



Building a stronger
performing arts
community in Ireland.

Briefing note

Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media

Challenges facing Arts Venues as a result of COVID-19

Theatre Forum thanks this Committee for the opportunity to discuss how Arts Venues and Centres could be best supported to respond to the challenges they are facing as a result of COVID-19.

25 June 2021

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Key points Theatre Forum will address to the Joint Committee

30 June 2021

Align policy, purpose and investment

The Covid-19 crisis has affected everyone and every sector. The impact at every level has been devastating. As we emerge from this crisis, there is an opportunity not just to rebuild the arts and culture sector, but to build it better and make it more sustainable. It is crucial to protect and invest in our arts sector and ensure the years of investment, experience, and artist support infrastructure in Arts Venues are not lost. Arts Venues must be enabled to purposefully do more for, in and with their communities.

This Committee has an opportunity to sync NDP and arts and culture policy, to draw together a capital and programme investment plan to evolve Arts Venues as a key channel of the arts and culture sector in order to contribute to all of Ireland's societal recovery and continue to enrich all our lives.

Ensure survival plus future viability

Right now, extending the Government employer supports for what is hopefully the last stage of the Covid-19 crisis is critical to the survival and stability of most of the country's Arts Venues. A commitment from the Government and Revenue that the Employer Wage Subsidy (EWS) Scheme will remain in place until audience capacities and box office income are restored to reasonable levels is essential if Arts Centres are to survive this crisis.

Longer term and planned funding commitments to Arts Venues would enable them to better plan projects and programmes, deepen engagement with artists, audiences and their communities and foster collaborations with communities of interest that continue beyond the limitations of sporadic projects in a 12-month funding cycle.

Promote sustainability

There is an opportunity for Arts Venues to show how climate and environmental issues can be addressed by making changes to their own buildings, working more sustainably as well as being spaces from which artists and communities co-create programmes to build a better – and more sustainable – shared future.

Arts Venues are also ideally positioned to offer quality work opportunities to artists and arts workers in their own locality. As art venues move to medium and longer financial planning cycles, that will translate to arts venues being able to offer artists longer term and better-quality work opportunities.

Put Arts Venues at the heart of their communities

Arts Venues and Centres are at the heart of their communities. They can improve access for all, be inclusive and celebrate diversity in their programmes, activities and events. A systematic approach to support arts centres to broaden their community remit as safe workplaces for artists to work with and for their communities, to engage with audiences of all ages, abilities, orientation, and ethnicity would create the much-needed energy and vibrancy to rebuild our communities.

Context

Like all other sectors, Arts Venues and Centres now face enormous difficulties as a direct result of the COVID-19 crisis. As well as the challenges of business closure and loss of box office, venue rental, bar and café revenue, they contend with continued uncertainty around when they will return to normality and open their doors to their communities and audiences again.

With every sector similarly focussed on facing the general challenges arising from COVID-19, there is little need to rehearse the overarching political, economic and social imperatives of reopening our society and our economy. Theatres along with venues and arts centres were first to close at the outset of this crisis and experience suggests that these spaces will be amongst the last to re-open fully. What is so important to Arts Venues now is to consider the specific challenges ahead as they reopen, rebuild their teams and rethink their role and remit in serving the needs of artists and their communities.

Note that various labels including Arts Venues, Arts Centres and Arts Venues and Centres, are used through out this briefing note. They are mostly interchangeable other than in the context of Arts Council policy where Arts Centre is the preferred term.

As the Committee will be familiar with the policies and reports referenced in this submission, these are referenced rather than repeated in any detail.

National Development Plan, the investment framework to achieve Project Ireland 2040 aims
Life Worth Living, The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce, October 2020
Arts Centre Policy and Strategy, Arts Council, 2019

Arts Venues – Purpose

Living through this crisis has shown how we took the arts and entertainment for granted. By extension, we probably took Arts Venues for granted too. Now we appreciate just how much going to a concert or exhibition, the cinema or a musical, theatre shows or pantomimes, singing in a choir or playing in a band enriches our lives. In this new socially distanced reality where so many freedoms are and will be curtailed, imaginative freedom seems more important than ever.

Arts Venues are a cultural asset

There are over 70 venues and arts centres in all parts of the country in addition to Local Authorities having Arts Officers and Offices with at least one venue or arts centre in every Local Authority area. Each operates on its own bespoke model of Arts Council, Local Authority, box office and other earned income. Regardless of why these individualised arrangements have evolved, we ask that you think about Arts Centres collectively as a cultural asset, the key arts ‘channel’ to communities, a vital arts focal point in cities, counties and towns nationally.

Arts Venues are infrastructure

In line with the National Development Plan’s Strategic Investment Priorities 2018–2027, we suggest that investment in Arts Centres enhances the value of this important cultural asset and is an investment in giving communities the freedom of their imagination.

Plans for investment in culture and heritage recognise that high quality infrastructure is critical for a vibrant heritage and culture sector and that investment in our cultural heritage underpins social cohesion and supports strong, sustainable economic growth. In terms of regional objectives, specific priorities are to enhance arts and culture centres throughout the country, develop the sustainable tourism potential of our culture and heritage infrastructure and improve Ireland’s outdoor recreation infrastructure and natural heritage.

National Development Plan.

The quality arts and culture infrastructure described in the Plan needs to be built on strong foundations. While the country’s built arts infrastructure is an asset, COVID-19 closure has meant it has also deteriorated. In addition, reopening arts centres and venues will be required to operate to significantly higher levels of public and workplace safety than before.

The quality of life in our regional towns and villages will play a key role in delivering a balanced regional economy as envisaged in the National Economic Plan.

The Taskforce believes that all across Ireland, there are spaces which can, with imagination and a well-funded capital improvement programme, be adapted to allow live performances in a safe environment, adhering to public health guidelines, and enriching life in our towns and villages and cities.

Life Worth Living, The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce

To achieve the NDP aim of social cohesion underpinning strong sustainable economic growth and the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce aim of being spaces that enrich the lives of people everywhere in the country, we ask that a capital expenditure plan is put in place in order to maintain and operate Arts Venues and Centres to higher post-COVID safety standards, reconfigure some of them as live performance and digital production hubs and ensure they meet the future needs of artists and communities.

Arts Venues are workplaces

It is crucial that we protect our arts sector and ensure the years of investment, experience, and artist support infrastructure are not lost. For performing artists, theatre-makers, musicians, dancers, production and technical staff, venues and arts centres are their places of work. Arts Centres are a key bit of infrastructure for artists and communities, an important touchstone for arts engagement and provide vital pathways connecting artists and audiences.

Each centre works with a host of public and private sector partners as well as local groups. It is a workplace for the artists and arts workers in that locality and a place where community and youth projects can expect professional production and presentation of their work.

Align policy, purpose and investment

The Covid-19 crisis has affected everyone and every sector. The impact at every level has been devastating. As we emerge from this crisis, there is an opportunity not just to rebuild the arts and culture sector, but to build it better and make it more sustainable. It is crucial to protect and invest in our arts sector and ensure the years of investment, experience, and artist support infrastructure in Arts Venues are not lost. Arts Venues must be enabled to purposefully do more for, in and with their communities.

This Committee has an opportunity to sync NDP and arts and culture policy, to draw together a capital and programme investment plan to evolve Arts Venues as a key channel of the arts and culture sector in order to contribute to all of Ireland's societal recovery and continue to enrich all our lives.

Arts Venues - Financial Stability

Arts Venues face two tough financial challenges after months of Covid-19 restrictions. One is their short-term financial stability in order to survive and another is their financial viability in the medium to longer term.

Support for survival

Covid-19 lockdown meant the loss of box office income from April 2020 up to and beyond June 2021. During the crisis, many arts centres have availed of Government employer supports such as TWS and EWS schemes, Arts Council stabilisation funding as well as a variety of deferrals and reliefs to ameliorate their losses due to COVID-19.

Unlike other sectors working to a defined reopening timeline, arts centres will be subjected to social distance and capacity restrictions long after other sectors have reopened fully. Looking ahead to the end of this year, social distancing and/or capacity limits for an extended reopening phase for Arts Centres will mean reduced box office income. This is a situation particular to Arts Centres. The combined impact of reducing future earned income on top of the loss in box office revenue during closure is detrimental to the financial stability of Arts Venues, their ability to work with production companies, promoters, amateur groups and artists to book shows, to support artists and to deliver projects in communities. Surmising that audiences could well be slow to return to theatres due to apprehension around indoor gatherings, restoring box office income to pre-crisis levels, up to 70% of total income for some Arts Venues, could take considerably longer than expected.

Despite these uncertainties and difficulties, Arts Centres are planning their programmes for the latter end of the year making significant financial commitments to theatre makers, production companies, dance companies, musicians and visual artists to present their work this Autumn without the benefit of any substantial box office income.

To withstand the effects of lost income with increased operating costs as they reopen, the Government's employer support as well as the Arts Council's Stabilisation Fund were and are vital factors in the survival of several of the country's Arts Venues.

Support for future viability

Other financial supports are also recommended, including amendments to the Tax Code, supports for the Arts Budgets of our Local Authorities, the immediate transposition into Irish law of the European Union (EU) Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market, and particular supports for Live Event Small and Medium Enterprises (SME's) currently excluded from the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme operated by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Life Worth Living, The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce

Pre-COVID, adhocacy characterised Arts Centres funding with most working to short-term, annual funding cycles. The enforced Covid-19 pause has temporarily broken the financial model of some Arts Centres. It also accentuated the ad-hoc and short-term approach to funding arrangements that pervade the sector.

To sustain arts centres for their next collective chapter of operation and to continue to support artists and arts centre staff working in their communities, a longer term and co-ordinated approach to financial support and funding commitments from funders, local government and local authority stakeholders to protect and sustain Arts Centres beyond this crisis are urgently needed.

Arts Council

While supports such as the Arts Council early drawdown option mitigated the early and worst effects of the crisis, Arts Centres are still placed in a very precarious position in terms of potential loss of revenue as box office income can represent up to 70% of total revenue. Further negative financial impacts are likely as revenues from local fundraising, sponsorship, donations and other community contributions which support their artistic programmes may also dry up as a result of the pandemic's long tail effects or any future economic downturn.

Looking ahead, a longer-term or multi-annual approach to Arts Venues funding would promote longer term planning and commitment to artists' residencies and projects, longer-life community projects and partnerships and provide resources to develop audiences and arts participation in communities. The Arts Council's consideration of a multi-annual funding pilot scheme for arts centres from 2022 is a big step in the right direction of enabling Arts Venues to adopt a strategic and longer-term approach.

Local Authority supports

To date, the role of the Local Authority in funding, control and management of arts venues, centres, theatres and galleries is particular to each organisation. While this does take account of local contexts, it has also led to inconsistencies in funding and resource commitments from Councils, occasional difficulties in drawing down local authority funding and during the COVID-19 crisis, redeployment of staff in situations where the venue is local authority run. This situation is not conducive to the vibrant and sustainable cultural sector envisaged in the NDP.

Working through the Arts Council and the CCMA partnership, finding an interpretation of the 2003 Arts Act that makes multi-annual funding or service level agreements between Arts Venues and their Local Authority the norm rather than an exception would be another big step to ensure the future financial viability of Arts Venues.

Survival plus future financial viability

Right now, extending the Government employer supports for what is hopefully the last stage of the Covid-19 crisis is critical to the survival and stability of most of the country's Arts Venues. A commitment from the Government and Revenue that the Employer Wage Subsidy (EWS) Scheme will remain in place until audience capacities and box office income are restored to reasonable levels is essential if Arts Centres are to survive this crisis.

Longer term and planned funding commitments to Arts Venues would enable them to better plan projects and programmes, deepen engagement with artists, audiences and their communities and foster collaborations with communities of interest that continue beyond the limitations of sporadic projects in a 12-month funding cycle.

Arts Venues - Sustainability

The Taskforce identified a real risk that Ireland will emerge from COVID-19 to find its arts, culture and events sectors decimated, with some venues closed for good, many businesses folded, large numbers of skilled and talented performers and workers gone to other careers, and much of the experience and creativity of the sectors gone.

Life Worth Living, The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce

Arts Venues have at least two obvious roles in increasing the sustainability of their sector. One is a response to climate change and the necessary changes that are needed to decarbonise arts organisations, make them more energy efficient and adapt their activities and practices to be more sustainable. The second is ensuring artists can expect fair pay and conditions to enable them to have a sustainable career.

Arts Venues working toward sustainability

Communicating complex stories and ideas is what the arts do best. As we shift towards a more sustainable future, the arts can play an important role in communicating with their audiences the culture shift required to confront climate change. In achieving increased sustainability, arts venues and centres can also function as leaders in their communities. Arts organisations can significantly reduce their own Green House Gas emissions and contribute to the decarbonisation of the Irish economy. Some have made inroads already, but Arts Venues are ideally positioned to act to reduce the carbon footprint of their own organisation as well as the overall environmental impacts of the performing arts sector.

- Arts Venues can take action to reduce their carbon footprint and overall environmental impacts.
- Arts Venues can enhance the sustainability competencies in their own organisation and the wider community through training and networking.
- Arts Venues can document improvements in their own sustainability establishing a benchmark for accurate measurements of future reductions.
- Arts Centres can reduce their energy, waste, and travel bills and become part of a wider community of arts organisations shifting towards a green economy.

Venues can lead by example making the transition to an energy efficient low carbon economy.

Artists and arts workers – sustainable careers

Precarity has been the enemy of sustainable careers in the arts. Precarity was replaced by no work at all during the pandemic. Some artists and arts workers could access pandemic payments and benefits while many others could not. In rebuilding a vibrant arts sector, improving pay, conditions and employment structures for artists and arts workers, actors and technicians, designers and producers is a responsibility that Arts Venues can take on.

Key points from Theatre Forum’s 2018 Payscales Survey

Four fifths of jobs in the performing arts are precarious. 81% of all jobs in festivals, venues and production companies are temporary, offer irregular hours each week, are freelance contracts or a profit share.

It’s like starting over and over and over on a zero hours contract. Contributor to the Artists’ Forum, Dec 2018

Reducing the precarity around working as an artist would enable artists and arts workers to have more sustainable careers. Arts Centres have a role in employing artists and offering them quality work that will sustain their careers, wherever they live.

The Taskforce's recommendation of a Pilot Universal Basic Income (UBI) Scheme and its establishment by the Ministers is probably the most welcome development in a long time. It can directly reduce the precarity experienced by artists and arts workers in their working lives, enabling them to have sustainable careers and make their own location, housing, family, partner and life decisions.

It was quickly and unanimously agreed that establishment of a Pilot Universal Basic Income (UBI) scheme with a duration of three years was the central recommendation to be made by this Taskforce. Other financial supports are also recommended.... But the UBI pilot scheme is the Taskforce's key recommendation.

Life Worth Living, The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce

Sustainability

There is an opportunity for Arts Venues to show how climate and environmental issues can be addressed by making changes to their own buildings, working more sustainably as well as being spaces from which artists and communities co-create programmes to build a better – and more sustainable – shared future.

Arts Venues are also ideally positioned to offer quality work opportunities to artists and arts workers in their own locality. As art venues move to medium and longer financial planning cycles, that will translate to arts venues able to offer artists longer term and better-quality work opportunities.

Arts Venues - Communities

Arts Venues and Centres are much more than their buildings – they are teams of professional, experienced people dedicated to supporting artists, audiences and communities. They require support so they can create plans for a reimagined future in which artists are supported and our communities are enriched.

The importance of the Arts Venues and Centres in their own communities is clear and reinforced by both the Taskforce's view and the Arts Council's definition:

Arts centres are full-time, public-facing, professionally managed, building-based organisations. They support the creation, presentation and mediation of the arts across a range of art forms, and arts practices. They support professional, collaborative, voluntary and amateur arts practice.

Forging connection between the arts and the public is a defining characteristic of the work of Arts Council-supported arts centres.

Arts Centre Policy and Strategy, Arts Council, 2019

...the Taskforce's recommendations are underpinned by the conviction that it is both urgent and important that Ireland's cultural life - subsidised and commercial - is protected and sustained so that it can survive and adapt to these changed circumstances, recover its equilibrium and contribute to the renewal of our collective sense of wellbeing and purpose. Ireland's creative and cultural industries are large and vital components of our economy and are critically dependent on the sustained recovery of our arts, culture and entertainment sector. Supporting this sector is both an economic priority and a social imperative. Public investment to that end will return distinctive benefits for our lives as individuals, as social beings, and as communities.

Life Worth Living, The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce

Value the local

As our population grows and in the last year disperses, there is an obvious need to maintain, upgrade and enhance existing Arts Centres to ensure citizens have access to the arts in their own areas. In their own locality and community, each arts centre takes on various roles in response to the arts and culture needs and desires of its community.

Arts Centres can put in place the numerous measures required to reopen as public spaces where people can gather safely.

Arts Centres are safe workplaces for staff teams, artists, arts workers, community leaders and volunteers and ultimately, safe places of assembly for the public.

Arts Centres can develop and deliver alternative programmes and channels, including digital ones, to broaden and deepen engagement with artists, arts workers, touring companies, audiences and their community.

Arts Centres can create opportunities for diverse communities to work with artists in new and inclusive ways, making spaces and technology available locally for creativity and development.

The ability of Arts Venues to grow and develop, to support and engage with their communities, should be supported with the necessary resources: longer term funding, physical space, production expertise, human resources and funding to produce work in, with and by communities.

Arts Centres enrich their communities

The quality of life in our regional towns and villages will play a key role in delivering a balanced regional economy as envisaged in the National Economic Plan. The Taskforce believes that all across Ireland, there are spaces which can, with imagination and a well-funded capital improvement programme, be adapted to allow live performances in a safe environment, adhering to public health guidelines, and enriching life in our towns and villages and cities.

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The role of an Arts Centre at the heart of its community and the supports required to sustain that work is summed up by Elizabeth Whyte, Director of Wexford Arts Centre:

We need to secure clear commitments from national as well as local government and local authority executives. Arts Centres are the gateways between community engagement and professional arts development and support. Throughout COVID they contributed to and implemented COVID Health and Safety plans to provide access where possible to a quality arts programme whether within their walls or outside through support of the ambitious Brightening Air or In the Open projects within their respective communities. They ensured continued employment with support of TWS and EWS Schemes. They can continue to be leading employers in the arts sector, including progression from schemes such as Community Employment and TÚS, and continue to actively engage local community with quality professional and amateur arts experiences with adequate resource funding preferably through multi annual funding for ongoing sustainability.

Arts Centres are of and serve their communities

Arts Venues and Centres are at the heart of their communities. They can work to improve access for all, be inclusive and celebrate diversity in their programmes, activities and events. A systematic approach to support Arts Venues and Centres to broaden their remit as safe workplaces for artists to work with and for their communities, to engage with audiences of all ages, abilities, orientation, and ethnicity would create the much-needed energy and vibrancy to rebuild our communities.

Theatre Forum

Established over 18 years ago, Theatre Forum is a national performing arts membership organisation with more than 200 members. Roughly half of these members are organisations and half of that number again are arts centres, theatres and venues. The views expressed here have been informed by open forum discussions with Theatre Forum's Arts Centre members, directors, as well as many collaborators such as the arts centre networks and working groups.

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