

## Arts and Older People Strategy 2010-2013, Arts Council of Northern Ireland

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### Abstract

This is a review of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's *Arts and Older People Strategy 2010-2013*, which sets out the council's policy on improving rates of access for older people in the arts in Northern Ireland. Set in the context of falling rates of participation, the strategy seeks to address key social justice issues such as poverty, isolation, loneliness and mental health. This review article establishes the context of the arts in Northern Ireland in relationship to creative industries policy, the roles of arts in enabling a more integrated society, and the demographics of older people. It suggests that while the *Arts and Older People Strategy* has a strong social democratic agenda, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland overlook key threats to such a policy direction that come from the influence of the market, and an over reliance on the Internet for promotion.

**Keywords:** Arts policy; older people; arts funding; social justice; creative industries; Arts Council for Northern Ireland

## **Arts and Older People Strategy 2010-2013, Arts Council of Northern Ireland**

### **Introduction**

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) is “...the lead development agency for the arts in Northern Ireland”, calling itself “...the main support for artists and arts organisations, offering a broad range of funding opportunities through our Exchequer and National Lottery funds” (Arts Council NI, 2013). This review article focuses on a key ACNI policy document, *Arts and Older People Strategy 2010-2013* (ACNI, 2010), which sets out the organisation’s strategy on improving rates of access for older people in the arts in Northern Ireland (NI). Before moving to discuss the strategy document, the article establishes the context of the arts in NI and Northern Irish society, focusing on the relationship between the arts and creative industries policy, the roles of arts in enabling a more integrated society, in a country that remains deeply segregated, and the demographics of older people.

### **Arts policy in Northern Ireland and the influence of creative industries policy**

The central document setting out general strategy for ACNI is *Creative Connections: a 5 year plan for developing the arts, 2007-2012* (Arts Council NI, 2007). This sets out the mission of ACNI to “...place the arts at the heart of our social, economic and creative life” (Arts Council NI, 2007, p.4; p.8). From the outset of *Creative Connections*, the arts are viewed by ACNI as being intrinsically tied to the economy: “The arts give people confidence and skills which contribute to their employment. They attract investment, boost the country’s profile...” (Arts Council NI, 2007, p.8). This connection between the arts and the economy is one strongly related to the New Labour government’s framing of creative industry policy, that emanates from its few four years in office (DCMS, 1998; 2001), and latterly in the report *Digital Britain* (DCMS, 2009). In this respect, the arts and the creative industries more generally, were seen as a means of replacing jobs and economic

output lost with the decline of heavy manufacturing in the UK. The Department for Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS) created thirteen “discrete creative industries” as a means of producing estimates of their economic output (White, 2009, p.337). Sectors such as education became viewed by the DCMS as something that could act in the service of the development of creative economies, seen in its “...intention [...] to join up the worlds of education, cultural and creative subsidies, training and trading support to encourage the creative industries to thrive” (DCMS, 2009, p.106).

This policy discourse has been dominant in arts policy across the world, and shown clearly in ACNI’s approach. In NI, responsibility for the creative industries lies with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), a devolved ministry of the NI Executive, while ACNI has responsibility for the Creative Industries Innovation Fund (Hull, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Returning to *Creative Connections*, it is clear from it that ACNI’s approach is to extend the UK government policy on the relationship between the arts and the economy. It argues that while education is an area that benefits from the arts, this should primarily be considered beneficial for economic reasons: “The arts [...] transform education, helping young people develop the creative resources our economy depends on” (Arts Council NI, 2007, p.8). The creative industries in NI have been identified as “...a significant opportunity for wealth and job creation” (Creative Skillset, 2013a), despite the creative industries in NI only employing 8,500 people (making up 2% of the total number of people employed in the UK’s creative industries) (Creative Skillset, 2013b). However, the arts in NI have remained relatively strong (as compared to other parts of the UK by population), and NI artists have enjoyed widespread success over the last few decades, and in particular over the last few years, even though “...per capita funding of the arts in Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland” (Arts Council NI, 2007, p.10). The band *Two Door Cinema Club* has become the latest international musical export from NI, with their success encapsulated by the choice of their lead singer Alex Trimble to sing during the lighting of the flame at the opening ceremony of the London Olympics in 2012. In this environment, ACNI positions itself as an organisation that seeks to ensure continued success in the arts, especially where it relates economic development.

## **The arts in Northern Ireland: enabler of a more integrated society?**

Fifteen years after the Good Friday Agreement was signed, NI remains a deeply divided society split along ethno-political lines (Hamilton et al., 2008; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). Its capital city Belfast has more ‘peace walls’ now (barriers dividing one community from the next) than when the Agreement was signed in 1998 (Nolan, 2012, p.71). Indeed such is the extent of the division, that many people living in NI only come into contact with people from the other side of the sectarian divide in the workplace (Hargie & Dickson, 2007). Division is particularly prevalent in NI when it comes to the arts and culture, with sport being a particularly strong example. Cronin (1999) suggests that the playing of a particular sport will often mark a person out as to their ethno-political background. For example, soccer NI is largely played in groups divided along sectarian lines, although there are some exceptions (Hargie, Somerville and Ramsey, 2011). Support for the national football teams on the island of Ireland – the Republic of Ireland and NI – is largely structured along sectarian lines (Hassan, 2002; Hassan, 2005). In the arts, there is also tangible division in NI. For example, 22 per cent of Belfast’s fifty three festivals in 2010 were “single-identity” (equating to twelve festivals, including Féile an Phobail and Orangefest), meaning they were predominantly aimed at and attended by either the Protestant-Unionist community or the Catholic-Nationalist community (Nolan, 2012, p.160). Some arts and cultural activities operate on a more neutral basis, with theatres and music venues in Belfast city centre generally existing in more shared spaces (Hamilton et al., 2008). Despite this, in most NI provincial towns, arts and cultural venues exist in what are traditionally town centres dominated by one ethno-political group or the other. In a section in *Creative Connections*, entitled ‘Art at the Heart - Promoting the Value of the Arts’, the arts are conceived of as something that in NI can help heal division:

As we move into a new era in Northern Ireland, with a vision to establish a fairer society where all individuals are considered equals and diversity is respected, we will highlight ways in which the arts and artists can play a role in addressing

issues such as racism, discrimination and sectarianism. (Arts Council NI, 2007, p.10)

Despite this statement of purpose, ACNI provided £878,949 in funding to marching bands in NI between 2005-2009, even though marching bands in NI are disproportionately located in Protestant-Unionist or Loyalist areas, and actively promote “...a cultural opposite to nationalism” (Nolan, 2012, p.161). This is notable, as while ACNI suggests it is addressing sectarianism, it arguably enables it through the funding of such bands (a facet that Nolan (2012) finds controversial).

### **Older people in Northern Ireland**

The population of NI is ageing more quickly than that of England, Wales or Scotland with changes in the age demographics of NI society clearly borne out in the data (NI Executive, 2012), where in “...2008, the median age in Northern Ireland was 36.5 years. It is projected to reach 37.0 years in 2011, 38.8 years in 2021 and 41.9 years in 2031” (NI Assembly, 2011, p.1). Population projections suggest that 44 per cent of the population “...could be over the age of 50 by 2058” (Wallace Consulting, 2012, p.6). The NI Assembly attribute these changes to changes in fertility, changes in mortality and net migration (NI Assembly, 2011, p.1). In NI, there are an estimated 57,000 older people below the poverty line (based on a measurement of 60 per cent of median income) (Nolan, 2012, p.85). Nolan (2012) notes – drawing on Institute for Fiscal Studies and Joseph Rowntree Foundation data from May 2011 – that NI has “...the highest rate of pensioner poverty in the UK – 26.8% against a UK average of 21.8%” (p.85). In terms of the impact of an ageing population, the NI Assembly has noted that public expenditure does not necessarily rise in line with ageing. Rather it “...is proximity-to-death that increases costs, rather than age per se” (NI Assembly, 2011, p.4). On the whole, the NI Executive is planning for the impact of an ageing population on social care in NI, shown in the September 2012 publication of the discussion paper *Who Cares? The Future of Adult Care and Support in Northern Ireland* (DHSSPS NI, 2012). While there is no concrete definition of

what an older person is, the OFMDFM (the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister) in the NI Executive “...suggests that the definition for older people should be aged 60 and over as ‘this was the age at which the range of challenges facing older people begin to take effect’” (OFMDFM in ACNI, 2010, p.10). Previous initiatives included the *Ageing in an Inclusive Society strategy* that set “...out Government’s strategic vision, objectives and key recommendations in improving the lives of older people in Northern Ireland and includes an Action Plan that translates these key recommendations through a programme of work” (ACNI, 2010, p.12). In terms of how NI’s older people relate to the continued segregation of society, Hamilton et al. (2008) summarise the work of Peter Shirlow that shows that older people are more likely to be related to members from the other community, mix with them on a social basis, be more progressive in their views towards the opposite community, and to be more likely to be “...repulsed by paramilitary activities” (p.29).

### **Overview of the *Arts and Older People Strategy 2010-2013***

The primary aim of the *Arts and Older People Strategy 2010-2013* (ACNI, 2010) is to improve the level of inclusion of older people in NI in the arts, in line with the overall ACNI strategy set in the aforementioned *Creative Connections*. As a result, ACNI states that its “...central purpose in developing this arts and older people strategy is to assist older people overcome barriers and increase access and participation in arts-related projects that address both their creative and social needs.” (ACNI, 2010, p.18). The strategy is informed by research and policy, from NI and the other countries of the UK, the Republic of Ireland, and from the broader EU. Drawing on a wide range of sources in its ‘policy context’ section (pp.11-16), it shows that older people were not addressed specifically by DCAL in its Corporate and Business Plan 2008 – 2011 (ACNI, 2010, p.13). Informing the *Arts and Older People Strategy*, ACNI visited arts festivals for older people in Ireland and Wales; it consulted with age charities Help the Aged and Age Concern (these charities have now merged under ‘Age NI’), and Age Sector Platform; they attended the Joseph Rowntree Foundation conference in NI in 2009; it met with various arts organisations engaged in working with older people, and with Dame

Joan Harbison, who is the Advocate for Older People in NI; and it met the Workers Educational Association (WEA), “...a non-profit organisation which provides adult education in community and workplace settings” (ACNI, 2010, p.22). The *Arts and Older People Strategy* also draws on research from the Scottish Arts Council in 2002, that “...states that the benefits for older people with particular health problems, like dementia or stroke patients have also been substantial and that arts are very often the ‘key’ to unlocking memory, arresting depression and anxiety, improving communication between individuals or simply adding some ‘fun’” (ACNI, 2010, p.26). In the strategy, ACNI also draws on its own previous research carried out in 2005 (ACNI, 2005), that identifies the main barriers to participation in the arts for older people:

These include: longstanding illness or disability which can affect the individuals access to or enjoyment of art forms; poverty and lack of disposable income which makes the cost of attending cultural events or venues prohibitive to some sections of the older person community; access to transport, particularly in rural areas where there is limited transport available [...] older people’s perceptions of the arts as elitist. Social stereotyping can also assume a narrower range of interests in arts events and activities, than is actually the case. (ACNI, 2010, pp.17-18)

These barriers, and perhaps others not listed, led to a 0.5 per cent decrease in participation in the arts among over 65s, between 2004 and 2009. The over 65s category was the only one that ACNI studied to register a decrease, with participation among 50-64s increasing over the same period by 6.1 per cent (ACNI, 2010, p.18).

## **The theme of social justice**

The theme of social justice is prevalent in the *Arts and Older People Strategy*, with the main points of strategy addressing this theme directly. This is directly tied to the funding of the Arts and Older People programme (the programme that delivers the strategy), which is provided jointly by the Atlantic Philanthropies and the ACNI (each organisation contributed £350,000) (Wallace Consulting, 2012, p.8). Atlantic Philanthropies is an organisation that specifically focuses on these issues: “The Atlantic Philanthropies invest in campaigns, institutions, movements and individuals that give voice to the people most affected by injustice, in the belief that lasting progress comes from building capacity to advocate on one’s own behalf” (Wallace Consulting, 2010, p.16). The influence of the Atlantic Philanthropies connection, and a desire to embed social justice priorities within the strategy is clearly seen in the ‘strategic themes’ that make up the *Arts and Older People Strategy*, and in each case how ACNI intends to address them on through ‘objectives’ and ‘outcome statements’:

1. Isolation and Loneliness: To address this area, ACNI sets the objective to “Provide opportunities for social interaction through arts-led interventions and projects”, with the planned outcome to be the “Increase social interaction amongst older people as well as on an intergenerational basis” (ACNI, 2010, p.33);
2. Social Inclusion: This is interpreted as the creation of a “...more peaceful, fair and inclusive community that does not discriminate against age and ethnicity”, with an objective that ‘arts interventions’ from ACNI should “...promote inclusion, free movement and sharing” (ACNI, 2010, p.33). In this case the outcome statement relates to working with those groups “...who feel particularly excluded” (ACNI, 2010, p.33);
3. Poverty: Here the focus is on older people in NI who live in “disadvantaged, marginalized and deprived areas” (ACNI, 2010, p.33), with an objective that such people have opportunities to partake in the arts, and an impact statement that their lives be improved;



4. Health Issues/Mental Health Issues: In these areas, the objective is that the lives of older people with these issues be improved through the arts, where the impact statement is seen in the promotion of “active ageing” (ACNI, 2010, p.33);
5. Strengthening the Voice of Older People: Here the ACNI assert that the arts can be used to help the level of participation and influence older people can have on the “...issues that affect them”, through the provision of “artistic, professional and personal development skills” (ACNI, 2010 p.34). Here the impact statement is that older people should be have greater awareness of key issues;
6. Develop life-long learning opportunities: The strategy should support the accessing of life-long opportunities related to the arts. In this respect, ACNI should “Assist older people develop new arts-related skills as well as increasing opportunities for older people to volunteer their skills within the creative industries sector” (ACNI, 2010, p.34).

The kinds of activities that the ACNI proposed would make up their programme included “artist-led interventions”, that included: “1. Writing programmes, e.g. social history and legacy of conflict in Northern Ireland; 2. Theatre projects: This could involve older people writing a script that addresses and highlights the needs of older people. Such work could also involve older people acting out the script through theatre and radio mediums; 3. Dance classes, e.g. reminiscing of the social dancing; 4. Life-long learning opportunities – access courses for older people and the development of new work-related skills” (ACNI, 2010, p.6).

## **Discussion**

The six strategic themes that the *Arts and Older People Strategy* focuses on – isolation and loneliness, social inclusion, poverty; health issues/mental health issues; strengthening the voice of older people; develop life-long learning opportunities – all underpin the ACNI’s focus on issues of social justice, addressing barriers that prevent inclusion for older people in the arts. The *Arts and*

*Older People Strategy* is an example of how a (part-)publicly funded arts organisation can attempt to alleviate societal problems in a way that runs counter to the prevailing political and economic agenda, as shown in the section above on the creative industries in NI. That the ACNI set out to do this – albeit tied into such an agenda by the funding the programme receives from Atlantic Philanthropies – shows that the organisation is prepared to take a policy position that is recognisably social democratic in its design. In each case, the six strategic themes stand against the prevailing view that the arts should be tied to economic development, so entrenched in current government policy on the arts and culture. Improving participation in the arts among older people would like bring little benefit to the expansion of the creative industries. However, the extent to which the ACNI understands and compensates for influence of marketisation to the publicly funded arts is unclear. In the *Arts and Older People Strategy* document, the ACNI identify nine threats to the strategy as part of a SWOT analysis.<sup>2</sup> While it notes “The impact of the recession on older people in respect of disposable income” as one of the threats (ACNI, 2010, p.28), it does not at any point identify adherence to market logic as a threat, despite the prevalence of creative industries policy that has established the connection between the arts and market in current UK policy. This appears to be a key deficiency in the SWOT analysis, and also in terms of the ACNI’s wider thinking on the role of the arts and their continuation as a (part-)publicly funded body addressing social justice issues. This also comes in a context of arts funding across the UK coming under threat, shown clearly in the March 2013 decision by Newcastle City Council in the UK to cut their arts budget by 50 per cent, while councils from Manchester to Bradford have planned cuts in their budgets, that are albeit less than those in Newcastle, are still significant (Youngs, 2013). In straitened financial times, the publicly funded arts are increasingly being seen as an unnecessary expense, and a populist target for local councillors. While not subject to the vagaries of local government funding in Great Britain, ACNI is funded mainly by DCAL, that imposed on it a budget cut of £1.041 million in its 2012-2013 budget (2011-12: £14.133 million; 2012-13: £13.092 million) (Arts Council NI, 2012). With the NI Secretary of State of the UK government suggesting in 2013 that NI is “too dependent” on public funding ( as cited in BBC News, 2013), additional funding cuts may yet be implemented at ACNI.

There is also a link to be made from the same SWOT analysis to the ACNI's understanding of how it can communicate the *Arts and Older People Strategy*, and while mitigating against threats identified in the SWOT analysis. On the threat – the *Impact of the recession on older people in respect of disposable income* – ACNI solely suggests that it “...will feature on their website arts events that are free and low cost” (ACNI, 2010, p.30). Moreover, in terms of the overall communication goals for the *Arts and Older People Strategy*, the ACNI intends to deliver the strategy through branding, public relations, publications (an E-newsletter that is sent out on a monthly basis), and its website (it “...will play an important role as an information point”) (ACNI, 2012, p.51). While ACNI intend to depend on that the Internet will have a central role in the publicising of its strategy and the opportunities it offers older people, there is apparent ignorance of the low levels of access to the Internet among older people in NI. Ofcom (2012) research shows that “Over-55s in Northern Ireland are less likely to have broadband than in the UK”, with only 44 per cent of the age group over 55 having a home broadband connection (Ofcom, 2012, p.43). Moreover, in relation to the focus in the *Arts and Older People Strategy* on social justice issues, broadband data from NI shows that socio-economic status is also a determinant of home broadband uptake (among DE socio-economic groups take up is 54 per cent) (Ofcom, 2012, p.44). While older people may be accessing Internet services through other channels – eg. Libraries – it remains the case that the bulk of UK online activity takes place at home or at work, which leaves most older people in NI excluded from accessing opportunities publicised by ACNI online. This clearly shows reliance on the Internet to be unwarranted as compared to trying to publicise the strategy through mass-media and offline channels.

The *Arts and Older People Strategy* remains a bold and worthwhile strategy, setting out clearly to address social justice issues that act as a barrier to inclusion in the arts in NI. The strategy is recognisably social democratic in its nature, showing how publicly funded arts organisations can act to alleviate social ills, especially for older people in society. However, the strategy fails to take account of the threats that come to both it and future ACNI programmes, where the connection between the market and the arts is increasingly influencing policy in the UK under the auspicious of creative industries policy. Moreover, the strategy fails to take account of the low levels of Internet

take-up at home, among older people in NI. Relying on it as a key component in its promotion strategy is short-sighted. These criticisms do not completely undermine the efficacy of the *Arts and Older People Strategy*, and ACNI should continue to pursue strategy regarding older people that attempts to address social justice issues.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The sector is currently being subjected to a Northern Ireland Assembly inquiry, the primary focus of which is on the economic benefits that can be brought from the CIs (NI Assembly, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> “Strategy has not identified the creative and social needs of all older people. 2. Strategy sets unrealistic objectives and outcomes. 3. Strategy fails to engage hard-to-reach older people across Northern Ireland. 4. Government has not ring-fenced funds to implement their older people strategy; instead actions and recommendations will be mainstreamed and implemented across all Departments. 5. The impact of the recession on older people in respect of disposable income. 6. Strategy fails to achieve buy-in from older people across Northern Ireland. 7. Strategy fails to achieve buy-in from relevant age sector stakeholders to support such work e.g. Age Concern Help the Aged NI. 8. Objectives and actions not met. 9. Communication Strategy fails” (ACNI, 2010, p.28).

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