



Making Great Art Work:

Festivals Policy & Strategy

2020-2025

General Description and Context

Festivals are key producers and presenters of the arts in Ireland and are essential for engaging large and diverse audiences. The Arts Council acknowledges the rich variety of artform practice areas presented by festivals and their critical role in broadening public access to the arts.

Festivals play a central role in delivering the arts to the public and also enable communities to curate and define their history, social commentary and reflect their identity through festival programmes and events. Festivals provide essential access to the arts in areas of low engagement along with significant opportunities for artists to develop their practice. Festivals play a dynamic and strategic role in the overall arts ecology in Ireland and in the broader arenas of cultural tourism, community development and urban regeneration.

Central to the importance of festivals is the unique opportunities they provide for presenting and experiencing art. Inherent in the festival form is the permission to experiment – a permission to cross thresholds that might be closed or forbidding throughout the rest of the year – as well as the flexibility to respond to both urban and rural landscapes, changing socio-political realities and an opportunity to engage with communities. As such, festivals are an indispensable platform that affords artists a space to innovate and invite audiences to experience work in different ways.

The Arts Council's role is to advocate for and support the development of a diverse and varied arts-festival ecology, and to provide a suite of supports that encourage models of national and international significance and best practice – i.e. models that increase opportunities for public engagement and participation in the arts or develop the work of an artist/artform. In addition, the Arts Council offers financial and developmental support to small festivals to deliver quality arts experiences for audiences, and prioritises programmes engaged with, and relevant to, local communities.

In [Making Great Art Work](#) (MGAW), the Arts Council identifies two policy priority areas: [the artist](#) and [public engagement](#). In delivering on these priority areas in festivals, the Council will take the following approach over the next five years.

Artists and Festivals

The Arts Council supports artists indirectly by the provision of funding to a broad range of festival models to create a varied and resilient festival infrastructure in which artists can avail of commissioning, presenting and co-producing opportunities, incubate and test new work, discover new environments that provide opportunities for experimentation, and gain exposure to new audiences.

In particular, festivals are at the forefront of nurturing street and spectacle arts in Ireland and central to its continued growth and development; providing a necessary environment for street and spectacle artists to test, foster and present work to audiences.

Festivals are recognised by the Arts Council as providing an environment for creative risk-taking, concentrated and critical appraisal of work, peer networking, and mentoring and exposure to national and international work of calibre, all of which can contribute to an artist's professional-skill development.

In addition the Arts Council recognises the complex and special nature of 'festival-making' as a creative act and its curatorial role in the development of artistic programming, which can establish new collaborative partnerships for artists as well as diversified approaches to creating art.

Through its [Strategic Funding](#), the Arts Council supports the essential infrastructure required to sustain and develop festival practice in Ireland. This spans a broad range of artform practice areas. The Council's [Commissions Scheme](#) and [Arts Grant Funding](#) supports the development of festival programmes and opportunities to strengthen their producing and commissioning capacity. In this regard the Arts Council values not only the development of single-artform practice but also the approach of multidisciplinary and inter-disciplinary arts models in festivals. Through its [Open Call](#) programme the Arts Council supports large, ambitious, new projects providing an environment for creative risk-taking in a festival context.

In further supporting artists, over the next five years the Arts Council will:

- Develop an incentivised pilot scheme for festivals to host artistic residencies across the country;
- Incentivise festivals through the [Festival Investment Scheme](#) to provide more opportunities for local artists;
- Incentivise and monitor festivals through the Festival Investment Scheme to provide opportunities for artists from diverse backgrounds in line with the Council's [Equality, Human Rights and Diversity policy](#);
- Provide increased support to street-and-spectacle arts;
- Provide funding supports for training to festival makers and artists making work in a festival context;
- Ensure through its funding schemes that festivals are committed to offering artists fair and equitable remuneration in line with the Arts Council's [Paying the Artist policy](#).

Public Engagement & Festivals

Festivals play a significant role in arts provision in Ireland, in many cases providing the public with new arts experiences. The Arts Council acknowledges the importance of this provision, and understands that festivals are often a gateway to introducing arts activity to the public for the first time. In terms of public engagement, 'The Arts Council champions diversified approaches through audience growth and development and the creation of opportunities for the public to engage in the arts as participants, artistic collaborators and volunteers.' In this regard

the Arts Council values and champions the contribution of amateur and voluntary participation in festival practice and acknowledges the increasing role that localism plays in the development and sustainability of festival programmes.

In the area of public engagement, the Arts Council interest is articulated through the festival policy in three areas: audiences, participation and volunteering.

AUDIENCES

There is a limited understanding, and measurement of the qualitative impacts festivals deliver in the communities they serve. The measurement of such activity would provide intelligence to festivals that would be useful for developing accurate and appropriate audience strategies.

PARTICIPATION

There are opportunities for festivals to build their public engagement capacity and develop different models and more dynamic approaches to public engagement, including participatory, collaborative and socially engaged arts practices.

VOLUNTEERING

The measurement and benchmarking of festival resources is currently limited and would benefit from further investigation to assess the potential vulnerability/resilience of the sector and the benefits of its social capital. An investment in the voluntary sector would help to further sustain the festival ecology in Ireland.

The support to festivals, through the Arts Council's [Strategic Funding](#), [Arts Grant Funding](#) and [Festival Investment Scheme](#) programmes, provides for the development of a broad range of audiences for the arts and increased participation in the arts. Together the suite of funding supports provides for a rich and varied ecology of opportunities for the public to access arts provision. Through the work of these organisations the public is given access to a diverse range of arts activity that otherwise would not be available to it.

In further developing public engagement, over the next five years the Arts Council will:

- Commit to researching and providing appropriate qualitative measurement models and tools for festivals to assist in the development of strategies for audiences;
- Conduct a study of benefit-in-kind and volunteerism to better understand festival infrastructure and the use of social capital;
- Develop capacity-building supports in volunteerism with a commitment to operating best practice in this area;

- Through the [Festival Investment Scheme](#), continue to encourage festivals to explore different models of practice that encourage increased public engagement;
- Through the Festival Investment Scheme incentivise festivals to develop work for diverse audiences in line with the Arts Council's [Equality, Human Rights and Diversity policy](#).

Specific Festival Development Areas

A range of other issues of particular strategic relevance to festivals have an impact on the wider ecology for artists and audiences.

Findings from the 2020 Change Makers festivals conference (in association with the MA Festive Arts, University of Limerick) and 2017 Festival and Events Scheme Review identify particular deficits in the current festival ecology and resource supports for festivals.

Smaller festivals play a vital role in the dissemination of the arts to particular communities across the country in both urban and rural locations and are key contributors to the broader festival ecology. While central to the delivery of arts in their communities, these organisations are often reliant on voluntary management and are under resourced. In this regard, the Arts Council would be best placed to increase financial investment in small festivals and to address the knowledge and skill-sharing deficits that currently exist in order to support these organisations to build capacity.

In particular, sectoral supports such as a dedicated resource for arts festivals, mentoring and greater cross-agency partnership and collaboration would further assist festivals in building their capacity and to inform their organisational development.

To address these issues, over the next five years the Arts Council will:

- Further develop and clarify funding mechanisms suitable for festivals matching their different stages of their development;
- Commission and develop (in consultation with the sector) a toolkit for festivals to provide best-practice approaches, guidance and practical supports including sector specific measurement tools;
- Increase its financial commitment to small festivals and encourage their strategic development;
- Explore the establishment of a multi-agency approach to assist festivals in building their skills and improve their practice;
- Establish a working group with festival makers and stakeholders and universities to develop coordinated national festival research and supports;

- Explore the need for a dedicated resource for arts festivals to assist in their capacity building and development of best practice principles;
- Support the community of festival makers to strengthen their collective sectoral identity;
- Incentivise opportunities and provide funding supports through the [Capacity Building Support Scheme](#) for small-mid scale festivals to receive mentoring opportunities to improve their skills and build capacity;
- Advocate for the recording of festival legacies across Ireland as a resource for festivals and festival research;
- Through the [Festival Investment Scheme](#) and [Capacity Building Support](#) incentivise festivals to develop diversity in their working practices in line with the Arts Council's [Equality, Human Rights and Diversity policy](#).

Other *MGAW* Areas of Strategic Interest for Festivals

In the area of spatial & demographic, over the next five years the Arts Council will:

- Invest in further geodata analysis of those festivals in receipt of financial support;
- Seek agreement (where appropriate) between the Arts Council and local authorities regarding specific targets in relation to strategic festival development;
- Introduce (and subsequently monitor) spatial and demographic priorities to the [Festival Investment Scheme](#) that strengthen the requirement for increased public engagement in areas of low arts engagement in line with the Council's [Equality, Human Rights and Diversity policy](#).

In the area of young people, children & education, over the next five years the Arts Council will:

- Explore with the YPCE team at the Arts Council and third-party agencies best-practice methodologies for increasing and improving opportunities for young people to engage in festival programmes.

In the area of international, over the next five years the Arts Council will:

- Introduce supports to provide festival makers with the opportunity to visit and observe international work, and to learn from these exchanges as part of a broader provision of festival capacity building.