

Response ID ANON-K6D3-UQW6-B

Submitted to Public consultation on the ACNI new ten-year strategy (2024 to 2034)

Submitted on 2024-03-29 17:27:16

Introduction

In what capacity are you responding to this consultation?

Other (please specify below)

Other::

Rural Community Network NI

ACNI Strategy - Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)

Do you feel the final draft strategy will have any adverse or negative impacts on one or more of the Section 75 groups, that have not already been identified?

Impact on S75 groups - Religious belief:

Don't Know

Impact on S75 groups - Political opinion:

Don't Know

Impact on S75 groups - Racial group:

Don't Know

Impact on S75 groups - Age:

Don't Know

Impact on S75 groups - Marital status:

Don't Know

Impact on S75 groups - Sexual orientation:

Don't Know

Impact on S75 groups - Gender:

Don't Know

Impact on S75 groups - Disability, D/deaf and neurodivergent:

Don't Know

Impact on S75 groups - Dependents:

Don't Know

If you answered 'yes' to any of the groups above, indicate what action you think should be taken to reduce or eliminate any adverse impacts on the group identified. :

We welcome the section included in the EQIA on rural proofing. The table included analysing the breakdown of awards to arts organisations and individual artists by Local Authority area is welcome but would have been enhanced by including a breakdown of spend by ACNI in Local Authority areas. RCN suggests that ACNI undertake further analysis of the access challenges of S75 groups in rural areas who must cope with additional barriers of distance from provision and poor public transport.

STRATEGY - Mission, Vision, Values

To what extent do you agree with the mission, vision and values?

Agree

Do you have any further comments on the mission, vision and values?

Comments on mission, vision and values:

- RCN largely agrees with the Mission, Vision and Values expressed, however we would raise the following points:
- Whilst we support the intention of the mission, vision and values our reflection is that more concrete actions need to be taken by ACNI to realise its mission and vision. In our discussions with member groups who are involved in grass roots work on the Arts in rural communities their perception of the Arts Council was as a "funder" who was not aware of the work they were involved in. Comments included the Arts Council is a faceless organisation and we don't know the staff who work there.
- When ACNI fund projects in rural areas they don't visit them or engage with their work.

- RCN is of the view that the mission and vision should include a reference to supporting and promoting excellence in the Arts. It should also include a reference to the role of the Arts in reflecting our society back to us.
- Advocate for increased investment
- The mission and vision should reference the need to offer support to individual artists.
- Although not referenced in the strategic plan we believe that the ACNI strategy should include a statement in the values section on the need to protect the right of artists and arts organisations to protest and dissent. This is important as an increasingly intolerant attitude by the UK government towards protest and dissent by artists has developed in the past decade. The recent controversy over Arts Council England issuing guidance to funded organisations to advise them to avoid activist or political activity as it could be perceived as being in conflict with the public funding of culture represents an encroachment on the rights of artists to freedom of political expression.

STRATEGY - Outcomes

Outcome 1

To what extent do you agree with Outcome 1?

Agree

Outcome 2

To what extent do you agree with Outcome 2?

Agree

Outcome 3

To what extent do you agree with Outcome 3?

Agree

Outcome 4

To what extent do you agree with Outcome 4?

Strongly agree

Outcome 5

To what extent do you agree with Outcome 5?

Strongly agree

Outcome 6

To what extent do you agree with Outcome 6?

Strongly agree

Do you have any further comments on the outcomes or actions?

Further comments on outcomes and actions:

Outcome 1: A more financially stable arts sector

- ACNI needs to fight for more money for the Arts to thrive in Northern Ireland they need to communicate and celebrate successes better. Spend per head on Arts provision in Northern Ireland needs to rise, ideally it should double to align with spend per head across these islands.
- RCN believes ACNI should strive for a fairer spread of Arts funding across Northern Ireland. Smaller rural towns are thriving hubs of creativity but need support. Comment on Table looking at spend across Councils
- We agree that there needs to be a more financially stable Arts sector but how will this be achieved? From speaking to member groups, the Arts are integral to life in NI and in rural areas, they are shaped by the people and places we live work and visit.
- According to Thrive NI research, we know that over 90% of people in Northern Ireland engage in arts and culture. This includes everything from attending a concert, to going to a gallery, to drawing a doodle, singing in their leisure time, or reading a book
- Groups we have spoken to believe ACNI need to advocate for more for funding for the Arts at government level.
- We agree that it's important to collect and analyse statistics on the financial status of arts organisations. ACNI should also collect and analyse data on the range of community groups who undertake arts programmes. Research also needs to be undertaken on the financial status of individual artists and how that impacts on their practice and career in the Arts here.
- Groups we spoke to would encourage ACNI to share the impact the arts has on good relations, cultural diversity, building partnerships, cross border relationships.
- Groups we spoke to would encourage ACNI to lobby the government for a commitment on multi-annual funding for the Arts in Northern Ireland, to align with funding practice across these islands.

Outcome 2: Sector that develops and looks after its' people and is more inclusive

- We agree that ACNI should foster the right conditions to grow artistic talent and develop the wider arts workforce. ACNI should also consider how it can model this commitment to inclusivity by working towards a Board that is more representative of diversity across Northern Ireland.
- We are in favour of additional support beyond grant funding and would encourage ACNI to prioritise the development of networking opportunities for rural based community group representatives, artists, makers and creatives who can share learning, knowledge and support to create a thriving rural arts environment. We would encourage the development of mentoring schemes and collaborations across sectors here to ensure the arts reaches other sectors such as health, education and environment.
- The groups we spoke to would like to see ACNI broaden its approach to the Arts, reflecting on local arts practice in communities embedded in our culture and heritage including storytelling and traditional dance and music. The Arts in rural areas are transformational when they reflect our places and spaces in which we live, work and play.
- Groups we spoke to have found ACNI application processes difficult and highlighted the SIAP and REAP application processes as problematic. A more developmental approach to funding project ideas/proposals would be welcome. Creating a more streamlined, accessible application process that reflects the level of funding groups/individuals are applying for would be welcomed and in turn would create a route into funding for new and emerging artists.
- ACNI should develop a database and accompanying app. that would map artists across Northern Ireland so that community groups are aware of local facilitators for art related projects.
- Groups were interested to know if the evaluation for REAP funding for the first two years (2022/2023) had helped shape the new 10-year strategy? A number of groups we spoke to had received REAP funding but were keen to know how others experienced the funding opportunities. They were also keen to know if the REAP programme will be retained and developed.
- We would be keen to see the Arts Council become more embedded in the Arts in rural areas, visiting community groups/artists to see what is happening on the ground and what the meaning of Art is in rural communities.
- The strategy raises the issue concerning artists being asked to provide their work for little or no compensation but does not detail how ACNI proposes to do to address this issue. We would suggest that joint work with sister Arts organisations in the devolved regions, with the UK government and at EU level will be required to address this global trend.
- Groups we spoke to said that the scarcity of artist/creator spaces in many rural communities was stifling the Arts in rural areas. ACNI should seek to partner with local Councils to develop a pilot scheme to support the development of artist/creator spaces in rural towns. There is currently a great initiative in Omagh Library where they are offering free art spaces to Artists for one year. Many town centres across Northern Ireland are seeing increasing vacancy and, in some cases, dereliction. There is potential to address this by repurposing obsolete retail space into spaces for artists and arts organisations. The reference in the strategic plan to "Supporting Rural Artists" is welcome, but this needs more financial commitment from ACNI.
- The arts is not just about a "tourist product" for Belfast. The arts is about reflecting how we see ourselves as a society.
- The priority to refresh and develop a Rural Forum for artists to engage is a positive but RCN would like to have seen more detail on what the purpose and intention of a Rural Forum would be and who would be invited to sit on such a forum.

Outcome 3: Better supported to develop through experimentation and innovation

- Groups we spoke to felt that the ACNI view of what the Arts are can be too narrow, rather than being open to the Arts developing and manifesting over time. It was clear from conversations with rural communities that the Arts are multifaceted and organic in nature. In rural areas, the Arts are embedded into our environment, place, our heritage and our identities. We would encourage the Arts Council to be more open minded on project proposals from rural people who see the Arts as being embedded into community and place.
- Our respondents were keen that ACNI were open to the Arts evolving here welcoming new comers to rural areas and the skills and artistic expression they bring to enhance the cultural diversity within our rural communities.
- We would encourage ACNI to value the traditions in rural arts around traditional craft, skills, poetry, storytelling/spoken word, music and dance so that rural communities feel their rural arts are valued and acknowledged.
- Our respondents would like to see ACNI acknowledge the problems of years of underfunding in the sector and the culture of fear and competitiveness that has resulted. Rural artists/makers/creatives told us they feel undervalued.
- We would encourage ACNI to be innovative with their future funding to encourage collaboration and connection. For example a mens' shed might work with a choir or a group of rural artists could support youth groups in desperate need of programming and events for young people at risk.
- Our member groups encourage ACNI to put in place a policy that stipulates that any organisations/community groups that receive funding must employ artists at agreed hourly rates so that artists receive fair wages for the work they undertake.
- We encourage ACNI to be mindful of the difference between events and art programmes that are run in rural areas compared to larger cities and towns where population is greater. Art events have a positive impact in rural areas and might not necessarily attract the same footfall as city events, but our member groups would encourage ACNI to research the impact these events have on rural areas in relation to economic growth, impact on mental health, isolation in rural areas and community cohesion.
- The Strategic plan states on pp16. "Committed to prioritizing creating an environment that encourages experimentation, supports innovation and fosters the development of new artistic forms". Whilst this is welcome RCN would ask how this will be realised in our rural communities?
- Networking and connections is identified as a key activity to enable innovation and artistic risk taking in the Arts sector but how will that networking and making connections work happen across NI to include rural artists and arts organisations? This will require additional resourcing in rural Northern Ireland to bring artists and arts organisations together.

Outcome 4: A sector that contributes to social and economic benefits, and cares about the environment.

- RCN agrees that participation in the arts as a hobby or as part of the community fosters creativity and overall well-being and would urge ACNI to work with rural arts organisations to bring forward practical actions to extend participation in rural communities? Rural is underrepresented in funding despite the important contribution of rural life to arts and culture in Northern Ireland. There are countless examples of arts inspired by and originating from rural communities. Within the report 100 Stories published by Thrive NI, research in predominantly rural council areas found that respondents would like to see more art events happening in their local rural areas, rather than having to visit the cities or large towns. This also would cut fuel emissions and transport to events further away for rural people.
- Linen Biennale was a positive example of a themed approach that combined Arts and local heritage. The Linen Museum worked with a wide range of local groups and devised a diverse programme of activities that attracted a broad cross section of people across a wide swathe of rural NI but particularly in the Lagan and Bann catchments. This themed approach with flexible programming worked well and that type of approach should be used to attract new audiences.

- It was acknowledged that ACNI budget of £10 million was a limited funding pot and that the Arts sector had been continuously defunded over the past decade. Artistic excellence is important but rural groups felt that they were not getting a fair crack of the whip.
- Groups reflected on the transient nature of arts provision in rural communities. One group shared their experience of receiving community arts funding for a programme with a professional artist which involved four creative sessions. Whilst the experience was positive for participants the limited resource available meant the project finished too quickly and created a demand for further work which the group could not provide.
- There was some positive feedback for the ACNI REAP programme which offered support for Arts programming in rural NI. However, this was tempered by feedback from some groups who were awarded funding in year one but were turned down in year two. This group said they were unlikely to apply again and had received limited feedback on why they had been turned down and how they could improve any subsequent application.
- Funding targeted using the NI Multiple Deprivation indicators does not work for rural applicants who cannot compete on this criterion against groups from Belfast, Derry or other settlements with areas where deprivation is spatially concentrated. There are many deprived households in rural communities, but they are dispersed amongst households that are less deprived so are masked by averages. We agree that ACNI should target new audiences and participants who have been excluded due to socio-economic status but need to use different methods to identify and target such households in rural communities. Most groups in rural communities are volunteer led and can find it difficult to compete with groups led by paid staff.
- ACNI should also consider a different range of indicators of participation in rural communities. In many rural areas communities are less diverse with fewer BAME residents so criteria to judge inclusivity in rural should focus more on participation based on age, gender, deaf and disabled persons, socio-economic background, LGBT etc.
- Local programming for rural communities on a more sustained basis would make a better contribution to socio/economic development than large events which may draw tourists or other visitors but have relatively little participation from rural communities.
- The climate emergency and carbon footprint of ACNI is referenced as a priority to address. It's unclear what this will mean for arts provision in rural areas where people travel longer distances to access arts programming and public transport options are often non-existent. ACNI will need to develop their thinking around this issue in partnership with rural artists and arts organisations.

Outcome 5 More people from all backgrounds can enjoy arts experiences

- RCN welcomes the recognition of "Rural" as an underrepresented group. We recommend that ACNI undertake further work to develop priorities and actions to address this.
- Funding targeted using the NI Multiple Deprivation Indicator does not work for rural applicants who cannot compete on this criterion against groups from Belfast, Derry or other settlements with areas where deprivation is spatially concentrated. There are many deprived households in rural communities but they are dispersed amongst households that are less deprived so are masked by averages. We agree that ACNI should target new audiences and participants who have been excluded due to socio-economic status but need to use different methods to identify and target such households in rural communities. Most groups in rural communities are volunteer led and can find it difficult to compete with groups led by paid staff.
- ACNI should also consider a different range of indicators of participation in rural communities. In many rural areas communities are less diverse with fewer BAME residents so criteria to judge inclusivity in rural should focus more on participation based on: age, gender, deaf and disabled persons, socio-economic background, LGBT etc.
- ACNI needs to better incentivise communities and volunteer led groups in rural areas to get involved in arts development work. It must be seen as possible and achievable for volunteer led groups.
- Groups recognised the necessity for online access and programming which emerged during the pandemic and which responded to the circumstances at that time. However, Arts organisations operating in rural communities need to provide programming which delivers in person so that connections between people are made to address loneliness and social isolation – online programming doesn't offer that.
- The Draft Strategic Plan acknowledges that physical distance in rural communities is a barrier to access but the activities and priorities don't appear to address this key barrier. Section 75 groups living in rural communities have the additional barrier of physical distance and poor public transport infrastructure to overcome to access arts provision.
- ACNI should consider developing Rural Arts Animators to encourage new groups to facilitate arts programming in their communities. A positive example of this type of approach was a recent project offered by Film Hub NI where they showed feature films in small community halls and this was cited as a model of good practice. The project involved Film Hub NI bringing projection equipment and a film and the local group providing the premises and undertaking publicity and promotion which led to a successful event.

Outcome 6 A sector that is more valued across society and government

- Levelling up money isn't working for capital investment in Arts venues in Northern Ireland and ACNI and the Assembly need to work better together to challenge this and ensure our share of Levelling Up funding is leveraged.
- There is a need to better capture the value of the Arts to rural communities and the crucial volunteer contribution
- There has been a historic deficit in Arts provision in rural communities but in spite of that the ACNI needs to be more aware of the depth and breadth of Arts provision across rural communities provided by local artists and community organisations.
- ACNI funding needs to prioritise programming for local people in local areas rather than focus on the needs of visitors in to events from Belfast or from further afield.
- ACNI staff, and funding officers in particular, need to be more present in rural communities. Local community organisations want to build better relationships with ACNI. The REAP programme which seemed like an exciting new departure for the Arts in rural communities was disappointing. Groups reflected on a relatively detailed application process for a modest investment. For groups who were subsequently turned down for REAP more feedback from ACNI was required on how they could improve subsequent applications.
- Concern was expressed that volunteer led groups start to follow the funding and become corralled into funding streams rather than what they really want to do which, in effect, thwarts their creativity.
- ACNI should explore the potential of a more developmental approach to funding applications for Volunteer/rural led groups

STRATEGY - Actions

What would you view as the 3 most important themes associated with the draft final ten-year strategy?

A more financially stable arts sector, A sector that develops, looks after its people and is more inclusive, A sector that is more valued across society and government

In the event that we need to better understand some of the responses collected, would you be willing to be contacted by the Arts Council to discuss your responses? Please note that your response will be treated as strictly confidential.

Yes

About you

What is your gender identity?

Not Answered

Preferred description:

Responding on behalf of an organisation

What age bracket do you fall into?

Prefer Not To Say

How would you describe yourself?

Not Answered

What is your ethnicity?

Not Answered

Other ethnic group not specified above::

Responding on behalf of an organisation

What is your sexuality?

Not Answered

Preferred description :

Responding on behalf of an organisation

How did you find out about this consultation?

Word of Mouth

Please specify other: