhán Cleary: Tá mé an-bhuíoch do bhaill an choiste as an deis labhairt leo inniu ar an ábhar tábhachtach seo. I would like to consider cultural infrastructure at three scales: regional Ireland, Dublin's suburban towns and the capital. I will start with regional Ireland.

Across much of continental Europe, cultural funding is a local and regional responsibility as much as a national one. In Germany, it rests with the *Länder* and municipalities. In France, regional opera houses are funded principally by their cities. The result is a distributed cultural life in which even modest towns sustain professional orchestras and theatres. Ireland allocates most arts funding nationally through a system centred on Dublin in its location and networks, and the result is a cultural life divided into a capital and a hinterland. Across Ireland, former

courthouses, Carnegie libraries and market houses sit under-used, while highly trained professional artists remain under-employed through lack of opportunity. These buildings, rehabilitated with music's acoustic and technical needs in mind, could host local authority-funded residencies, giving musicians a professional base in the communities where they live, bringing the buildings back into active use and contributing to local regeneration. Two measures would support this: a national audit of arts infrastructure extended to vacant public buildings with performance potential, and a meaningful transfer of arts funding responsibility and budget to local authorities within a national accountability framework.

The second scale is Dublin's suburban towns. Consider Fingal, the third largest local authority in the State, the population of which has more than doubled since 1991. There have been welcome initiatives, including the new cultural centre in Swords. However, for a population of over 330,000, Fingal has just two funded arts centres and for many people professional performance still means travelling into the city. For children and families, older people and people with disabilities, that journey is often the barrier. Properly resourced professional venues, scaled to their towns, would serve these audiences and give performers a circuit of stages within an hour of the city.

The third scale is the capital. In this very building, the room where the Dáil now sits was once the Royal Dublin Society's lecture theatre, where the society held its celebrated chamber recitals. One of the first acts of the new State was to take the recital hall for its Parliament. The recitals moved out to Ballsbridge, where they drew audiences of up to 900, but the city centre never got its hall back. Dublin faces a critical shortage of venues in the 150 to 500 capacity range suitable for professional music. The appetite is there. The Hugh Lane Gallery's excellent Sunday concerts are at capacity every week. Straight hire of venues can run to several thousand euro a night, excluding piano hire, rehearsal space, technical support, marketing, box office and front of house. For an ensemble on Arts Council funding, one night can consume a disproportionate share of its entire budget. The result is that new music has become concentrated in festivals rather than sustained through year-round concert series.

It would be transformative if the State commissioned or designated a venue for music at that scale, with the acoustic, a concert grand piano and provision for electroacoustic work, run as a presenting house with marketing and box office included, and with subsidised hire priced to what an Arts Council grant can pay. Kings Place in London offers a model, with its two purpose-built halls of 400 and 200 seats, funded by ticket sales and its conference business.

A venue of that kind would give independent music in the capital a home.

Across all three scales, the challenge is one of infrastructure. Regional Ireland needs local capacity, Dublin towns need a circuit of venues and the capital needs a permanent home for independent music. Together, these would enable artists to make and present work where they live while giving audiences regular access to professional performance in their own communities.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Ms Cleary and now move to Ms Aoibhie McCarthy, artistic director of Sample-Studios, who has five minutes.

Ms Aoibhie McCarthy: Sample-Studios is Ireland's largest artist studio, currently supporting over 200 creative professionals. We welcome this opportunity to discuss arts infrastructure, instigated as a result of the loss of The Complex, a loss that played out almost

identically ten years ago with the loss of Sample-Studios' original building. Our experience, which we believe is demonstrative, can be described as one of indentured precarity.

Our goal of a sustainable and accessible studio building is in direct alignment with the programme for Government's focus on supporting the development and provision of affordable spaces for artists. It also aligns with the goals set out in the Cork city development plan and the Cork City Council arts strategy.

Many studio organisations in Ireland begin as "meanwhile use" as landlords seek to fill on a temporary basis empty spaces that are unsuitable or undesirable for other purposes. The presence of creative industries enlivens areas, making them more appealing, safer and populated with 24-7 use. The studio becomes an increasingly critical fulcrum for the creative community, but it also becomes increasingly vulnerable.

Sample-Studios owes its foundation 15 years ago to the meanwhile-use model, whereby a private landlord made the former tax office building in Cork City centre available for artists for a reduced rent from 2011 until 2016, at which point we had to leave to make way for a hotel. The hotel was never built. The site in the heart of the city has lain vacant since. Ireland's largest set of artist studios is now based in an ageing, unheated warehouse vacated by FÁS 25 years ago and surrounded by dumps. This is where we have been located for the past ten years. We have seen ourselves that a continually uncertain existence depletes organisational capacity and growth opportunities and limits artists, who cannot make their best work or meet their potential amid chronic uncertainty.

Our case is demonstrative of many, whereby "meanwhile" becomes "long term" and what was intended as, and only fit for, a short-term solution becomes long term due to the dearth of alternatives. Landlords are precluded from securing capital investment in improving the infrastructure where they are not willing to enter into long-term leases that might activate real growth in order to pursue commercial advantage as the market shifts. However, the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport requires arts organisations to secure long-term leases in order to broker capital investment to carry out sufficient capital upgrade works.

In mid-2024, the Department announced an artist workspaces scheme. To date, only one quarter of the €6 million made available has been drawn down. Nearly two and a half years since its announcement, I suggest that the pilot scheme, while very welcome, must offer more support and flexibility to make it feasible to undertake the kind of upgrade works frequently required to bring derelict and heritage sites into contemporary use. The scheme is restricted to sites in the ownership of local authorities. For example, Cork City Council, like the majority of local authorities, has not engaged with the scheme due to the lack of available and suitable stock within its gift. In our view, eligibility for the artist workspace scheme should be expanded to include applications from workspaces themselves. Allowing us to apply independently of local authority engagement would allow us to pursue a broader range of options that are aligned with artists' needs and that may be more flexible and cost-effective than council stock.

A tenant-in-situ-type scheme for workspaces, offering once-off funding for them to purchase their existing premises and access capital funds for upgrades, would protect artist studios from the catastrophic impact of losing their space or having to move. The scope to consolidate and apply per cent for art allocations for investment in local workspaces should also be explored as an avenue to reinvest in cultural infrastructure.

Despite comprising the largest artist studios in Ireland by membership and square footage, we are precluded from accessing strategic funding through the Arts Council or departmental capital schemes due to the precarious nature of our lease, even though precarity is pervasive among artist workspaces. Security is the exception rather than the norm. There is a failure to acknowledge that precarity is inherent in so much of Ireland's existing workspace infrastructure and this further compounds the issue whereby critically important but precarious infrastructure is chronically under-resourced. The Arts Council's role in relation to capital investment in artists' workspace infrastructure needs to be clarified. At present, it does not provide capital funding at scale for studios but, rather, claims it acts as a broker with other key stakeholders and provides at a limited level for utilities and repairs. The scope of eligibility for higher levels of funding, such as strategic funding, needs to be examined, and new entrants should not be precluded on the basis of their security of tenure.

Organisations like Sample-Studios, with robust and diversified income sources, are still hamstrung in that we cannot invest properly ourselves in infrastructure that we have temporary leases on. While we can provide programmatically rich experiences for audiences and provide quality soft supports for artists, including training and exhibition opportunities, we are nonetheless limited in the scale and quality of workspace we can provide for artists. We are programmatically rich but infrastructurally poor. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome our guests in the Public Gallery. They are witnessing a Seanad Public Consultation Committee discussion of arts and culture. There are Senators on the right of me and more will be joining us to ask questions. Representatives of the arts and culture community are on my left. They will be making a presentation about where they see changes are needed. A report will be put together afterwards to be presented to the Minister and Government. That is what is going on here this morning.

I thank Ms McCarthy for her opening statement. I now call Ms Niamh O'Donnell, who is here on behalf of the Irish Theatre Institute.

Ms Niamh O'Donnell: I thank members for inviting me to contribute today. I want to begin with something quite simple. Artistic and cultural expression are part of how we create and sustain a healthy civil society. Across every art form, artists contribute to the cultural life and cultural health and wealth of this country. The arts create places where people come together, exchange ideas and encounter perspectives beyond their own. If we truly value that, then we have to provide the conditions in which artists can make their work.

When we talk about cultural infrastructure, we tend to first think about the buildings where audiences encounter work, such as theatres, galleries, arts centres and concert halls. Those spaces are absolutely vital but infrastructure of culture begins much earlier. Culture is made collectively. Artists need spaces to meet, share knowledge, develop ideas, rehearse, create, produce, collaborate and build relationships. Across Ireland we simply do not have enough affordable, secure, suitable or accessible spaces in which to do those things.

We also need to move beyond the assumption that artists will somehow make work anyway, and that they will write at their kitchen tables, meet in cafés or rehearse in whatever room they can find. They do that, of course, because they are extraordinarily resourceful, but their resourcefulness should not become an excuse for failing to provide the space and conditions

they need to make work. How we value artists and the conditions we believe their work deserves says something about how seriously we, as a society, value culture itself.

I really want to acknowledge the role of Ireland's network of arts centres, theatres and venues. They are cultural anchors in communities across the country. That network must be protected, properly resourced and supported but arts centres cannot and should not be expected to meet every infrastructure need. We also need dedicated spaces to rehearse, make, produce, collaborate and gather. Accessibility must be central to that conversation. Too often we think about access to cultural buildings only in terms of audiences. We also need to think about the people making the work. Can a disabled person get to the rehearsal room? Can they get onto the stage? This is not an additional consideration. It is a question of equality, it is a question of legal obligation and, fundamentally, it is about who gets to be an artist in Ireland today. If we create cultural infrastructure that some artists cannot use, we are building exclusion into a system for generations to come.

What should the Government do? I have four suggestions. First, develop a national cultural infrastructure strategy. Map what exists, identify what is missing region by region and connect cultural space to planning, housing, regeneration and local government. Second, protect what we already have. Cultural space should not simply disappear through redevelopment. Planning policy should support its retention or replacement and major developments should be required to consider cultural infrastructure. Third, invest specifically in the places where work is made, including rehearsal rooms, studios, production and technical spaces, storage and shared creative hubs, alongside continued investment in the arts centres and venues that exist. Fourth, make better use of the buildings we already have. Bring vacant and publicly owned buildings into cultural use through practical routes such as longer leases, community asset transfer and long-term cultural property models. In every case, accessibility must be designed and funded from the outset, and investment in buildings must be matched by funding, or funding models at least, as well as the secure tenure needed to keep them open and working overtime.

We need to recognise cultural infrastructure as public infrastructure because buildings are not in themselves what is important. It is what happens in them that is vital.

If we want Ireland to continue to produce ambitious, distinctive work and if we value what culture contributes to our communities, economy and democracy, then we must provide the conditions in which that work can be made. This is not simply an investment in artists. It is really an investment in all of us.

An Cathaoirleach: Gabhaim buíochas le Ms O'Donnell. We now move on to Mr. Eunan McKinney from the Sligo Jazz Project.

Mr. Eunan McKinney: I thank the Cathaoirleach, Senators and colleagues for the opportunity to contribute to this important consultation on culture and arts infrastructure in Ireland. I am speaking as a voluntary director of the Sligo Jazz Project, a company limited by guarantee, CLG, and an organisation that, under the artistic direction of Mr. Eddie Lee, has spent more than two decades cultivating audiences, nurturing artistic talent and building a sustainable ecosystem for jazz education and performance in Ireland.

Today, Sligo Jazz Project is recognised as one of the largest and most accessible jazz education events in Europe. Our commitment is simple: inclusivity, mentorship, artistic discovery and community-rooted sustainability. In 2025, as we celebrated our 20th

anniversary, we welcomed over 140 participants to our school, ranging in age from ten to 80, 29% of whom had travelled from overseas, while the project itself generated over 5,000 local bed nights and involved 15 local businesses. This not only demonstrates our cultural value but also the significant economic and social impact for our region.

Our experience over 20 years has shown us what is possible when arts organisations are supported and, here, we wish to publicly acknowledge the continued funding and support by public bodies such as the Arts Council, Fáilte Ireland and Sligo County Council. However, our experience has also shown us the barriers that continue to prevent cultural enterprise from reaching its full potential.

We welcome the Seanad's focus on access to cultural and arts infrastructure in communities throughout Ireland. There is no shortage of creativity, ambition or public appetite for public engagement. The challenge is creating and sustaining the space that allows culture to flourish. One of the key issues is that, while publicly owned and underused buildings exist in many communities, they remain inaccessible. The costs associated with activating these spaces can be overwhelming. Renovation and maintenance expenses are high. At the same time, community organisations encounter complex planning processes, zoning issues and regulatory hurdles that delay or halt projects even before they begin. The result is a paradox. Communities need cultural spaces, arts organisations are ready to use them, yet many buildings remain vacant, underused or deteriorating because the pathway to activation is too difficult and costly. For small and medium cultural organisations, largely voluntarily run, they are additional challenges.

At the Sligo Jazz Project, our primary mission is programming, education, artistic development and audience engagement. We would not have the financial capacity to take on major infrastructure projects, nor could we easily assume the risks associated with renovating or managing buildings. While public funding may support artistic programming, as our colleagues have outlined, there is often a lack of capital investment available for infrastructure that facilitates that activity.

We believe that there are some practical measures that could make a meaningful difference. First, local authorities working with community-based organisations could undertake audits of existing public and underused properties that have the potential to become cultural spaces. Identifying opportunities is the essential first step to activation.

Second, particular attention should be given to creating intimate venues. These smaller spaces are vital for art forms and cultural practices that may not always attract mass audience but play a crucial role in nurturing creativity, emerging talent and diverse cultural expression. Jazz is one such example. In this respect, we believe there is an opportunity to realise a broader universal access and approach to the availability of existing public infrastructure, which in some instances excludes music genres.

Third, we strongly support the creation of a dedicated fund to assist community-based cultural organisations, local authorities and public bodies with feasibility studies and early-stage planning for cultural infrastructure projects. There is a compelling case for a cultural capital grant scheme, similar in ambition, scale and structure to the successful sports capital programme.

Finally, we encourage the development of a multi-annual funding model that enables cultural organisations to engage in long-term partnerships and support the imaginative reuse of public buildings.

We commend the committee for undertaking this consultation. Culture strengthens communities, drives economic activity, fosters inclusion and enriches citizens' lives.

By addressing the barriers that prevent the access to cultural infrastructure, we can unlock the potential of existing public assets and create lasting opportunities for future generations. We look forward to continuing the conversation.

An Cathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat. I will now move to Ms Eve Woods from Pallas Projects-Studios.

Ms Eve Woods: I thank members for the invitation to speak today. Pallas Projects has been at the forefront of providing artist workspaces across Dublin for over 30 years and supporting artists remains the core of what we do. As leading proponents of research and advocacy for artist-run spaces, we were the arts advisers for Dublin City Council's feasibility study on artist workspaces in 2020. We strongly believe in a vibrant, creative, liveable city and that the provision of artist studios can greatly add to the cohesion and vibrancy of the community in which they are situated.

Artist studios are a vital resource that allow artists to create art and culture. In addition, we provide free, accessible and participatory cultural space with cutting-edge contemporary art, artist workshops, talks, events and performances. Long-term vision requires long-term space, and that is the real challenge. Good news stories for studios are only due to the tenacity and labour of artists and organisers who take on extra work and costs to survive. Pallas has moved 12 times due to redevelopment and, even now, with retaining the same building for close to 14 years, has had to contend with rent increases of 85% since 2022. Richmond Road Studios avoided closure, but not only has it moved further out of town, it faces an average 56% increase in cost to artists for studios. Ormond Studios managed to retain its space, despite receiving an eviction notice, through negotiating directly with the landlord, and only due to his goodwill, but it had an annual rent increased jump of 32%.

Competing with commercial rents is not the only barrier to artists seeking workspace. As creative organisations are pushed to less desirable buildings, issues of physical access come to the fore. Orla Jordan, an artist and member of Ormond Studios, shared with me:

As an artist with a physical disability, my options for studio spaces in Dublin are severely limited. I have been denied access to opportunities not because of the quality of my work, but because the spaces themselves are inaccessible to me. This is ... [extremely] frustrating, as it means that before my work can even be considered, I am already excluded by physical barriers. Accessible studio spaces are essential, not only for disabled artists but also for the disabled public, to ensure equal opportunities to experience and participate fully in the arts.

The numbers alone speak for themselves and it is difficult to think of another sector where access to a workspace is so precarious. Our research shows that between 2000 and 2020, in the region of €102 million was awarded in the area of capital spending by the Department for art centres nationwide. Of this, only 1.7% was dedicated artist studios. Twenty-eight buildings providing workspaces for artists have closed in Dublin city since 2012. Of the 28 studios, eight

were located in Dublin 8 and 11 were in Dublin 7, two areas that have been affected by rapid development without protections for the community and culture that are there. In the Dublin City Development Plan 2016-2022, the importance of retaining existing cultural infrastructure was acknowledged - infrastructure that reflected the identity of Dublin's neighbourhoods - and it directly referenced a commitment “to ensuring that there is a supply of workspaces for artists in the city”.

We also welcome the subsequent introduction of the capital spending through the local authority workspace scheme as one strand of recourse to solve this crisis but believe it needs to be expanded and more needs to be done to support existing studio groups. Crucially, few studio spaces own or hold long-term leases required to access capital funding. We now see an opportunity for the Department, alongside Dublin City Council and key stakeholders, such as the Arts Council, to bring to the fore a plan to invest in the capital purchase and outfitting of artist studios to ensure that generations of artists to come can continue to work and contribute to a culturally rich city society.

We wish to submit a proposal to embed support to artist studios through capital funding to safeguard vital cultural provision and ensure that artists can continue to work in Dublin and other cities alongside commercial development. Key to this is the recognition of the importance of retaining artist studios in the city and designing a capital funding model that allows studio organisations to purchase and develop studio buildings or sites and requires developers to work directly with studio groups to design and outfit cultural spaces as part of their development plans from the outset if they intend to provide community arts and cultural use.

An Cathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat, Ms Woods. I welcome Mr. Cólín O'Connell, campaigns officer, and Ms Alice Quinn Banville, recruitment officer, from Praxis: The Artists Union of Ireland. I understand Mr. O'Connell will be our witness and he has the floor.

Mr. Cólín O'Connell: I am the campaigns officer of Praxis and chair of the working spaces group. I thank Senators for the invitation and opportunity to present to the committee this afternoon.

Praxis is Ireland's only trade union for artists. The union has over 500 members and is an affiliate union within SIPTU. Praxis is run voluntarily by and for artists and arts workers and, as such, has a unique and understanding of the arts and culture sector.

Recently, the basic income for arts scheme and the successes of Irish artists across disciplines have drawn considerable international attention to the arts sector and the perceived achievement of Irish cultural policy. I am not here to dispute these specific successes but to highlight that the reality of poor arts infrastructure in Ireland paints another picture for artists and arts workers struggling to make a living in Ireland. It is well and good to receive a highly competitive grant from the Arts Council, but if artists and arts workers cannot source, let alone afford, spaces to rehearse, exhibit, perform, build or develop their work, then it makes working and earning a fair wage in the sector especially difficult.

The lack of studios and performance spaces as well as their unaffordability are consistent issues for our members and a fundamental constraint on the sector as a whole. We engaged members and non-members in an artists' working space survey and it clearly indicated the negative impact of the scarcity of working space. In our survey we found that the lack and

affordability of working spaces are curtailing artists' careers and causing many artists to leave the sector or consider moving abroad. Most of the respondents to the poll indicated that they do not currently rent a workspace. Of these, the majority, 64%, responded that the reason was that they were unable to afford it; 38% said it was because they were unable to find a space suitable for their practice; and over half of those polled, 53.1%, have considered giving up their working space as a result of financial pressure, indicating the disparity between what artists actually earn and what they are required to pay in rent for a space in order to work. Over 40% of respondents have considered leaving Ireland to find more affordable workspaces. This is a worrying figure that highlights the significance of secure and affordable working spaces in maintaining a healthy arts sector in Ireland.

We advocate for quality and affordable multi-purpose artist performance and workspaces. Such spaces are critically important for artists to create, develop and share their work, but they also essential to nurture the vibrant communities that can emerge around those spaces. It seems that the conditions in the private property market are not conducive and, in some instances, outright hostile to non-commercial cultural spaces. To address the space crisis in the immediate term, there is great potential for State bodies, including the OPW and local authorities with access to vacant properties, to make a greater effort to open more of their properties as working spaces for artists. Positive examples of this model exist as evidenced by the likes of FLUX on Chatham Row, and by our colleagues here today, Pallas Studios and Sample-Studios. However, this process should be pushed and incentivised further through progressive Government policy.

We advocate for a specific task force that will address the supply and provision of artists' working spaces in Ireland. Its objectives should be to ensure that artists across disciplines have space to work, that spaces are affordable and are indexed to the median wage of artists rather than aligned to market rates. The task force should work with State bodies that have possession of property, such as the OPW and local authorities, and with suitable private actors. The task force should include artists, arts professionals, legal experts and planners, and operate independently but in close collaboration with local authorities and other relevant State bodies.

A task force of this nature would be best equipped to ensure that State investment into such infrastructure would have the greatest impact possible for artists and, by extension, for communities and the public more broadly. Best practice examples can be found in other European jurisdictions, such as the *broedplaatsen* or breeding grounds system in the Netherlands, which includes 60 separate working spaces in the city of Amsterdam alone.

In the medium to long term, the State needs to increase investment in artist working spaces and cultural infrastructure throughout Ireland. As noted by the NCFA, the €40 million as part of the ten-year Project Ireland 2040 National Development Plan allocated to local arts and cultural infrastructure nationwide is not adequate to reach the Government's stated goal of achieving appropriate cultural and heritage infrastructure in all parts of the country and ensuring all major urban centres as well as smaller towns have cultural and creative facilities. The Arts Council and local authorities play crucial roles in the provision of funding and infrastructure support, and they need suitable funding to start to provide multi-annual funding support.

The cultural capital scheme and artist workspace scheme launched by the Department of culture are very welcome, but they need to be expanded and brought on par with the sports

capital grant scheme in terms of scale. We are advocating for quality, secure and multi-purpose artist working spaces. I will be delighted to take any questions the committee might have.

An Cathaoirleach: We now move to Mr. Kenneth Killeen of the Improvised Music Company.

Mr. Kenneth Killeen: I am the chief executive and artistic director of the Improvised Music Company. With me is our general manager, Caitríona O'Mahony. I thank the committee for the opportunity to address it today. The IMC, is Ireland's national resource organization for jazz and improvised music. We come before the committee with 35 years of experience advocating for music infrastructure but also as an organisation directly displaced by the systemic failures under examination today.

On 15 January this year, The Complex, a multidisciplinary arts centre in Dublin 7, closed permanently. It closed because no mechanism existed in government to provide the capital funding required to acquire the building. With it, our dedicated jazz hub within the complex, The Cooler, also had to close its doors. The Cooler occupied a 72 sq. m. unit within the complex. In many ways, our experience is a microcosm of what happened across the building. We were one of the many artistic tenants working there alongside some 20 other artist studios, although our space was also public facing. This is simply the part of that wider story that we can speak to directly. The Cooler served as a primary engine room for Irish jazz, a 24-7 accessible space for 141 member ensembles. In a single year, this modest space delivered over 800 rehearsals, 50 public performances, 12 album launches, and generated almost €96,000 in direct economic value to the local inner-city economy. A viable acquisition plan existed. Dublin City Council was prepared to commit €1.5 million. Cross-party public petitions gathered over 16,000 signatures, and local representatives made emergency calls to action. Public money was available and political support existed. The case for retention had been made. What did not exist was a State mechanism capable of completing the acquisition. As a result, yet another piece of cultural infrastructure was lost to Dublin's commercial property market.

This is part of a documented pattern going back decades following the loss of spaces like Unit 44, Block T, and the Tivoli Theatre, and this just represents Dublin. Dublin remains the only major European capital without a permanent dedicated jazz venue. These are not simply property losses. Each closure removes another place where artistic communities and audiences can gather, develop and become visible, contributing over time to an erosion of the city's cultural identity. This failure is structural. Nationally funded organisations operate on precarious commercial leases with no statutory security of tenure. Our planning laws lack an agent-of-change principle to protect established venues. Crucially, State funding currently supports artistic programmes, but not the physical places required to deliver them.

To break this cycle of loss and cultural displacement, the IMC recommends six specific actionable policy solutions.

First, we must introduce a statutory agent of change principle within planning law to protect established cultural spaces. Second, the Department should commission a comprehensive national audit of arts infrastructure to map what exists, what is at risk, and what has been lost. Third, we need a dedicated capital infrastructure fund in the next national development plan to support venue acquisition. Fourth, we must define clear, statutory obligations for local

authorities regarding music and cultural spaces. Fifth, the Oireachtas should examine the possibility of amending the Arts Act 2003 to allow the Arts Council to provide lease guarantees and rental support alongside programme supports. Finally, the Government must formally recognise multidisciplinary arts hubs as essential civic infrastructure on a par with public libraries.

These recommendations are not a wish list; they represent the minimum architecture required to prevent the next closure. Had these measures been in place, The Complex and The Cooler would still be open today.

I thank the Cathaoirleach and Senators. We welcome their questions and look forward to our discussion.

An Cathaoirleach: We move on to Ms Louise Donlon of the NASC Venue Network.

Ms Louise Donlon: I thank the Chair and Senators for the opportunity to address the committee today on behalf of the NASC Venue Network.

NASC is a network of eight regional arts centres across Ireland, from An Grianán in Letterkenny to Siamsa Tíre in Tralee, the Town Hall Theatre and Black Box in Galway, the Pavilion Theatre in Dún Laoghaire, Backstage Theatre in Longford, Dunamais Arts Centre in Portlaoise, Glór in Ennis and the Lime Tree Theatre and Belltable in Limerick. Our venues are very different but we share a common purpose: to support artists, develop audiences and ensure that people can experience and participate in arts and culture in the places where they live.

If I may, I want to begin with some figures, because they demonstrate the scale of what these buildings already deliver. In 2025, our eight venues welcomed almost 520,000 audience members, presented close to 3,000 events and directly supported over 5,000 artists through performances, commissions, residencies, rehearsal space and technical support. In total, there are 50 arts centres currently funded by the Arts Council. These are not occasional use buildings. They are working cultural infrastructure, operating throughout the year and embedded in the civic and social life of their communities.

Last Friday was Culture Night, but we would contend that it is culture night every night of the year in venues throughout the country. Many of our venues operate seven days a week, 52 weeks of the year, up to 18 hours per day. For example, the Town Hall Theatre in Galway, whose director, Fergal McGrath, is beside me, only closes for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and St. Stephen's Day.

However, with that kind of constant use and their age, these venues are in need of renewal. A significant proportion of Ireland's regional arts infrastructure is now 25 years old or more. The buildings may still look familiar to audiences, but behind the scenes the pressure is becoming increasingly obvious. Heating and ventilation systems are creaking. Roofs, seating and public areas require investment. Technical equipment installed two and, in some cases, three decades ago is becoming obsolete. Lighting, sound, rigging and stage systems increasingly need replacement rather than repair. Due to the constant battle for funding, arts organisations have had to be extremely resourceful, repairing and making do when faced with challenges with the buildings or equipment, but there is only so many times you can repair.

At the same time, we are asking these buildings to do more. We are expecting them to become more energy efficient, to meet higher accessibility standards, to accommodate

contemporary artistic and digital practice, and, quite rightly, we expect them to provide good quality working environments for artists and administrators and inclusive, accessible spaces for audiences. However, those ambitions require investment.

One particularly significant challenge ahead is welcome and very important: the energy-saving transition from tungsten bulbs to LED stage lighting. For many venues, this will not simply mean replacing light fittings. It may require substantial retrofitting of cabling, dimming and electrical systems. That represents a major capital cost which venues simply do not have access to.

Our request of the committee is straightforward. Ireland needs a co-ordinated, multi-annual national investment programme for existing cultural infrastructure. That programme should address the repair and renewal of ageing buildings; technical and production equipment; energy and sustainability upgrades; accessibility; and planned, preventative maintenance.

I particularly emphasise the word "existing". These buildings have already been built. The State and local authorities have already invested substantially in them. Audiences already use them. Artists already depend on them. They have established relationships with their communities, built up over decades. Allowing those assets to deteriorate until emergency intervention is required makes neither cultural nor economic sense.

Capital investment in our theatres and arts centres should not be viewed as discretionary expenditure - it is preventative investment, protecting assets that are already delivering substantial public value. Ireland has spent decades developing a remarkable network of cultural buildings across the country. Those buildings have helped make access to professional arts and culture a national, rather than an exclusively metropolitan, proposition. The next challenge is to ensure we look after what we have built. On behalf of the NASC venue network, I ask the committee to recommend a properly resourced, long-term capital framework that will allow these venues to remain safe, accessible, sustainable and artistically ambitious for the next generation.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank all witnesses for their contributions today. I now move to the other side of the House, where Senators will put their questions to the witnesses.

Senator Pat Casey: I thank Senator Frances Black for putting this on the agenda. Without her, I do not believe anybody else would have put it on the agenda for public consultation so I thank her for that. Equally, for every submission that has been made in relation to this public consultation, I thank everyone for that. I apologise now because I have to go shortly as I have something else on. I again thank all of the witnesses for their submissions this morning.

About six months ago, I attended a housing meeting where the GAA made a presentation about sporting facilities and the slogan was time to say stop. It said that we, as a society, are growing at a rapid pace but we are not bringing the sporting infrastructure along with it. I look at the witnesses here today and there are huge parallels between both strands. I would say artistic groups are probably in a much worse position than sporting organisations around the country but they play a huge role in every day life and every day society. When we, as politicians, are on the international stage, we like to say how great we are as a country with our arts and culture but we are probably not backing that up as we should be.

There were a lot of themes today, such as the capital investment needed to deliver the critical infrastructure that is required to allow performance, arts and culture to happen. You can divide that into national, regional and local. How do you fund that, moving forward? If you look at the sports capital programme, should there be a parallel funding scheme for arts and culture? On the GAA, it looked at local authority level and it looked at municipal, district-led facilities. We should be looking at the very same for cultural and arts facilities. We are seeing huge development happening at the moment. Somebody might have mentioned it already but local authorities have a development levy scheme, which charges a percentage for each house that is built. We indicated that we probably need to revisit that and put a much bigger allocation towards not alone sports but arts, culture and community facilities than what is there.

Another thing that was suggested as part of the planning and development Act was the section 39 development levy contribution scheme, which is where a municipal facility can bring in a special levy if they are delivering a municipal-led facility. Currently, that only applies to water, sewerage and roads infrastructure but we were looking at trying to provide that equally for community sporting, cultural and arts infrastructure. What you do need, moving forward, is a continuous stream of capital funding, which will allow you to build the critical infrastructure that is needed. The second problem is the operation and maintenance of all those facilities, which equally has to be supported. The viability then becomes a challenge. You are then looking into our communities, at the capacity of each community and whether that has the ability to carry all of this and bring it forward.

I hear exactly what the witnesses saying, even though arts and culture probably are not my forte.

Arts and culture probably would not be my forte - I would not ask me to get up and sing a song - but it has a huge role to play in our society. It is even more critical now, as we are growing at such a rapid rate, that we have all this integration in relation to our social and community infrastructure.

I thank the Chair for letting me in first because I have to go. I appreciate all the submissions. There are many parallels in what the GAA was saying and what has been said here today. We have to look at culture and arts as a specific funding stream at a national level and how we can roll that out at local and regional levels. Equally, how the groups maintain and operate them is also a challenge. There are also professional paths within arts and culture the same as there are in some of the sporting organisations. There are many parallels there. I thank the witnesses for their contributions this morning.

An Cathaoirleach: Would any of the witnesses like to respond to Seanadóir Casey?

Ms Niamh O'Donnell: I completely agree with what the Senator said. We are absolutely similar to sport. Like sport, that is our culture and that why it is so important.

It is really important that we do not pitch development against the arts. We do not we think local government or national government should be responsible for running every cultural space. What the committee has heard from my colleagues is that loads of spaces are being closed down that can maintain themselves. They can sustain themselves. This is a crisis. The Senator is correct that we are worse off than sport, so it is a crisis.

It is not about a huge investment but about moderate changes. There are really good international examples of trusts and of how to protect, how to include development in planning and how to protect what exists and to build on or at least reopen the places that have closed. I have a couple of examples, which I will send in, that represent best practice internationally.

An Cathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Siobhán Cleary: At the beginning of the year, the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, talked about reviewing the Arts Act. This could be a good opportunity to look at the possibilities, to see what is best practice in other countries and to maybe look at the local authorities' role in that.

An Cathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat. Would anybody else like to respond?

Mr. Eunan McKinney: The message I would take back from Senator Casey's comments is that the committee really needs to think about a sustainable mechanism in relation to capital funding. We can obviously do that in two ways: through the national Exchequer or through local funding. I take the Senator's point on the local funding in terms of the development but we have other mechanisms that could be considered too. For instance, we have had a debate in this city around a tourism tax and perhaps some of that potentially could be developed with a ring-fence back into the arts' capital requirements. That sustainability point is crucial now. We have a crisis, as my colleagues have outlined. What will solve the crisis is not part funding, which has been the case for so many years. It is about a long-term sustainable funding mechanism.

An Cathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Caitríona O'Mahony: What came to mind in that conversation in terms of, as the Senator said, the funding mechanism is that not everything needs to come from central budget. We have a lot of colleagues in different European countries who work under different models. The Senator mentioned levy procedures. In France, for instance, the situation that our colleagues are working with is that under the municipality major stadium-level events are levied per ticket and that funding is channelled back into the small-scale arts organisations. I am sure everyone knows someone who paid €400 for Oasis tickets. They could probably afford to lose a few quid off the top of each one of those and that could be funnelled back in. That is also a sustainability point because we know from all of the research that the bigger the venue, the bigger the carbon footprint because the audiences are travelling further. The most sustainable arts and cultural infrastructure is small-scale venues because the artist and audiences are not travelling as far. It is also a sustainability point if we use the more carbon-heavy events to support the less-carbon heavy events.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Ms O'Mahony. Have we any other contributors?

Mr. Fergal McGrath: I would echo some of the remarks Senator Black made in her opening comments. She used some key words there. She spoke about the importance of the arts in building resilient social fabric but she also used the words “sustainable” and “multi-annual”. Senator Casey's analogy of sports capital funding is brilliant. We need adequate support, it needs to be multi-annual and it needs to happen soon because artists are often at the vanguard of development. What has happened in Dublin is happening outside of Dublin as well. The

Complex was a shocking example of the success of this country in driving artists out of their home. It needs significant funding, it needs to be multi-annual and it needs to be soon.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome guests of the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad, Senator Mark Daly. We have having a debate on arts and culture infrastructure and have some witnesses from the arts and culture sector. Enjoy your stay.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I welcome our guests and our witnesses. I have been blown away by their professionalism, enthusiasm and commitment and the very practical recommendations they made. I thank Senator Black for all the work she has put in to getting us to this point.

I will make a few comments. I apologise, as I am chairing a session in the audiovisual room on older people as we age. It strikes me that it is only when people reach retirement age and start to look around at what they have in their communities that they find many of our sporting groups are not fit for purpose unless they are doing boules or baite or whatever. It is a time when people have the opportunity to really submerge themselves in the artistic culture of where they live.

The submissions to the committee were excellent. There are a lot of recommendations that we can use for our report to the Government. Pallas said long-term vision required long-term space. That was 100% correct. Ms Cleary's suggestion that an audit be done on all of our local empty buildings is correct. We have a suggestion from Silken Thomas Players in Kildare where I am from. It has been using an old courthouse on an *ad hoc* basis. It is a semi-professional group. It won the all-Ireland amateur drama competition on a number of occasions. It also runs other activities. It is prepared to share the space but is finding it difficult to get it. There does not seem to be a general culture of supporting groups that have proven they are sustainable in themselves. I feel that sometimes as a country we use the soft power of our culture, our music and poets. In particular, the culture programme of the opening of the EU Presidency was excellent and everyone remarked on it. At any state occasion I have been at, visiting prime ministers and dignitaries always remark upon it. It is something we are very proud of that we boast about but we are not doing enough to sustain it at a grassroots level to encourage the next generation coming through.

Some of the recommendations on tax incentives and so on are really important. As to dedicated public funding, something I have brought up within my own party is that we need to have a scheme similar to the sports capital grants for arts. The idea has been received positively and I certainly will be continuing to push that. The point is very well made, but while national funding needs to be scaled up - only €6 million was given in 2026 for capital infrastructure - local authorities need to be *ad idem* on that. We have the Riverbank Arts Centre in Kildare where we have just started a redevelopment. We looking for €16 million to do it, so national funding of €6 million in one year would go nowhere.

The suggestion of a task force and of ensuring that we feed into the next national development plan, which is always evolving, at every level is important.

Senator Fitzpatrick raised the tragedy that was The Complex on so many different occasions here. We have a submission from its representatives and will be having them in, but it was a tragedy to see a vital living organisation like that close because there was not a mechanism there.

There is an awful lot of work that we have to do on our side of it. I thank the witnesses for their commitment and for their recommendations.

An Cathaoirleach: Just to inform everybody that witnesses from The Complex will be contributing on 8 October to our hearings. Would anybody like to respond to Seanadóir O'Loughlin?

Mr. Mark Cullen: I would like to reiterate that point about the State having no instrument to enable the purchase of buildings. That is something that should be seriously addressed. Currently, the access fund is offering a grant of €50,000, which does not go anywhere close to doing anything. You would not refit a small studio with fire-accessible doors or anything like that with that level of funding. The access to capital funding is very low but it is equally important that the State would have an instrument that could actually act on the opportunity to retain buildings as legacy buildings for the long term so that it is no longer rent going out into the private sector, but money going into the creation of culture for the long term, which is what we all want and need.

An Cathaoirleach: Would anybody else like to comment?

Ms Niamh O'Donnell: I can give two examples. The Creative Land Trust in London does an amazing job in protecting cultural spaces. There is also the Senate of Berlin department of culture workplace programme, which is a good example of how that can be implemented.

Mr. Fergal McGrath: I will give a quick example in reference to the scale of the €6 million nationally and the centre in Kildare needing €16 million. I manage two ageing buildings. One of them needs €100,000 to pay for a new passenger lift, €500,000 to put in a new flying system and €200,000 to recover the roof, and we have just spent €70,000 making toilets bigger so that they are more accessible for the larger wheelchairs. The committee can get a sense of the scale. We do 120,000 seats a year and we get a lot of people through our doors, but we run ageing buildings. What they do is worthy and important and it is a significant contributor to the local economy as well as the social fabric, but we need money to keep the doors open.

An Cathaoirleach: As no one else would like to contribute, I will move on to Seanadóir Black.

Senator Frances Black: All of the witnesses are an inspiration to me. I thank them most sincerely for the amazing work they are doing for Ireland and our culture.

We have to look at the question of vacant buildings and the OPW. I already had a meeting with the Minister of State on that, and I am hoping to have a follow-up meeting. There are many lovely buildings - empty Garda stations and things like that - that could be used for cultural spaces.

I know they are not big venues. I hear what the witnesses are saying. I have performed in all of the venues they are speaking about and I know there is a need for even basic upgrades, although they need so much more.

I have a general question and then I have questions for almost everybody. I am interested to hearing the views of everyone else on practical mechanisms needed to bring vacant publicly owned buildings into cultural use. That will be key in our report. It is an area I am particularly interested in. While I know it was referenced in the Irish Theatre Institute's opening statement,

if anyone else would like to make suggestions to that end, it would be very helpful to us in preparing this report when we are finished.

Sample-Studio's submission was exceptionally detailed. Will Ms McCarthy speak a bit more about the demand for spaces in the studios? Will she speak about the limitations the studio faces in accessing current funding schemes, the difficulties faced by those on short-term leases and any other inflexible features? Will she speak about the working model referenced in the submission whereby Cork City Council is helping arts organisations secure long-term leases in heritage buildings? Will she speak about the proposal for a tenant in situ scheme?

If the witnesses do not mind, I will go through all of the questions before they reply. Moving to Evlana Ensemble and Sinfonietta, I love Ms Cleary's suggestion of a concert hall in every town. That is a lovely idea. Will she talk a bit about the festivalisation of new music and its impact on the frequency of cultural activity? Will she briefly outline her group's ideas regarding a civic venue access scheme and a State-commissioned 200- to 600-person capacity venue in Dublin?

On the Sligo Jazz Project, will the witnesses speak a bit about the example of La Sucrière in Lyon that they referenced in their submission and other examples of industrial and derelict sites in Europe being transformed?

Will the witnesses from Praxis, the artists' union, outline the challenges its members are facing in accessing work space and the impact that is having on their arts practices? Will they speak about the cultural brain drain that results in, which is really important?

The opening statement from Pallas studios referenced having to move 12 times in its 30 years of operation. Will the witnesses outline the challenges the organisation has faced in securing long-term sustainable infrastructure for its studios? Do they have any proposals to tackle those challenges?

The Improvised Music Company's submission outlined how impactful the venue, The Cooler, that it ran in The Complex, which recently devastatingly closed, was. Will the witnesses speak about the company's efforts to find a new venue in the aftermath of that closure and some of the proposals it has put forward that might help it in those efforts?

NASC Venue Network's submission outlined venues' need for ongoing investment towards building maintenance. Will the witnesses say a little bit more about that and expand on it a little? I know they have touched on it but we need to get what they have said into the report.

I thank the civil servants for the amazing work they have done in putting all of this together in sending out the invites, handling the submissions and all of their other ongoing work on this. I did not thank them in my initial statement and I thank them both sincerely on that. The floor is open to the witnesses. We have half an hour so they can take as long as they like.

An Cathaoirleach: Given that Senator Black has a question for everybody in the audience, we will start to my left and work down.

Ms Siobhán Cleary: I cannot remember all of the Senator's questions but I will do my best. She talked about festivalisation. This is something that has happened. For years and years, funding for arts organisations has been at a standstill and has not reflected things like inflation.

Most arts organisations are getting less than they used to. Festivalisation happens because partnerships are encouraged.

It is a case of if we provide whatever we can, it will be matched this way and there is the partnership. In an ideal world that works great but what is happening now is outside of that - there is nothing and there is no partnership. We are unable to have a year-round, nationwide concert series. We would like to be doing concerts every week all around the country in various-sized venues. However, because of the nature of the current funding structures, we are encouraged to go into a festival idea, which would happen once a year. It tends to be specialised and ghettoised and I would really like to see some funding structures that would support activities outside of that.

The civic access scheme is something I will get back to the committee on because I had not prepared it for this, but there are some great examples in Europe of how this would work. I will send them onto the committee.

Ms Aoibhie McCarthy: Senator Black initially asked about the challenges of our context and the demand from artists. As I said, we are the largest artist studios in Ireland and I receive an application from an artist for our workspace every other week. That is demand I cannot meet. At present, we have 40 artists working out of our 850 sq. m warehouse. It is an incredibly challenging environment to work in, having come from a five-storey city centre building, where we very much occupied the heart and soul of the city centre. With the loss of that building, we had to move to the hinterland and have just held onto existence in that way.

Over the past ten years, we have been faced with the contradiction that we are programmatically rich. We have been able to deliver extraordinary programmes, where we engage 32,000 people a year with our programmes and support our membership of 200 artists. However, I cannot provide a space that is warm for them, a space that is adequate for equipment provision or a space that is adequately staffed for the 24-7 use of our building. As many of my colleagues pointed out, there is a lot of wear on these buildings. We are providing for audiences from cradle to grave, and we are providing for them and artists 24-7 compared to, say, our matches on a Sunday and the training on a Tuesday night. These are buildings and infrastructure that are under significant demand that we cannot meet.

In the past ten years, we have tried to access capital investment funds but because of the nature of a short-term precarious lease, we cannot. The task should certainly start with looking at the scope and eligibility of the existing funds and schemes. For example, while the Department's artist workspaces scheme is very welcome, as I said, the reality is the €300,000 available to Cork City Council does not come near replicating the need of 200 artists in the city centre. We really think there is scope and urgent need to expand the eligibility and scope for that. The real challenge for us is that it is only available through local authority stock, which assumes local authorities around the country have suitable stock. As we have heard from many of our colleagues, heritage stock is incredibly costly to bring into contemporary use, assuming it exists at all. That is a vast assumption in the design of that programme.

The other scheme that is well-established is the artist workspaces scheme and higher levels of funding through the Arts Council, like arts grants and strategic funding. We are explicitly precluded from accessing the highest form of funding available to workspaces - strategic funding - purely because of the precarity of our lease, despite our being in our building for ten

years. Until we can secure a long-term lease, we are precluded from accessing higher funds. There is again this contradiction that emerges whereby we are acknowledging those that are secure will be funded and those that are not will never be. While we are trying to address our colleagues in arts centres with a very ageing fabric, there is also a cohort within the arts who do not even have access to that.

Providing for the full scope of the need is the task at hand.

The Cathaoirleach also asked about the experience of Cork City Council. There were some excellent examples within Cork City Council. Two years ago, it completed an extensive arts infrastructural mapping exercise, which identified that Cork is chronically underserved by artist's studios compared with equivalent European cities. There are excellent examples of the local authority working with arts organisations to protect those organisations with long-term leases by purchasing sites. The National Sculpture Factory, Backwater Artists studios and Cork Printmakers are all in local authority owned buildings. We have seen where those organisations can thrive as a result because they can access capital investment at scale.

Mr. Eunan McKinney: I start with the example we cited in our submission. The reason we cited that example is because we felt it was an opportunity to point out where industrial landscapes have been repurposed. In that instance, not only is it an existing planning issue where there is industrial zoning, services and everything else established, it was also a venue where multiple disciplines were brought together. It was protecting artists, music and the complete range of artist practice and disciplines. That was attractive to us. The other factor was that the city authority was the one providing the funding within the context of a levy. We felt it was a good example to provide in that context.

An Cathaoirleach: I turn to Ms O'Donnell.

Ms Niamh O'Donnell: I am not sure that I was actually asked a question, but that is okay.

Senator Frances Black: It was a general question about the practical mechanisms, so would she like to say a bit more about that, or maybe take a bit more time?

Ms Niamh O'Donnell: I have just done desk research on trusts and asset transfers and how spaces can be protected. I do not feel I can speak eloquently because it is outside of my general skills base. However, I have done quite a bit of research, and I think a mapping exercise is needed. Like every other organisation here, the Irish Theatre Institute is a research organisation for independent artists, and I cannot reach demand. We have a four-storey building. We are 24-7 and we are turning people away every day. On sustainability, my feeling is I could run a building three times the size and I could do it commercially. I can make it work. There are lots of us who can make things work. I would love us to be tapped and supported to be able to grow.

Mr. Mark Cullen: Our history is of having approximately 12 different locations across the city. In that time, they have had short leases and then gone on to meanwhile arrangements with landowners. Our current situation is that we have three different places, and they are all in that meanwhile situation. We have a lease on an old school building which has been there for ten years. Since that lease has been up, maybe four years ago, we have been on a six-month rolling lease, which is tricky. It is hard to think and plan ahead. We have another space in a location in Dublin 8, which is also on a meanwhile situation. If there were a State mechanism to support

the purchase of a building, that is something we would welcome. The question was asked about raising funds for the arts. The Per Cent for Art is a model that could be looked at. At the moment it is used specifically for creating art and there is no capital element in it. It is called Per Cent for Art but when you look at it, it is nowhere close because the ceiling tops out at €100,000. That is for a project of €50 million.

If a project is €500 million, about €4.5 million is not utilised. The State could look at implementing a scheme whereby anything above the ceiling, up to the level of the percentage, would be allocated to a pot to address capital funding. This would bring in quite a bit of money over time. We are looking at a ceiling that kicks in. There is a ceiling of €500,000 but there are lower ceilings of €125,000 and €350,000, which mean it is nowhere close to that percentage. The percentage is about the European average of the capital spend on the arts across Europe. It is something that would be reasonable to implement.

Another option would be to pursue the vacant levy and make sure it is collected. We hear it is not being collected. There is also the site levy. With regard to the site levy, doing an audit of spaces throughout the State has been mentioned by multiple people. Some people mentioned the Carnegie libraries. It is terrible that these spaces, which were specifically designed for public use and the greater good, with a cultural impetus, are being left empty and have been left empty for years and years. This should be addressed with haste.

An Cathaoirleach: I acknowledge the former Minister of State, Finian McGrath, who is very welcome. His brother Fergal is here. They are welcome to our hearing.

Ms Eve Woods: Vacant spaces in older buildings have been mentioned, as has the OPW. There are a lot of empty unfinished units that were built in new developments which are zoned for arts or community use but there does not seem to be away for them to be fitted out to be used. A lot of people who want to use them are in smaller community groups which do not have the structure to fund raise or even to accept grants at a high level to make it happen. We have been working on a very small unit in Dublin 8 for Pallas and the cost of fitting it out is very high. It has been very arduous and it is taking a number of years to get the space open. We had hoped to be open three years ago. I ask for this to be addressed. It is linked to the 5% for culture also. We see a lot of empty ground floor units in Dublin 8 while people are crying out for space, whether for artist workspaces as studios or performance spaces or for people who want to do short-term community projects. We get emails every week looking for space but we do not have the capacity to assist with this and nor do we have the space to share.

Mr. Cólín O'Connell: From practice, our bread and butter is artists' pay and working conditions. CSO figures have consistently shown that artists and arts workers are some of the lowest paid workers in the State. This emphasises the crisis in the sector and what it is causing for artists and arts workers. I mentioned our survey earlier, which found 50% of artists or arts workers have considered giving up their working space due to financial pressure and 40% of respondents are considering leaving Ireland. This paints a pretty stark picture of the reality of the situation, whereby artists cannot really afford to work or earn a living in Ireland. This is an important issue to address. This is a crisis and immediate, medium and long-term measures need to be taken. I reiterate what has been about using OPW vacant spaces in the short term and having more ambitious plans, and we have mentioned the task force, and increasing capital spending in the medium to long term.

Ms Alice Quinn Banville: I echo this. Many of us here today have raised the fact this is an issue of access and accessibility.

We have definitely heard from many of our members, and anecdotally, that the longer you spend in this industry, you start to lose different kinds of colleagues. We are thinking of people with disabilities. People who are parenting, particularly mothers, are often hit by these kinds of issues around access to workspace, which, in turn, affects their income and their ability to work. A lot of great points have been raised on this. I just wanted to emphasise it.

Mr. Kenneth Killeen: I thank Senator Black. I think her question was about The Cooler and what we have done since we have been homeless in the intervening period. It is mostly a story about displacement and identity for the art form. It has been devastating, frankly, to build something at considerable cost and have no security of tenure. It is hard to mouth. It is indicative of the conversations that we have been listening to today. We put over €100,000 into a very small space to fit it out specifically for what we needed, and we had to tear it down. That represents a waste of taxpayers' money.

In the intervening period, we have gone back to programming in various commercial establishments around the city and the country. Considerable costs are associated with that, as has been mentioned before, such as renting pianos, backline insurance and commercial rents, which are through the roof. It is always a tough ask on the audience as well, some of whom prefer the Kevin Barry room and some of whom prefer Whelan's. We do not know when we are programming what we are going to programme into. Sometimes, it is whatever is available. We have been deprived of the scalability - having had security of tenure, or thinking we had - to build on something and represent good value for money.

This is all a story about identity - identity for the artists as having a place that they can go all the time to create their music - and identity for the audiences as this is where this music happens. Ultimately, this benefits the art form. As I said earlier, 141 ensembles who were using The Cooler regularly have been now displaced. These were creating meaningful work around the country. Music developed at The Cooler went on to the National Concert Hall, Cork Jazz, Electric Picnic, New Music Dublin, abroad to the EFG London Jazz Festival, Ronnie Scott's and various venues around the world.

The thing about music that is different from other art forms is that music makes noise. This can be a problem for seeking tenancy ownership or whatever it may be, because it needs that acoustic isolation. Music development is different from other art forms in this regard. All art forms are deserving of a spotlight, but you need to look at the case made for music specifically, and it is different for practical reasons, not because it deserves more. It needs the acoustic separation and permanent equipment and continuity. It needs somewhere to house our grand piano. Audiences need this one place to find it.

None of that is exotic by any stretch of the imagination, but it is hard. It is hard when we are talking with Dublin City Council about meanwhile use of space and what has to be done to fit out that space even for a basic requirement. When we get something and build into it, it seems an incredible waste of money to have to tear that down and go when you have found something like that. We are on the register for Dublin City Council's vacant spaces, and have provided documents in our guise as Music Alliance Ireland for Dublin City Council on what a space for music needs in particular. We have applied for meanwhile use all around. It is an

issue of displacement and identity, fundamentally. The work that we were able to do in just two short years of that space shows we have the proof of the model, but we do not have the room to do it in anymore.

Ms Louise Donlon: We are in a very different situation from a lot of the witnesses here today. In many ways, some of the stories we have heard here today are shocking. We tend to be in buildings that have been built by local authorities.

In the mid- to late nineties when Michael D. Higgins was the Minister for the arts, he initiated a cultural capital programme. That is when many of the venues started to be built. The town hall was one of the first, then there was An Grianán in Letterkenny and Dunamais from 1998 until 2010. Every county now pretty much has an arts centre. They are owned generally by the local authority on very long-term peppercorn rent to the company that is running them in most cases. That is not an issue for us. By the very nature of the age of those buildings, that is where our rubber is hitting the road because things are deteriorating, as I said in my statement.

I will give the committee a simple example. In 2010, the Belltable got a new projector. We show film as part of our programme. It is live music but also film. We have a great partnership with the IFI. It is a server system and a very high-tech projector and full cinema screen. The server is now 16 years old. There are not many computers that are lasting for 16 years, as everybody here will accept. We are absolutely nursing it along. About two years ago, it completely failed. It had to be sent to Belfast. The company said to us, "Lads, you have to get a new server. We are doing our best, but we cannot keep this going." We have no money. We do not have €80,000 to buy a new projector. Every day I am thinking if today will be the day that it completely fails. If it does, we will have completely stop our film programme, which is hugely popular. A huge number of people attend the screenings every Monday. Where do we go? Who do we turn to? At the moment, there is nowhere. That is just one small example.

Mr. Fergal McGrath: In 30 seconds, my reading of the room today is that any policy - members are looking for specifics - should have a three-pronged approach. First, we need to be cognisant of new urban areas like Fingal where we may need to build new buildings to cope with people who cannot travel to the city centre. Second, we need to look at existing buildings, such as the ones that are vulnerable now that the economy has lifted and the artists are in the firing line. For example, places like The Complex need to be protected. Somehow there has to be - the facilities were mentioned earlier - Government intervention to buy and protect those sites. Third, from our perspective, Ms Donlon and I are representing just two of 50 art centres across the country. We are managing ageing buildings. We need to be rebooted because any building is amortised over 20 or 25 years. We are now past our sell-by date, but we have a lot more to give. We just need to be rebooted.

I thank Senator Black for all she has done in bringing us here today and for all the work she done in general for promoting the arts and bringing it to the attention of Senators.

An Cathaoirleach: Would anybody else like to make a contribution who I did not call on or are they all happy?

Ms Caitríona O'Mahony: I have a minor point.

There are two intersecting areas of policy that need to be considered in this role. One is in dereliction. A lot of the spaces that we are talking about that arts have occupied in a meanwhile use have prevented dereliction. When The Complex went into that building initially, you should have seen it. The roof was barely there. There was more than €1 million put into that building which would have otherwise deteriorated and completely collapsed. Meanwhile use is serving that a lot.

That relates to the second point on insurance reform, which is a major issue for a lot of arts organisations. There is a lot that artists can do. As the Irish Theatre Institute will know, we build sets. We make our own studios. We literally do that with our own hands. A lot of The Complex was built with our own hands. We can do that if we are allowed to, but the increasingly stringent requirements of the insurance industry and the increasing cost makes that very difficult to do. The meanwhile use that would have been possible for places like Sample-Studios or other meanwhile use in previous years - for example, ten years ago - is not possible now because of the insurance restrictions that are impacting a lot of people. Dereliction and insurance are two intersecting areas that we need to keep in mind.

An Cathaoirleach: On behalf of the Seanad Public Consultation Committee, I thank all the witnesses for coming here. It has been a very informative morning for all.

A lot of thought-provoking ideas have been put forward. I thank Senator Black and the other Senators who participated. I also thank our team here, including Mark and Denise, the stenographers and the sound people because today would not have been possible without their help and support.

All of the ideas and the consultation we had here will form part of the report which will be sent to the Government. That report will be put together with the support of Senator Black, as the rapporteur, and the Seanad team. Witnesses will receive a copy of the report when it is finally published. Again, I thank all of the witnesses for taking the time to travel here to Leinster House to participate. I am sure we will meet them again in the context of arts, performance and cultural issues. I wish them all the best for the future with all of their different projects.

Cuireadh an roghchoiste ar athló ar 12.21 p.m. go dtí 2.30 p.m., Déardaoin, an 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2026.

The select committee adjourned at 12.21 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Thursday, 1 October 2026.