

PLAYGERS MATTER

An Arts Council / Local Government
Conference arising from the
Framework for Collaboration
agreement

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Bailey Allen Hall, NUI Galway

BUILDING INCLUSION IN THE ARTS

Orlaith McBride, Ann Doherty

[ORLAITH MCBRIDE] You're all very welcome to the Bailey Allen Hall at NUIG, my name is Orlaith McBride I'm the director of the Arts Council and together with our colleagues from the County and City Management Association we are thrilled and delighted to be here this morning for our second conference; Places Matter, building inclusion in the arts.

It's the second conference that we've had with local government under our Framework for Collaboration agreement. Our first Places Matter conference talked about the arts and places such as the cities and towns and villages and urban and rural communities, the places where we live. This conference explores places in a much broader context, such as our place in society and within community, where we place our values and priorities and how we place and position the arts within our diverse contemporary Ireland.

Building inclusion in the arts refers to the Arts Council and local government's joint priority of social inclusion in the arts. In 2019 together both the Arts Council and local government will invest approximately €115 million in the arts right across Ireland. This is a significant investment and one that we have been developing for over 30 years.

34 years ago when Clare County Council in partnership with the Arts Council appointed the first ever local authority arts officer, Ireland was a very different place. It was a time that Ireland was in the depth of a recession, when we had huge unemployment and emigration and it was only 60 years since the formation of the Irish State.

We were struggling for identity, the articulation and recognition of Irish culture was tied into our struggle for independence as we entered into the 20th century. We were perhaps so preoccupied with Irish national and cultural identity that we overlooked that Ireland has always been a diverse country with a multiplicity of ethnic and cultural communities.

The report the Arts Council commissioned back in 2009 *Cultural Diversity and the Arts* reminded us that sometimes we presume that diversity is a new challenge for a society that was previously homogeneous; we were never all the same!

But dominant societal discourse obsessed with national identity gave way to white privilege in this country. It gave way to the arts being seen as elitist, predominantly a white middle class pursuit for both artists and audiences. While pockets of excellence around the country were and are challenging that discourse, there is more that we can all do.

And I include the Arts Council in that statement, there is more that we can do and that we will do. Last night we launched our *Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy* here in Galway, the most multicultural city in Ireland and in it we committed to taking actions over the course of the next five years to actively deepen our understanding of the inequality in the arts and develop substantive ways to address these inequalities. We recognise that our policy must be embedded from the outset in our own institutional structures and practices and we will work towards ensuring that our board, our staff our visitors and panellists best reflect and represent the diversity of contemporary Ireland.

We are committed to a proactive and focused approach to guaranteeing that everyone who lives in Ireland has the opportunity to engage with and participate in the arts. Through our ten year strategy *Making Great Art Work* we are focused on ensuring that public investment in the arts reaches and benefits all sections of our society.

We will work with arts organisations to help and inspire and encourage programming and projects that are relevant for all members of our society, irrespective of origin, place of residence, religious belief, economic or social background.

Inequality exists because of historical and existing structures that continually propagate it. Many of us here have not experienced it; but there are also many in this room who have. It is the collective responsibility of those who have not experienced it, to recognise it and to take action. Otherwise we'll continue to propagate inequality, injustice and exclusion.

Our national and local policies recognise that arts and culture have an important role to play in promoting tolerance, inclusivity and social cohesion in our increasingly diverse society.

Today we'll ask what does that look like in practice? Today we'll break open the conversation, reflect on our own work, and ask ourselves some challenging questions.

Our conference chair, Dr Ronit Lentin has had a long career in challenging discriminatory discourse in Ireland and internationally and we are delighted to have her at the helm as she guides the conversation throughout the day. We warmly welcome your presence and involvement today and we hope you will leave inspired, informed and committed to make a change in your practices and in your policies.

I'm now going to hand over to my colleague Ann Doherty, who is the chief executive of Cork City Council, and is the chair of Management Liaison Group of the County and City Management Association that we work with very closely as part of our Framework for Collaboration agreement, thank you very much and enjoy the day.

[ANN DOHERTY] Good morning. Great to see so many people out bright and early on a beautiful day in a most fantastic setting here in the university campus in Galway. As Orlaith set out in her contribution, we have a very strong partnership between local government and the Arts Council. It is a really important partnership and as Orlaith said, 34 years ago these conversations weren't happening in the way that they are happening today. But they are happening today.

Each local authority is committed to the arts and has invested in the arts, with our colleagues in the room who are Arts Officers right across local authorities in Ireland. I'm here on behalf of my colleagues, the Chief Executives of all of the local authorities and we want to express a warm welcome to you to this really exciting event; it's difficult, different and it's diverse and that's why it's important.

The importance of the work of our Arts Officers and what happens in our areas is huge. The bringing of arts to everybody is what we are all committed to doing, that's why the agenda between the Arts Council and local government is so important, it's that bringing together of national and local agencies to ensure that we reach more people, that we have better public engagement, that we support more artists and that we work our partnership for the benefit of everybody.

Our partnership agreement has a work plan that goes with it, today is part of that partnership, and this year we are also working on the venues review and developing partnership agreements between local authorities and the Arts Council to ensure that what we do is joined up and of benefit, because every local authority is at a different place.

Local authorities have a huge role in inclusivity; we are the only organisation in the country that has a democratic mandate through County Councils, representing the people who voted for them. Our community role is something that is at the heart of what we do, it has been strengthened recently through the development of the LCDC, the creation of economic and community plans, creation of PPM's which are all set to strengthen community involvement in what happens in their neighbourhoods and in their places.

Local authorities support and drive those agendas with communities to ensure that everybody has equal access to what is happening in their community.

Our place in the arts is well recognised, Orlaith spoke about our investment and investment is important; I believe equally important is the participation of citizens and not everything that we do needs huge investment, not disparaging or recognising the need for investment, but the importance of communities to have the opportunity to experience the arts is as important as investment.

Local authorities have been very committed through our local elected representatives when they vote for budgets every year to support the arts as part of that engagement with the community.

I think that it's very important to reflect on the title of this conference, it talks about place and place matters, and place means different things to different people, but for all of us who now call Ireland our home, place is really, really important. It's a place of neighbourhoods, a place of inclusion, local authorities have had a very strong and active role in ensuring that there is inclusivity in our communities and in our places.

We work on an interagency basis, across many challenging areas in terms of ensuring that communities have inclusivity be it from LGBT communities, Traveller communities, people

who experience homelessness or other areas, and ensuring that they have a place at the table to influence and ensure that their community and their place is really powerful.

When I was thinking about today and what would I like everybody to leave with at the end of today... what I would like everybody to leave with is that sense of we can all make a difference. We're going to be challenged, I hope, by our fantastic speakers today, who will give us some new thinking, who may challenge our own thinking. We can leave with a collective movement that says that we're going to do things differently and maybe think a little bit differently about how we deliver the different things that we do in our place.

I finally want to compliment the organising committee; the programme is fantastic and I know that these things don't just happen by accident, a lot of hard work goes into it, so I do want to acknowledge the organising committee and I do want to call out one person and that's Sinéad O'Reilly, I know that without somebody driving everybody to make it happen, none of us would be here today.

So my next task is to introduce a very special lady, her name is Dr Sindy Joyce. She's a human rights activist and doctoral graduate at the Department of Sociology at the University of Limerick. Her research interests include direct and indirect forms of racism, ethnicity, identity, production of space related inequalities. Sindy was successful in winning a Research Council of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship Scheme with a score of 95.5%. I know that we'll give her very warm welcome to the stage and we look forward to her contribution.