



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Shared Island
Dialogues

Shared Island Dialogue Series

Arts and Culture on a Shared Island



Dialogue Report

Introduction

The Shared Island Dialogue series was [launched](#) by the Taoiseach Micheál Martin TD in October 2020 as part of the Government's Shared Island Initiative, to foster constructive and inclusive civic dialogue on a shared future on the island underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

The Dialogue Series brings people together from across the island together to discuss key concerns for the future, opportunities for cross learning and understanding and harnessing the full potential of cooperation through the framework of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Dialogues actively seek a broad range of perspectives and experiences from civil society on the island and the inclusion of voices that have been under-represented in the Peace Process, including women, young people and ethnic minority communities on the island.

Previous Dialogues have focused on the themes like New Generations and New Voices on the Good Friday Agreement; climate and environment; civil society cooperation; equality issues; economic recovery on the island; health cooperation; the future of Education; Tourism; Sport; Rural and Community Development; and Identities on the island. Reports and videos from past Dialogues are available online [here](#).

The key points from the first year of discussions were captured in a composite report: "Looking to a shared future: Report on the Shared Island Dialogue series 2020-2021", which can be read [here](#).

The twelfth Shared Island Dialogue took place on 13 October 2022 in Mandela Hall, Queen's University, Belfast on the theme 'Arts and Culture on a Shared Island'. Over 130 people attended the Dialogue in person and a further 80 people joined online for this fourth hybrid event of the series.

[Minister Catherine Martin TD](#) and [Minister Deirdre Hargey MLA](#) delivered opening addresses and the Dialogue heard from stakeholders from different sectors, regions, communities and backgrounds on how we can enhance, develop and deepen North/South cooperation and collaboration in the areas of Arts, Culture and Creativity.

The Dialogue was moderated by broadcaster, Seán Rocks and featured two panel discussions which addressed **Arts and Culture on a Shared Island - Challenges & Opportunities** and **Building Cultural & Creative Communities**.

There was broad discussion at the Dialogue on these themes and on how to better foster arts and cultural respect, exchange and development across the island of Ireland.

The Shared Island Dialogue series is organised by the Shared Island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach working on this occasion with the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport & Media, other relevant Government Departments and Agencies and in consultation with civil society stakeholders across the island of Ireland.

Further information on the series, including videos of the sessions, is available at gov.ie.

Summary:

Over the course of the Dialogue a number of key themes emerged:

- The related **value of North/South and East/West dimensions to policy and programming and the scope for governments and agencies to significantly deepen the level of cooperation that exists** today. The practical benefits of cross-border cooperation were emphasised including in respect of funding, scale, audience reach, and professional and community artistic development.
- **Differences in funding levels for the Arts and Culture sector** across the two jurisdictions were noted. The role of cooperation and exchange in providing **opportunities to manage resource constraints, and also learn from different policy and funding approaches**, North and South was also discussed. The Basic Income for the Arts in the South was noted as a significant innovation, while capital funding for Arts and Cultural infrastructure in Northern Ireland was seen as progressive/far-sighted. The **record of the Arts Council and Arts Council of Northern Ireland in cooperating and co-funding the Arts over the years, and the intention to deepen that partnership** was emphasised.
- The importance of providing **support for Arts, Culture and Creativity development from the grass roots level up** was highlighted, and of ensuring an **inclusive access to creative and cultural opportunities across all ages and cohorts, particularly/critically including ethnic minority communities**.
- The **common and continuing challenges of the Covid pandemic** for the sector were emphasised.
- The **role of community arts organisations** in providing creative opportunities was emphasised, and **their contribution to individual well-being, community development, social enterprise, and cross-community interaction and understanding**.
- A strong theme in panel 2 relating to the need to move beyond a **binary conception of cultural and community identity in Northern Ireland and in terms of all-island interactions**. Arts and culture provides a unique space for interaction around identity, and often with a broader reference to a range of national and cultural **identity and not-solely traditional green-orange identities on the island of Ireland**.
- The fact that **linguistic diversity and heritage in all its dimensions are parts of culture** was highlighted and it was agreed that **ways to link different dimensions of this cultural heritage in policy and programming are important**. Language and heritage are vibrant spheres of cross-border and all-island interaction, commonality and exchange.
- Finally, there was consensus that **arts, culture and creativity needs to be more accessible to all**. The importance of the visibility of minority groups, including the benefits of seeing themselves represented in the arts was discussed. Arts and creativity opportunities for **children and young adults were seen as critical**.

Address by Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport & Media, Catherine Martin TD:

- In her opening [address](#), Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport & Media, Catherine Martin TD spoke of the importance of hearing from artists and arts organisations on how we can harness the power of the arts, culture and creativity sector to strengthen our connections on this island.
- Minister Martin referenced that artists and arts organisations have played a key part in the realisation of peace on this island. Poems, plays, films and songs have helped to convey different experiences, emotions and perspectives on how we see, hear and relate to each other.
- The Minister referenced that there are 14 arts organisations that work on an all-island basis with long-standing supports and co-operation from the Arts Council and Arts Council Northern Ireland. Both Arts Councils work together to foster deeper collaboration between artists and arts organisations across the island through joint funding, schemes, projects and research.
- The Minister noted that in July the Government allocated over €7m from the Shared Island Fund for cross-border arts investment projects to be developed in consultation with both Arts Councils north and south.
- And that Culture Ireland supports artists and arts organisations on an all-island basis to travel internationally to perform and showcase their work, bringing the rich variety and diverse voices of artists practicing on the island of Ireland to a global audience.
- Under the Shared Island Initiative, the Government wants to harness the power of the arts, culture and creativity to strengthen our connections on this island.
- The Creative Ireland programme is rooted in collaboration between people and communities, and a Shared Island dimension in its next phase will explore with local authority, cultural and community partners how to deploy creativity to strengthen connections across the island. Through culture and creativity, community and voluntary organisations provide spaces for people of all backgrounds and traditions to come together, interact and build bridges among our communities, and to reflect on who we are, how we feel, and how we work and live together.
- Through the PEACEPLUS programme, the Irish Government, Northern Ireland Executive, UK Government and the European Union will also make available significant funding over the next seven years to support peace and progress, including through arts and cultural programmes.
- The Minister noted that the Dialogue is an opportunity to think about how - in government, in the professional arts, and in community organisations - we can build on existing links and fully release the potential of the arts and cultural sectors to bring people together. That includes connecting and cooperating with diverse communities, such as those from a unionist and loyalist tradition, people from new communities across the island, and from communities that are traditionally underrepresented in arts participation.
- The Minister also referenced the difficult times the cultural and creativity sector has faced over the past two years as a result of the pandemic. The challenges faced and overcome and the questions to answer about our cultural interactions on this island, reminds us of the vital role of arts and culture in our lives, communities and society. This Dialogue is an opportunity to hear from everyone in attendance - part of truly world-class arts, cultural and creativity sectors - on how to create opportunities and overcome challenges for our shared island in the years ahead.

Address by Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey MLA:

- In her opening [address](#), Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey MLA spoke of the links on this island, which extend beyond political outlook or perspective. And dialogue is essential across all sectors, for communities and government to look at relationships both North/South and East/West.
- It is important to support the full potential of our arts and cultural offerings on the island, as it connects fundamentally to who we are as people, communities and traditions. The arts and culture sector are also a catalyst for wider innovation and economic and social change on the island.
- The Minister highlighted the immediate challenges impacting the arts and culture sector in Northern Ireland. The sector was disproportionately hit by the Covid pandemic, with an Arts Council NI survey in October this year highlighting that the sector is only back at 45% compared to pre-pandemic times. The current energy and cost of living crisis are additional pressures.
- The Minister stressed the importance of focussing on these challenges and opportunities and looking at how best to move forward, to harness the great cultural and creative strengths the island has to offer.
- The Executive is committed to working with arts and cultural organisations, to harness connections and expertise north and south, east and west. To help build strategic and operational capacity, and craft cultural and creative partnerships to inspire and benefit communities on the island.
- The Minister also referenced how important arts and culture is in areas such as health, education, regeneration, equality, good relations, tourism and the wider economy. How can we work together to explore new possibilities in these areas too?
- The Executive is due to publish a Culture, Arts and Heritage Vision Strategy and Action Plan which is a co-designed strategy to help government & stakeholders in the North to deliver more effective ways to achieve a shared ambition and look at sustainability across the sector.
- The Minister also highlighted the importance of looking at how the arts, creative and heritage sectors play a key role within the wider economic sector and how we can enable a creative ecology to thrive across the island of Ireland. Creativity, arts and culture transcends boundaries.

Panel Discussion 1

Arts & culture on a shared island - challenges & opportunities

Key Messages:

This panel was moderated by Seán Rocks and had the following panellists:

- Maureen Kennelly, Director, Arts Council
- Roisín McDonough, Chief Executive, Arts Council of Northern Ireland
- Jimmy Fay, Director, Lyric Theatre, Belfast
- Paul McVeigh, Author

This discussion is available online and can be watched back [here](#).

Key themes that emerged from the discussion included:

- The panel discussed existing projects that take place on a shared island basis and the **positive impacts on artists and communities** across the island of these collaborations.
- **Developing connections and building working relationships** both North/South and East/West helps open doors to artists and the creative sectors and provides opportunities to travel and showcase the wealth of talent on the island of Ireland.
- The strong relationship between the two Arts Councils on the island of Ireland was highlighted and how their cooperation is important in providing coordinated and joint **cross border supports for the Arts**.
- The **disparity of funding for the arts** between the two jurisdictions was highlighted. Panellists spoke of how lower levels of funding can lead to the loss of talent due to emigration and also lead to difficulties in finding or funding collaborative partnerships. It was noted however that some collaborations can help in managing funding constraints.
- The role of capital investment was also discussed by the panellists. The existing strong **attention and investment in arts infrastructure** across the island of Ireland was highlighted. It was noted that such infrastructure takes a long time to develop and implement.
- The importance of taking stock, researching, and **listening to the lived experience of the artists** were highlighted as areas for consideration as part of policy development. Panellists spoke of the need for funding organisations to appreciate that **artists need time to develop their work**. The playwright Arthur Miller was quoted 'art is slow, life is quick'.
- The panellists discussed the **Basic Income for the Arts Pilot Scheme** and the lessons that can be learned on an all island basis. It was noted that there was a large demand for the Pilot Scheme, which seems to be unanimously welcomed. One panellist expressed the view that the scheme **dignifies the arts profession**. It was noted that it is Pilot Scheme, which is in the research phase, and will have an in-depth analysis to assess its success.

- Panellists also discussed the importance of **funding** supports for non-professional artists and organisations, noting that some of the finest and most effective organisations are within the community sector.
- The **difficulties arising** from Brexit; the Covid pandemic; and audience confidence post Covid were discussed. It was felt that despite these challenges, there continues to be an appetite for experiencing and engaging with arts and culture across the island. However, it was noted that the Covid pandemic in particular had a huge impact on the artists and the arts and creative sector as a whole.
- One panellist noted the importance of **arts education** in schools and the need for art to be more ingrained in the curriculum was expressed. The panel also raised the need for a dedicated Writers Centre in Northern Ireland.
- The panel agreed that **arts and creativity need to be accessible to all**. The importance of the visibility of minority groups, including the benefits of seeing themselves represented in the arts was discussed. These groups can often face additional barriers and it was agreed that it is vital that they are supported. The importance of arts and creativity being **accessible to children and young adults** was also noted.

Panel Discussion 2

Building Cultural and Creative Communities

Key Messages:

This panel was moderated by Sean Rocks and had the following panellists:

- Tania Banotti, Director of Creative Ireland,
- Nisha Tandon OBE, Founder & Director of ArtsEkta and Belfast Mela festival,
- Lee Robb, Founder & Director of Positive Carrickfergus,
- Séan Love, Founder & Director of Fighting Words.

This discussion is available online and can be watched back [here](#).

Key themes that emerged from the discussion included:

- The **importance of grass roots organisations** in providing creative outlets to children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may have less opportunities, and the **positive impact of creativity for children's engagement with learning and education more broadly**.
- Community creativity has a key role to play in helping **minority and new communities to integrate**. ArtsEkta is providing support to ethnic minority artists, but further opportunities are needed, as confidence is lacking in some communities. **ArtsEkta alone is working with 42 different artists** across different genres, and its members speak some 71 different languages.
- The **Belfast Mela festival** has been successful in bringing people into a **shared and diverse cultural space**; the education system also provides opportunities for cultural exchange.
- ArtsEkta are partnering with festivals and exchange programmes, both north and south - Brexit has inhibited some of this work with visa requirements for some nationalities inhibiting ability to move freely across the border.
- **Fighting Words** originated in Dublin's north inner city to provide a creative outlet to children from disadvantaged areas by providing **creative writing workshops**. It has expanded to work with people from all socio-economic backgrounds, providing tutoring, mentoring and publishing with financial support from **Creative Ireland**.
- **Positive Carrickfergus**, the panel discussion heard, began as a Facebook page to highlight positive aspects of the town, which over 37,000 people call home. The Facebook page garnered broad community support and the project progressed. Through Positive Carrickfergus **attitudes towards and perceptions of the town are positively changing**. This highlights how community activism and collaboration can make positive change. Positive Carrickfergus works to **connect the community** and create **social capital**.
- **Creative Ireland** the Irish Government's creativity programme, was outlined including the **Creative Communities pillar**, which sees every local authority employ a culture and creativity team to support creative actions at community levels.

- It was noted that links and networks on a cross border basis could be better developed in regards to community creativity, however this requires funding.
- The panel also discussed **identity diversity**. Positive Carrickfergus engages on the basis of a diversity of experience in Carrickfergus, challenging the inaccurate perception of a single identity space, which is not accurate. **Socio-economic disparities** are an issue, and this is where difficulties are grounded, in any town or city.
- The discussion heard from a number of community organisations that work to bring people across different communities on the island together. Arts and culture provide a unique space for interaction around identity, and often with a broader reference to a range of national and cultural **identities and not just traditional green-orange identities on the island of Ireland**.
- The panel noted that there appears to be different lenses and vocabularies in the two jurisdictions for how arts and culture are viewed. Funding disparity is part of this, but also different approaches to how arts, culture and creativity are supported and seen to engage with and contribute to society more broadly.
- The discussion heard about the **importance of language** as an aspect of culture. In 2016 there were 212 languages recorded as being spoken on the island. A question was asked how **incorporating language** into infrastructure would combine and bring it into the mainstream. - A truly shared space which is shared not just in art forms but also from language, food and different cultural traditions should be considered.
- Heritage was raised as another vital **aspect of culture**, which also **touches on identity**. It was suggested there could be more holistic thinking on how to recognise heritage as part of broader cultural funding and programming.
- For Fighting Words, **peer interaction** is hugely beneficial for young people. It strengthens self-esteem, confidence and it empowers through creative writing.
- The panel heard how comic books were an important aspect of culture for young people that is not always well acknowledged. Comic books are a creative outlet that also introduce a wider culture and art form at a younger age.
- Celebrating **young people's creativity** was noted as a priority for **Creative Ireland**, including through the annual Cruinniú na n'Óg programme, and comic drawings are one of the most popular requests from young people. Fighting Words noted, at their camps, young children and teenagers are particularly keen on graphic fiction and it's an important aspect of the programmes offered by Fighting Words.

As part of the Shared Island Initiative
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