

2019, Volume 6

The Meaning and Importance of Working Cross-Border: A Local Authority Perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

Summary:

This paper discusses the meaning and origins of cross-border working, particularly the importance of this work and the relationships which are formed in resourcing and nurturing the arts. It includes the views of artists, senior council officials and community leaders which adds greatly to understanding the practicalities, challenges and potentialities of working in a local context for ensuring a sustainable approach to arts development.

Key words: Local Authority; Cavan; Border; Communities; Arts Office; Arts Strategy; Cultural Strategy; Ireland; Cultural Policy

Introduction

Cavan County lies in Ulster, which is by its very nature a cross-border province on the island of Ireland. Ulster is made up of nine counties, six of which lie in Northern Ireland and the remaining three, including Cavan, lie in the Republic of Ireland. As such, the ethos and practice of Cavan County Council arts office means working with artists, communities and organisations in Cavan and neighbouring counties, particularly Monaghan and Fermanagh. The arts office works in collaboration with others when it makes sense culturally, geographically and economically. More specifically, the arts office is interested in working with our neighbours in arts and culture to learn, to understand, to experiment and to produce quality arts experiences in our hinterland and beyond. Cross-border work is fundamental to this process.

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

This piece reflects my professional experience of cross-border working. I suggest the meaning and origins of cross-border working, the importance of cross-border work and relationships for resourcing and nurturing the arts, and the challenges and ways forward for ensuring a sustainable approach to arts development. In doing so, I quote the opinions of artists, senior council officials and community leaders as these are the people with whom I work and share the lived experience of supporting and developing arts and culture in Cavan and the border area. I reference relationships and projects that have informed and shaped our work in Cavan and draw on our experience in the arts office as well as the artists and community leaders who have shared their insights of working in a sustained way across communities and borders.

The Meaning and Origins of Cross-border Working

Cavan is divided from the six counties of Northern Ireland by the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The border represents the legacy of a bloody conflict that has caused fear, hatred and division. People in these counties have been intimidated, injured and murdered because of the border and all that it represents. During the Troubles, natural hinterlands were cut off by roads closures and bombed bridges, which disrupted every aspect of life in this area. This legacy has had a real and lasting impact on personal, social and administrative relationships on the border. From a policy perspective this is often limited to approaching cross-community and cross-border work as being solely about crossing a Catholic / Protestant divide. However, working in cross-community and cross-border contexts and also with our neighbours in Fermanagh, Northern Ireland means more and requires more.

The work of the arts office and the cultural team in Cavan County Council is initiated by our desire to work with artists who are interested in exploring ideas from the deep well of their imagination and from externally motivated

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

themes. We work to develop relationships within our communities of place and interest, to be informed by and to explore cultural memory, and build understanding and capacity in the arts and the wider community. The role of the arts office is to enable, to facilitate, to advocate for, and to support artists and communities to grow and develop the arts. Acknowledging and working across our border with Northern Ireland is a critical part of this work.

This work includes supporting and connecting with artists, like Sally O'Dowd, a Cavan born artist who has travelled and studied in Ireland, England and Cyprus. Describing herself as a 'border hopper', crossing borders is a not only a lived experience for O'Dowd, but as such, it has impacted her professional perspective; as is the case for those of us working in the Council's arts office. O'Dowd now lives in Belfast for personal and work reasons. She was a member of the artist collective Townhall Cavan Arts Space between 2015 and 2018, which had a strong ethos to work with artists on both sides of the border. O'Dowd (2019) reflects on making and experiencing quality arts as a key motivation for working in the border area:

the selection of Array Studios' 20-year anniversary show, a Belfast based, artist-led studio group for the first exhibition at Townhall Arts Space, Cavan was important in terms of defining that political borders did not separate us. Belfast has an exciting arts scene to be celebrated, and we were interested in showcasing exciting, emerging creative talent.

According to O'Dowd (2019) learning about the common interests shared with artists across the border, have made the territorial separation that the border represents seems less divisive.

Developing the arts locally not only requires consideration of the personal, social, and professional experiences of our citizens and artists, but also of the wider arts context in Ireland and in Northern Ireland. Our current arts strategy

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

for Cavan County, *Inclusivity and Ambition: A Strategy for Cavan Arts 2018 to 2023 (2018a)* identifies four key priorities for ongoing resource support and focus. These are: artists, audience, infrastructure and diversity. Our strategy was developed through a shared consultation process with the Cavan County Library Strategy, *Evolving Libraries: Cavan Library Service Development Plan 2017 – 2021 (2018b)*, the Heritage Office and the Creative Cavan cultural plan, *An Cavan Culture and Creativity Strategy, 2018 - 2022 (2018c)*. This joined up approach to consultation was adopted to reflect our strengths in working together as a cultural sector and to take an integrated approach to cultural development. These and other sectoral strategies in our local authority are informed by and fit within *The Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP), 2016 – 2021 (2016)* for Cavan. The LECP vision for Cavan is:

That Cavan 2021 will be a place that we can be proud of; a place where people can have a good quality of life; a better place to live, to work and to enjoy (p. ii).

This policy and the work of the arts office equally operates within a broader policy context that is both national and supranational. Our national context is informed by *Culture 2025* the Republic of Ireland's draft cultural policy from the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (2015), the strategic framework of the Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon, *Making Great Art Work* (Arts Council Ireland, 2016a), and *Project Ireland 2040* (Department of Housing Planning and Local Government, 2018), the Republic of Ireland's National Planning Framework. Wider European cultural policy has a range of priorities that include the value of culture in well-being, diversity and social integration, the need for mobility for artists and cultural organisations, networking, visibility for the arts, audience development and cross sectoral working. The European Union (EU) PEACE Programmes have similar core priorities of creating shared spaces and supporting tolerance and resilience in society (Haase and Kołodziejki, 2019). The PEACE Programmes have both

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

promoted as well as benefitted from the arts as a tool for effective development work in cross border and cross community settings (McCall and O'Dowd, 2008). While all these policies inform and contextualise our work, the people and places in which we engage are what shape our practice most.

Resourcing and Nurturing the Arts through Cross-Border Work and Relationships

Resourcing and nurturing the arts through cross-border work and relationships is possible and facilitated by dedicated funds as well as personal, social, professional and administrative relationships; all of which have a legacy for, not only how we relate to one another across the border, but equally how art develops *despite* the border—whether that border is cultural, ideological or territorial and administrative. For instance, the first European PEACE Programme provided Cavan County Council with seed funding to establish youth theatre in rural and urban settings in the county and along the border with groups in County Fermanagh. Youth theatre in Cavan was initially developed by the local authority arts office to work in cross-community and cross-border settings with young people between twelve and eighteen years old. As it developed, the youth theatre became embedded in local places—that is local communities—and continues to flourish in the county with ownership moving from the local authority to community leaders, youth theatre practitioners, parents and youth workers.

In addition to the EU's PEACE programme, which has including the Building Peace through the Arts Initiative administered by Arts Council Northern Ireland (ACNI, 2015), Cavan artists, and communities and those of us working in Cavan County Council have taken advantage of other cross-border funding initiatives to support relationships and develop infrastructure, capacity and diversity in our work. These funds include the [International Fund](#)

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

[for Ireland](#) (2017), the Culture Connects programme administered by The Arts Council/ An Chomhairle Ealaíon to mark Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2013 (Arts Council Ireland, 2019a), and the Leonardo da Vinci Programme (2007 – 2013), now known as Erasmus + funded through [Leargas](#) (2019), a charitable body in the Republic of Ireland that manages national and international exchange programmes in education, youth and community work, and vocational education and training. These initiatives have provided additional financial resources at times when local resources were scarce. At the same time it has facilitated means for leveraging locally-based financial and in-kind administrative and promotional support. Additionally, securing the support of national and European funding and partnership has brought international recognition of the work taking place locally.

Cross-border relationships are also critical to resourcing and nurturing the arts in Cavan and across its border with Northern Ireland. In many cases these are daily, lived experiences for people residing and working at the border. Sharon Howe (2019), an experienced cross-border community worker, illustrates this point:

Cross border working is an integral part of our ethos. We are in a small village located two miles from the border. Cross border working is part of everyday life for local people from employment, farming, businesses, schools etc. Therefore, it is essential that this [experience] is reflected in running community programmes. SDA [Swanlinbar Development Association] deliver a range of programmes funded through International Fund for Ireland and PEACE IV. I have an advantage of being an example of a cross border worker. I reside and worked in the community sector in Northern Ireland. Now, working in Cavan County I am able to use my past personal and work experiences to network and work cross-border easily.

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

Like Howe (2019), individual artists and those who work in organisations have developed and progressed their careers through personal and professional cross-border relationships. Martin Donohoe is a professional traditional musician and the founder of [Nyah Comhaltas Ceoltoirí na hÉireann](#) (CCE) group, which promotes Irish traditional music (Comhaltas, 2019). He explains how his cross-border relationships started, have been maintained, and have nurtured his own development (Donohoe, 2019):

I get to perform in all six counties. CCE (Comhaltas Ceoltoirí na hÉireann) have a Centre of Excellence in Omagh Tyrone and we attend and perform there every month. Comhaltas held fleadh[s] [competitions] and I [have] travelled down since 1979 and made friends since that. From 2009, I made friends with Ulster Scots Willie Drennan and his band members. This opened up engagements with them. Also, at the same time, Mullaghboy Marching Band started doing cross-culture music with us. We first had IFI Funding (International Fund for Ireland), which brought the Mullaghboy Marching Band and Willie Drennan to Cavan for workshops / events and during 2010/11/12 PEACE III supported many performances.

A number of artists who are influential in Cavan and nationally first experienced the arts through the youth theatre established and funded as a direct result of the first PEACE Programme mentioned earlier. These include award-winning actor and director, Aaron Monaghan, Philip Doherty, award-winning writer and director and the artistic director of Fíbín, the country's only Irish language touring theatre company, and Kim McCafferty, artistic director of the Cavan Arts Festival and circus and spectacle artist who works internationally. While causal links may be difficult to ascertain, cross-border experiences have undoubtedly contributed to the cultural ecology and thus the development of the arts in and beyond our border region.

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

Challenges in Cross-border Work and Relationships

Shared and partnership-based approaches to arts and cultural activity bring the benefits and opportunities outlined above, but are not without their challenges. While new relationships and an awareness of new practices can be gained, cross-border activity can be met with suspicion, anxiety and administrative differences. Such challenges to cross border work can be a result of the complicated and difficult past that underpins the border. This complexity is succinctly described by Tom Sullivan, former Cavan County librarian who commissioned the project, *The Voices of the Troubles*. *The Voices of the Troubles* involved interviews carried out by Maurice O'Keeffe of [Irish Life and Lore](#) (O'Keeffe and O'Keeffe, 2019), an oral history collection and archive, on behalf of Cavan County Library Service. This unique oral history project archives the reflections of over 100 people from the border area of Cavan and Fermanagh who were interviewed in 2017 and 2018, who spoke about how 'the Troubles' affected their lives. In reflecting on the work, Tom Sullivan (2019) refers to the need to get beyond surface engagement to develop meaningful dialogue that may lead to understanding and acceptance):

The challenge is to break down the suspicion that exists, to engage with individuals and groups who do not want to engage and to develop relationships that are more than surface engagements.

This essential work takes time and requires reflection, commitment, and the willingness to listen and to respond, adjust and change self and practice. Flexibility is often frustrated by legislative and governance responsibilities. Eoin Doyle (201), Director of Services for Housing, Corporate and Cultural Affairs at Cavan County Council explains:

Cultural differences between the way local government in the North and South operate [exist: there are] differences in the [the] range of

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

functions. [Further, the] different relationships between Councillors and the executive [and] misconceptions on both sides as to our respective goals [are points of clash at times]. It is time consuming to navigate these], but I feel at this stage, it is now a core part of our work.

Addressing low aspirations, which exist in many border areas is also a key challenge. Speaking of the West Cavan Area, Sharon Howe (2019) explains:

Our area has been hit economically by the Troubles and there are large numbers of derelict properties and empty business premises as people stopped visiting the area due to border checkpoints. This [neglect] has resulted in the area being a 'commuter area' where everyone goes out to work during the day. Many people now have an apathy and an expectation that nothing good happens in the area. Many funders only provide basic funding for short term projects. The lack of funding for match funding / staffing and running costs is off putting to many groups resulting in many deciding not to engage with cross-border working.

A local authority arts office experiences issues where the demand and expectation greatly outweigh the resources and the capacity to deliver. The constant demand to deliver results, to develop and sustain relationships, to reach governance standards and to justify the value of the arts for their own merit—and in the multiple contexts required—threatens to overwhelm quality work. Different expectations are articulated by the various stakeholders. Senior management and funders require work to be delivered in public contexts on target, on budget and in line with national and EU governance standards while delivering a quality service for the maximum number of artists and participants. Elected representatives are interested in the value that has been delivered by and for the arts in their area. The public have expectations in line with their interests, be that classical

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

music, architecture, circus or quality immersive and fun experiences. Artists are interested in their own art form and how it can be developed to improve their ability to make excellent art and enjoy a quality standard of living. Time for critical thinking, analysis, evaluation and research feel like luxuries. This concern is often shared by arts officers who are members of the Association of Local Authority Arts Officers.

Implications and Ways Forward for Arts Development on the Border

Much work and joint decision-making is needed to support local authorities to connect with one another as well as citizens, businesses and voluntary and charitable organisations in meaningful ways that will deliver positive results in areas of shared concern. This importance is emphasized by Eoin Doyle (2019):

A small rural authority cannot deliver its objectives in isolation, in order to deliver infrastructural and social change we need to collaborate with other local authorities, cross-border and across the EU.

A local authority that works on the border, such as Cavan County Council, can struggle to realise and sustain meaningful cross-border work without significant resources, a legislative framework, and ongoing personal and professional commitment to dialogue, all of which lie at the core of any successful partnership.

Leadership and alignment from central Government and from the Arts Councils of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are needed to support and guide local efforts in terms of arts development. Formal networks and frameworks, like the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) ⁱⁱ, founded in 1995 to promote cross-border cooperation and communication on common regional development concerns at local government level, or the Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon *A Framework for Collaboration*

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

agreement with the County and City Management Association (Arts Council Ireland, 2016b) as a start. Still, greater formal links between Arts Council Northern Ireland and The Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaíon that offer support to artists to develop work in and of this area that is sustainable, reflective and insightful of the border experience would be valuable. Such initiatives legitimise cooperation and partnership as a means to respond to what are ultimately shared concerns (Arts Council Ireland, 2019b).

Yet, even with formalised approaches, the work that has happened in Canva in a cross-border context has developed through the drive and deep thinking of individual artists, community leaders, and local politicians and officials. Yet, arts practice and policy will not be sustained on the good will of committed individuals alone. Deeper acknowledgement of, and investment in, border artists whose experiences are unique on the island, is also needed. An all-island approach with long term goals and a strong evidence base informed by longitudinal research on cross-border work in the arts will move arts practice beyond once, off, targeted initiatives into sustained work that can help to deal with any entrenched fear and prejudice. Furthermore, there is a need for funding agencies not only to recognise that work in this area is 'slow work', which requires thought, reflection, research and space, but also to resource this work with that recognition in mind.

Conclusion

Considering the context of local arts development, this piece attempted to outline the meanings and origins of cross-border work, the importance of cross-border relationships and work for resourcing and nurturing the arts, and the challenges and ways forward for ensuring a sustainable approach to arts development. As has been demonstrated, economics is a very important part of the border story. Funding provides the resources not only for connecting across the border, but it also allows for resources for some

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

initiatives and organisations despite and beyond the border, from jurisdictions outside the one in which an artist or organisation may reside.

The resources required for cross border work in the Brexit scenario will be far greater. While important, the need is not simply financial. I suggest that dialogue at a local, national and European level, supported by formal frameworks and legislation, and informed by research is needed to resource artists and local communities to be sustained along the border area. Slow, place-based, community-responsive work will provide for healthy and resilient communities.

Acknowledgement: The essay is informed by the feedback of artists, officials and community leaders who are committed to living and working on the border. I am deeply grateful to the people who have shared their knowledge with me and thankful for the invitation to be included in this publication.

Catriona O Reilly has worked as Arts Officer with Cavan County Council for twenty one years. She holds a BA in English and Geography, NUI, Maynooth (1989), a Post Graduate Diploma in Theatre Studies NUI, Maynooth (1995), a Certificate in Local Government, (1997) and a Certificate in HR, NUI Limerick (2004).

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

Bibliography

Arts Council Ireland / An Chomhairle Ealaíon (2016a). *Making Great Art Work: Leading the Development of the Arts in Ireland*. Arts Council Strategy (2016 – 2025). Dublin: Arts Council Ireland / An Chomhairle Ealaíon.

Available

at: http://www.artscouncil.ie/uploadedFiles/Making_Great_Art_Work.pdf,
[Accessed 18 October 2019].

Arts Council Ireland / An Chomhairle Ealaíon (2016b). *A Framework for Collaboration*. Dublin: Arts Council Ireland

/ An Chomhairle Ealaíon. Available

at: <http://www.artscouncil.ie/uploadedFiles/FrameworkforCollaboration.pdf>,
[Accessed 18 October 2019].

Arts Council Ireland / An Chomhairle Ealaíon (2019a). *About Culture Connects*, [Online]. Arts Council, 2019.

Available: <http://www.artscouncil.ie/initiatives/eu-presidency-culture-programme/About-Culture-Connects/> [Accessed 16 October 2019].

Arts Council Ireland / An Chomhairle Ealaíon (2019b). *Brexit deal must allow for continued free movement of artists between Ireland and the UK* [Online].

Arts Council, 1 March. Available: <http://www.artscouncil.ie/News/Brexit-deal-must-allow-for-continued-free-movement-of-artists-between-Ireland-and-the-UK/> [Accessed 18 October 2019].

Arts Council Northern Ireland (ACNI) (2015). *Building Peace through the Arts: Re-Imaging Communities* [Online]. Available at: <http://artscouncil-ni.org/the-arts/visual-arts1/re-imagining-communities> [Accessed 16 October 2019].

Cavan County Council (2018a). *Inclusivity and Ambition: A Strategy for Cavan Arts 2018 to 2023*. Cavan: Cavan County Council. Available

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

at: http://cavanarts.ie/Default.aspx?StructureID_str=35&guid=1148,
[Accessed 18 October 2019].

Cavan County Council (2018b). *Evolving Libraries: Cavan Library Service Development Plan 2017 – 2021*. Cavan: Cavan County Council. Available at: <http://www.cavanlibrary.ie/file/Policies-Page/Publications/Evolving%20Libraries/CCCLibraryDevPlan.pdf>, [Accessed 18 October 2019].

Cavan County Council (2018c). *County Cavan Culture and Creativity Strategy, 2018 to 2022*. Cavan: Cavan County Council. Available at: https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2018-09/CreativeCounty_Cavan_Screen.pdf, [Accessed 18 October 2019].

Cavan County Council (2016). *Cavan Local Economic and Development Plan, 2016 to 2021*. Cavan: Cavan County Council. Available at: <http://www.cavancoco.ie/file/community/LCDC/Cavan-LECP.docx>, [Accessed 18 October 2019].

Comhaltas (2019). *About us*, October 2019 [Online]. Comhaltas, 2019. Available: <https://comhaltas.ie/about/> [Accessed 16 October 2019].

Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. (2015) *Culture 2025 / Éire Ildánach: A Framework policy to 2025, Draft Document*. Dublin: Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Available at: https://www.chg.gov.ie/app/uploads/2016/07/culture_2025_framework_policy_document.pdf, [Accessed 18 October 2019].

Department of Housing Planning and Local Government (2018). *Project Ireland 2040, National Planning Framework*. Dublin: Department of Housing Planning and Local Government. Available at: <http://nplf.ie/wp-content/uploads/Project-Ireland-2040-NPF.pdf>, [Accessed 18 October 2019].

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

Donohoe, Martin (2019). Traditional musician: Email Communication with author, 14 June 2019.

Doyle, Eoin (2019). Director of Services, Cavan County Council: Email Communication with author, 17 June 2019.

Haase, Diána and Kołodziejcki, Marek (2019). *Northern Ireland PEACE programme*, April 2019 [Online].

Available: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/102/northern-ireland-peace-programme> [Accessed 16 October 2019].

Howe, Sharon (2019). Community Co-ordinator, Swanlinbar Development Association: Email Communication with author, 20 June 2019.

International Fund for Ireland (2017). *Welcome to the International Fund for Ireland* [Online]. International Fund for Ireland, 2017.

Available: <https://www.internationalfundforireland.com/> [Accessed 16 October 2019].

O'Keeffe, Jane and O'Keefe, Maurice O'Keeffe (2019). *About Us* [Online]. Irish Life and Lore, 2019. Available: <https://www.irishlifeandlore.com/about-us-and-our-work/> [Accessed 18 October 2019].

Léargas (2019). *About Us*, October 2019 [Online]. Léargas, 2019.

Available: <https://www.leargas.ie/about-us/> [Accessed 18 October 2019].

McCall, Cathal and O'Dowd, Liam (2008). Hanging Flower Baskets, Blowing in the Wind? Third-Sector Groups, Cross-Border Partnerships, and the EU PEACE Programs in Ireland. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 14:1, 29-54.

O'Dowd, Sally (2019). Artist / Curator: Email Communication with author, 20 June 2019.

Meaning and importance
of working cross-border,
a local authority
perspective

CATRIONA O'REILLY

Sullivan, Tom (2019). Former Cavan County Librarian: Communication with author, 24 June 2019.