

Talking Festivals Live and Digital, Session 1

Festival Making in the face of COVID '19

Wednesday 24th June 2020

3.00 – 4.30pm

These online discussions are designed for small to medium scale festivals and will provide an opportunity to share information and knowledge and to discuss the merits, challenges, opportunities and restrictions facing festivals as they plan programmes for reconfigured public spaces and explore online sharing of the arts. What creative solutions are there for festivals in reimagining how to engage the public with the arts?

In attendance

Organisation	Contributor	Arts Practice/Artform area
Dublin Fringe Festival	Ruth McGowan (Chair)	Multi-Disciplinary Arts
Arts Council	Dr David Teevan (Moderator)	Festival Advisor to the Arts Council
Arts Council	Karl Wallace	Head of Festivals, Arts Council
Arts Council	Regina O'Shea	Festival and Venues Officer, Arts Council
Quiet Lights	Jonathan Pearson	Music
Borris Festival of Writing and Ideas	Hugo Jellett	Literature
Consairtín	Áine Hensey	Traditional Arts
Tipperary Dance Platform	Jazmin Chiodi and Alexandre Iseli	Dance

Classics Now	Helen Meany	Literature
Ennis Book Club Festival	Dani Gill	Literature
Bray Literary Festival	Tanya Farrelly	Literature
Poetry at Skerries Mills	Ernestine Woelgar	Literature
Limerick Jazz Festival	John Daly	Music
Cavan Arts Festival	Kim McCafferty	Multi-Disciplinary Arts
East Asia Film Festival	Maria O'Brien	Film
Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival	Caroline Conway	Multi-Disciplinary Arts
Wexford Literary Festival	Elizabeth Whyte	Literature
PhotoIreland Festival	Angel Luis Gonzalez	Visual Arts
Masters of Tradition	Clodagh Whelan	Traditional Arts
Open House Dublin	Karen Lee Walpole	Architecture
Franco Irish Literary Festival	Christine Weld	Literature
Wicklow Screen Dance Laboratory	Adrienne Brown	Dance
Architecture at the Edge	Frank Monahan	Architecture
Shorelines Arts Festival	Noelle Lynskey	Multi-Disciplinary Arts
Galway City Council	James Harrold	Local Authority Arts Officer

Clare County Council	Siobhan Mulcahy	Local Authority Arts Officer
Tipperary County Council	Melanie Scott	Local Authority Arts Officer
Roscommon County Council	Rhona McGrath	Local Authority Arts Officer

Minutes

David Teevan welcomed the participants and introduced himself.

He introduced Ruth McGowan, Director of Dublin Fringe Festival, who will facilitate the conversation.

This series of meetings started in February when the Arts Council ran the Change Makers conference in Limerick. 250 festival makers were brought together of all artforms and sizes. The interaction was incredibly important. One month later the landscape had changed completely due to Covid 19.

There have been 6 festival discussions 'curated conversations' which have taken place with a smaller group of festivals and themed particular to their practice. The four larger more general discussions, such as this one are to discuss the current challenges of presenting live and digital work in festivals. This is not knowledge that any one festival has, so this is a space to share concerns and knowledge. The learning will be open source and so the minutes of each session will be shared online.

Local Authority arts officers will join us for the conversation. They are very welcome.

Dr. Theresa Ryan and Dr. Bernadette Quinn from the Technical University of Dublin are also joining the meeting and are working on an EU funded project Festivals public space and cultural inclusion. Part of their research is learning about how festivals are responding to the COVID crisis. Attendees can contact David or Karl if they would prefer not to have their opinions included in the research although it will be general information and not attributed to any one person. They will also write a reflection on today's session.

Attendees were encouraged to use the chat forum and that chat would also be saved and shared.

Karl Wallace thanked everyone for attending the meeting today to discuss the challenges facing festival organisations at this time - festivals meetings such as these are critically important to the festivals sector and although there is a limited run of these sessions he encouraged the participants to exchange information with each other so they could keep talking to one another. He thanked both David and Ruth for moderating and facilitating the session, and all the preparation they put in to get to this point during what is a very busy time.

The Arts Council's interest in hosting these sessions is to provide an opportunity for festivals to meet and discuss the current challenges and opportunities arising from the Covid pandemic and also to gather intelligence from the festivals sector about how we can better support festivals in the short to medium term.

The Council's priority in festivals is to ensure there is a diverse ecology of festival practice taking place across the country. Festivals are seen not just as essential platforms for artists to showcase and develop work and for audiences to engage in the arts, but also as contributors to their local economies, their communities and for articulating their identities and histories.

There are at present just under 170 festival programmes supported by the Arts Council, of which about 130 are small to mid-scale in operation and take place across the country on islands, in villages and towns providing a vital diverse ecology of artform practice essential to local arts infrastructures and a necessary supply chain of arts experiences for the public. It is therefore the interest of the Council that these festivals find ways to sustain themselves in these very challenging times and continue to receive programmatic support.

To that end the Government's stimulus package for the arts will provide supports to ensure there is an effective response in supporting artists and organisations at this time. The detail of these supports will follow in due course and he encouraged the attendees to stay in touch with us about that.

In addition the Council has just approved and adopted a Festival's policy to run from this year until 2025 which outlines priorities of how festivals can build capacity and develop further, not just with AC support but also with the support of other public agencies. It is encouraging to see some local authority arts officer colleagues joining the meeting today as they play a vital role in sustaining and enabling festival projects. Their continued support during this particular time and into the future seems even more critical.

Thank you for being here today.

ACTION: The festivals policy will be published on the AC website in due course.

Ruth McGowan is the Director of Dublin Fringe Festival. The festival is 16 days and nights of a multi-disciplinary arts festival. In a normal year the festival would have many premieres. The festival team was thanked for convening the meeting and to everyone for coming. The meeting is to share goals, new problems and if there are any solutions to any of the problems discussed. Festival making is vital to the community and everyone in the meeting cares very much.

Provocation 1

Every festival is different, but all festivals are now working in an altered context. All of our plans and processes have been forced to change. How do we navigate the challenge of staying true to our festival's identity, while working in a new way?

Jazmine Chiodi and Alexandre Iseli – Tipperary Dance Platform and International Dance Festival

Their festival takes place in different towns so they use a number of different venues including libraries. They are mainly a dance festival but have film, workshops, discussion forums etc. Dance at a social distance during a pandemic is very difficult. They represent the voices of artists and it's their responsibility to deliver something to maintain their artists in some way. Their festival is going to take place on land and online. They will be cohosting the festival and will interconnect with other people but then foster the local artists. They don't have a lot of space for risk and so they cancelled the international visits but used digital to make a closer connection. Some of their events will be hosted live but at a reduced scale. They plan to hold masterclasses in several locations at the same time using Zoom interaction. Their idea is to keep a sense of locality. The challenge is to believe in it and that it will all work. Dialogue with partners and artists is extremely important on how can we adapt. You have to stay in touch all the time. They have a format but the formats are constantly shifting.

Comment: You must hold space with all that's important to your festival. Everyone is missing live. Digital erases geography.

Elizabeth Whyte – Wexford Literary Festival

They are using this time to take advantage of connecting with international artists. Colm McCann in New York is part of their digital programme who they might never have had the chance to book live. The challenge is working in zoom which is a format they have never used before. It has brought them a wider international audience and the chat is great for community spirit in the background but you need the knowledge on how to use it.

Maria O'Brien – East Asia Film Festival

They feel lucky that their festival can go online –They have 10 films to be shown. It is a good experience that they can go digital with IFI. Their festival is usually guest driven. They will be able to sell tickets at a reduced cost but don't have any way to know projected audience figures. They are expanding geographies and they may go hybrid in the future. The timing has worked out but they won't be able to get all the films they had programmed.

Comment: A crisis can be used for room to experiment and you may even decide to keep some things.

Noelle Lynskey – Shorelines Arts Festival

Their full festival programme had to be cancelled but they do plan on marking it in September. Digital does not work for Shorelines Arts Festival. They use small venues and are currently looking at a drive in concert. They are planning on celebrating locally and keeping the programme quite compact. The Visual arts programme works quite well outdoor. They just want to remind people they are here. They do have some questions around insurance policies for next year.

Comment: They might like to contact Cork Midsummer Festival who did an event last week that may be of interest to them.

Frank Monahan – Architecture at the Edge

Today is very useful. There is currently an issue that some Local Authorities have not clarified funding for festivals. This festival is about built environment in Galway. It's all about proximity and closeness. While things are opening up at the moment there is a possibility of a 2nd wave of Covid in October. The festival accesses buildings that are not normally open to the public. A huge part of it is the social aspect, meeting people and the general vibe of a place. We know public space impacts our lives but also so does creativity. They need to look now at trying to do something outside. They have been watching festivals online like Cork Midsummer Festival and Carlow Arts Festival but they need to connect with the public and take things out to the streets for peoples wellbeing and they feel that, that is their job.

Comment: At a recent Canadian meeting of festival maker's there were similar conversations taking place and these kinds of meetings were sited as the answers to finding solutions.

Caroline Conway – Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival

They have a couple of outdoor events. 'Window projects' is one where people take part in online workshops to create a piece of work and then it's exhibited in their windows. Another is building illuminations. This festival has always been a home coming festival and a big drinking festival. They do have a lot of worries about things that are out of their control, like crowds gathering outside. How do they know what is their responsibility. If they make a mistake it could be serious. They are programming art where people could die.

Comment: A lot of festivals have the same concerns. You can control a certain perimeter but not outside of it. And there are questions around what to do if there are large unexpected queues. Dublin Fringe Festival is working with venues and local authorities to unpack the responsibilities for their festival.

ACTION: Tipperary County Council had a gathering last week in which they are organising risk assessment planning around those considerations. It's going to be part of an online webinar and Melanie will feed back if anything comes out of it.

Comment: Festivals are resourceful by nature so if they knew the parameters they would find a way. Guidelines and packs are so useful.

Ernestine Woelgar – Poetry at Skerries Mills

This is a Fingal poetry and music festival and they will have a couple of real live events. They are still struggling with how many people you can you put in a venue. That number will determine their projected income. They suggested that it would be helpful if the Arts Council could see themselves as a lobby group to find out the social distance rules and feed out the concrete information. It would also be helpful if there was a risk assessment template for staff and audiences. It is a very big burden to be responsible for Health and Safety in these times.

Dani Gill – Ennis Book Club Festival

There are currently a number of meetings taking place with Val Ballance and the funded venues. This festival works closing with Glor. Ultimately changes in those venues will affect capacity and box office for festivals. There is a risk to public health and there will be a calculated risk for all of us in everything we do for the future. We will have to abide by government rules but could the Arts Council issue guidelines on how to deal with budgets in a reduced capacity situation.

KW responded to this question: The Arts Council cannot act as a lobbying body. The Arts Council funds Theatre Forum and as part of its activities produced guidelines for indoor venues which includes a roadmap for phased reopening. The guidelines are available on the Theatre Forum website and there are ongoing venues consultations with Anne Bonner taking place at the moment.

Another thing to note is that Event Industry Association is offering Covid Officer Training, Mary Kells is the contact there and it would be worth making contact with them. Also festivals should talk to their local authority arts officers regarding actions they are taking and the Covid officers appointed that are at their disposal.

Research into outdoor guidelines with other public agencies is ongoing.

ACTION: Karl will put up the contact details to the EAAI in the chat that will be circulated after the meeting.

Adrienne Brown – Wicklow Screen Dance Laboratory

This festival is live and dance on screen. It is a small and young festival and they are happy to be listening to the experience of people in the room. There is experience needed to become a digital festival and not just funding. A lot of venues don't have that experience and it is hard to physically manage the work involved. It would be good to hear that there is flexibility in becoming digital, and hopefully that there will be the same flexibility in returning to normal. Currently the digital space feels very crowded and it's difficult to be visible.

Comment: Conversation between festivals is key. At a meeting of Canadian festivals recently the question came up of where is the heart of a digital festival? But over these months festivals will gain so many skills and knowledge.

Question: Is there feedback from festivals that have gone online already? It is very hard to stay engaged. Are there cost benefits to people to engage?

Hugo Jellet - Borris Festival of Writing and Ideas

The Borris Festival of Writing and Ideas has been postponed until September. They did have one digital event and had 760 attendees. This is over twice what they would have done previously in audience figures but they felt that it didn't matter because they lost the atmosphere of their usual location.

Karen Lee Walpole – Open House Dublin

Open House Dublin knew quite quickly that they would have to cancel their festival as the idea is for them to take people into buildings. They needed to find a safe way to accommodate that if they were going to go ahead and so had to decide early on to cancel as they would have had to apply for their licenses. The situation changed rapidly and they decided to look at some sort of digital event in October. It has given them the opportunity to move partly online and still engage with architecture in the city. Karen has been watching as many online events as she can but it is quite difficult not to be at a live event. They feel they will have succeeded if they can get people to do a self-guided tour, but it is a big challenge. Programme wise it's a lot more work.

Comment: Not only are you trying to unbuild your planned festival but also building a new programme at the same time. It's an incredible amount of work for a voluntary festival maker.

Comment: Hybridity makes planning more future proof. It's important to note that festivals may have to take some steps back if a second wave of Covid hits. They need to be leaving space to stay nimble.

Áine Hensey – Consairtín

This is a concertina festival that takes place in Ennis. They were right in the eye of the storm and so had no choice but to cancel from the start. They didn't have time for any other options. They have since done 1 concert where the musicians recorded remotely and they set up YouTube channel. The reason for doing it was to try and keep a connection with their audience. They felt lucky that they got in before online saturation. Their online audience was 10 times more than they would have had at their live festival but didn't feel that you could equate the two. It would

be very different to keep the festival going like that as people want to be around the town and their Venue is a huge part of the festival.

Angel Luis Gonzalez – PhotoIreland Festival

They have announced their online and offline programme of events. Further financial offerings would be helpful. Positively their festival is strongly connected to Europe and this situation has given them the opportunity to have more partners and different people to attend. It is a challenge but they feel that photography doesn't rely on being a live event although this year they had planned on pushing live events but the change is a challenge.

Tanya Farrelly – Bray Literary Festival

Bray Literary Festival is being run as a hybrid festival this year and will include some interviews and panels. They are sacrificing live audience for the artists. There will be a small private audience and hopefully that will reduce some of the risks. Filming the festival and broadcasting the 3 – 4 days and editing is a large extra cost if they were to pay a professional. They are in the lucky position that they have a voluntary cameraman who wants to do this to add to his portfolio. It would have been €1,000s extra in budgets if you included 3 – 4 days filming, editing and uploading.

Question: Does anyone have any guidelines for a festival due to take place in November for a festival that needs 80% capacity to break even.

Comment: There is currently an issue on what to do when your digital costs are higher than artist's fees. It's a conflicted situation.

Kim McCafferty – Cavan Arts Festival

They are a young festival and Kim is also part of the National Circus Festival due to take place in November. She suggested making contact with Jonathan from Quiet Lights as their festival is also November and they could share information. Their festival has artists that tour with physical theatre/circus and so they had to cancel. They were quickly aware of the financial and mental health worries for their artists. They created employment for artists by performing once a week in the car park of nursing homes and this allowed them to pay them. The artists get to see each other every week from a social distance. Their priority was to find emergency ways of

creating work. They are a young committee but aware that the demographic for older people has been forgotten. They are currently trying to figure out what to do and are looking at a 'cycle in' as it's better for the environment. They've been working closely with Spraoi who are making new work that has to be for passing audiences.

Provocation 2

We are thinking both practically and philosophically about festival making in a time of pandemic, balancing solving immediate problems with future proof planning. What do you need in the next six months to do your work? (From key partners, from funders etc.) What actions would be useful to you in the short term?

- Clear guidance on Insurance
- Is there a way that there could be a state indemnity that protects festivals if they are working within the guidelines?
- Clear understanding around what is a festivals responsibility in relation to crowd control, health and safety.
- Financial support – information on the additional money from the Department
- Training
- Would it be possible to partner with RTE so that they could host some of the work made?

ACTION: KW will check in with AOIFE as they were making representations to the department around insurance, licensing and restrictions.

Provocation 3

What do you need in the next year to do your work? (What should we be asking our partners and funders for in the medium term? What are the resources or skills you feel you need to adapt and thrive?)

- Certainty around continued Arts Council funding
- Training opportunities
- Guidance on costs relating to digitising a festival
- Information on copyright issues for online work

Karl Wallace and David Teevan thanked everyone for a great exchange, for their time and knowledge and also to Ruth for chairing.

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