

A policy review of A response to the Covid-19 crisis for the Arts in Ireland and Impact of the Coronavirus on the Northern Ireland Arts Sector

MARIA O'BRIEN & LUCY COSTELLOE

Summary:

Focusing on two policy reports addressing the crisis in the arts arising from COVID-19, this paper interrogated the policy responses to the challenges for the arts sector in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Abstract:

Focusing on two policy reports addressing the crisis in the arts arising from COVID-19, this paper interrogates the policy responses to the challenges for the arts sector in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The enduring challenges of precarity in the arts and the problem of the digital divide are reinforced by the challenges of COVID-19.

Key words: COVID-19; arts policy; digital divide; precarity in the arts.

Introduction

A review of two documents (*Survive, Adapt, Renew: Report of the Expert Advisory Group June 2020* to the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon "ACI" (the "SAR" report) and *Impact of the Coronavirus on the Northern Ireland Arts Sector – Findings of survey of artists and arts organisations for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland "ACNI" (the "Impact Survey")*) from what we might

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optimistically call the 'early' COVID-19 period (April/June 2020 respectively) may seem to be, at the time of writing, redundant. However, a May 2021 review of policy documents allows us to reflect on the particular context and conditions shaping these documents. It is evident that COVID-19 has had and will continue to have a significant impact on the arts, cultural and creative industries fields and has exposed the 'fragile infrastructure' holding up the arts (SAR, p.3). For Ernst & Young:

In 2020, the recession in the Arts sector will be around -55% compared with -11% in the Irish economy on a whole [*sic*]. During Q2 2020, according to the latest CSO publication, the activity of the Arts sector in Ireland fell by 67% (October 2020, p.9).

More recent research by the Centre for Cultural Value in the UK identifies 'clear evidence of the existence ... of a jobs crisis in the creative industries' and highlights the unevenness of effects across different sectors/demographics (O'Brien, Taylor & Owen, 2020). We contend policy responses in NI/ROI fail to fully recognise the granularity of the arts and cultural sectors.

Documents are socially and politically constructed meaning-making artefacts. To complement our content analysis of the chosen policy reports, we also place them in their wider social, cultural, and political context, and treat them as reflective (and constitutive) of the political and social attitudes towards the arts. As Freeman & Maybin hold, 'all documents exist in time, their relationship to time being set and reset by those who produce and use them' (2011, p.160). Thus, the two reports are mined for their storytelling abilities to enable us trace understandings of the policies towards the arts under COVID-19.

Policy analysis in Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI) is complex, reflecting the two distinct political structures. A comparative analysis

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illustrates the deeply embedded and continued instrumentalism of arts and culture. Cultural policy research tends towards interdisciplinarity (Durrer, Miller & O'Brien, 2017) given the nature of the forces shaping the discourse. Nevertheless, there are commonalities across approaches to arts policy that allow for the development of generalisations. While we might consider that the world is becoming increasingly borderless, COVID-19 has re-emphasised the significance of regional/national state policies with the development of different restrictions and supports in both ROI and NI.

The two policy reports are mined to trace the implicit and explicit meanings therein. We attempt to identify how the authors/stakeholders influence or seek to influence policy through a specific understanding of the problems the sector faces. We contend that such framing contextualises the proffered solutions. We hold that policy documents express and reproduce norms (or policy 'ideas' per Scalise, 2020) which are set by relations of power between social, political, and economic actors. Bacchi's policy research method (WPR - What's the Problem Represented to Be) is a useful approach to understanding the framing of a policy problem (Bacchi, 2009). Bacchi's WPR approach uses problematisation as both a goal and a method and echoes Freeman & Maybin's (2011) consideration of the policy document as a meaning-making artefact. This holistic approach to policy research allows for a recognition of the importance of temporality in policy research, or seeing a document as a snapshot in time, both as a reflection of the times in which it was prepared and a mirror/lens through which it can be analysed.

A number of distinct themes have been identified. In the SAR report for ACI, the themes are as follows:

- The structural and enduring precarious nature of the arts;
- The reliance on opportunities of the digital and the consequent problem of the digital divide;

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- The granularity of responses required to address the multiple problems COVID-19 brings to the arts and cultural sectors.

The SAR report focuses primarily on the more traditional art forms (such as art, theatre, dance, music, opera) that come within the remit of the ACI. Thus, the proposals contained within SAR must be analysed with cognisance of this relatively narrow focus.

The specific recommendations within SAR include an immediate survival fund and a longer-term sustainability fund, wage supports, the establishment of a Cultural Recovery Taskforce and an ongoing capital funding scheme for arts buildings. The rationale of the recommendations is 'to affirm public recognition of the mission and value of the arts' (p.6). Specific issues are highlighted including curtailed audience capacities, the significance of digital, the need to foreground new voices and the hope that the arts will be more reflective of diversity. The acknowledgement of ACI that they will fund new applicants (SAR, p.6) is significant. There are proposals towards new ways of engaging with art. However, an overreliance on the transformative aspects of the digital is concerning and fails to acknowledge the significance of the digital divide and digital poverty.

The report proposals are structured under the headings: Survive, Adapt, Renew. The proposals for survival recognise the vulnerability of the sector under Covid-19 restrictions and include immediate supportive measures such as bursaries and supports. The suggestions for adapting the sector are framed around enhancing the affordances of the digital, the development of new models for in-person events and an ill-fated *Wintering-out* week-long learning experience celebration at the end of 2020. The ACI-supported Brightening Air | *Coiscéim Coiligh* event taking place around Ireland from 11-20 June 2021 with an innovative, diverse and varied programme of

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outdoor/socially distanced events illustrates an unbowed optimism and resilience on the part of ACI.

Measures for renewal of the sector posit that a post-COVID-19 arts sector will be more resilient with the emergence of new models of engagement. SAR emphasises the need for continued significant funding for the sector through the Arts Council: to build capacity, to continue engagement with the challenges of the digital and to act as a way of memorialising the effect of COVID-19 in communities. The significance of the arts as a communicative process and a way to enrich our lives is emphasised. This is echoed by the inclusion of an appendix by Gabriel Scally on the importance of arts to health. For Scally:

A purely resource and asset based approach to the support of the arts in Ireland will tend to eliminate the potential contribution of cultural and artistic dimensions to improving health (SAR, p.32).

Significantly, Scally points to the uneven distribution of the benefits of the arts to society 'even in the best of times' thus implicitly acknowledging the imbalances in existence in pre-COVID-19 times.

The NI Impact Survey carried out by ACNI endeavours to measure the potential financial impact of COVID-19. Nearly 14 months into lockdown, the short term nature of the survey means it is of little effective use as an informative policy document, and it has been supplemented by more nuanced in-depth research such as that carried out by the Centre for Cultural Value cited above, and the *Freelancers in the Dark* project (Edelman, FitzGibbon, & Harris, 2021). However, the Impact Survey is informative as an indicator of the wider policy discourse surrounding the arts – a sector that has been increasingly datified, commodified and marketised.

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The early-COVID-19 Impact Report survey was held over a sixteen-day period primarily focused on real/anticipated financial loss with some coverage of wider societal impacts. The summary holds that:

Evidence demonstrates a severe and immediate economic impact on artists, the consequence of their inability to create and deliver activity in a range of education and social settings (Impact Survey, 2020, p.2)

The survey gathered 321 responses in a short time period, from independent artists/freelance workers, individual arts organisations and a small number of responses from 'other' affected individuals. All groups anticipate severe impact, with a median impact of 4.15 out of 5. Tellingly, the survey covered what is – with the benefit of hindsight – a very short window from March-May 2020, thus focusing on immediate closures and consequent loss of income. There are some reported answers on the impact on education, outreach and the consequent impact on vulnerable groups, given that for some artists such work forms part of the income base.

At the time of the Impact Report survey the eligibility details for government support for arts workers in NI had not been published. The sector is, like in ROI, marked by significant and increasing precarity, with a large cohort of arts and cultural workers considered precarious, temporary, and freelance (Tsioulakis & FitzGibbon 2020). Tellingly, for McCallion:

According to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), of the 7,500 people employed by 102 of its annually funded organisations, over 6,000 people were employed on a temporary or freelance basis (2020, p.1).

When published subsequently to the Impact Report, access to the first COVID-19 self-employment income support stream (SEISS) required certain

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eligibility requirements (with the need for 50 per cent of prior earnings to stem from self-employment) which excluded the predominantly freelance arts and cultural sector; much of which relies on employment earnings. The anticipated income stream losses in the Impact Report were further compounded by the inequitable and misjudged exclusionary restrictions.

The survey findings (Impact Report) and sector proposals (SAR) are more informative when analysed within the wider context. Figure 1 shows a timeline of significant policy events in NI and ROI showing a select number of government responses to the impact of COVID-19 on the arts (Figure 1). The density of the timeline illustrates the complexity and multiplicity of policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis including an increase in funding in both NI and ROI (albeit an unevenness in the supports offered) and an attempt to address the need for long-term support structures for the arts. In addition, the complexity of policy measures introduced in a short time frame from March 2020 to May 2021 points to the ingrained precarity of the sector that has long been accepted as the norm from a policy perspective.

Since the first closure of the sector, patterns of governmental funding in ROI and NI have shown a consistent focus around career development and work opportunities for the sector. The inherent precarity of the sector has been somewhat recognised by the recommendation in the ROI to trial a Universal Basic Income ("UBI") for artists (Programme for Government, 2020). This recommendation was echoed by the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce and has the backing of the current Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Journal of Music, 2021). A pilot scheme for a Basic Income Guarantee for artists has been announced as part of the Economic Recovery Plan 2021 (Government of Ireland, 2021). However, while UBI for artists may go some way towards addressing the structural barriers to increasing diversity in the arts, it is insufficient on its own and fails to counter structural inequities around housing, healthcare and access to

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education. Consideration should also be given as to whether it should be extended to all, as a truly 'universal' policy.

Figure 1. A timeline of policy developments in the arts sector in ROI & NI from March 2020 to May 2021

ROI	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Covid -19 Income Support announced First closure (13th) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deadline for Covid-19 Crisis Response Award AC Announce C1m new scheme. Covid-19 Crisis Response Award 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theatre Forum publish guidelines for reopening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> E&Y Employment & Economic Impact released. SAR published 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 40% increase to AC Budget compared to 2019 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes to the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme Arts During Lockdown, Public Sentiment Research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resilience & Recovery Plan 2020-2021 Plan for Living with Covid-19 E&Y Economic Impact Update 	
NI	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First closure (16th) Impact of the Coronavirus on the NI Arts Sector Survey Conducted 26th March - 10th April 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government Job Retention Scheme Emergency Fundling Creative Support Fund totaling £1.5m ACNI award £8.57m of Exchequer funding to 97 arts orgs through the annual funding programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Closure of Artists Emergency Fund due to high demand Creative Support Fund announced for s/m arts orgs Awards for Creative Support Fund Artists Emergency Programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ACNI Orgs Emergency Programme opens £15.5m Covid-19 Charities fund ACNI open Support for the Individual Artist Programme Deadline announced for furloughing employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communities Minister announces £4m lifeline for the arts ACNI Box Office Survey published Reopening of Creative Support Fund ACNI opens £1.1m emergency funding for individuals in the Creative Economy (Future Screens NI) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reopening guidelines for theatres published ahead of reopening Phase 1 of the Orgs Emergency Programme announced. 150 orgs totally £1.95m £1m DfC Emergency Resilience Programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phase 2 Orgs Emergency Programme £0.9m Health & Safety Capital Fund released £0.5m 	
ROI	Oct	Nov	Dec	2021 Jan	Feb	March	April	May
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> €10m funding as part of the Arts Grant Funding programme. Awarded to 166 artists & 166 arts orgs including 42 not funded in 2019. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Life Worth Living" Published Universal Basic Income recommended to government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Covid-19 Completion Fund New arrangements as part of the National Framework for Living with Covid-19 Arts During Lockdown survey on online activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surviving or Thriving series devised to support the well being of arts professionals in ROI 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New public health measures announced Plan Your Outdoor Summer Published 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity Building Support Scheme deadline Deadline for Arts Grant Funding 		
NI	Oct	Nov	Dec	2021 Jan	Feb	March	April	May
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> £20m allocated by the Department following £3m for individual artists 1,089 awards through the Individuals Emergency Resilience Programme Stability & Renewal Programme for orgs £7.75m Small Capital Purchases Grant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Lottery Heritage Recovery Fund Deadline Stability & Renewal Programme for orgs. 39 out of 168 offered funding are first-time applicants to ACNI 62 orgs receive funding through phase 2 of Orgs Emergency Programme totalling £900k 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sign Language Covid-19 Support Fund Deadline Ulster-Scots Covid-19 Resilience Fund Relief and Relaunch Fund, Community Events Fund: Seachtain na Gaeilge le Energia The D/deaf and Disabled Artists Support Fund 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual Artists Emergency Support due to be released delayed. Stability & Renewal Fund due to be released delayed. Culture Beyond Covid Published 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deadline for The Community, Arts, Culture & Heritage Fund Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions published 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ACNI call for artists & orgs to contribute to survey on emergency funding 		

We have highlighted the challenges of overreliance on the digital to 'fix' the problem of engaging with the arts under COVID-19 restrictions. A recent study by The Audience Agency highlights that the increase in availability of new technologies is not a cure for lack of engagement with arts and culture in times when it cannot otherwise be experienced in person (2021). The concept of the digital divide focuses on three key areas, Digital Access, Digital Skills, and Motivation and Confidence (Good Things Foundation, 2020). With

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extensive research into the accessibility and inequalities of the digital, the Office of National Statistics (2019) shows that Northern Ireland has continued to have the highest proportion of internet non-users. Digital disparity is a challenge that is, it is contended, under acknowledged in the policy responses to COVID-19. An overreliance on the digital to plug the gap in arts consumption (and creation) fails to acknowledge the exclusionary nature of such measures.

There is evidence of recognition in the analysed reports (and wider policy discourse) that a direct shift of arts and cultural exchange to a digital format is insufficient and exclusionary as a primary mode of engagement. For example, the SAR report emphasises the continued significance of more traditional means of cultural consumption. With this in mind, the green shoots of reopening cultural institutions is being closely watched. With reopening dates set in England for May 17th 2021 for indoor performances, currently we are observing multiple trials and experiments around the return to cultural engagement. Although no definite date was offered to Northern Ireland at the time of writing, the gap in terms of regaining normality is widening between ROI and NI in terms of vaccines and the easing of specific restrictions, particularly social distancing as they move from stage 2 'Cautious First Steps' to stage 3 'Gradual Easing' (NI Executive, 2021). More recently we see a focus from both governments on the need for positive messaging to bolster audience confidence to allow a return to live performances and events (SAR; Arts Collaboration Network, 2021). In particular, the Expert Advisory Group to ACI has argued that there is a need to take a national and local approach to the survival of strategic and building based arts organisations as socially distanced performances at significantly reduced capacity are unsustainable. Cross-border attendance and participation with arts and culture will need to offer some level of consistency around restrictions and safety procedures to not only offer confidence messaging to audiences, but also to safe-guard the reputation of organisations. Any insights or studies around taking a nuanced

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approach are yet to be seen however, more information will arise as the other nations of the UK move further into their stages for reopening.

The NI based Arts Collaboration Network references community outreach and social engagement and how a 'Covid-led recovery and regeneration has been shown to deliver a broad range of social and economic impacts' (Arts Collaboration Network statement, January 2021). Engagement with communities is tied into digital dissemination and creation in the ROI where the Expert Advisory Committee has highlighted the need to allocate funding to support arts organisations to engage with audiences and in doing so, support the work of artists alike (SAR). The Irish Arts and Cultural Recovery Taskforce and Northern Irish Arts Collaboration Network both suggest an adaptive approach to the reformation of policy and strategy moving forward while also advocating for increased funding for both ACI and ACNI. The increased exchequer grant of €130 million received by ACI in 2021 is a significant indication of the recognition of the precarity of the sector and a heartening reminder of the importance of the sector to society broadly. ACNI's increased funding in 20-21 of £23m to £33m is *relatively* significant but still underfunded due to a relative decline in the previous 10 years (from £14.1 in 2011-12 to £9.5 in 2020-21) (ACNI, Feb 2021). The increased funding overall is a pragmatic recognition by policymakers of the concrete measures required to support what has been a traditionally chronically underfunded arts sector. Weakened by decades of underfunding and increasing precarity, the arts sector has been significantly, albeit unevenly, affected by a global pandemic.

Our analysis has identified some key drivers of cultural policy towards the arts in ROI and NI and a welcome albeit uneven recognition of the complexity of the conditions under which the arts sector operates, from creation, consumption to engagement. As we showed, Freeman & Maybin suggested analysing documents not only for their content, or their contribution to the

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discourse but also as a 'thing' or an 'as an artefact or institution, which serves as the nexus of a set of governing practices' (2011, p.159). Thus we have placed the analysed policy documents in their social, political, cultural and temporal context, identifying key aspects to the policy response to the arts.

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