

*DESIGNING
OFFALY'S ARTS
STRATEGY*

2024 -2028

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THE PROCESS

The Approach – Engaging, Listening, Building on Success

This strategy was developed through a programme of consultation supported and guided by the Arts Office, informed by the extensive research undertaken by the Office in recent years, and guided by the relevant local and national policies.

The approach was informed throughout by the principles of Design Thinking, as set out in the *Action Plan for Designing Better Public Services (Prepared by the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, 2023)*.

The data, insights, and opinions collected through the consultation process were compared to the previous strategy (*Inspire Imagine, Involve 2018 -2022*) to identify what goals had been achieved, what goals needed to continue into the current plan, and what new goals needed to be set.

The Methodology

In keeping with the Action Plan for Designing Better Public Services there were Four phases to the work:

Discover

- Analysing and Summarising the socio-economic context, the wider policy environment, and the existing research.
- Engaging with and listening to key stakeholders.

Define

- Understanding and formulating the challenge that the strategy must address.

Develop

- Designing a strategic response to the challenge based on the ideas, insights and concerns of the stakeholders

Deliver

- Establishing high level objectives, actions, and goals in such a way that delivery can be measured and impact assessed.

Discover

A profile of County Offaly: People & Place

Administrative region

In the context of the regional assembly areas, County Offaly is located within the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, along with 11 other areas/counties that include: Dublin City, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, South Dublin, Fingal, Wicklow, Kildare, Meath, Louth, Laois, Westmeath and Longford. The counties of Offaly, Laois, Westmeath and Longford form one section of the Midland Strategic Planning Area. County Offaly is a member of the designated EU NUTS II Eastern and Midlands region of Ireland.

The County Council has Municipal Districts in Birr, Tullamore and Edenderry. Tullamore is the county town and the administrative centre of Co. Offaly and is designated as a Key Town Under the Regional Spatial & Economic Strategy.

Geography

Offaly's land extent is approximately 493,985 acres (199,981 hectares). It is primarily a county of flat and undulating lands, with the exception of the Slieve Bloom Mountains. Other significant features include the River Shannon (and Callows) running along the western boundary of the county; the River Brosna, a tributary of the Shannon; the Grand Canal which traverses the county; as well as important archaeological and historical sites such as Clonmacnoise, Durrow and, an extinct volcano, Croghan Hill. A comprehensive system of eskers is mainly concentrated in the northwest and centre of the county.

Approximately one fifth of the county is peatland, with the majority of land being used for a mix of agriculture and forestry. In recent times, some peatland areas have been developed as key educational and cultural amenities. Peatlands have traditionally been a significant asset to Offaly in terms of an energy resource and a source of employment, but in recent years as an amenity, tourism attraction, and educational resource.

These developments have replaced the traditional usage of peat extraction as the main source of combustible energy, which had assured employment opportunities for generations of Offaly people. The best known examples of these transformational and renewal programmes include Clara Bog, which is of international scientific and educational significance, being over 50% of the remaining uncut raised bog in North West Europe. Also, Lough Boora Discovery Park is a prime example of a cutaway bog area that has been developed as a high value, bio-diverse, environmental and cultural amenity that now incorporates Offaly's highly regarded Sculpture Park.

Offaly also has a well-developed network of towns and villages. The county is well served by strategic road access and a rail line with stations in Tullamore, Clara and Portarlinton. Offaly's central location, good connectivity and quality of life make it a great place to live and work. There is a wealth of attractions in the County including the Grand Canal, Durrow, Croghan Hill, Clonmacnoise, Birr Castle, Gardens and Science Centre, Tullamore D.E.W. Visitor Centre and Lough Boora Discovery Park.

Demographics

According to the 2022 Census figures the population of Offaly stands at 83,150 of which 41,522 reported themselves as female and 41,628 reported as male This is an increase of 5,189 (7%) on 2016 figures.

There are 17,167 children aged from 0 to 14 years, 5,623 (33%) of which were in childcare in keeping with the national average. There were 5,819 young people from 15 – 19 years, and 4,569 young people aged 20 - 24. Almost a third of the population is between 0 and 24.

The average age is currently 39, this is above the national average of 38.8 and above the 2016 average for the county of 37.2.

The population is aging. There are 7,452 people aged between 65 and 74, and 5,506 people over 75. The number of people over 65 stands at 22% (12,958). Approximately 15% of the population is 65 and over.

Non-Irish citizens accounted for 9% of the county's population (lower than the national number of 12%). There are 1,972 (2.4% of the population) with dual citizenship, this is an increase from 1,130 in 2016.

28,231 people are Irish speakers with 586 people speaking Irish daily, and 1,536 people speaking Irish monthly, accounting for almost a third of the population.

The percentage of people who feel that their health was good or very good dropped to 83%, down from 86% in 2016. This is in keeping with a national trend.

There were 35,248 people (aged 15 and over) at work in 2022, that's an increase of 16% between 2016 and 2022. 24% of the workforce (8,324 people aged 15 and over) worked from home at least one day a week.

In 2022 72% of households owned their own home, with a further 22% renting. This compared with 66% of households owning their home nationally and 28% renting.

Economy

According to Census 2022 almost 50% (40,903) of Offaly's population resides in the larger towns of Tullamore (15,598), Birr (4,726), Edenderry (7,888), Clara (3,403) and Portarlinton (9,288). However, the county remains predominantly rural in nature, with 79% of the rural population (33,506 persons) residing in the open countryside or small settlements (LECP 2023 -2028).

The 2022 Pobal Deprivation Index ranks Offaly as Marginally Below Average with a score of - 3.95 (an improvement on the previous score of -4.58). However, according to the latest Socio-Economic and Demographic Profile of the county the index is "...possibly under-representing the level of deprivation in rural areas". The report identifies 8 very disadvantaged and 54 disadvantaged Small Areas (SAs) in the county.

The level of unemployment in Offaly remains higher than the national average, but those numbers are improving.

Mindful of all of the above, a key activity within this strategy is to work with our partners in each district to develop ambitious and sustainable programmes that engage and support marginalised, hard

to reach, and deprived groups. We also acknowledge that over 33% of the population are under 24 and so we will work with all partners to develop ambitious and sustainable programmes that engage and support children and young people, and we acknowledge that approximately 33% of the population speak Irish and that we will work with all partners to develop and support the arts in Irish.

Local and National Policy Context

Arts, Culture, and Creative Industries

The Arts Office and the Local Authority are required to develop strategy and plans within an increasingly complex policy environment. Within that policy environment the terms “arts, culture and creative industries” have become almost interchangeable, and both the role of the arts – and the role of the arts office - and the justification for public funding have shifted.

In order to make a coherent and focused Arts Strategy we need be clear on what is meant by “the arts”.

- “The Arts” are a set of very specific practices that people engage in (e.g. performing, composing, writing, painting, etc. as set out in the Arts Act 2003).
- “Culture” is how a group of people thinks and behaves and what it believes in.
- “Creative Industries” is a cluster of businesses built on copyright exploitation (either through licencing of rights or the ability to copy and distribute objects/services/experiences in which copyright is owned).

These three categories overlap and are interdependent: the arts express the culture, and sometimes specific arts activities can be an input into businesses within the Creative Industries, but the distinction between the three is important if strategy is to be focused and effective. The expertise and responsibility of the Arts Office is with “The Arts”.

The New Culture Policy Framework

There are clear themes running through the policy environment, and they are effectively summarised in *Culture 2025 - Éire Ildánach: A Framework Policy to 2025* which states that:

“Culture 2025 is underpinned by certain key values:

- The intrinsic value of culture.
- The value of arts, culture and heritage to our lives and our communities.
- The right of everyone to participate in the cultural and creative life of the nation.
- The value of creativity to individual and collective wellbeing.
- The importance of the Irish language, our cultural heritage, folklore, games, music and the uniqueness of our Gaeltacht areas.
- The value of cultural diversity, informed by the many traditions and social backgrounds that constitute contemporary Ireland.
- The value of culture as a means of fostering a more sustainable future for Ireland, including through economic, environmental and social policy.
- The value of culture in presenting Ireland to the world.”

Culture 2025 is a National *Culture* Policy. It acknowledges that artistic practice has value in and of itself, has value in terms of individual and community identity and development, contributes to economic, environmental and social policy, and contributes to diplomacy and international brand identity.

The values and assumptions underpinning Culture 2025 are embedded across the wider policy environment.

Legislation

The Arts Act 2003 replaces the Arts Acts of 1973 and 1951. The purpose of the act is

“to promote the development of and participation in the arts...to continue in being An Comhairle Ealaíon; to confer certain functions in relation to the arts on the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism...”. (emphasis added)

The act defines “The Arts” as

“any creative or interpretative expression (whether traditional or contemporary) in whatever form, and includes, in particular, visual arts, theatre, literature, music, dance, opera, film, circus and architecture, and includes any medium when used for those purposes;”

The act mandates local authorities to

“prepare and implement plans for the development of the arts within its functional area and ... take account of policies of the Government in relation to the arts.”

Regarding funding of the Arts by local authorities the act states that:

“A local authority may provide such financial or other assistance as it considers appropriate to such persons or in respect of such activities, projects or undertakings, for the purposes of—

- (a) stimulating public interest in the arts,
- (b) promoting knowledge, appreciation and practice of the arts, or
- (c) improving standards in the arts,”

The Arts Act 2003 makes no specific mention of, or provision for, artists.

Local Government Act 2001

Section 66.3 (a) of this act states that

“a local authority may take such measures, engage in such activities or do such things in accordance with law (including the incurring of expenditure) as it considers necessary or desirable to promote the interests of the local community”.

And section 66.4 (f, g) states that the local authority may

“(f) upon and subject to such terms and conditions as the authority considers appropriate, provide assistance in money or in kind (including the provision of prizes and other incentives) in respect of the organisation or promotion of competitions, seminars, exhibitions, displays, festivals or other events, or organise or promote such events,

(g) upon and subject to such terms and conditions as the authority considers appropriate, provide assistance in money or in kind to persons engaging in any activity that, in the opinion of the authority, benefits the local community,”

The act explicitly lists “artistic, linguistic and cultural activities” under section 67.2 (iii) as activities that are “necessary or desirable to promote the interests of the local community” and therefore a local authority may “take such measures, engage in such activities or do such things (including the incurring of expenditure) as it considers necessary” to develop and support the arts.

The purpose of the Local Government Reform Act of 2014 is to “amend the Local Government Acts 1925 to 2013”. The 2014 act makes no reference to the Arts so the 2001 act remains effective in this context.

These acts constitute the legislative basis for the development of all arts policies, plans, and strategies in the public sector.

National and Local Policies

Culture 2025 - Éire Ildánach: A Framework Policy to 2025

This is the Government's overarching policy statement on culture and the cultural sector. The values underpinning the policy have been set out in the introduction to this section above.

The policy states that

“Culture is fundamental to human experience and to our nature as a species. It is abiding and ever-changing, universal and particular. For that reason there are many definitions of culture. In its broadest sense culture describes everything we do as a society and how we behave. However, for the purpose of this policy framework a more circumscribed, but still wide-ranging, definition of culture is appropriate.”

The policy does not provide a single definition, but it does list The Arts, The Creative Industries (specifically advertising and marketing, architecture, crafts, design, fashion, film, TV, video, radio and photography, IT, software and computer services, publishing, museums, galleries and libraries, music, performing and visual arts) and Cultural Heritage as components of Culture.

The policy is built on three principles,

- Recognising the value of culture and creativity to the individual and society
- Supporting creative practice and cultural participation
- Cherishing our cultural heritage

It is important to remember that Culture 2025 is not a policy for the Arts. It is a policy for a wide range of cultural activities and identifies ways in which artists and arts activity can *support* those wider activities.

Creative Ireland Programme

Creative Ireland is a project office within the Department tasked with the delivery of the National Culture Policy. It describes itself as an all-of government culture and wellbeing programme that inspires and transforms people, places and communities through creativity.

The vision that every person in Ireland should have the opportunity to realise their full creative potential is central to Creative Ireland's ethos. The vision is supported in each county through a Culture and Creativity Strategy delivered by a culture team within each local authority, pursued through the five main pillars of the Creative Ireland Programme:

- Enabling the Creative Potential of Every Child
- Enabling Creativity in Every Community
- Investing in our Creative and Cultural Infrastructure
- Ireland as a Centre of Excellence in Audiovisual Production
- Unifying our Global Reputation.

Creative Communities is a local authority-led initiative which pioneers and supports creative collaborations and local cross-sectoral projects in arts, heritage, local history, STEAM and the creative industries.

Building on their report 'Engaging the Public on Climate Change through the Cultural and Creative Sectors' Creative Ireland launched the Creative Climate Action fund, which seeks to meaningfully connect people with the changes happening in our environment, society and economy arising from climate change.

Investing in our Culture, Language and Heritage 2018 – 2027

This is referred to in Culture 2025 as one of the many implementation plans for Culture. It sets out Government plans for investment on a phased basis to 2027. The investment priorities directly relevant to this strategy include

- investment in local arts and cultural infrastructure nationwide (€40m),
- investment, in media production and audiovisual industry, (€200m),
- investment in `national parks and nature reserves (€50m),

Our Culture, Language and Heritage 2018-2027 recognises that arts and culture contribute to a strong social infrastructure and are an essential part of individual wellbeing.

Life Worth Living 2020 – The Report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce.

This report was a response to the significant economic impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on the wider arts sector which suffered the greatest downturn.

In acknowledgment of the impact on the livelihoods of artists *Life Worth Living 2020* makes a number of recommendations in relation to income, taxation and financial provision measures, education and training supports, technology supports, mental health supports, social protection measures, and copyright measures.

The report argues that the quality of life in “regional towns and villages” is paramount as remote working becomes normalised, and that this quality of life plays a key role in delivering a balanced regional economy as envisaged in the National Economic Plan.

In keeping with the assumptions underpinning Culture 2025 the report argues that arts and artists are essential to the development of that quality of life.

Project Ireland 2040

The National Planning Framework establishes a hierarchy of settlements and related infrastructure for cities, towns, villages and smaller settlements. It states that Towns with populations greater than 10,000 should have an arts and cultural centre and Towns with populations less than 10,000 should have a community centre, sports facility and welfare services.

Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy 2021 – 2025

Our Rural Future recognises that culture, heritage and the creative industries play a key role in strengthening rural Ireland’s offering for young people, community health and wellbeing, tourism and economic development.

A key deliverable of Our Rural Future is to “provide investment for multipurpose spaces in the community (e.g., community centres, libraries, and sports clubs) for a variety of activities, including leisure, community, cultural and services provision”.

The policy notes that there is “often a gap in the diversity of activities available in rural areas for young people, outside of sports”.

The policy recognises the importance of supporting young people in rural communities to “encourage their active participation in issues that affect their daily lives, to build their leadership capabilities”.

Our Rural Future acknowledges that engagement in the arts actively contributes to participation, active citizenship, and leadership abilities.

The policy also notes the close relationship between arts and tourist numbers, and states that the wider Creative Industries have a significant role in job creation specifically through Culture and Heritage, Performing Arts, TV, video and films, software and computer games development, visual arts, design, crafts and architecture and that the Creative Industries sector has potential for strong growth and the high-quality employment in rural areas.

Our Public Libraries 2022

The ambition of ‘Our Public Libraries 2022’, positions the library at the centre of the community providing guidance and support for people across a range of areas including reading and literacy, lifelong learning for all ages, business and employment, and health and wellbeing.

There are three strategic programmes:

- reading and literacy,
- learning and information and
- community and culture.

The policy also places a strong emphasis on digital literacy,

The Arts Council – Making Great Art Work

Making Great Art Work (2015) is a ten year strategy now entering into its final year. It’s vision is

- The arts are valued as central to civic life, as a hallmark of local and national identity, and as sign and signature of our creativity as a people;
- The arts are practiced and enjoyed widely in our communities, public spaces (real and virtual) and in dedicated venues and centres across the country;

- Artists and practitioners whose exceptional talent and commitment lead them to work professionally in the arts can have productive and rewarding careers;
- Local and national politicians, decisionmakers and officials in a wide range of departments and agencies recognise the distinctive societal value of the arts and provide for them accordingly; and
- The Arts Council as the national development agency for the arts is resourced adequately to address the full breadth of its remit.

The strategy has five priority areas, namely: The Artist; Public Engagement; Investment Strategy; Spatial and Demographic Planning; and Developing Capacity.

It aims to “value and support artists working in a broad range of contexts to reflect the range of practices and variety of settings in which artists make work and engage with the public”.

The strategy also aims to “create opportunities for increased engagement in the arts by particular communities” and to invest in “artists and arts organisations with a commitment to high quality collaborative, community focused arts practice”.

The Investment Strategy responds to quality, artform development, and public engagement, focusing on artistic activity and supporting ambitious, original and experimental work

Under Spatial and Demographic Planning, the strategy emphasises sustainability in investment that manifests as “...advise that government capital funds contribute to maintaining and operating the existing built infrastructure, so focusing our current investment on artistic activity”.

Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027

The County Development Plan recognises the arts as central to Social Inclusion, stating that the arts and cultural facilities are significant contributors to the economy of the County by creating jobs and attracting visitors and investment, as well as contributing to the artistic, social and general quality of life of communities.

The plan sets out a number of relevant development policies including

- Assist, where feasible, in the provision and extension of social, community and cultural facilities and amenities within the county;
- Implement the Creative Ireland Programme 2017-22, Council’s Arts Strategy 2018-2022 and the Offaly Culture and Creative Strategy 2018-2021;
- Maximise the per cent for art scheme for Offaly in relation to its major capital projects which provides opportunities for artists of all disciplines to create work for the public realm.

The Plan makes a specific mention of Lough Boora Sculpture Park, stating that “The development of Lough Boora Discovery Park in Offaly, voted ‘Ireland’s Favourite Place’ in a nationwide Royal Town Planning Institute competition in 2018, is an example of a suitable after use for a cutaway bog, providing important habitats for a wide range of animals, birds and plants along with amenity facilities such as a Sculpture Park, visitor centre, angling area, bird watching facilities and walking and cycling routes”.

Offaly Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan 2022 -2027

This plan is built on a central theme of “Standing up to power Ireland’s Net Zero Ambition”. The plan demonstrates how Offaly “...within itself and working with others, can show the ambition and matching appetite to stand up and create new national leadership positions in the various sectors that are legacy strengths in the county”

The plan has six areas of focus, including “Eco-tourism and the Creative Arts”. This area of focus is informed by recent research which suggests 70% of high value tourist spend goes on experiences, including sport, leisure, arts, crafts, and healthy living. The plan states that “Offaly needs to reposition itself in this sector – offering experiences and sport opportunities to Tourists who will spend more”.

Offaly Culture and Creativity Strategy 2023 – 2027

This strategy aligns with the Creative Ireland programme and states that

“Offaly County Council’s Culture and Creativity Ireland team is committed to delivering a responsive and all-inclusive cultural and creative programme as its vision for County Offaly. We are committed to the vision that every person in Offaly should have the opportunity and supports to realise her or his full creative potential”

This strategy focuses on sustainability, positive climate and biodiversity actions, and inclusion of new and socially excluded communities.

It identifies a need to “...encourage and facilitate activities that foster the cultural economy, support social cohesion, and harness creativity to generate new skills, innovation and experiences” and states that “broad explorations of our ‘sense of place’ and what is distinctive about Offaly will remain a key focus of our *Creative Communities* engagement”.

The strategy has five strategic priorities designed for a long-term impact that will “strengthen wellbeing and cohesive support of the community, while enabling creativity and cultural acknowledgement and respect for the place”.

The priorities are:

- Enabling and Empowering Communities
- Building Capacity
- Art, Science, and Industry
- Climate and Biodiversity
- A Sense of Place

The strategy aims to provide a collective forum for the ambition of culture and creativity; focus on diversity and inclusivity and enable harder to reach communities to participate in cultural and creative activities; build on in-house expertise and strategies across areas of wellbeing, social cohesion and economic development; enable a shift in how the cultural and creative sector is valued within and across local authorities and ensure that culture and creativity is embedded across local authority plans, policies and project teams; drive cross-collaborative actions that support change and positive outcomes locally, and potentially between local authorities at regional level; and be innovative and take risks.

Creating Collaborative Communities – Offaly Libraries Interim Development Plan 2022-2023

The relationship with Libraries is key, particularly with reference to the planned development of Edenderry Library and Arts Space.

The interim development plan states that Libraries “... will support the people of Offaly in their pursuit of knowledge, culture, inspiration and recreation” and will provide “free and equitable access to quality information, resources, education, creativity and culture”

There are numerous points of engagement throughout this plan, and it specifically states as a strategic action to “Work in collaboration with Offaly County Council Arts Office and the Creative Edenderry Steering Group to devise and inform future meaningful cultural arts programmes for the community.”

Summary of Policy environment

In summary The arts are characterised as having many different values including:

- Contributing to personal health, wellbeing and development
- Fostering wider creative skills of direct economic value in industry and employment
- Strengthening communities by creating a sense of place through an expression of local identity
- Contributing to local economic development, tourism, marketing and branding, through festivals, quality creative experiences, and the “buzz” associated with Creative places.
- Supporting disadvantaged and hard to reach communities by respecting human and cultural rights and hearing the voices of marginalised people.

These values have been integrated into the final design of this Arts Strategy.

Existing Research

The Offaly Arts Infrastructure Strategy 20230-2028, The Future of Film in Offaly – A Review of Offaly Film (2023), The Makings: Fostering Youth Creativity (2020), as well as the reports produced under the Invitation to Collaboration scheme namely *Art in the Landscape (2020)* and *Mapping Arts and Health Across the Midlands (2021)*, and several independent reports including *Seeing The Beyond (2020)*, *Local Film Needs Analysis (2020)* and the *Review and Assessment of the current promotional resources of Film Offaly (2019)*.

All of these reports were built on extensive and focused consultation with specific groups, and these consultations and their recommendations have informed this strategy.

How the Arts are Resourced in Offaly

The Arts Office currently has a team of three, an Arts Officer, an Assistant Arts Officer and an Administrator.

The Arts Office sits in the Community and Culture Section and reports to the Council's Community, Culture & Emergency Services SPC.

In 2023 The Arts Programme Budget was 1.2% of the total local authority budget, or €10.68 per capita. This compares to a national average of €17.96 per capita, a median of €14.03, and an average of 1.52% of total local authority spend. (Local Government Finances, NUIG, 2023). These figures are a snapshot in time and do not capture the very significant increases in investment by Offaly County Council in recent years.

Arts Council funding of individuals and organisations in Offaly reached a peak in 2020 of €215,494 and fell back to €118,600 in 2021, approx. €1.42 per capita. (Who we funded, Arts Council, 2023).

There has been an increase in funding from the Arts Council directly to Offaly County Council from €49,000 (2019) to €96,000 (2023). Additional Arts Council funding includes *Invitation to Collaboration* funding (a three-year project) €118,500, *In the Open* funding of €90,000, and *Creative Place* funding (invested into the county) of approximately €500,000 over 3 years. The Arts Council has also co-funded a post in the arts office through their Specialist Support scheme.

Overall, investment into the arts in Offaly is trending up.

The 2016 census data¹ recorded less than 100 people working in the arts in the county (Artists; Producers and Directors; Actors, Entertainers and Presenters, Authors, Writers, and Translators).

¹ The 2022 figures for these categories were not available at the time of writing

This appears to be inaccurate based on the number of applications received by the Arts Office. It is probable that artists are reporting themselves – for a variety of reasons – under other occupations. This suggests that the majority of artists in the county are dependent on other work for their primary income, which suggests that the artistic practice stretches across voluntary, pre-professional, and professional status, and that earning a living within the sector is challenging at best.

These numbers do not reflect either the quantity or the quality of the work carried out by professional artists, organisations and volunteers, and nor do they capture the unpaid labour of those working across the wider arts sector in Offaly.

All of the numbers mentioned above are in keeping with the Weaknesses and Threats of the SWOT analysis carried out for the previous arts plan, namely

- Lack of supports, financial awards and work opportunities for individual artists to sustain a living
- Insufficient funding and resources allocated to key arts venues, organisations and groups vis à vis comparative allocations in neighbouring counties

And

- Declining levels of funds are always a threat to the development of the arts across all art forms²

It is important to acknowledge that the economic challenges facing individual artists are systemic and global. Neither the Arts Office nor the Local Authority can resolve them. There have been initiatives at national level (Basic Income for Artists) but the impact is limited at this time.

Likewise the economic realities within the county cannot be ignored. The capacity of the local authority - both in terms of human and financial resources - is limited and stretched. Therefore, strategically speaking, collaboration between stakeholders is vital for the sustainability and impact of the arts.

² It must be noted that although funding may increase in nominal terms, the value in terms of purchasing power may decrease.

Summary

It follows that key activities in this strategy must be:

- To build and broker partnerships in health, education, business, and tourism that can deliver additional funding into the sector, and
- to position the value of artists and the arts sector in the Programme for Just Transition.

A Changing Role

The Role of an Arts Office has changed since the first arts officer was appointed. This change is felt across every county and in every arts office in the country.

Over the last twenty years we have seen significant changes in the wider arts sector in terms of infrastructure, funding, and policy. There are more Multi-Disciplinary Arts Centres and national funding has increased to record levels (albeit still below EU averages) through the Arts Council and Screen Ireland; there is a National Culture Policy and Creative Ireland is tasked with putting creativity at the heart of government and the heart of every community; the policy conversation has shifted to a Creative Industries framework, and the arts are spoken of at a policy level as a vital input to local and national branding, Foreign Direct Investment, Cultural Diplomacy, Tourism, the development of creativity and a driver of innovation, creative place making, inclusion and equity, wellbeing etc.

Within this changed environment the Arts Office has effectively moved from a production and delivery function to a strategic function. The Arts Office needs to plan within a complex policy environment. It needs to continue to advocate for the significant role played by artists in enhancing well-being and the public realm. It needs to manage relationships and partnerships within the local authority, working collaboratively with the Culture Team and in particular with Enterprise, Tourism, Libraries, Heritage, Planning, and Architecture.

The internal relationship with planning is key to unlocking the Per Cent for Arts funding and the Arts Office will need an additional staff member to manage and deliver the Per Cent for Art projects.

Strategic collaboration is required also outside the local authority. The Arts Office needs to build and manage relationships with an increasing number of stakeholders including artists, arts centres, festivals, community groups, local and national agencies, Youth Services, Health Services, the business community, educational institutions and more. It needs to broker partnerships, develop networks, and build capacity within this complex network of relationships. It needs to identify and apply for additional sources of funding and it needs to be conscious of gaps in provision and, when necessary, initiate, develop, and support collaborative projects in response to those needs.

This strategic, collaborative approach is vital to maximise resources, build capacity, and work with the many diverse communities across the arts sector in Offaly.

Stakeholder Engagement

1. Public survey

An anonymous online survey was conducted via Survey Monkey and distributed in both Irish and English language versions by the Arts Office through all channels including email and social media, via its partner organisations, and via the library services. There were 65 respondents in total, representing 0.07% of the population. This is a normal response rate. The survey sought to understand people's perception of arts in Offaly: what they liked, what they thought needed to improve, and what their priorities for the future were.

2. Written Submissions.

An open call for written submissions was announced by the Arts Office through all channels including email and social media, via its partner organisations, and via the library services. Six written submissions were received focusing on specific projects.

3. Online “round table” discussion with key senior members of Offaly County Council.

The round table explored shared goals, objectives and outcomes across departments, and what effective collaboration might look like (see Appendix I for full list of participants).

4. Semi-structured interviews

These were in depth interviews with key internal and external stakeholders. (see appendix I for full list).

5. Public Meetings

Five meetings in total were held in Birr Theatre and Arts Centre, Esker Arts, and Edenderry Library. These public events were promoted by the Arts Office through local media, through the Libraries network, PPN, social media, and email.

An additional workshop was held with Funhouse Youth Theatre in Tullamore to gather the experiences and aspirations of young people in the county.

The workshops were designed on the World Café model to ensure that all voices in the room were heard. To ensure consistency the same table challenges/questions were used across the workshops.

The ideas and insights were discussed at the end of each session and gathered for thematic analysis.

There was an additional workshop held in Esker Arts Centre focused on individuals and organisations working in Festivals in the county to identify and discuss emerging opportunities and concerns.

The ideas, insights, and concerns collected through all of these interactions were collated and transcribed. They were analysed through a combination of discussion, sentiment, and thematic analysis.

Define

The ideas and themes identified in the discovery phase were shared and discussed in a facilitated workshop with the Arts Officer.

Based on the data gathered in the Discovery phase, conscious of the existing strengths and assets within the arts sector, and in consultation with the Arts Office, a “strategic question” was formulated, namely:

“How might the arts office position itself to ensure the best use of available capacity, capabilities, and resources and to best respond to the requirements of artists, arts organisation and community interests in the county?”

Develop

The strategy was designed in a facilitated workshop with the Arts Office.

A number of techniques and tools were deployed including a Gap Analysis, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and threats) and SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results) analyses.

The strategic framework was Vision, Mission, Values, and Priority Goals.

SWOT Analysis

SWOT analysis is primarily a business tool. Its purpose is to identify Strengths and Weaknesses within an organisation so that we can develop those strengths and reinforce the weaknesses, and to identify the opportunities and threats that exist outside the organisation so that we can develop plans to exploit the opportunities and defend against the threats.

The SWOT analysis conducted for the previous arts plan was comprehensive and we have used it as a starting point in our analysis here. We have moved the original SWOT to the second stage of the analysis by asking the questions

- How might we develop our strengths?
- How might we exploit the identified opportunities?
- How might we defend against the threats?
- How might we reinforce our weaknesses?

Strengths	How might we develop our strengths?
Substantial number of practising artists especially in visual art, film and the performing arts	Work to increase supports from the arts office and other sources; Support the development of networks led by the sector.
Film Offaly and the strong pool of creative talent based locally	Respond to the recommendations in the reports on Film Offaly and the Animation Residency
High quality arts and community festivals e.g. OFFLine Film Festival, Hullabaloo! (Offaly's Children's Arts Festival), Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival, Birr Festival of Music, Scripts-Ireland's Playwriting Festival, TradFest. Collectives: Birr Festivals Collective	Develop their capacity by providing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused investment, • Expert advice, and • Supporting the development of networks
Anam Beo for their delivery of excellent in context arts in healthcare settings	Support Anam Beo in their current phase of growth and programme diversification by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to broker the relationship with the HSE and other key stakeholders; • Working with their stakeholders to widen their presence; • Developing their programme of delivery, talent development and mentorship into a national model of best practice
Birr Theatre and Arts Centre for presenting and promoting the arts and as an incubator hub for arts festival management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to support their programme of work; • Explore additional funding resources and partners, • Work with them to develop their audience and community engagement strategies; • Lend advice and support toward the development Birr Courthouse.
Music Generation Offaly for the provision of accessible, creative, diverse and inclusive, high-quality performance music education programmes both in and out of school settings	Continue to work in partnership with Laois/Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB) to support the development of Music Generation Offaly to increase levels of participation in the music training programme.

High quality public art commissions that capture the cultural essence of the county	Maximise the public art commissions and the Per Cent for Art investment by exploring the possibility of contracting an additional specialist staff member
Very good working relationships between the Arts Office and other Council Departments, e. g. Heritage, Community, Architecture and Libraries	Continue to develop the internal collaboration and communication through the development of the Public Art Working Group and maximise effective operations through the development of a five-year Public Art / Collections Policy
Drama, in particular the vibrancy of the amateur drama movement and the quality of many local productions and the opportunities the amateur movement provides for local people to participate in arts activity.	Work with the venues to ensure that this continues, and support the local groups when possible and as appropriate within the available resources
Weaknesses	How might we reinforce these weaknesses and transform them into strengths?
Lack of supports, financial awards, and work opportunities for individual artists to sustain a living	(This is a national systemic problem within the arts. There have been initiatives at national level but the impact is limited) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adhere to the Pay the Artist programme ; • Work with partners to drive creative business, schools and health organisations toward creating opportunities for artists
Insufficient funding and resources allocated to key arts venues, organisations and groups vis à vis comparative allocations in neighbouring counties.	(The economic realities within the county cannot be ignored. The capacity of the local authority - both in terms of human and financial resources - is limited). Work with all stakeholders to increase the impact of the arts, identify partnerships in health, education, business and tourism that can deliver additional funding into the sector, and work to position the value of artists and the arts sector in the programme for Just Transition
Insufficient built arts infrastructure in terms of locally based creative spaces for community participation; and, work spaces for artists	Esker Arts is now complete and operational. Work closely with internal partners, especially libraries, to drive the delivery of the Edenderry Arts Space, and support Birr 20:20 in their representations on the development of the Courthouse.

Very limited opportunities for rural communities to engage and participate in the arts on any sustained basis	Work with partners in venues and communities to develop programmes and strategies that engage with hard to reach communities.
Heavy reliance on voluntary support in the development of arts festivals and special projects	Collect data on volunteerism in the arts to inform a policy in this area.
Threats	How might we defend against these threats
Declining levels of funds are always a threat to the development of the arts across all art forms	While this is a risk more than an immediate threat, it has to be accepted and mitigated. We will work with our arts organisations to develop robust funding plans and funding partnerships. The only protection against this threat is to diversify the funding model.
Pressure for artists to move due to inadequate facilities and/or work opportunities.	Work with our venue partners and with our internal partners to further develop artists space and residency programmes
Lack of clarity around the artistic ethos of the Lough Boora Sculpture Park.	Continue to work with Bord na Mona to develop an effective governance model for the Sculpture Park and widen the stakeholder base.
Opportunities	How might we exploit these opportunities
Develop the Sculpture Park at Lough Boora Discovery Park as a high quality national arts facility	Continue to work with Bord na Mona to develop an effective governance model for the Sculpture Park and widen the stakeholder base.
Working with the Local Enterprise Office to stimulate crossover, co-creation, and co-production between the arts and other sectors, particularly tourism.	Explore a model of “Creative Business” similar to the Creative Schools model and align it with the recommendations of the Government Report <i>Together for Design</i> (Gov. of Ireland 2020), and the <i>Action Plan for Deigning Better Public Services</i> (Gov. of Ireland 2023). Many artists already possess the design thinking skills identified in this report.
Build the Film Offaly project, invest and grow the talent pool and skills base – positioning Offaly to evolve as a regional hub that supports national film and audio-visual clusters on the east and west of Ireland.	Follow the recommendations of <i>The Future of Film in Offaly – A Review of Film in Offaly</i> (2023).
Improving public access to the County Art Collection through an exhibition programme in the Atrium, Áras an Chontae, Tullamore	Explore potentials of expanding the County Art Collections and the practicalities of reopening the Aras as a public exhibition space, set against potential opportunities across existing and new venues in the county.

SOAR Analysis

The SWOT is only one way of looking at the world, and it encapsulates a competitive business perspective that is not always appropriate in the human centred world of public value and the arts.

The SOAR framework (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results) can produce a more nuanced and appropriate framework for strategic thinking in a not for profit, social impact context. It is based on Appreciative Enquiry and asks us to look at what we do well with the resources we have, and how we can build on that.

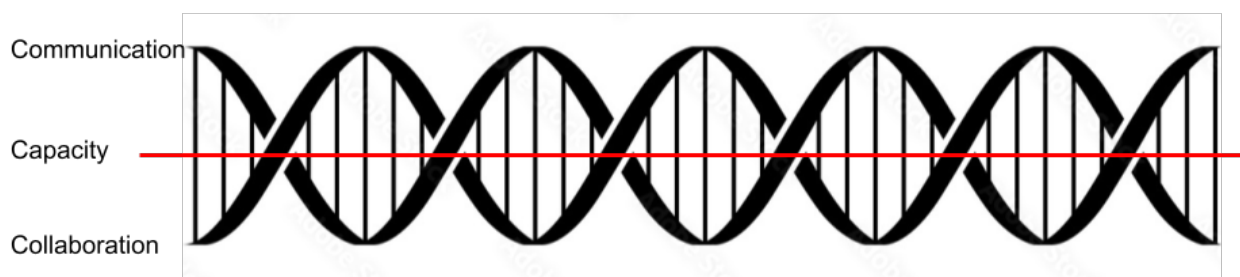


Strengths	Opportunities
People’s commitment and willingness to engage both within the various departments and levels of the local authority and among the artists, arts organisations, and community groups.	Develop collaborations within the local authority, for example with the delivery and programming of the Edenderry Library and Arts Space, and securing regular Per Cent for Art funding across departments
The commitment and the quality of the artists, the venues and the festivals that constitute the arts sector	Develop existing, and explore new, Models of best Practice e.g. Anam Beo, the Animation Residency, the Festivals Co-operative, Lough Boora, Creative Places. Work with the sector and support the development of sector led networks for collaboration, sharing, mentoring etc. Work with the sector to identify additional sources of funding and new funding models/strategies.

Strong community support for the work, particularly through the PPN.	Explore real collaborations with diverse communities that deliver meaningful and valuable impact
Strong Support from the Business Community in terms of sponsorship and engagement.	Explore a model of “Creative Business” that will create opportunities and value, responding to the 2020 Future Skills report
Political understanding of and support for the many values of the arts among elected representatives	Collaborate with venues and festivals, and identify a third level partner to gather relevant data that can demonstrate the many values of the arts and provide a compelling evidence base for political support. This could be managed through the development of a venues network - a goal outlined in the Arts Infrastructure Strategy.
Strong commitment to and understanding of the many values of the arts throughout the local authority and particularly at the most senior management levels	Create regular opportunities for artists and arts organisations to present their work and make their case, and make their impact visible through effective internal communications.
Results	Aspirations
Job creation, economic activity, and opportunity have all increased, and the real values of the arts captured, and are seen to contribute to Offaly’s Brand and development	The artists and arts organisations of Offaly are operating in a sustainable and supportive ecosystem in which all elements are supported equitably and appropriately.
An increase in the number of artists (and arts organisations) relocating to Offaly, and creating work in and for the county	Artists can live, work, and pursue sustainable careers in Offaly
There is an increase in innovative arts practice in terms of artform development, community engagement, business and funding models	The number of artists and organisations serving diverse communities has increased and continues to scale.

Offaly is experienced by locals and visitors alike as a vibrant, exciting, place to live and work	All of the diverse communities of Offaly have the opportunity to creatively engage, explore, and develop their identities and their places.
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The analysis of the insights, concerns and ideas gathered in the course of the research, survey, interviews, written submissions and public meetings through the use of SWOT and SOAR led to the formulation of the triple DNA model of this strategy: Capacity, Collaboration and Communication.



The strategy is designed to focus attention and action on the following areas:

1. Capacity – a need to build capacity across the community of artists, volunteers, venues, organisations, festivals and the Arts Office itself. This includes the need for staff, venues, and improved community engagement and marketing skills across the sector.
2. Collaboration – a need to work together across the arts sector to develop new partnerships and investments, share knowledge and skills, and maximise available resources.
3. Communication – a need to develop clear and effective communication channels so that information on funding and supports is accessible, so that advice and mentoring can always be found, so that the venues, festivals and organisations can reach and engage with a wider audience, and so that the size and impact of the wider arts sector in the county is captured and presented.

These three elements are interconnected. Attention given to one of them will impact the other two. For example, we can build the capacity of the wider arts sector through more and better collaborations, which in turn require changes in how we communicate with each other. That process also works in reverse – if we improve communication between organisations and across the local authority then this can lead to more and better collaboration resulting in a growing capacity.

The triple DNA model led to the formulation of a strategic Vision and Mission, namely:

The Arts Office will be instrumental in the ongoing development of the arts in the county, collaborating with artists and arts organisations to create and present valuable work, and supporting all sectors of society to celebrate their communities through the arts.

Our mission, within the timeframe of this strategy, will be to develop capacity, to collaborate with our stakeholders, and to develop clear and effective communication channels across the entire arts sector in Offaly.

Deliver

The strategic design set out in the previous section can be summarised as

Strand	Action	Outcomes
Capacity	Design innovative ways to increase resources of knowledge skills and investment	Increased capacity across the entire arts sector in the county
Collaboration	Build networks broker partnerships and share knowledge and skills	Effective collaboration between the arts sector and the diverse communities in the county, and between the sector and external partners in business, tourism, health and education
Communication	Connect effectively and strategically with all stakeholders to drive collaboration capacity and wide engagement.	Improved communication between all stakeholders to support effective collaboration across the wider community and build capacity and capabilities.

Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation

This Strategy is designed as a high-level guide for the development of the wider arts sector across the county. It is built on the achievements of the artists and arts organisations in collaboration with the arts office across the county over the last five years.


It sets an overarching vision for the arts in Offaly, acknowledges several priority areas and actions, and sets out how the mission will be achieved over the life of the strategic plan through 32 individual actions defined in terms of Target Areas or Groups, Actions, Goals and Potential Partners

The strategy positions the arts office as a strategic partner in the development of the artists, arts organisations and festivals across the county. Its role is to work with its partners within the local authority, with national and international agencies, and with artists, arts organisations and festivals to build capacity and foster ambition across the county in the creation, programming, and management of artists, programmes, festivals and community engagement practices.

Key to developing capacity is collaboration and networking between artists and arts organisations, and between the wider arts sector and the business, educational, youth services, health, heritage and tourism, and local communities.

The development of capacity, driven by collaboration, requires clear and strategic communication and the arts office will target communications so that artists, arts organisations, festivals and community organisations are aware of opportunities in a timely manner; we will work with our partners to develop their communication and engagement practices to ensure the widest reach, and we will develop a robust data collection practice throughout the sector to present the strongest case for the arts across the county.

Managing this complex web of partnerships, brokering collaboration and supporting the development of networks, and ensuring clear and effective communications will require a comprehensive communication strategy.

The arts office will oversee, in consultation with stakeholders, the delivery of this five-year arts strategy, implemented through annual operational  plans that are budgeted and resourced in line with allocated resources, the outputs of which are monitored and evaluated and published in the arts

office's Annual Report to Offaly County Council. These operational plans will inform those strategic interventions that require more long-term planning and a greater level of investment.

Appendix I – Interview and Consultation Respondents

Online Round Table participants (assigned roles at time of interviews)

Sally O’Leary	Arts Officer
Angela Ryan Whyte	Assistant Arts Officer
Clare Dunne	Arts Office
Aisling Lambe,	Climate Action Officer
Amanda Pedlow	Heritage Officer
Andrew Murray	Senior Planner
Ann Dillon	Director of Services of Planning, Economic Development, Tourism, Heritage, Regeneration, Just Transition, and the Municipal District of Birr
Brian Pey	Administrative Officer
Bridie Costello Hynes	Public Participation Network Development Officer/Age Friendly
Coordinator at Offaly County Council	
Eamonn Henry	Offaly Sports Partnership
Eileen Hughes	Administrative Officer
John Cunningham	Senior Engineer
Eimear McGinn	County Librarian
Jackie McIntyre	Senior Executive Librarian
Karen Gray	Creative Communities Engagement Officer
Lourda Giles	Chief Officer LCDC
Mark Connolly	Head of Finance Director of Services at Offaly County Council
Mark Mahon	Climate Action and Environment
Mark Maken-Finlay	Administrative Officer
Monica Cleary	Senior Executive Officer
Olive Farrelly	Tourism Officer
Orla Martin	Head of Local Enterprise
Paul McDonald	Executive Engineer
Rachel McKenna	Senior Executive Architect
Sinead McEvoy	Community Climate Action Officer
Tom Shanahan	Director of Services for Climate Action, Environment, Water and Transportation (including NWCPO, Swimming Pools) and Municipal District of Tullamore
Karen Conlon	Assistant Staff Officer, Community & Culture

In-depth Interviews participants

Anna-Marie Delaney	Chief Executive
Sharon Kennedy	Director of Services for Housing, Community, Culture (including Libraries, Arts, Sports), Emergency Services and Municipal District of Edenderry
Ann Dillon,	Director of Services of Planning, Economic Development, Tourism, Heritage, Regeneration, Just Transition and the Municipal District of Birr
Sally O’Leary	Arts Officer
Angela Ryan Whyte	Assistant Arts Officer
Eimear McGinn	County Librarian
Andrew Murray	Senior Planner

Rachel McKenna	Senior Executive Architect
Amanda Pedlow	Heritage Officer
Karen Gray	Creative Communities Engagement Office
Olive Farrelly	Tourism Officer
John Cunningham	Senior Engineer
Emma Nee Haslam	Manager, Birr Theatre and Arts Centre
Sean Walsh	Director, Esker Arts Centre
Salters Sterling	Birr 20:20
Seonaid Murray	Creative Edenderry
Julie Spollen	Anam Beo
Ger Relp	Music Generation
Joe Ryan	Bord na Mona
Gary Hctor	Offline Film Festival

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- Members of the Community, Culture & Emergency Services SPC
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- The Arts Council/An Comhairle Ealaíon