

BACKGROUND DISCUSSION PAPER

May 2005

Traditional arts

PROFILE

The Irish traditional arts are a collection of indigenous arts practices that reflect our identity, history, and contemporary thinking. They comprise our traditional music, song and dance, and oral arts such as storytelling and *agallamh beirte*. They represent a vitally important expression of our cultural identity. While informed by the past, the traditional arts are contemporary and vibrant. We have never been a major player where the traditional arts are concerned. Lack of funding and inflexible application processes have generated a low level of response from the traditional sector and this, in turn, has resulted in that sector's sense of alienation. However, with the publication of *Towards a Policy for the Traditional Arts* in 2004, and the adoption of a new policy, we are committed to engaging in a new dialogue with the traditional arts community. This, we hope, will demonstrate our commitment to significantly improving provision for the traditional arts and to including them within the mainstream of our activities.

An increased confidence within the traditional arts community and a desire to engage with state funding agencies has led to a demand, supported politically and outlined in the 2003 Arts Act, that the traditional arts be adequately supported. This is in order to i) allow the traditional arts to be sustained and to flourish in a rapidly changing environment that presents increasing challenges to the traditional arts community and ii) to maximise the contribution the traditional arts can make to the wider arts community and to contemporary life in Ireland.

STRENGTHS

- Traditional arts are in a healthy state in Ireland. Supports are provided through various state and semi-state agencies such as Culture Ireland, the Department of Foreign Affairs, local authorities, the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Údarás na Gaeltachta. The health of the sector is evidenced through high levels of participation, ongoing success in embracing diverse opportunities for transmission and dissemination, and the constant renewal of the tradition and its repertoire through creation and performance to high standards of originality and virtuosity.
- The traditional arts are highly regarded internationally and Ireland continues to set the standard at an international level. They also play an increasing role in cultural tourism.
- Ireland is a leader internationally in the integration of the traditional arts into mainstream education structures to the benefit of the wider arts community and of the traditional arts themselves.

CHALLENGES

- Our relationship with the traditional arts community to date has been patchy and tenuous, with little critical dialogue. There still exists an unacceptable feeling of having been discounted. Despite the high expectations that exist the mainstreaming

of the sector remains unrealised, to the impoverishment of the traditional arts themselves and the wider arts community at home and abroad.

- Our funding of traditional arts has not been adequate to their needs.
- The ambition of the traditional arts community is to have the traditional arts recognised and valued on their own terms, alongside other arts practices, and to underpin this with significant funding. Our challenge is to find, through ongoing consultation with the traditional arts community, open, flexible and sensitive mechanisms through which this can be achieved.
- It is important that the considerable inherent strengths within the traditional arts are recognised at all times and, to respect this, we will adopt a responsive as opposed to a prescriptive approach.

WHAT MIGHT BE DONE, BY THE ARTS COUNCIL AND OTHERS

Arising out of our discussions with the arts community, the following issues are identified as key concerns; the first three of these, listed in italics, are considered as priorities.

1. *Empower the traditional arts community itself to develop and sustain its own artforms and practices through adopting an inclusive approach and a light touch that respects the independent frame of mind of the traditional arts community.*
2. *Enable this process through an appraisal of funding and human resource allocation.*
3. *Engage with the traditional arts community in a process of moving towards the informed integration of the traditional arts into the central structures, systems and philosophy of our activities in ways that are fully cognisant of the integrity and dynamics of the traditional art.s*
4. Demonstrate a new understanding of the traditional arts.
5. The fundamentals of (i) the artist and (ii) arts practice, in particular transmission, will be at the core of our policy and spending decisions on the traditional arts.
6. The term 'amateur' will have no relevance in describing traditional arts practice.
7. Core values regarding the traditional arts will include:
 - Respect for the integrity of the traditional arts, artists and arts practice;
 - Standards of excellence as understood by the traditional arts community;
 - Recognition of the value of the key players already working to the benefit of the artist and arts practice;
 - Understanding of transmission as a central element within arts practice;
 - Recognition of traditional arts as having an important contribution to make to contemporary life in Ireland.
8. Implementation of a 3-year initiative for the traditional arts.
9. Stabilise existing key players and consolidate a basic infrastructure for the traditional artforms, artists and arts practice through adequately resourcing existing organisations and events; developing and supporting networks and partnerships between key players; identifying gaps in the provision for traditional arts and addressing such gaps; and working closely with key stakeholders.

10. Develop new funding initiatives that will enable the traditional arts community to engage with us.
11. Raise the profile of our work and the opportunities available through our funding programmes among the traditional arts community.
12. Encourage and support collaborations between the traditional arts and other forms of arts practice.
13. Recognise that not all aspects of traditional arts may fit comfortably within our current structures and adopt a flexible approach that will allow for independence where appropriate.
14. Advocate for the traditional arts in matters relating to education, broadcasting, royalties and rights for artists.
15. Work alongside the traditional arts community to improve the appreciation of traditional arts among the general public.
16. Use existing and on-going sources of information and initiate new research that will strengthen the case for the traditional arts.
17. Create flexible mechanisms for us to work with the traditional arts community towards an improved and informed mutual trust and understanding.

This policy was adopted by the Arts Council at its meeting on 24th May 2005.