



Response to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure Draft Budget Proposals 2015 /16

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01. Northern Ireland needs to invest its way out of economic decline. It also needs to have a joined up approach to that project.
02. Those assertions apply as much in culture, arts and leisure as in any other sector. Yet the approaches adopted by DCAL in its draft budget proposals focus only on cuts, reductions in grant aid and support for front line projects, a disregard for the implications of its actions and an undermining of the work and achievement build up over many decades by local professional, amateur and community groups, filmmakers, musicians, digital media developers, writers, directors, technicians and others.
03. The recent history of the arts and the creative industries in Northern Ireland has been one of a sector that is fast growing, a global success and value for money. That successful development has been helped by the investment of public money in a number of projects over a period of time.
04. Above the line that has been evidenced in the public funding and support for awards ceremonies, international sporting events and contests and the underwriting of international artists to perform in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure have made much of the strategy to support culture, arts and leisure with public money and have extolled the downstream benefits of that strategy and the inward investment, job creation and tourism benefits which have resulted.
05. The less publicly obvious support for the arts has allowed the sustained development of projects which have seen local initiatives, groups and individuals flourish. The development and growth of the creative arts in Northern Ireland have contributed greatly to the development of creative industries here. In fact without the grass roots, publically funded creative arts the creative industries would not have developed or remained. There is a clear symbiotic relationship between the two. A reduction in public funding of the creative arts, culture and leisure has a direct and immediate effect on local creative industries. Awareness and an understanding of that relationship seem sadly lacking in the DCAL budget proposals.

06. An understanding of the value of culture, arts and leisure in society, and in particular in a society like Northern Ireland, is also absent from DCAL thinking. So too it would appear is any commitment to the aspects of the Executive programme which seek to promote a shared public space, eliminate sectarianism, racism and homophobia and involve all citizens of Northern Ireland in public life. The arts has a major contribution to make in all these areas, but only if it is appropriately funded and viable.
07. Reductions in public funding for culture arts and leisure over recent years have been absorbed by the arts community. While commitments to ensure there are no closures of public libraries are welcome, the proposals to reduce opening hours are not. Shorter opening hours is likely to have an adverse effect on children and families without computer and internet access. The reality remains that the unimaginative, hurried and predictable budget cuts proposals to withdraw grants now represent the tipping point for the future of many projects and initiatives.
08. It is an indication of DCAL's lack of undertaking of how the arts and related sectors function. Once withdrawn, funding cannot be turned on again in six or nine months' time with the assumption that the projects can pick up where they left off. Projects will collapse, initiatives will wither and local skills and talents will remain undeveloped. Society in Northern Ireland will be diminished and the rationale for attracting external or indeed indigenous private sponsorship of the arts will be gone.
09. These proposals have serious consequences: immediate and longer term. Once cut they cannot simply be revived and function as before. Once cut private sector sponsorship will dry up and foreign direct investment will look elsewhere. These are the outcomes of this DCAL draft budget.
10. That will have a serious and long term impact on Northern Ireland society. How does DCAL square its proposals to slash arts, cultural and leisure funding with the objectives of its colleagues in the Department of Education or Social Development? If we take education as just one example we see how cuts in one area have adverse and lasting consequences in another. Speaking about this very issue Sir Peter Bazalgette Chair of Arts Council England said,
- 'There's a strong relationship between arts and cultural engagement and educational attainment. We see an improvement in literacy when young people take part in drama and library activities and better performance in maths and languages when they take part in structured music activities'*
11. Deny those opportunities to young people and to communities in social deprivation and crisis and the inevitable will result. However, assume a holistic vision of the role of culture, arts and leisure and the contribution which that can make to society extends to community development, educational attainment, social well-being, a sense of community, of identity and purpose. It also lays the foundations for the identification and development of local talent, the growth of creative arts in Northern Ireland and a magnet for the creative industries. The arts are good for individuals, for society and for the economy.

12. At the start of this response we argued that Northern Ireland needs to invest its way to economic improvement. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure needs to play its part in that by completely revising its approach to funding cuts which are completely incompatible with its own objectives to 'promote *equality and tackle poverty and social exclusion*'.
13. The proposals contained in the Department's Draft Budget Proposals will not only undo and undermine much of the work which has been done in the development of the creative arts and a creative community in Northern Ireland in recent times, it will also impact adversely on areas of social deprivation, educational attainment, initiatives designed to address social exclusion and a shared society. It will ultimately impact on the economic benefits derived from the creative industries which have developed or been attracted to Northern Ireland. Opportunities, talent and jobs will be lost at a time when Northern Ireland needs them most.
14. The Draft Budget proposals need to be re-written to reflect the contribution which arts, culture and leisure, make and can make, to society, the significant contribution which they make to other sectors and to other strategic targets.
15. To secure the existing gains, nourish emerging talent and support future initiatives a Culture Arts and Leisure investment plan is required: not a list of cuts.

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