



Arts Council of Northern Ireland

A Strategic Framework for the Literature Sector (2015 to 2020)

This framework was developed through 2014-15, setting out principles and actions for the development of literature support over a five-year period.

1 Introduction

“Language is fundamental to society: words, spoken or written, are a unique means of communication. Because they can express concepts and ideas, and can precisely give us past, present and future tenses, they are the basis of social activity, the vehicle of our history” – W R Rodgers, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1965

The Arts Council's Five Year Strategy¹ sets out the Council's ambitions and aspirations for the development of the Arts in Northern Ireland over the period to 2018. As part of the strategy, there was a commitment under Theme Two to support the development of the literature sector by undertaking a review and preparing a forward-looking plan for the next five years. This takes the form of a strategic framework, which details a series of actions designed to support and enhance the work of organisations and individual artists whose activities can be described under the rubric of literature.

This framework has been developed based on a robust consultation and review process involving desk-based research and consultations in the form of focus groups and depth interviews with local, national and international partners. The first systematic thinking about what public subsidy for writers might look like in Northern Ireland came when the poet W R Rodgers joined ACNI early in 1965. His deliberations on methods of supporting literature, in consultation with the poet John Hewitt, produced a memorandum to the Board in which he suggested a number of support schemes including bursaries, residencies, travel grants, grants for publishers and reading programmes. However, it was only in 1970, and after several reiterations of the need for support for small magazines in particular and outlets for new writing in general, that the Council first instituted strategic support for literature.

Those recommendations remain pertinent to the needs of writers, literature professionals and readers in our time, especially where health challenges or social or economic disadvantage deprives people of easy access to the gifts of imaginative writing and reading.

Given the current funding environment and transitional nature of local and central government structures, a more pragmatic approach has been adopted through this plan which proposes a series of incremental, sustainable actions to move the sector forward.

The Government's emphasis on societal responsibility will mean the sector needing to develop stronger skills relating to community engagement and civic duty.

¹ Ambitions for the Arts (2013 to 2018). (<<http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/images/uploads/publications-documents/Ambitions-for-the-Arts-5-Year-Strategy.pdf>>

There is also a need to harness opportunities presented by the digital revolution, transforming how literature is produced and accessed. New technology is considered to be an invaluable tool and a driver in underpinning a literature strategy.

Building an infrastructure around this core will require a range of functions to be performed including advocacy, audience development and engagement, with partnership working, while supporting the individual artist, editors and publishers. Creating a model that is appropriate for Northern Ireland and sustainable in the current economic and funding environment will require some creative and challenging discussions. Driving and delivering a new strategic framework must be done with a strong partnership and collaborative ethos. To this can be added the need to be entrepreneurial, risk-taking and, above all, creative.

1.1 Aim

To develop a coherent and ambitious sector which values all its elements, encourages points of access and recognises the range of players involved while placing the writer, the narrator, the reader or listener at the centre.

1.2 Objectives

1. Provide opportunities for writers and other literature professionals to develop their practice and work within new creative and community contexts;
2. Develop methods to enhance evidence gathering and lobbying opportunities in order to meet future advocacy needs;
3. Widen entry routes for children and young people to engage in literature to enhance personal and social development;
4. Recognise the changing landscape of production by promoting new practices that meet the needs of the sector; and
5. Harness opportunities presented by digital technology to engage new audiences and create a more inclusive sector.

2 Strategic Themes

To achieve these objectives, we have set out a clear statement of priorities under five strategic themes that reflect the changed context and the need for strong public engagement. These are:

1. Making Connections
2. The Reading Challenge
3. The Literary Life
4. The Production Issue
5. Windows & Doors

2.1 MAKING CONNECTIONS

Though the funded literature sector in Northern Ireland is a small one in terms of infrastructure and number of active organisations, sectoral cohesion and communication has not always been easy. Much of the activity is voluntary, much is purpose-specific (publishing, magazines), there is considerable diversity of location and mission; all of which has made common thinking directed towards strategic development difficult. This deficit, however, was identified in consultation and the Council will seek to establish better means of communication both across the sector and between the sector and the general culture. There is a particular need to gather in the variety of contexts in which writing, reminiscence, story-telling, reading and text-based performance occur in pursuit of objectives in other areas of Government, especially Education, Health and Social Services.

As a first step, the Council will bring together the diverse and varied strands of the sector by creating a Literature Panel. It will comprise, for example, writers, festival organisers, publishers, literature professionals, administrators, local authority officers and representatives from universities and LibrariesNI, among others, and will fulfil the following functions:

- a. Act as the collective voice for the sector to articulate its achievements and promote its role amongst policy makers;
- b. Identify new opportunities for artists to engage in other spheres of public life to enhance or promote joint social outcomes;
- c. Explore ways to work more collaboratively and be more effective; and
- d. Enable the sector to share information and research to back-up its advocacy work.

Among the Panel's priorities will be to consider the shape and function of a proposed virtual hub and to promote heightened awareness across Governmental interests of the value of current and potential literature practice in delivering on key objectives, for example in well-being, mental health, children 'in care' and people with dementia.

It will also help shape the opportunities presented by the internet to enhance the ways the literature sector creates, operates and networks by defining an on-line resource with a focus on enhancing connections, promoting quality and stimulating innovation. This resource might:

- a. Present the sector with opportunities for collaboration and promotion;
- b. Develop online tools for writers to use in their work within communities;
- c. Provide showcasing opportunities for new work, helping to nurture new talent;
- d. Establish creative resources to enhance the educational role of artists working within schools, in the community and in libraries;
- e. Include public facing elements for people interested in engaging with literature; and
- f. Provide sign-posting for artists seeking to explore new routes for the monetisation of their work.

ACTIONS

- Establish a sectoral panel as a platform for networking & to explore connectivity via schools, care environments, children, young people and elderly people & identify the potential of creative partnerships for ACNI.
- Explore the feasibility of a 'hub' to act as a beacon illuminating the variety of literature offer in Northern Ireland and signposting to other assets and services available across the region.

2.2 THE READER CHALLENGE

The demand for the narrative skills of professional writers is considerable and exists across a very wide range of contexts, from storytelling in support of conflict resolution initiatives to healthcare environments to work with prisoners and their families to script development as part of screenplay production. It is worth noting that these have not always been formally recognised as *artistic* skills; but their deployment in pursuit of a range of cross-Government objectives, for example, is a feature which it is important to register here.

Traditionally, supporting the literature sector in Northern Ireland was considered to be a matter of simply supporting writers and publishers. Measures initiated by the Arts Council historically sought to address the needs of these two elements within Northern Ireland as a means to establish a platform of achievement both valuable in itself and as a springboard for both national and international recognition. Both these strategic insights remain valid as principles and it will be for this framework to articulate contemporary and adequate solutions to sourcing such support.

In addition, though, it is clear from the consultation process that there is a further element to be considered – readers. Whether emerging, disadvantaged or neglected, the value of the reading experience is one which has long been identified but which had struggled to find an appropriate vehicle for development. Even in a context of widespread literacy and a strong educational system, reading as a creative, imaginative, developmental and quality-of-life experience has been subsumed within other objectives connected either with ‘leisure’ or ‘learning’. It is obvious, from the role reading now plays in a variety of contexts, from well-being and mental health, to care environments and confidence-building, from ‘babies love books’ to enhanced socialisation, that reading imaginatively brings multiple benefits to a range of sectors traditionally considered uncongenial to the arts.

In this context, the development of the ‘reading rooms’ model of participatory initiatives, particularly within a managed and quality-assured context, is a challenge for the Council’s framework. However, this is clearly a model which completes the creative wheel of literary engagement with the public – writers-publishers-readers – and which presents significant evidence of the value of literature and narrative in terms of life-enhancing and life-changing outcomes.

Critical to this insight is the need to engage children and young people as readers. Building on current support for initiatives such as the work of Verbal Arts Centre, Poetry Ireland, Poetry in Motion, Children’s Books Ireland & Laureate na nÓg, and other children-focused literary activity, the Council will seek to strengthen its links with early years’ literature providers and seek to raise awareness of this particular arts practice across service provision for children and families.

ACTIONS

- Support the ‘reading ethos’ across the age ranges as an instrument of personal and social development

2.3 THE LITERARY LIFE

Sustaining the viability of “a literary life” is as problematic in Northern Ireland as it is for public funders elsewhere. But it is clear from the consultation that the Arts Council has already nimble and beneficial structures of support for individual writers which have helped benchmark artistic quality, encourage innovation in practise and delivery, make risk-taking possible and boost both careers and their visibility in the general culture. It will be important to reaffirm faith in those simple but effective structures and, if and where possible, upgrade them.

But it is also true that the range of roles and responsibilities now arising out of writing, reminiscence, story-telling, reading and text-based performance, for example, flourishing on digital platforms also, greatly exceed in number the traditional few. The challenge for the Council is to recognise those roles – such as editors, facilitators, workshop providers, critics, designers, illustrators, bloggers, festival organisers (what Creative & Cultural Skills in 2010 described as ‘literature professionals’) – as eligible for support under current structures for individuals.

The Support for Individual Artist Programme (SIAP) is the main way the Council supports writers. The programme extends opportunities for writers to develop their profession by providing time and resources to reflect and engage their practice. Particularly valuable has been the Artists’ Career Enhancement Scheme (ACES) which has helped develop many significant new published writers over the last four years.

The Arts Council will explore practical partnerships with agencies and organisations specialising in writer development, build on developmental successes and join-up sectoral provision in practical ways and continue to invest in the professional development of writers by maintaining the current level of support available through its suite of schemes and award programmes. It will also encourage more artists to work in social contexts by promoting training opportunities provided by organisations such as Community Arts Partnership, designed to develop skills needed to work effectively in, for example, disadvantaged communities.

ACTIONS

- Seek to formalise links with key sectoral support organisations in Ireland to develop the skills of creatives & literature professionals; remaining open to other mechanisms elsewhere for sourcing such support
- Designate the roles of literature professionals (including, for example, editors, designers, illustrators) eligible for SIAP support

2.4 PRODUCTION SUPPORT

The Council must also take account of the radical changes which have occurred in the publishing trade over the last ten years. The Council's support for a handful of publishers in NI which sought to publish work of literary merit (traditionally understood), was always a contentious one, as such subsidy was often perceived as tilting market forces. This was, of course, true; but sustaining the production of books which may have had a limited market was a valid activity of an arts council, given that the alternative was no product of literary merit being published in the geographical location from which it originated, which is where its first and perhaps only audience might be expected to be found.

However, as the mechanics of publishing have changed radically, it is clear that current practice may not adequately match the needs of the sector.

Most authors from NI are currently published by GB-based or RoI-based publishers, and many of those publishers have been able, on a title-by-title basis singly or through engagement with a programme of publishing, title-by-title, through Lottery Project Funding, it is an obvious recommendation for the Council to advocate this method of support and that route for accessing it as the most effective one in this publishing climate; and encouraging publishers from elsewhere to explore its funding schemes when considering an author or a title 'of benefit to Northern Ireland'.

In tandem with this, it is clear that the phenomenon of 'self-publishing' would remain outside the Council's priorities – enabling individuals to finance the production of their own work, frequently from printing firms rather than 'publishers' as such, would be a step backwards in identifying quality work. Hence, while funding schemes are open to all with an intent to make application, including any organisation which wishes to publish the creative work of an individual, individuals would not be encouraged to source such funding from programmes aimed at organisations; and production costs for self-published work would not be eligible under support for individual artists.

ACTION

- Designate the eligibility of non-NI and non-Ireland-based publishers for Lottery Project Fund & Small Grants support

2.5 WINDOWS & DOORS

As the publishing industry changes with digital innovation, at the points both of creativity and sales, the Council will explore the potential for sustaining innovative, credible, quality-driven digital opportunities for showcasing new and existing work while, as above, seeking greater flexibility in support of traditional publishing routes.

Writing, reminiscence, story-telling, reading and text-based performance are the core activities within literature. There remains, though, a challenge of access to the professional delivery of these artistic skills and the nurturing of those gifts within communities which are already challenged by disadvantage, unfamiliarity with the cultural processes of expression or working within the creative parameters of a language and culture other than English. The Council must find a means clearly to open access to the means of creative expression for all within literature, especially disabled people, individuals and communities newly-arrived in Northern Ireland and those writing imaginatively in languages other than English.

ACTIONS

- Designate routes to support writers and publishers in languages other than English
- Designate routes to support minority ethnic writing, disability writing, community-based writing and performance-based work through SIAP
- Seek to support digital and online platforms promoting new & existing work