Making Great Art Work
Leading the Development of the Arts in Ireland

Arts Council Strategy (2016–2025)

Engagement programme | Findings
Making Great Art Work, the Arts Council new ten year strategy was published in September, the first strategy ‘proper’ since Partnership in the Arts, 2006 – 2010, which was never fully realised due to the economic crisis.

The Arts Council wished to share the strategy with the arts sector and beyond and sought feedback and perspectives to inform the preparation of the first three-year plan (2017 – 2019).
Engagement programme
Engagement programme: reach

- The Arts Council
- The Arts (as defined in the Arts Act and supported by the Arts Council)
- Creative & Cultural Sector
- Social, Civic & Economic Environment
Engagement programme: outline

ONLINE SUBMISSION
A portal housed on our website facilitating a structured response to the strategy.
(27 Oct - 30 Nov)
Open to all

STRATEGY FORUM
Regional round table facilitated conversations
Wexford (29 Oct)
Cork (3 Nov)
Sligo (5 Nov)
Dublin (10 & 11 Nov)
Limerick (12 Nov)
Galway (24 Nov)
By direct invitation and through the newsletter

DIRECT DIALOGUES
Focus groups with key informants
By invitation

27 October 30 November
To be conducted in 2016
Engagement programme: participation

1540 invited to strategy forums*

*Funding recipients 2013 – 2015

*PLUS open invitation via September, October and November e-newsletter

*PLUS additional 40 cultural academics, independent producers & presenters, voluntary arts representatives

439 registered to attend

369 booked via Eventbrite.

70 booked via email request to strategy@artscouncil.ie

305 attended

20% of the total number invited attended the forums

114 people completed online submissions (4 as Gaeilge), plus 5 responses to the strategy received by email
The **Making Great Art Work** strategy forums used the world café methodology to engage participants in round-table conversations.
The Strategy Forums were attended by 305 people, mainly artists, arts workers, arts officers, and cultural academics.

- 860 artists were invited [56% of invitees], and 680 arts organisations, plus approx another 40 academics and individuals.
- 439 registered to attend: 154 artists [35% of registrants] and 285 arts workers.
- 305 attended: 81 artists [27% of attenders] and 224 arts workers.
- 146 [48%] attended the two Dublin forums, and 159 [52%] attended forums outside of Dublin.

- 27% artists
- 73% arts workers / organisations
- 48% at Dublin forums
- 52% at forums outside Dublin
114 responses were received, 4 as Gaeilge.

- Artists/arts practitioners were the most numerous respondents at 48.2%, followed by those who work in the arts at 40%.
- 76.1% of respondents are or were funded by the Arts Council.
- 64.2% of respondents were aged between 35-55. 16.5% were aged under 35.*
- 61.5% of respondents were from outside Dublin [Dublin 38.5%, Cork 10.1%, Galway 7.3%, Waterford 5.5%, Kildare / Limerick / Mayo 3.7%].

* 36% of Irish population is under 35 (Census 2011)
Key findings: response to the strategy

Conversation one

• What did you find **encouraging and motivating** about the strategy?

• What aspects of the strategy do you consider to be the most **challenging**?
Key findings: response to the strategy

1. In general, the strategy was warmly welcomed with people commending its vision and accessibility.

The ambition of this strategy is great, as well as the recognition of the wider political and policy supports that its implementation will require. So is its clarity combined with realism. [online]

There was widespread welcome for the strategy. On the whole participants and respondents noted that it was ‘easy to read’, ‘clear’ and ‘timely’. They applauded the fact that it was ‘ambitious’ and spanned 10 years, with three three-year implementation plans.

However, some people were concerned about maintaining the momentum of the strategy over the period and about ensuring that there would be review periods to allow the strategy to evolve appropriately.

Some others found the strategy ‘vague’ and lacking detail and were keen for there to be tangible targets or key performance indicators.

Participants frequently questioned how this strategy fits with the National Cultural Policy, currently being developed.

Glad that care of public money being said so clearly. Glad that this will force the sector to up its game and communicate strongly about the arts’ worth.

[strategy forum, Wexford]
The need for change was recognised and welcomed. People are ‘up for it’. However, there is anxiety about what change will mean in reality.

The strategy’s focus on change and renewal was understood with participants and respondents noting in particular:
- The transition from funding body to development agency
- Subsidy changing to investment with the concomitant expectation of a return
- New reporting requirements re measurement of outcomes
- New funding criteria and the determination that strategic choices will be made
- The commitment to advocacy

However, whilst participants and respondents were accepting of the need for change, they expressed anxiety about what it will mean in real terms and, specifically, what it will mean for them.

Am encouraged by the Arts Council’s commitment to change.
[strategy forum, Wexford]

Change in language from subsidising the arts to investing in the arts could be seen as negative/ unclear? Does change mean less rather than more?
[strategy forum, Cork]
Key findings: response to the strategy

It was widely acknowledged that the many aspects of the strategy will be challenging to implement, for both the Arts Council and the sector, and will need time, resources and new or enhanced skills to achieve.

The challenge of implementing the strategy was acknowledged by participants, respondents and staff who recognised that it will take time and resources to achieve.

Participants and respondents were largely pessimistic about the provision of increased funding to the arts from national and local government, which caused scepticism about the deliverability of the strategy as envisaged. However, the Arts Council’s commitment to advocacy, to making an evidence-based case for the arts and to working with local authorities was seen as encouraging in this regard.

Concern was expressed about the capacities, skills and expertise of the Arts Council to deliver on some aspects of the strategy. Participants and respondents also queried their own capacity and ability to deliver on activities such as audience development, fundraising, measurement of outcomes.

The strategy will require a change in culture and perception of the role of the Council, both from funded organisations and artists as well as the Council itself. [online]
There was widespread appreciation that the artist and the public are equal priorities at the core of the strategy, but the role of arts organisations in this relationship was raised.

The equal focus on the artist and public engagement was very positively received. People considered the relationship appropriate and recognised its complementarity.

However, at a number of forums, participants queried the role of an arts organisation or venue in this relationship. They did not see themselves depicted in the ‘ying and yang’ graphic and many considered this an omission. For some, it was a concern.

Participants expressed their belief that arts organisations are a vital broker in the relationship between artist and the public and they would have liked this to have been represented and acknowledged in the strategy.

Big missing part of the strategy is organisations. The strategy doesn’t look to organisations to deliver on anything. In signing up to this strategy, are organisations signing their own death warrant?

[strategy forum, Galway]
Key findings: response to the strategy

The specific commitment to artists as a priority was applauded, but the difficulties in achieving the objectives in this regard were acknowledged.

The goal, objectives and actions to support artists ‘to make excellent work which is enjoyed and valued’ was universally welcomed.

Participants and respondents considered that the strategy shows understanding of how artists work and the challenges they face in e.g. sustaining their practice, developing a career over a lifetime, making a living or working in new or different contexts.

Many people considered that the strategy acknowledged the ‘hidden subsidy’ of the arts and was trying to address it, which was appreciated.

There was both positive acknowledgement of the commitment to balance support for new or emerging artists alongside support for those who are mid-career or more established and an unease about the implications of this commitment.

Very many people recognised the serious challenges for the Arts Council in the work it has set out to do within this priority area and some were doubtful about what can be achieved in reality.

[The strategy has a] sense of fairness about funding new and emerging and longer-term practice / established artists.

(strategy forum, Limerick)

It’s positive to say artists will be supported but what will this look like in reality? [strategy forum, Dublin]
On the whole, participants and respondents were receptive to the goal of ‘more people and different people’ enjoying high-quality arts experiences.

Most people liked the idea and understood the value of the arts reaching new and different audiences and communities (geographic, social, cultural, demographic).

However, there was concern about this principle in practice and the implications for artists and organisations of the strategy’s commitment to public engagement were widely discussed. Common considerations included:

- The necessity to ‘go after’ social and culturally diverse audiences or develop ‘socially engaged work practice’
- Requirement for supports to deliver on the public engagement and audience development objectives
- The role of digital engagement
- How to account for and value public engagement that is ‘narrow and deep versus wide and popular’

It was observed at a number of forums that there is very little diversity within the sector itself and this in itself may need to be considered.
For many people, the strategy prompted a call for definitions, such as of ‘artist’, ‘public engagement’, ‘excellence’, ‘value’.

Given the strategy’s priorities and the principles and criteria of the investment strategy, participants across a number of forums called for the Arts Council to provide definitions for the following and so obviate any potential misinterpretation:

- Artist
- Public engagement
- Excellence or quality
- Participation
- Value.

Need definitions of what is ‘value’, ‘public engagement’, ‘quality’, ‘partnership’, so artists, arts organisations and sectoral partners are informed in a meaningful way.

[Online]
Key findings: response to the strategy

The inclusion of spatial and demographic planning as a priority area was considered appropriate and supported once understood as informing not driving policy.

The spatial and demographic planning priority was generally introduced at the forums as being about ‘people and places’.

Whilst its inclusion was welcomed by some, others needed to be reassured that spatial and demographic information would inform not drive arts policy and provision.

Participants and respondents outside of Dublin were hopeful that such informed planning would ensure a more even distribution of support (currently perceived to be very Dublin centric). People also expressed the hope that ‘smaller, more rural communities won’t be overlooked’ and that ‘established centres of artistic creativity will hold sway against population centres’.

We welcome the inclusion of spatial and demographic planning. Recognition that there is a problem with funding being Dublin-centric. Great to see this as a priority.

[strategy forum, Galway]
Key findings: response to the strategy

The fact that young people and children are a discrete objective was positively received.

Objective 8 - to plan and provide for children and young people – was universally commented on and welcomed. Participants and respondents applauded its inclusion as a discrete objective.

There was a shared understanding of the importance of encouraging engagement with and/or participation in the arts from a young age.

It was agreed that parents and schools are critical gatekeepers in forging a relationship with the arts.

It was noted that the strategy would ‘span a generation’ and could impact on the life of a child almost from birth through to secondary school.

One of the first times seen youth arts pulled out as a priority. Recognition that young people can contribute to arts has a real value.
[strategy forum, Wexford]

Inclusion of children and young people encouraging. Everyone in Ireland should have the same access to arts education: people who get this education may be artists of the future.
[strategy forum, Cork]
The inclusion of a stand-alone objective regarding amateur arts caused some disquiet, with concern that this would mean less resources for professional arts.

There was a mixed response to the inclusion of an objective to ‘champion and encourage amateur and voluntary arts practice’.

Whilst some people expressed satisfaction in seeing its inclusion, others expressed surprise and disquiet.

On the whole, people responded more positively towards the acknowledgement of voluntary practice than to amateur practice.

There was discussion as to what the verbs ‘champion and encourage’ mean in reality. Many participants expressed concern that if the Arts Council committed funding to this area it would take away from what was allocated to professional arts.

Concern about “championing” amateur arts: enough of a challenge with funding professional art. Will this be a resource drain?
[strategy forum, Limerick]
Key findings: response to the strategy

The development of strategic partnerships with local government was deemed important and welcomed, with a degree of caution.

There was unanimous support for the Arts Council’s determination to ‘develop (its) key strategic partnership with local government’. Local authority support for and funding of the arts are considered ‘a vital part of our ecology’.

However, this welcome was tempered by some expressions of caution:

- Whilst welcoming the imminent MoUs with local authorities, many people advised that the Arts Council needs to tailor its approach to each authority; ‘one size does not fit all’.
- The discretionary nature of local authority funding is an ongoing concern: ‘funding can’t be relied on’.
- The timing of and transitioning to new funding agreements: concern about ‘lack of synchronicity’.

It could be very positive if Local Authorities become advocates for arts and arts organisations, but relationship needs to be clarified.

[strategy forum, Cork]

Local Authority partnerships: what about legislation to support/protect the arts at local level? We need funding and muscle.

[strategy forum, Sligo]
People were very encouraged by the Arts Council’s commitment to take on an advocacy role. However, there was some uncertainty about their ability and positioning to do so.

The Arts Council’s commitment to advocacy of the value of the arts was widely welcomed. There was shared understanding that the arts needs to ‘shout louder’ and make its case more cogently, backed up by meaningful evidence of its value.

However, some participants and respondents expressed doubt as to whether the Arts Council was equipped with the skills and resources to advocate effectively at present.

Others also wondered about whether the Arts Council was positioned to do so, and was sufficiently ‘at arm’s length’ from government.

We look forward to a renewed, invigorated Arts Council which feels strengthened and bolstered by our sector to champion on behalf of all art forms [online].

We have anxiety about the Arts Council as an advocate. Are they the right agency? Have they the skills? Is there a conflict of interest? [strategy forum, Cork]
The need for outcomes measurement and evidence gathering was supported in theory but prompted concern about the skills and resources required as well as questions about the methodologies and metrics to be used.

The strategy’s determination to measure the impacts \textit{and} outcomes of Arts Council’s investment received a mixed response.

There was understanding of and support for the need to gather measurable, authentic (with values true to the arts) evidence to make a case for the arts but also concern and reluctance about the work involved. Many participants and respondents stated they had neither the skills, time or resources to do additional reporting. This was true for those within the Arts Council as well as external artists and organisations.

Participants also queried the metrics to be used, given that the nature of arts work or of engagement may defy conventional measurement tools. They asked how to assess and account for risk-taking, failure and experimentation in arts practice and for work that ‘hasn’t found its audience yet’.

Who defines these outcomes? How to quantify? Measures for outcomes need to be specific to individual situations.

[strategy forum, Sligo]

Measuring artistic standards is a grey area – dangerous.

[strategy forum, Dublin]
Key findings: ‘establishment’ objectives

Conversation two

• Thinking about the **objectives** of the strategy, where does the Arts Council need to focus its **efforts** in the first three-year plan?

• At your table, **agree the five objectives** that should be **prioritised in the first three-year plan**.
Key findings: ‘establishment’ objectives

Five objectives were selected at each forum and also online as the top ‘establishment’ priorities for the first three-year plan.

Forum participants were asked to consider and agree at their table the five objectives which should be prioritised in the first arts plan, to establish or lay the foundation for the future success of the strategy.

On the whole, the initial response was very individual. Although encouraged to think ‘as though they were the Arts Council’, many people struggled to leave their own or their art form agendas behind.

Some tables succeeded in coming to a consensus on their five objectives, but most resorted, at some stage of their deliberations, to a vote.

There was no significant difference between the objectives chosen in or outside of Dublin.

Despite the lack of unanimity of individual responses, when examined per forum, five objectives were selected at each forum and were also most often selected online.

Two of these objectives were among the five selected by Arts Council staff in an internal forum.
### ‘Establishment’ objectives selected at each external forum and online

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ensure artists are supported at key stages in the life cycle of their careers</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Advance the living and working conditions of artists</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Promote and develop good practice in audience development and public engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Plan and provide for children and young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Make clear the principles and criteria that guide our investment strategy and inform our funding decisions</td>
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An additional objective that came up as an establishment priority at all forums, but did not register in the online submission, was **objective 16**: Develop our key strategic partnership with local government.

- **4 objectives about the artist and public engagement**
- **1 objective about funding**
- **Staff selected objectives 6, 10 and 16**
Question: Thinking about the specific objectives outlined in the strategy, which do you believe are the most important to prioritise and get right in the first three years of the strategy? **Pick your top five.**

Only objectives 1, 3, 6, 8, 10 were selected by 30% or more of respondents
### ‘Establishment’ objectives selected by Arts Council staff

<table>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Make clear the principles and criteria that guide our investment strategy and inform our funding decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Improve measurement of the outcomes of our investment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Develop our key strategic partnership with local government</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Ensure the Arts Council delivers this strategy expertly, effectively and efficiently</td>
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Key findings: ‘establishment’ objectives

Objectives 9: ‘champion and encourage amateur and voluntary arts practice’ and 14: ‘improve measurement of the outcomes of our investment’ were consistently not selected by external forum participants and respondents as priorities for the first three years.

Objective 9 to ‘champion and encourage amateur and voluntary arts practice’ was the only objective not to be selected as a priority for the first three-year plan at any forum. It received the second lowest percentage online.

Objective 14: improve measurement of the outcomes of our investment’ was only selected as a priority in one forum and had the lowest percentage online. However, this is one of the priority objectives chosen by Arts Council staff.
There was a reluctance amongst arts sector participants and respondents to prioritise objectives that were perceived to relate to the Arts Council’s capability and capacity to deliver the strategy.

Even though there was a lot of discussion at the forums about the Arts Council’s capabilities and resources to realise the strategy, with some participants clearly understanding and expressing the need for the Arts Council to be ‘match fit’, in the end there was a reluctance to prioritise objectives which related to this.

Some people dismissed objectives such as 19 and 20 from their consideration set because they perceived them to be ‘a given’.
Report by

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