



Seeing the Beyond

BIRR FESTIVALS PLANNING
FOR A SHARED FUTURE



BIRR FESTIVAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY
OCTOBER 2020





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■ foreword

Birr 20:20 took the strategic decision to research and recommend ways in which to maximise resources and opportunities within an already vibrant and collective cultural environment that exists amongst the Birr Festivals organisations. Commissioning this research therefore, offered an ideal opportunity to draw together the committee members of Birr Festivals and for each to take the time and space, to consider areas of concern that they see are affecting their development and sustainability.

While it was an opportunity for each festival to highlight their own specific requirements through their festival profiles and development priorities, there was also an understanding that within the research, an overarching aim would be to find a mechanism that can focus on specific areas of support which can assist the groups collectively.



Sally O'Leary
Arts Officer

It should be acknowledged at the outset that the research was conducted under very difficult circumstances. It is therefore to be commended that the development strategy provides a thoughtful and considered response to the implication for the future development of Birr festivals, in what is now described as a time living with Covid-19. While it would not be feasible to expect the development strategy to be able to fully anticipate the level of damage to the Arts sector and in particular to performance, arts venues, and festivals, it is acknowledged that this will need to inform future planning in the discussions going forward.

The development strategy offers a comprehensive and detailed analysis for the vindication of festivals, voluntary and community groups and festival organisers, in terms of value and validity; showing the wide and significant impact socially, economically and culturally that festivals can have, locally, regionally and nationally, using a variety of strategic reports to substantiate this.

In this regard, Offaly County Council Arts Office has long understood and promoted the development of festivals across the county, understanding the value in terms of community cohesion and development, potential cultural tourism and the impact that festivals can provide to the local economy. The Arts Office greatly appreciates the huge effort on the part of local communities and voluntary organisations involved in the delivery and promotion of festivals in the county, and as such provides supports through advice and grants to local arts festivals through the Arts Office Festivals Scheme. The value of festivals has been alluded

to in a number of the County Art Strategies, the most recent being the County Offaly Arts Strategy *Inspire / Imagine / Involve 2018-2022*, which specifically refers to the potential strength of Birr Theatre and Arts Centre as ‘an incubator hub for art festival management’.

With this in view there is certainly strength in the development strategy’s allusion to the importance of the social, economic and cultural value of festivals, in terms of validation, and I would suggest that the strategy will add to the substantial and impactful national research and reporting into the value of festivals to the local community, and to counties they serve.

While the recommendations within the development strategy are both practical and achievable, there is also a prudent recognition that further investigation will be required when clarifying the logistical and operational priorities with regard to engagement of professional support across the festivals. Of particular interest will be the development of an evidence-informed strategy for audience development and engagement which, the Arts Office would commend, would take cognizance of and align to both relevant local and national strategies in its formation and implementation.

The Arts Office would encourage the experimental and exploratory nature of the proposed approach alluded to in the development strategy, and could certainly see potential practices such as the development of a critical peer review of the curatorial and programming practice and invited curator programmes, as potentially enhancing the core skills of the festival committees, with the aim of achieving high level content and programming delivery and which could ensure the festivals continued success and development as contenders on the national arts scene.

And to conclude therefore, it is also promising to see from this strategy the potential effective and impactful learning process which will be of benefit to all involved and also as a model of future planning for other towns in the county interested in following a similar approach.

Sally O’Leary,
ARTS OFFICER, OFFALY COUNTY COUNCIL

A note from Birr 20:20 Vision CLG

Festivals, in one shape or form, celebrate the essence of Birr. **Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival** is one of the oldest town festivals in the country. It celebrates the community, the heritage tradition, the visual arts, the built environment and the hospitality of the town. **OFFline Film Festival** is a contemporary celebration of that pioneering adventure into photography associated with Mary, Countess of Rosse, wife of the Astronomer Earl. **Hullabaloo!** celebrates the creative and imaginative intelligence of children and young people whose lives were deemed worthy of protection in the Law of the Innocents proclaimed near Birr more than 1300 years ago. **Scripts** is a testimony to the long traditions of Drama, Publishing and Printing in which Birr has excelled for more than two centuries. **Birr Festival of Music & Voice** represents the pursuit of excellence in the making of music in castle, townhouse, farmhouse and cottage that has characterised Birr and its neighbourhood over centuries.

Birr 20:20 Vision is delighted to have been able to sponsor the exercise in reflection and planning represented by this report - ‘*Seeing the Beyond — Birr Festivals Planning for a Shared Future*’. The Birr Festivals separately and collectively are essential to the social and economic wellbeing of Birr and the towns, villages and farms that constitute the Municipality. They provide occasions for the celebration of our togetherness, for the sharing of that togetherness with others, for the affirmation of our historic identity, for the generation of revenue and for the enjoyment of a community spirit generating pride in place. These were the core characteristics articulated at the public meetings six years ago when Birr 20:20 was launched. The work of the Birr Festivals organisers, much of it voluntary, during the Coronavirus lockdown, facilitated by meetings on Zoom, exemplifies and endorses them.

Birr 20:20 salutes the spirit of collaboration and collegiality with which the Festivals organisers are facing an uncertain future and is most grateful to all those who have contributed to the shaping of this Report, in particular to Dermot McLaughlin of Creative Strategic Solutions for his inspirational leadership, to Offaly Local Development Company for the funding to make it possible, to Sally O’Leary, Arts Officer of Offaly County Council, for her solicitous Foreword and to Karl Wallace of the Arts Council for proposing the value of such a strategic review in the first instance.

Salters Sterling,
CHAIR, BIRR 20:20 VISION

October, 2020.

■ introduction

Birr 20:20 Vision CLG commissioned this report, with support from Offaly Local Development Company (OLDC), with the objective of producing recommendations to support sustainable festival development in Birr into the future.

THE GROUP OF FESTIVALS COMPRISES:

MAY

**Birr Festival
of Music &
Voice**

JULY

**Scripts
Ireland's
Playwriting
Festival**

AUGUST

**Birr Vintage
Week & Arts
Festival**

OCTOBER

**OFFline
Film
Festival**

OCTOBER

**Hullabaloo!
Offaly's
Children's
Arts Festival**

In addition, there is now the regular **Annual Hot Air Balloon Event** organised in Birr Castle Demesne (September).

The report aims to identify the festivals' core strengths and the challenges facing each of the five festivals, and to propose a framework for festival development and support.

The process involved in producing the report in the period January–June 2020 is informed by an examination of the overall festival landscape (nationally and in Offaly), common needs among the festivals, and opportunities for growth.

The recommendations contained in the report propose a realistic and sustainable way forward. They are aimed at creating time and space for:

- strengthening the Birr festivals;
- developing artistic programming,
- exploring creative opportunities for collaboration
- increasing capacity and capability in strengthening audience engagement
- maximising funding opportunities.

The core group of festivals involved in the project includes five established festivals and there is ambition to support the development of new events to broaden and extend Birr's festival season from March through to November.

An extended festival season in Birr would aim to include at least one event per quarter. Potential new events include:

An Annual Symposium on International Humanitarian Law

inspired by the 7th century legal text Cáin Adomnáin which has close associations with Birr (Mar-Apr).

Building on the science and technology traditions of the Parsons family in Birr, Professor Peter Gallagher of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies is preparing to propose an **Annual Colloquium of World Class Scholars to Consider the Contemporary Frontiers of Science and Technology** to be held in Birr, ideally in association with the celebration of Science Week each November.



■ executive summary and recommendations

This report was produced, with support from Offaly Local Development Company (OLDC), in the period January–June 2020 which coincided with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. The consultation process that informed the report included structured interviews with a diverse group of stakeholders that included public bodies, funders, policymakers, festivals, media, local business and enterprise, and arts professionals. The research strand included a review of pertinent literature including local and national policy and strategy documents.

The production of the report was guided by a Steering Group who provided direction and oversight. The Steering Group was convened by Birr 20:20 Vision CLG and comprised Salters Sterling, Caroline Conway, Michael Hanna, Michelle de Forge, Emma Nee Haslam, Maureen de Forge and Gary Hctor. This group represented Birr 20:20 Vision CLG, The Birr Courthouse Project, Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival, Birr Festival of Music & Voice, Scripts – Ireland's Playwriting Festival, Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival and OFFline Film Festival.

This report establishes that the Birr festivals create significant opportunities for citizens to engage with culture and the arts in diverse ways.

The festivals follow a policy of encouraging access, participation, and engagement with the arts. This is reflected in both the affordability of events, with admission charges in the range €2.50 – €20.00, and in

In 2019 the estimated total number of attendances at the five festivals in Birr was

46,291

Birr population c.5,700

This creates an estimated economic impact of

€2.08¹m

for Birr

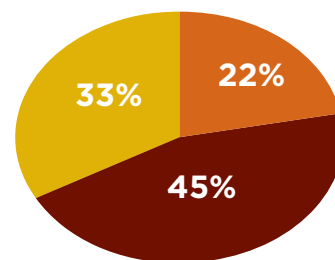
In 2019 the five festivals presented

107 different events
for people to engage with arts and culture.

Of these 107 events,

43 (40%)
were free of charge to attend

¹ Based on Fáilte Ireland domestic visitor overnight rate, reduced from €71 to €45



In 2019 the five festivals generated a gross turnover of

€164,602

which includes

€35,665 (22%)
in earned income from events

€74,475 (45%)
from sponsors, donors, and philanthropic trusts

€54,462 (33%)
from public funding

the proportion of events that are free of charge to attend. The Birr festivals are reliant mainly on earned income and local fundraising (including philanthropic funding, donors, and sponsorship) and public funding accounts for less than one third of the festivals' turnover.

The consultation process found a high degree of positive interest in the proposed experimental initiative by Birr 20:20 to encourage a new collaborative and strategic approach to developing festivals in Birr. Feedback from the local business community was positive and encouraging, with the possibility mentioned of additional financial support for a new approach to the promotion and marketing of the festivals as part of a developmental initiative. The consultation process also helped to identify a number of strategic and operational issues that would need to be clarified and resolved in the design of any initiative to provide new, shared, professional support services to help the Birr festivals plan and work more strategically and effectively. The Steering Group addressed these points as part of its regular meetings and discussions, and the recommendations in this report reflect the depth and detail of the Group's deliberations.

The recommendations are presented as practical actions that need to be initiated during 2020. They aim to retain the exploratory and experimental spirit and momentum that Birr 20:20 Vision CLG brings to the initiative.

The purpose of the project is to find the best and most effective ways of building strategically on the strong bond of common purpose that connects the festivals with each other, with the local community, with local business and with policy makers and funders. The ultimate goal is to create conditions in Birr that are conducive to the sustainability of existing and new festivals, and to increase appreciation of Birr's position as a unique and desirable place to live, work, visit and engage with culture, arts, science and heritage.

RECOMMENDATIONS (summary)

This report recommends that the following developments need to be initiated during 2020:

- 1 Continue the work of the Birr 20:20 Vision CLG Festivals Strategy Steering Group, to oversee the implementation of the strategic actions contained in this report and to maintain an action research approach to developing the consortium of festivals.
- 2 Engage professional services to provide shared executive support to the Birr festivals consortium.
- 3 Procure equipment to support the live streaming of events.
- 4 Devise an evidence-informed strategy for audience development and engagement for the Birr festivals consortium.
- 5 Engage with local and regional tourism bodies to influence Offaly's tourism strategy and position Birr and its festivals more prominently.
- 6 Convene a working group, involving external stakeholders, to explore the feasibility of an action research project with Offaly County Council Arts Office for submission to the Arts Council's Invitation to Collaboration Scheme.

context

This report comes at a time when Birr stands to benefit from strategic opportunities including the designation by Fáilte Ireland (with the support of Offaly County Council) of Birr as a Destination Town, and the planned redevelopment of Birr Courthouse as a creative and cultural hub for the town (the Creative Court project). The Destination Town project aims to increase visitor numbers to Birr throughout the year, which represents opportunities for the Birr festivals. Birr 20:20's Report on the Courthouse redevelopment project states, when completed, the facility will

“provide accessible creative space... and facilitate sustainable collaboration with local and visiting professional practitioners and the wider community in the pursuit of creative excellence.”

The Courthouse project is a significant strategic opportunity for Birr's cultural infrastructure and presents practical and creative opportunities for Birr 20:20 and for the festivals.

An additional dimension to the context for the Courthouse development is contained in the *Just Transition Progress Report* by Kieran Mulvey (April 2020). This report responds to the transformative and traumatic social and economic impacts caused by the fundamental changes in the business models and strategies of Bord na Móna and ESB in Midland counties. The report sets out practical actions across counties to maximise their infrastructural, natural, and human resources and build on their existing strengths.

The Mulvey Report sets out ambitious policy-informed goals for the region:

“The Midlands must seek to position itself as a second site location for

coastal city-based businesses, and so must promote itself as a central, well-connected region with relatively lower operating costs than coastal cities. Second site facilities must be developed throughout the region. The region also experiences approximately 24,000 people leaving on a daily basis for work or college. The Midlands must deliver on Enterprise Ireland's “Empowering the Regions” Report to have 600 workstations in remote working hubs and innovation centres, adding to the membership of the Midlands Network for Co-working Facilities. This will require funding for capital works, and human resources supports for business development managers for these facilities for 5-year periods to ensure sustainability. The development of such facilities will be of benefit to the local communities.”

An initial call for proposals has targeted initiatives in tourism, green enterprise, and related areas of employment.

Birr 20:20 has also identified opportunities for Birr's festivals to work collaboratively to address strategic goals in artistic development, audience engagement, and strengthening Birr's position as an attractive and accessible cultural destination.

In this context of strategic opportunity, this report notes that the level of cohesion, common purpose, and shared ambition among the festivals and other stakeholders in Birr and County Offaly is significant. This represents a significant resource for Birr and the County, and it could be developed and explored as a potential framework or way of collaborative working that could be adapted and tested elsewhere as a local arts development tool. This point was made by several contributors to the consultation process that has informed this report. Others suggested that, taken together with developments in neighbouring Tipperary where the County Arts Office provides support services to festivals, there is an opportunity for Birr 20:20 and the festivals to initiate discussions on the feasibility of an approach, led by the relevant Local Authorities, to the Arts Council's *Invitation to Collaboration Scheme*.

■ COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainty, looking ahead

The national and global context in which this report has been produced has changed drastically due to the COVID-19 pandemic. National economies worldwide have been destabilised, individual and group behaviours have changed, social and community structures and practices are in flux, and there is a high degree of uncertainty. The pace and momentum of both public sector and private sector projects have, in the short term, been affected by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as public and private resources have been redirected and as priorities have changed.

The medium to long-term scenarios remain uncertain, although a general assumption is that we will be living with, and working around, COVID-19 for the foreseeable future.

The implications for the arts and culture sector have been profound. As a result of the measures taken globally to manage the pandemic, there are severe practical and operational difficulties for artists, audiences, festivals, and venues in Birr and worldwide. This report acknowledges these difficulties and proposes steps that Birr 20:20 and the festivals should take now to put systems and supports in place to stabilise and strengthen the festivals' capacity to think and plan strategically.

A working assumption in this report is that we are in a dynamic period of transition and uncertainty possibly until late 2022, by which point there should be greater clarity about how we will live, interact, and work with COVID-19. It seems reasonable to assume that our ways of creating, producing and consuming culture and the arts will continue to change, and that strategies, policies, and systems for distributing funding and other supports for the arts will also change.

While the migration of some events and programmes to online platforms is an option, this is only part of the complex answer to the complex challenges that face festival programmers, producers, artists, and audiences. This report recommends that the Birr festivals should, where appropriate and feasible, plan and prepare for online delivery of events, including live streaming, as part of the transition period 2020-2022. An underlying assumption here is that the online delivery of events, including opportunities for active audience engagement, will be a routine element of the planning and production of many events from now on.

In this complex operating environment, the Birr festivals need the time, freedom, support and other resources to focus on strategic thinking and planning, on building networks of collaboration and cooperation, on innovating in programming and artistic planning, and on devising and preparing different and new ways of engaging with audiences and other stakeholder groups.

■ responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

The festivals considered the spectrum of possible implications and changes that will or might happen as a result of the pandemic and a consensus emerged on what assumptions to make in order to manage ambition and expectations alongside uncertainty and curtailments on movements, congregating and other social behaviours.

The Government of Ireland have implemented evidence-based public health measures designed to curtail the spread of the virus. These measures include restrictions that have affected all areas of life, particularly people's movement and social interaction. There have been sudden and profound implications for people's employment status and for business and work practices. Many sectors, including the arts sector, have effectively had to shut down business operations or scale back or devise continuity and recovery plans to maintain some capacity to recover when restrictions are eased. Some 40% of the workforce have been laid off or are on the Government's wage subsidy scheme.

The implications for the arts have been significant. Initial research by An Chomhairle Ealaíon/The Arts Council confirms that the COVID-19 crisis has had drastic consequences for the arts and cultural sector which includes around 23,000 artists and arts workers.

Published on 8th May 2020, the Arts Council's survey contained the following main findings:

Loss of audiences estimated at

2.4 million

which includes

1 million

for street arts and spectacle parades and a further

1.4 million

for other activities - including performances, exhibitions, readings, screenings

Loss of participants from cancelled classes/workshops and participatory programmes estimated at over

55,000

85% of organisations are planning to postpone

and provisionally re-schedule some activities later in 2020 or 2021

47% are cancelling some activities outright

9,000 artist engagements

affected by cancelled/postponed activities

5,000 artists

affected by closed workspaces/facilities or withdrawn services and resources

Over 12,000 activities cancelled

including

3,700 performances

and

195 exhibitions

over 112,000
tickets already sold

for activities that will not
now take place

269 staff

have lost their jobs.

No evidence as yet that

insurance
cover

will provide relief

over €3.85m

invested to date in activities
now cancelled/postponed

potential income of

€6.4 million

lost from activities now cancelled

over 65%

of organisations

have initiated activities
specifically in response to
COVID-19 in addition to
business-as-usual activities

over 50%

of organisations

have created or are specifically
promoting online content or
service



The Arts Council survey also established the top three risks identified by organisations:

1. **Ability to reschedule and re-programme planned activities**
2. **Funding and impact on fundraising**
3. **Ability to recover financially**

The Arts Council has estimated that arts organisations – venues, festivals and events, resource organisations, production companies – will incur significant financial loss in the region of €2.9 million in income per month of shutdown.

On 16th June 2020, the Government allocated an additional €20m to the Arts Council as an initial response to the crisis in the arts. On 10th June 2020, the Arts Council published the report of its special Advisory Group which recommended that Government:

- *maintains current wage supports (PUP and TWSS) for artists, arts workers and organisations until they can return to full capacity*
- *ensures fair remuneration for artists is reflected in all public policies; and support the rights of artists in discussions of Article 13 of EU Copyright Directive*
- *reviews taxation practice as it relates to the arts including an examination of VAT, gifting and artists' incomes*
- *provides capital funding scheme for arts buildings to adapt to social distancing requirements.*

On 19th June 2020, the Council also committed to:

- giving priority in additional funding to enhanced commissioning schemes and increased bursary and professional development schemes.
- working with the arts sector to address challenges of digital dissemination and adapting existing physical spaces and exploring new spaces.
- working to restore public confidence in attending live events.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform estimates that some 14,833 people in the arts, entertainment and recreation sector are now unemployed. The Department's most recent assessment is that "Sectors most affected by the shutdown account for higher share of employment than added value and include: Distribution, Transport, Hotels & Restaurants and Arts & Entertainment."

Having reflected on these new additional challenges for the arts and culture, the Birr festivals considered the following questions:

What does all this mean for festivals?

What needs to change?

What form will festivals take in future?

What are the most effective choices that festivals can make now to manage the uncertainties and risks, and to exploit any opportunities, that arise directly and indirectly due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

The group considered ideas and assumptions to help create a framework for thinking and planning for the Birr festivals to work through this period of uncertainty, and towards a different state of affairs in 2022. The assumptions reflect the fluid and uncertain environment within which the entire arts sector and the creative industries must identify pathways towards sustainability and resilience:

- 1 We are in a transition period as we move towards a new state of affairs (a new way of living and working with and around COVID-19) by 2022
- 2 Current temporary arrangements and reliefs provided by Government and public funders will inevitably reduce or cease
- 3 Public confidence will take time to restore
- 4 Some festivals will not survive 2020
- 5 New festivals, and new forms of festival, will emerge 2020-2022
- 6 Festivals will struggle to operate in 2021, some will not survive
- 7 Rescheduling of festivals in 2020 and 2021 will have both predictable and unforeseeable consequences (for example arising from event clashes/ bottlenecks, overcrowded marketplace, fractured audience, diminished revenues etc)
- 8 During this period there will be restrictions on the size and nature of gatherings of people
- 9 There will be travel restrictions within Ireland
- 10 There will be restrictions on travel into Ireland
- 11 Social distancing will remain in place, in some form
- 12 There will be difficulties with insurance



- 13 Pressure on public finances will limit the funding available for arts and culture
- 14 Funding programmes will be delayed/frozen/cancelled
- 15 In the absence of a national cultural strategy and investment programme, there will continue to be a low level of policy cohesion and implementation, regarding arts and culture, between national and local public bodies and agencies
- 16 The tourism/hospitality sector will struggle
- 17 The funding model for festivals and events will change
- 18 The skills and organisational structures required to organise and produce festivals and events will change, creating additional pressures for voluntary committees as well as for professionally staffed organisations
- 19 Sponsorship will be more difficult to secure
- 20 The form of the festival, as we know it, will change
- 21 Usage patterns for venues and locations will change – capacity will reduce significantly or very significantly, and established business models are not sustainable
- 22 The cost of maintaining and using venues will increase to meet public health requirements
- 23 The experience of attending an event and the experience of being an audience member will change
- 24 The role of the online, digital and virtual event will grow as both a cost centre and source of revenue for festivals, and the quality of viewer/participant experience will become increasingly important as a differentiator among events especially if people have to pay to access online content

The festivals also considered this question: **“How do we go about rethinking the purpose and form of the festival, in light of these assumptions?”**

The ideas and responses here give some sense of the tensions between established patterns of experience and behaviour that are the norm at festivals, and the disruption caused not just by the COVID-19 pandemic but by the need to adapt quickly to augmenting or replacing live events with online or virtual events and experiences.

In considering these issues the Birr festivals reached consensus on a vision for what festivals can represent for community and society.

Humans are social animals; we need contact and proximity to others.

Festivals are one of the ways that we celebrate our humanity and our ability to imagine, create and share. Festivals help us to celebrate, to step outside ‘normality’, to commemorate, to connect.

Festivals create a safe and sometimes challenging space for people to come together to experience culture in different ways, as individuals and collectively. Festivals also provide a focal point for a celebratory coming together of artists and other professionals who share common interests and passions – an artform or genre, for example, or a specific sector of the cultural and creative industries.

In addition to these individual and communal aspects, festivals play an important role in local economies and add intangible and immeasurable value to the assets of a place.

The basic form of the festival is that of a purposeful gathering. Some of the attributes of a successful festival include:

- Opportunities for human interaction
- Imagination, vision, creativity
- Quality
- Community involvement
- Sense of connectedness, social cohesion
- Sense of place, local image, local identity
- Sense of wellbeing, enjoyment, discovery, anticipation
- Stimulation of economic activity

It is unlikely that the means for producing and experiencing festivals post-2022 will be the same means that have helped us to produce and experience festivals hitherto. There are many unknowns at this stage.

Perhaps the safest strategic assumption to make is that there is an opportunity now to use the remainder of 2020 and all of 2021 as a **transition phase** to plan for a radically changed scenario in 2022 and beyond, shaped by the assumptions listed above and driven by our collective belief in the power of festivals to contribute to the common good.

In this daunting context, the group of festivals in Birr are committed to taking a position of leadership through their collective values, actions, and ability to work cohesively and strategically.

This collective approach is underpinned by a set of values:

1. Quality

A commitment to providing artists and audiences with high-quality experiences throughout their engagement with the festivals in Birr; this means fair remuneration for artists and contributors, a safe environment for artists, crew, staff, volunteers and audiences, and excellent production and presentation standards

2. Sustainability

A commitment by the cluster of festivals in Birr to lead by example in adopting and implementing principles of sustainability in how events are produced and promoted; and to avail of the benefits and economies of scale that are possible through planned collaboration

3. Accessibility

A commitment to ensuring that as many people as possible can engage with, and benefit from, the festivals in Birr

4. Inclusion

A commitment to designing and producing events in Birr in ways that extend a welcome to as many people as possible, particularly to those whose circumstances mean that they are infrequent attenders at festivals and events

5. Innovation

A commitment to adapting and changing the ways that we devise and produce our events sustainably and effectively in Birr (ranging from organisational arrangements and planning to programming, the use of technology and changed funding models)

6. Partnership/collaboration

A commitment to thinking, planning, and working together, and with others, to increase our resilience and to broaden our resource base for creative programming





■ towards a vision and mission

Arising from these discussions, the consortium of Birr festivals identified clear elements of a shared vision statement and mission statement that reflect the festivals' ambition and sense of common purpose.

VISION:

A healthy and prosperous Birr where it's easy for people to engage with culture, the arts, science and heritage.

MISSION:

To devise and present high-quality festivals and events that promote and support artists and their work, and that foster public engagement with culture, the arts, science and heritage in Birr.

■ strategic focus

With these assumptions, reflections, and values in mind, festivals and venues in Birr are committed to planning with optimism and common purpose within this highly uncertain context, and these plans are part of an ambitious developmental strategy for festivals in Birr.

This report has identified practical and structural barriers that impede the festivals from focusing fully on this strategic agenda, and that limit the individual and collective effectiveness of the festivals. The report's recommendations aim to address these issues.

This strategy is about helping the festivals to achieve their individual and collective goals for:

- 1** Ambitious creative & artistic development
- 2** Inclusivity & accessibility through broadening and deepening engagement with audiences
- 3** Positioning Birr as a great place to live that is also attractive and accessible as a destination for visitors, investors, and businesses.



■ understanding the audience

One of the recommendations of this report is that there is a need for an evidence-based strategy for audience development and audience engagement for the Birr festivals group. Having such a strategy will strengthen the festivals' ability to plan and will create the capacity to respond to and engage with funders, perhaps on a more dynamic footing.

This recommendation recognises that each festival has, to varying degrees and according to resources and capacity, different audiences and different understandings and analyses of their audiences. The recommendation also acknowledges that there will be challenges in devising a systematic approach to gathering audience data. However, the strategically central role and infrastructure of the Theatre & Arts Centre, combined with the experience of the Birr festivals, represents a significant resource on which to build. In addition, the free online resources provided by the Arts Council and the CSO help to establish national, regional, and local profiles on which new strategies and targets can be based.

Approximately 40% of Offaly's population of around 78,000 people resides in the larger towns - Tullamore, Birr, Edenderry, Clara and Portarlinton. The population of Birr is just over 5,740 according to Census 2016. The census shows that the average age of people in Offaly is slightly over 38 years in rural areas and slightly over 36 years in urban areas, which is close to the national median age of just over 37 years. The top three non-Irish nationalities living in Offaly are Polish, UK and Lithuanian.

The Offaly Arts Strategy 2018-2022 (Inspire-Imagine-Involve) notes that "the county remains predominantly rural in nature, with 30% residing in a well-developed network of smaller towns and villages of less than 1,500 population and the remainder located in the open countryside. Mindful of this, a stated key objective of the Offaly arts strategy is to foster and invest in ambitious and sustainable programmes that target those communities most hard to reach."

Birr's catchment area extends beyond the county boundaries into North Tipperary, Laois and East Galway, and significant population centres in these areas include Nenagh, Portumna and Borrisokane. The table opposite is generated by the Arts Council's *Mapping Your Audience* tool and shows how many people live within various driving times of Birr:

The Birr festivals have already identified opportunities to develop programmes designed for young people (15-24 years) and as part of the work for this report, have also identified collaborative projects aimed at increasing audience engagement across various age groups.

Select Arts Venue

Birr Theatre & Arts Centre

Select Indicator

Population - Total

Select Count/Number Format

☒ Count - Agrigated Catchments

☐ Count - Individual Catchments

☐ Percentage

Birr Theatre & Arts Centre, Birr, Offaly

Selected Indicator: Population - Total

County Type: Count - Aggregated Catchments

Time Blends

■ 0 to 10 Minutes

■ 0 to 30 Minutes

■ 0 to 45 Minutes

■ 0 to 60 Minutes

■ 0 to 120 Minutes

National Comparison
Figures

	0 to 10 Minutes	0 to 30 Minutes	0 to 45 Minutes	0 to 60 Minutes	0 to 120 Minutes
Population 0-14 years	1,723	10,800	40,618	86,307	736,900
Population 15-24 years	998	6,081	22,186	47,729	425,608
Population 25-44 years	2,180	12,869	50,009	106,036	1,058,966
Population 45-64 years	2,085	13,284	46,686	93,439	816,408
Population 65+ years	1,259	8,369	27,233	52,251	450,076
Total Population	8,245	51,403	186,732	385,762	3,487,958

Population 0-14 years	1,006,552
Population 15-24 years	576,452
Population 25-44 years	1,406,291
Population 45-64 years	1,135,003
Population 65+ years	637,567
Total Population	4,761,865

<http://www.artscouncil/Arts-in-Ireland/Strategic-development/Mapping-your-audience/>



■ the festivals

**THE GROUP
OF FESTIVALS
INVOLVED IN
THIS PROJECT
COMPRISES:**

MAY

**Birr Festival
of Music &
Voice**

JULY

**Scripts
Ireland's
Playwriting
Festival**

AUGUST

**Birr Vintage
Week & Arts
Festival**

OCTOBER

**OFFline
Film
Festival**

OCTOBER

**Hullabaloo!
Offaly's
Children's
Arts Festival**

Birr Theatre & Arts Centre continues to play a significant strategic role in nurturing and developing festivals in Birr, and it remains a centrally important resource to Birr's cultural infrastructure.

The relationship of the Theatre to the genesis and development of festivals underlines the importance of having stable, expert, professional structures in place, and also illustrates the developmental arc that festivals have been able to follow, with support from the Theatre, in recent years. Other venues in Ireland fulfil a similar function, and well-known examples in densely populated urban areas are the Project Arts Centre in Dublin, the Hawk's Well in Sligo, and the Triskel in Cork.

Birr Theatre & Arts Centre therefore is a strategically important resource base for festivals in Birr. In addition to providing access to a venue and related facilities, the Theatre also provides professional administrative services, marketing support and box office management support.



MAY

Birr Festival of Music & Voice



Birr Festival of Music & Voice is a four-day festival that takes place over the May Bank Holiday weekend, that presents recitals and concerts of classical music performed by Irish and international artists. The festival aims to present great music in Birr, and to inspire more participation in musical activity in the town. There is a clear ambition to strengthen the artistic programming, and the festival plans to explore possibilities such as working with an artistic director or a guest curator/programmer, as well as creating opportunities to collaborate with other festivals and presenters.

The festival has a strong focus on supporting and promoting young musicians and singers at the beginning of their professional careers. One of the main support mechanisms for this is the Trench Award competition, which provides performance opportunities and valuable bursaries, together with masterclasses and ongoing mentoring from distinguished international artists.

In partnership with Music Generation, the festival has developed the children's choir Birr Young Voices (ages 8-12) over the past four years. The choir has also participated in the Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival.

Another of the festival's developmental projects is Midland Musical Youth which involves young people (16-24 years.) from throughout the Midlands region and includes a five-week summer project and performances during Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival. The festival has ambitions to develop a Community Choir as part of its mission to increase participation in music-making in Birr.

Structure, Governance:

The festival is organised by a voluntary committee and has no paid staff. Birr Theatre plays a vital role in providing administrative, marketing support and box office support as well as the main venue for the festival.

Funding:

The funding mix for this festival includes earned income from box-office, grants from An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council (Festivals

Investment Scheme), Offaly County Council, Offaly Local Development Company, Birr Municipal District, with major funding from the Trench Trust. Other sources of funding include Birr Lions, Birr Credit Union, and Birr Stage Guild.

Impact of COVID-19 on 2020 event:

The 2020 Festival, postponed from May to September, engaged a professional film company, HelloCamera, to film and record several of the planned concerts and recitals during the summer, with no audience, in compliance with health regulations in place at the time. These were streamed online in September, and included Music in Birr Castle and the Trench Awards, with International online mentoring for the young Trench artists. As the International artists engaged for the Festival faced ongoing travel restrictions, their events and masterclasses were postponed to 2021.

Income from Box Office, patrons and sponsors was reduced this year. Funding had been guaranteed from the major funders which enabled the festival to pay its artists fees. Expenditure was also less, through reduced marketing, accommodation, events.

Development priorities for Birr Festival of Music & Voice:

- 1 Engage an artistic consultant, as a step towards engaging an Artistic Director, to develop the artistic programme and extend the festival's network of connections nationally and internationally
- 2 Grow and strengthen links with conservatories and third level institutions to support our strategy of creating opportunities for aspiring young professional performers
- 3 Establish a new community choir, and a new choral music event in Birr to help achieve the strategic goal of increasing participation in music-making and increasing attendance at music events in Birr.



JULY

Scripts: Ireland's Playwriting Festival



Scripts: Ireland's Playwriting Festival was established in 2013 by Birr Theatre & Arts Centre and Jasango Theatre as a national event that creates opportunities for playwrights to have their work critically appraised and performed. The format of the festival is built around script development through structured engagement with professional writers delivered via mentoring sessions and workshops over a 7-day period.

The public face of the festival is presented in various venues in Birr over four days of performances of new work by selected writers, and the headline event features the work of young writers presented in rehearsed readings by professional actors. The festival programme includes workshops, panel discussions, children's theatre, and site-specific events.

The festival has built links with The Abbey Theatre, Fishamble: The New Play Company, The Irish Writers Centre, Listowel Writers' Week, RTE Drama Department and local radio station Midlands 103.

Since 2013, festival highlights include the involvement of writer Eugene O'Brien in the script development process, writing workshops, pop-up plays and the co-production of a radio play with Midlands 103 which won silver at the PPI Radio Awards for Drama in 2014. More recently, the winner of the 2017 playwright's prize, Phillip O'Doherty, had his play *Pilgrim* starring Rex Ryan performed as part of Scripts 2018, and the winner of the 2018 playwright's prize, Sionnán Ní Nulláin, had her play selected by Druid Theatre for *Druid Debuts* in Galway International Arts Festival 2019.

Structure, Governance:

Scripts was initiated by Birr Theatre & Arts Centre and the festival is now an annual production in the Theatre's calendar and delivered in co-production with Jasango Theatre, with the Theatre providing management and production support.

Funding:

The funding mix for this festival includes: An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council (Festivals Investment Scheme), Offaly County Council, Offaly Local Development Company, donations and earned income from box-office.

Impact of COVID-19 on 2020 event:

The 2020 festival was delivered successfully online and learning from this experience is currently being evaluated to inform future activity.

Development priorities for Scripts: Ireland's Playwriting Festival:

- 1 Increase audience numbers and the reach of the festival among target audience groups
- 2 Establish minimum guaranteed remuneration and fees for artists
- 3 Develop a Youth Arts strand of the festival to engage with teenagers and young people (14-23 years.)



AUGUST

Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival



Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival was established in 1968 and is one of Ireland's longest-running festivals. The week-long festival in August presents an eclectic and diverse programme of events that engages with a broad community including the Birr/Offaly diaspora. The festival is for many people an annual gathering to celebrate Birr and a compelling reason to come back home.

The festival presents multi-disciplinary arts in ways that celebrate community, place and creativity. The programme is crafted to present a wide spectrum of the arts to people in Birr in ways that aim to challenge, entertain, and stimulate interest and appreciation within the local community. To this end, the programme includes art workshops for children, adult masterclasses, and a guided art walk.

The arts festival strand of the programme explores ways of presenting work in the public realm and has successfully programmed immersive visual experiences such as using buildings as a canvas for illuminations, projection mapping and soundscapes.

As a multi-disciplinary festival, the programme aims to create platforms for celebrating the breadth and depth of culture and heritage in Birr, and to engage with the community in diverse ways through the festival's eclectic and inclusive programming that includes participation by local clubs and societies, sports events, theatre, music, pub competitions, community activity and the Festival Parade that attracts more than 6,000 people.

The festival is seen as a priority 'headline' cultural and community event for Birr and is of significant economic benefit to local businesses. The estimated number of festival attendees in 2019 was just over 32,400.

Structure, Governance:

The festival is organised by a voluntary committee and has no paid staff. The relationship with Birr Theatre is important and the Theatre is involved as a programme partner with the Festival. As the curated arts programme strand of the Festival develops, this creative partnership with the Theatre is likely to become more important.

Funding:

The funding mix includes An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council (Festivals Investment Scheme), Offaly County Council, Creative Ireland, earned income (workshops, markets), sponsorship and donations.

Impact of COVID-19 on 2020 event:

Although the main programme had to be cancelled, Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival maintained a public presence in 2020 through the Vintage Luminaries and Window Wanderland projects; a professionally curated virtual visual arts gallery; a selection of online children's events including the much loved pavement art; and exhibitions using shops windows throughout town.

Development priorities for Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival:

- 1 Develop the programme to increase opportunities to engage with teenagers and young people (14-23 years)
- 2 Continue to expand the artistic programme to present new and challenging art in ways that remain inclusive and relevant to the community in Birr
- 3 Strengthen the organisational structures and governance arrangements as steps towards professionalisation of the Festival
- 4 Implement a policy of fair remuneration and pay for artists, curators, programmers, and other professional services



OCTOBER

OFFline Film Festival



OFFline Film Festival was established in 2010 by Hello Camera, Marcella Corcoran Kennedy and Birr Theatre & Arts Centre as an outcome of a feasibility study commissioned by Film Offaly (Offaly Film Commission).

OFFline Film Festival's mission is to promote the exhibition of new films by Irish film makers and the festival aims to present new Irish work in a diversified international context that includes work by overseas film makers. The festival's programming policy aims to present the best of contemporary world cinema – shorts, documentaries, and feature films – to Irish audiences in a curated and critical context.

Within the landscape of film festivals in Ireland, OFFline is recognised as developing a distinct niche for the exhibition of new short films, for promoting new work by independent filmmakers and in providing structured opportunities for artistic and creative development through its innovative Animation Residency programme. The festival's scale is seen as one of its strengths alongside the quality of programme and contributors. OFFline also contributes to Offaly's strategic goal of establishing the county as a location for production, post-production, and skills development within the Irish film sector.

Through this approach to programming, OFFline works to develop audience engagement with the art of film through interviews and discussions with film makers.

The festival's Animation Residency is funded by the Trench Trust and Offaly County Council and offers opportunities for up to 3 animators to work in Birr for 6 months on their projects, with support from the industry-leading studio Piranha Bar. OFFline also runs a 57-Hour Filmmaking Challenge where participants make and edit a short film in Birr, and the winning entry is guaranteed a screening at Galway Film Fleadh.

Structure, Governance:

The festival is run by a voluntary committee and engages professional technical, management and marketing services.

Funding:

The funding mix includes An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council (Festivals Investment Scheme), Offaly County Council, Offaly Local Development Company, JVM Trench Will Trust, Birr Municipal District, and Birr Lions Club. As is the case with other festivals in Birr, the Theatre provides a venue for the 5 days of the festival as well as box office support and audience development support, and in recent years the Theatre also provided financial support.

Impact of COVID-19 on 2020 event:

The festival took place in October 2020 assessing all events in light of changing regulations and restrictions. The ambition to realise a festival with physical events, within permitted guidelines, as well as delivering events online was achieved. The 3rd Animation Residency remains intact with three animators starting in September until Spring 2021.

Development priorities for OFFline Film Festival:

- 1 Positioning OFFline as a niche festival of significance in the exhibition of independent feature films and independent short films by Irish and international makers
- 2 Ensuring fair remuneration and payment for artists and contributors
- 3 Establishing stable relationships with key funders in the context of national and local arts strategy (Making Great Art Work/Arts Council and Inspire-Imagine-Involve/Offaly County Council)
- 4 Playing a leadership role in developing a film hub in Birr as part of the Creative Court development and as part of the national strategy for strengthening film infrastructure





OCTOBER

Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival

Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival was established in 2007 by Offaly County Council Arts Office and Birr Theatre & Arts Centre specifically to cater for primary school children (up to 12 years).

The 4-day October festival programme aims to stimulate children's imagination and creativity and contribute significantly to culture in Offaly. *Hullabaloo!* is scheduled to coincide with the mid-term break and the programme includes participatory activity for children such as workshops and live performances and the festival showcases theatre for young audiences.

Hullabaloo! takes place in three locations – Birr, Clara and Edenderry – and the festival aims to make full use of local amenities including Birr's Theatre & Arts Centre, Marian Hall and Birr Castle, Clara Family Resource Centre, Edenderry's Youth Café and Community Cabin, as well as libraries and community parks in the three towns. Approximately 1,500 children and their families participate in *Hullabaloo!* Events are usually booked out, which indicates that the festival is at full capacity and suggests also that there may be unmet demand and therefore opportunities. In Birr, *Hullabaloo!* creates opportunities for Transition Year students to get involved in the festival and gain valuable experience in participating in the cultural life of their community.

Structure, Governance:

The festival is coordinated and managed by Offaly County Council and Birr Theatre & Arts Centre, in conjunction with Offaly Library Services and Clara Family Resource Centre and with external support engaged under a contract for services.

Funding:

The funding mix for the festival includes An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council, Offaly County Council, Offaly Local Development Company, Birr Lions Club, earned income (workshops, box-office).

Impact of COVID-19 on 2020 event:

The festival is scheduled for 28-31 October 2020 with plans adapted/revised to include online activity alongside live events as a response to prevailing COVID-19 regulations and recommendations.

Development priorities for Hullabaloo!

Offaly's Children's Arts Festival:

- 1 Expand the footprint of the festival in Birr, particularly in light of the redevelopment of the Courthouse
- 2 Extend the reach of the festival during the year by developing projects with Creative Schools/ Creative Ireland
- 3 Using learning from 2020, develop the online programming strand to create a balanced blend of the physical and virtual events that prioritise quality, inclusivity, and accessibility



■ collaboration, cooperation, and development

In addition to these development priorities for each festival, the Birr festivals have identified joint strategic and developmental priorities that address artistic issues, audience engagement and creative place-making. As a group, the festivals are committed to

- 1 Ambitious creative and artistic development:**
through closer, long-range planning and collaboration in programming, commissioning, producing, and presenting work, and through developing new opportunities for artists (including residencies, commissions, and projects)
- 2 Inclusivity and accessibility through broadening and deepening engagement with audiences:**
through researching and understanding the potential audience in Birr's greater catchment area, through focusing on needs that are specific to potential audiences in Birr itself, and through the development of a multi-annual strategy and plan for audience development and engagement
- 3 Positioning Birr** as a great place to live that is also attractive and accessible as a destination for visitors, investors, and businesses.

The festivals, along with Birr 20:20, are part of an active local network of stakeholders who share a common purpose and ambition for promoting and revitalising the cultural, social, and economic conditions in Birr. There is a habit of partnership and cooperation among the festivals and between the festivals and local stakeholders, and this represents a significant resource of support for tackling this ambitious strategic development agenda.

For example, Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival, is a multi-disciplinary Festival and has the largest audience of any of the Birr festivals, as well as a well-established and positive brand and reputation. Vintage Week is an ideal partner for collaborative projects that can help to showcase for the other more specialised festivals in Birr and this, in turn, will help strengthen and diversify Vintage Week's programming. Each of the Birr festivals represents a potential source of new ideas and programming opportunities for creative collaboration projects.

A discussion with the five Birr festivals focused on identifying the potential for creative collaboration and co-programming. This discussion underlined the importance of the festivals having time and freedom to explore and develop creative ideas, and gave a sense of the potential at local, regional, national, and international level for these festivals. Creating this time and freedom is one of the objectives of this report, as outlined in the Recommendations.

The table opposite gives a sense of the breadth of possibilities for creative collaborations locally, and a number of these are being actively explored in 2020.

Birr Festival of Music (BFM) with Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival

- BFM presents Trench Award recipients in lunchtime concerts during Vintage Week, increasing the audience numbers and reach of classical music in Birr
- Midland Musical Youth in evening concerts together with Trench Award voice winners
- Source and engage classical street musicians/buskers
- Commission projections to respond to/accompany music performances during BFM

Birr Festival of Music with OFFLine Film Festival

- Engage Accompanist for a Silent Movie
- Commission a composer for a soundtrack for one of the films from the 56-Hour Challenge
- Screen a 'Great Composer' or 'Great Performer' film, e.g. *Amadeus*, *The Great Caruso*
- Projections of recitals/operas/performances onto public buildings, or video-mapping to music

Birr Festival of Music with HULLABALOO!

- Introduce 'Young Persons Guide to the Orchestra' workshops
- Birr Young Voices - expand this programme to include once-off choral sessions with a professional Kodály tutor during Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival

SCRIPTS with Birr Vintage Week

- New programme strand of creative writing workshops

SCRIPTS with Hullabaloo!

- Develop creative writing strand aimed at young people aged 14-23

OFFline Film Festival with Hullabaloo!

- Curated Youth Film programme
- Filmmaking for Kids workshops
- Screen acting for Kids workshops

OFFline Film Festival with Birr Vintage Week & Arts Festival

- Develop the Vintage Luminaries project as a significant platform for creative artists
- Screening of programme featuring local and diaspora work
- Curated invitational programme on a theme selected specifically by Birr Vintage Week

OFFline Film Festival with SCRIPTS

- Stage to Screen Writing Masterclasses
- Stage to Screen Acting transition classes
- Winning entry at SCRIPTS is developed and made into a short for exhibition at OFFline
- Scriptwriting for young writers for short film

■ impact of the festivals

Festivals are recognised as important forces for positive development and change within communities. An Arts Council contribution to the research for this report states that:

“Arts festivals and venues have been central columns of the Arts Council’s arts provision since the 1970s, delivering high quality arts experiences to urban and regional publics, and offering the arts community platforms to present their work. Festival/venue partnerships, in their different guises, are recognised as vital, providing among other things, a context where artistic risk taking is supported and facilitating venues to connect with a wider demographic than they might otherwise achieve. In the likely scenario of a changed social landscape and with the prospect of restricted budgets coming from the government, the strength and clarity of imagined future festivals will be essential to ensuring continued investment in the sectors.”

This Arts Council contribution touches on the value and benefits of the relationships that grow between venues and festivals. This is particularly important when looking at how festivals have developed and are sustained in Birr.

Birr Theatre & Arts Centre continues to play a central role in the genesis and development of festivals in the town, providing performance spaces as well as administrative, promotional, marketing and production support. To describe this support in terms of ‘in-kind’ or ‘back-office’ misses the point.

The support that Birr Theatre provides is in the first instance strategic and developmental, aimed at achieving the end goals of having a cluster of quality festivals and events available to the community in Birr. This support allows festivals to develop artistic programmes that stimulate, challenge, and entertain audiences, and that broaden inclusion, participation and access to culture and the arts for people in Birr.

In addition to the cultural, social and community impacts, festivals also play a part in animating economic activity and supporting local economies and businesses. An immediate challenge for the festivals and their stakeholders in Birr is to build on the foundations that are already in place with audience/participant surveys, and adopt a broader strategy to gathering, analysing, and using data. In this way the festivals can set about mapping the benefits and impacts that they create to demonstrate the value that festivals bring to Birr and the region, and identify opportunities for further investment in the festivals to increase this value.

As part of implementing this strand of this new development strategy, the festivals are committed to developing their capacity and systems for gathering data and, where appropriate, commissioning research to describe and evaluate the economic and other impacts that the festivals make in Birr. Initial discussions with local business interests indicate a willingness to work jointly with the festivals in building research and information resources.

Initial research for this report establishes the following baseline figures (based on 2019 data):

In 2019 the estimated total number of attendances at the five festivals in Birr (population c. 5,700) was

46,291

which creates an estimated economic impact on Birr of **€2.081 million**

In 2019 the five festivals presented

**107
different
events**

for people to engage with arts and culture. Of these 107 events

43 (40%)

**were free of charge
to attend**

In 2019 the five festivals generated a gross turnover of

€164,602

which includes

€35,665 (22%)

in earned income from events

€74,475 (45%)

from sponsors, donors, and philanthropic trusts

€54,462 (33%)

from public funding



■ festivals and their operating environment

The festivals in Birr share many of the main characteristics of arts festivals in Ireland:

- the people involved in the festivals are passionate about bringing the arts closer to people's lives, and are strongly motivated to contribute to the wellbeing of their local community
- funding tends to come from a diverse mix of public and private sources
- the festivals are valued as important elements that contribute to the quality of life in their community
- they are considered an important driver of economic activity in the town across all business sectors
- from a tourism perspective, the festivals help to animate Birr and to give substance to the proposition that Birr is a significant, if under-promoted, destination town rich in architectural, scientific, and cultural heritage including a thriving contemporary arts scene
- festivals and arts activity can help to attract investment in venues, buildings, and other facilities for culture
- tourism agencies and organisations identify festivals and culture as important 'pull' factors in attracting overseas visitors.

The festivals also face many of the same challenges that confront other festivals in Ireland:

- there is a high reliance on voluntary committees, volunteers, and other unpaid work
- organisational structures can be vulnerable, reliant on a small pool of people, and succession planning can be difficult
- there is a limited pool of people with specific skills and experience who are available and able to make the kind of commitment now involved in being a trustee, board member or committee member
- in the absence of multi-annual funding commitments, the funding model is inherently unstable which makes long-range programming and planning difficult

- festivals find it difficult to secure funding for full-time or part-time employment, although employment schemes can be an important short-term source of support
- the festivals are challenged by the demands that funding and governance processes can place on their fragile voluntary structures and resources
- the cycles of work involved in funding applications and reports, and in managing governance, limit the time and resources that festivals have for creative thinking, planning, and developing strategy
- a related challenge is the reduction of time available for exploring and developing new sources of funding, or projects that could attract funding (particularly collaborative projects with an EU dimension)
- they are also challenged to find adequate quality time for medium to long-range research and development to address developmental opportunities that they have identified individually and collectively.

Although festivals are normally perceived, and usually self-identify, as part of 'the arts sector' or 'the arts industry' it is worth considering the position and role of festivals in a broader context and as an integral part of Ireland's community, voluntary and charities sector. The role of arts festivals is already seen as an element of national wellbeing in the Government's Éire Ildánach/ Creative Ireland programme, and the Arts Council now identifies spatial planning and space making as strategic drivers for its strategy *Making Great Art Work*.

Viewing arts festivals in these broader contexts helps illustrate strengths, weaknesses and strategic issues that are shared widely by thousands of community and voluntary organisations throughout Ireland. Many of the structural and funding issues that face arts festivals are almost identical to those faced by organisations in the community and voluntary sector.

This sector comprises approximately 10,000 registered charities and more than 20,000 non-profit organisations. The Wheel, the umbrella body for the sector, reports that

“This sector has combined annual turnover of over €14.5bn, employs over 190,000 staff, benefits from the voluntary work of over 50,000 volunteer board members/directors and the work of over half a million “operational” volunteers, (valued by the Central Statistics Office at around €2bn per year). Indecon Economic Consultants estimate (in a report published by the Charities Regulator in 2018) that total direct, indirect and induced value of the impact of the work of Ireland’s charities exceeds €24bn.”

The 2016 report *Let’s Commission for Communities* (The Wheel, 2016) describes the additional value that community organisations (such as festivals, venues, arts organisations) can deliver to society and it describes, in broad terms, how community organisations do this: *“they have one thing in common: they take the same basic not-for-private-profit, community and voluntary approach to their work. The community and voluntary approach is a process that activates, encourages, empowers and supports groups of people to join together in activities that promote their common interest, improve their communities and benefit all of society. Its key features include:*

- *responsive, tailored, and holistic approaches to identifying and meeting needs*
- *flexibility, innovation, integration, and collaboration in delivery*
- *ownership, involvement and empowerment of service beneficiaries and the wider community*
- *contributing to building social capital and social cohesion and*
- *bringing additional sources of funding to support their work that would not be available to the State*

This approach delivers significant Societal Value for Ireland’s people. Societal Value comprises both financial and non-financial value creation by using resources to produce a good and just society. If society is to continue to benefit from the Societal Value generated by the community and voluntary approach, then public policy must create an enabling ecosystem that will sustain it and make it better into the future.”

In recent years, organisations in the sector – including the arts sector – have had to respond to stronger and clearer governance and reporting requirements. These requirements aim to strengthen and protect the entire sector, to support each organisation within the sector, to support and protect the people who run and volunteer in organisations, and to protect the public purse and the public interest/stake in the sector.

However, the administrative burden on both professional and voluntary staff, and on the voluntary boards of organisations, can be considerable notwithstanding the resources and guidance that are available such as the Governance Code and the provision of templates and other materials by regulators and funders. All of this puts considerable pressures on existing structures and resources.

Alongside governance matters, funders at national and local level require reports in differing formats and this means that many organisations spend time presenting the same data in different ways to different funders and other organisations. This also places recurring pressures on existing structures and resources.

This report has identified an approach to providing professional support, on an ongoing basis, to enable the Birr festivals to focus more time and resources on the creative thinking and strategic planning that is essential to ensure that the festivals remain sustainable, relevant and effective in the coming years – not only through the current crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic but in the years beyond. This approach is set out in the report’s recommendations.

■ research and consultation

The process that has informed the production of this report included a research strand and a consultation process.

Research Strand

The research strand included a review of the strategic and policy context for arts development in Offaly and nationally and considers issues and opportunities for sustainable festival development for the Birr festivals.

Consultation Strand

The consultation strand included interviews with around 40 contributors representing funders, policy makers, arts & culture organisations, business representatives, tourism experts and media, as well as meetings with the Birr 20:20 Festivals Project Steering Group.





■ review of policy context – culture at local and national level

Festivals provide an essential civic and cultural service to citizens by providing regular opportunities to experience, enjoy and engage with the arts. Since the 1973 amendments to the 1951 Arts Act, Local Authorities have had an increasing role in promoting the arts, initially via arts grants and later through the establishment of local arts offices with dedicated staff and a range of arts and cultural services.

Local Authorities and County Arts Offices are now an integral part of Ireland's professional cultural infrastructure. Since the enactment of the 2003 Arts Act all Local Authorities have been required to prepare and implement arts development plans for their area.

Offaly County Council

The current Offaly Arts Strategy is *Inspire, Imagine, Involve* and covers the period 2018-2022. The vision of this strategy is that:

“the arts are embedded and integrated into the way of life of the people of County Offaly; accessible to and experienced by all citizens, as well as attracting visitors to the county.”

Three priority strands underpin the Offaly Arts Strategy:

- 1 The People** – enhancing public engagement with the arts
- 2 The Place** – promoting the arts in the civic space
- 3 The Process** – nurturing artistic talent and creative endeavour.

The Offaly Arts Strategy outlines clearly the public policy and strategic framework that underpins cultural planning at Local Authority and at national level and references the enabling legislation such as The Arts Acts (1951, 1971, 2003), the Local Government Reform Act (2014).

The crossover between these strands of statutory responsibility can be seen in Offaly's Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) and the role of the arts is stated with clarity and ambition:

“An integrated approach is required within which the arts have an important role and function in both the economic and community streams of Offaly's LECP. Developing the County's cultural infrastructure enhances employment opportunities and attracts inward investment and tourism. Providing better access and greater public engagement with the arts is a unifying force enhancing community cohesion and imbuing a sense of place.”

The Offaly Arts Strategy underlines the role of collaboration in this integrated approach: *“The arts office collaborates with a number of Offaly County Council sections to foster and develop a creative and dynamic environment in which Offaly citizens can engage with the arts. Increasingly, the arts office cooperates with local authority sections, such as Heritage, Community,*

Architecture, Housing and Planning; working transversally to harness resources and build capacity for the arts."

The planned actions under the Offaly Arts Strategy 2018-2022 refer to maintaining support for Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival and include a measure that is of strategic relevance and importance to this report:

"2.1.3. Continue to provide resources to Birr Theatre and Arts Centre to sustain the quality of its programme while developing its business potential as a festivals hub (Birr Vintage Week and Arts Festival, Scripts Ireland's Playwriting Festival, OFFline Film Festival, Hullabaloo! Offaly's Children's Arts Festival, Birr Festival of Music and Voice)."

This measure raises the possibility of a hub for festivals in Birr. Although the hub is not described in any detail, the measure seems to reflect a felt need and opportunity that is seen as strategically important for Offaly. This also creates the opportunity for this report to propose actions that can lead to the development of a support structure, or hub, for festivals in Birr.

Offaly Local Development Company

Offaly Local Development Company (OLDC) was established in 2008 as a partnership of agencies and groups representing the community, statutory and private sectors. It is funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union to deliver a variety of programmes and supports to individuals, communities, and businesses in Co. Offaly.

OLDC is responsible for delivering the LEADER programmes and it plays a key role in delivering social inclusion, community support and community development programmes, support local community groups via a socially inclusive community development approach.

This work supports collective community engagement and the development of sustainable, stronger communities and community groups which represent or work within disadvantaged communities and SICAP target groups can avail of these supports. Direct supports include needs identification, community planning and capacity-building to deliver social, recreational, developmental, and cultural activities. Practical supports are also provided to ensure equality and inclusion measures are in place and facilitation to participate in local and national decision-making structures.

OLDC recognises the role that festivals play in strengthening cohesion and in animating individuals and communities and has provided support to festivals and cultural infrastructure in Birr.

Éire Ildánach/Creative Ireland

County Arts services have been positioned centrally in the implementation of the *Éire Ildánach/Creative Ireland* which is "an all-of-government culture and wellbeing programme that inspires and transforms people, places and communities through creativity". Each county now has a Creative County strategy and plan to support the delivery of Creative Ireland's five strategic pillars which are:

- 1 Enabling the creative potential of every child
- 2 Enabling creativity in every community
- 3 Investing in our creative and cultural infrastructure
- 4 Ireland as a centre of excellence in audio-visual production
- 5 Unifying our global reputation

Offaly's Creative County Strategy is focused on placing "community collaboration centre stage for the delivery of Culture and Creativity in Offaly" and the Local Authority's focus is clear: "Offaly's Culture Team has the mandate to lead on Pillar 2, Enabling the Creativity in Every Community. However, the Council's role is not exclusive to Pillar 2 and the Council will collaborate with communities, groups and agencies to assist with developing and delivering the four other pillars."

This further enhances the policy and strategy environment for festivals. The scope, experience, track record and connectedness of the festivals in Birr represent a considerable, perhaps unique, resource for the County in delivering on both national and local policy priorities for community wellbeing led by creativity and culture.

An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council

At national level, The Arts Council's strategy *Making Great Art Work* (MGAW) identifies two policy priority areas: the artist and public engagement. The strategy acknowledges the many ways that festivals provide opportunities and supports for artists. In terms of public engagement, the strategy highlights three areas where festivals play a role: audiences, participation, and volunteering.

The strategy identifies the central role that festivals play in bringing people closer to the arts:

"Festivals are key producers and presenters of the arts and are critical to engaging large and diverse audiences. Festivals are often central to a community expressing and exploring its local identity, providing access to the arts in areas of low engagement and providing significant opportunities for artists to develop their practice."

The Arts Council's describes its role as follows: "to advocate for a diverse and varied arts festival ecology and to provide a chain of funding supports that encourage: models of national and international significance and best practice, models that increase opportunities for public engagement or develop the work of an artist/artform, support for small festivals to deliver quality arts experiences for audiences and festival programmes engaged with, and relevant to the local community."

The Arts Council's goal is to support festivals that

- *make a critical contribution to innovative arts practice and provide arts experiences for a large and diverse audience*
- *assist artists in developing their practice*
- *commit to interpreting the arts in new and challenging ways and developing audiences to engage with such work.*

In supporting festivals, artists and audiences, the Arts Council focuses its funding through its Festival Investment Scheme which is calibrated to address and support the development of festivals of varying scale and ambition.

The festivals in Birr offer a rich and diverse range of opportunities and platforms for artists for performance, exhibition, developing their practice and engaging with participants and audiences. These include concerts, screenings, workshops, classes, readings, exhibitions, and other events. The collaborative and developmental approach of the Birr festivals aligns with Arts Council goals and objectives for artists, audiences and place-making.

Although the Arts Council's Festivals Strategy makes no explicit reference to organisational development, collaboration, or cooperation among festivals, the Council's thinking is informed by the need for capacity-building and supports for festivals, most of whom rely heavily on the input of voluntary committees. Building capacity is likely to become a more visible priority in the Council's funding programmes, given the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, festivals contribute to the objectives and goals of *Making Great Art Work* (MGAW) which also contains relevant objectives in its consideration of Spatial and Demographic Planning:

Objective 17: *Ensure investment in arts infrastructure is strategic and sustainable.* The relevant action in MGAW is "We will develop and implement a clear strategy for selective and sustainable investment in the infrastructure for the arts (built and organisational). It will be informed by our role as national development agency, by our strategic priorities, by spatial considerations, by the commitment of our funding partners, and by projected resources."

Objective 18: *Advise and advocate to ensure that national, regional, and local capital provision are co-ordinated and sustainable.* The relevant action in MGAW is "We will seek to influence decision-making on capital development in the arts to ensure that it is well planned from a spatial perspective and that future annual operating and programme costs are calculated and provided for".

CONCLUSION

This overview of the cultural policy and strategy environment at local and national level suggests that the Birr 20:20 Vision CLG initiative to support sustainable local festival development is in tune with current strategic thinking and is perhaps in some ways ahead of the curve because of the degree of intended collaboration and cooperation among the festivals. The emergence of this consortium of festivals in Birr as a vehicle for sharing knowledge and ideas, for strategic planning and for exploring new business and delivery models for festivals, opens up interesting possibilities for research and learning, as well as creative opportunities that will benefit artists and audiences. In time, the Birr festivals consortium could be well positioned to apply for funding on a project basis or for more sustained activities.

In this context, an initiative by Birr 2020 CLG to support sustainable festival development needs to have clearly defined strategic goals as well as operational elements and outputs that decision makers and funders can connect to their agendas and objectives. The strategic goals identified by the Birr festivals resonate with Arts Council and Local Authority strategic priorities for artistic programming, engaging with audiences and communities, and creative place-making. The Birr festivals' goals include:

- 1 **Ambitious creative and artistic development**
- 2 **Inclusivity and accessibility through broadening and deepening engagement with audiences**
- 3 **Positioning Birr as a great place to live that is also attractive and accessible as a destination for visitors, investors, and businesses.**

■ consultation with stakeholders

Consultation with external stakeholders comprised around forty interviews plus email correspondence. The range of contributors to the external consultation included people involved in:

- arts management and programming
- business
- policymaking at local and national levels
- public funding
- social and economic development
- tourism and hospitality
- media and communications

Contributions to interviews for this report were treated as confidential and non-attributable, as agreed with contributors. Because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, several interviewees agreed to be re-interviewed to take account of the fundamentally changed context and circumstances.

Interviews were designed to elicit insights and opinions relating to four main themes, in addition to specialist or issue-specific issues (such as emerging public policy priorities, funding, infrastructural issues). The four themes were:

- **Idea:** responses to the idea that Birr 20:20 Vision CLG, along with the group of festivals, would undertake a strategic project to strengthen and promote the festivals and position Birr more prominently as a cultural destination; more specifically, some contributors were asked to consider the idea of shared professional support services for the festivals
- **Needs:** identifying Birr's current and future needs that this project could help to address; identifying and commenting on needs that are specific to the festivals (individually and collectively)

- **Advice:** based on their knowledge and experience, contributors offered advice on how such an initiative might work and suggested critical success factors
- **Risks:** contributors identified issues and risk that could impede the successful development of the project or that could limit its operational and strategic effectiveness

The consultation process showed that there is consensus that Birr has an opportunity to become more prominently placed as a cultural tourism destination with a unique mix of attributes including location, heritage infrastructure, natural environment, and the calendar of annual festivals.

The idea of a collective initiative under the aegis of Birr 20:20 Vision CLG and the festivals is seen as a positive and exciting opportunity that *"could only be good for the town and county"*. One respondent cautioned that further development/ investment in Birr's festivals could be perceived as over-concentration, relative to other towns in Offaly, and that a balanced approach across the county was essential. Others observed that different parts of Offaly have different strengths, and that culture, heritage, science and arts were dominant characteristics of Birr, and that it made sense to build on these as part of a balanced approach to development and investment in Offaly.

Contributors felt that the timing of this Birr 20:20 Vision CLG festivals project was good, as a step towards realising the potential of the redevelopment of Birr Courthouse which will be a significant new creative hub for the town and region. The Courthouse was identified as a potential springboard for growth and development of arts and culture activity, both in servicing existing activities (festivals, organisations) and in attracting

new activities such as artists' residencies, projects, training and skills development particularly in film and animation, and in providing a base for start-up businesses in the creative industry sector.

Contributors frequently expressed the view that while Birr already *"punches above its weight"* in responding dynamically to the challenges facing rural Ireland, at the same time Birr could be more visible and *"on more people's radar"*. A frequent comment related to the sense that Birr, like many parts of rural Ireland (and the Midlands in particular), continues to be challenged by the consequences of policy decisions to concentrate investment and resources in the Greater Dublin Area.

Some contributors suggested that Birr needs to be more assertive in presenting options for the delivery of State policy – for example in the regional development of support for aspects of film production, or as a regional hub for skills development and training in film, or as a "festival town" to capitalise on its designation as a Destination Town. Some contributors emphasised this latter point particularly for domestic tourists, as a pragmatic and urgent response to the COVID-19 situation and the collapse of the international tourism market.

Several contributors commented that Birr's location gives the town a competitive edge for two reasons:

- (i) there is a large population of potential festival goers within an hour's drive of the town and people in rural Ireland are used to travelling to events, and
- (ii) proximity to the Dublin market

However, contributors also commented optimistically that while not enough is being done to exploit this competitive edge, the Birr 20:20 Vision CLG initiative with the festivals could play a part in helping to change this.

Birr's calendar of festivals was identified as a strength, and some respondents suggested that the festival season should extend throughout the year, partly to enrich quality of life for the community and partly to add to Birr's cultural tourism proposition.

Several respondents emphasised the importance of any new approach having clearly visible benefits and potential for the whole community, and as a 'next stage' in further strengthening the good relations between the festivals and the local business community. More specifically, some respondents spoke of the opportunity to build a stronger *"Birr festivals brand"* that would benefit festivals, tourism, and the local economy.

Feedback from the local business community was positive and encouraging, with the possibility mentioned of additional financial support for a new approach to the promotion and marketing of the festivals as part of a developmental initiative.

However, some respondents also stressed the importance of balancing the needs of the tourism industry and international visitors with the needs of the community, and also referred to the tensions or incompatibilities between language, priorities and metrics used for arts and culture and those used for tourism.

Some respondents suggested that Birr and Offaly should focus primarily on domestic tourism and take a guarded approach to investing in tourism infrastructure that was predicated on regular large numbers of international visitors. On this point, some contributors suggested that the Birr festivals need to be clear on the tourism focus (domestic or international) for their initiatives and decide how they can be most effective in supporting the town's designation as a Destination Town. Several contributors stressed the need for a balanced approach to cultural tourism that is sensitive to conditions in and around Birr including demographics, heritage and cultural infrastructure, accessibility, access to broadband, and accommodation capacity.

Contributors were asked to comment on the idea of the festivals working collectively and engaging shared professional support services, with the objective of (a) allowing festivals to develop and grow, and (b) making a more strategic contribution to cultural, social and economic development in Birr.

Contributors were generally energised and enthused when describing the outcomes and impacts that this idea could create (such as programming opportunities, economies of scale, greater profile for Birr, attracting creative individuals and companies to establish in Birr). At the same time, there was a consensus that it was vital to be clear about what this initiative would look like, what any new role would be called, and how it would be resourced and managed. Some contributors were familiar with the idea of Birr engaging a festivals co-ordinator or administrator or development officer, but all felt that these terms and titles needed to be explained as clearly as possible.

Many respondents felt that the idea was a practical and creative approach that would build on existing strengths, describing Birr as *'well used to working together'* and *'resourceful, self-reliant'*. Some felt that this approach could unify or channel the collective energy and impact of the festivals to create more impact and benefits for Birr.

Others referred specifically to the opportunity to help festivals that were run by voluntary committees and suggested that access to a shared professional service could help to build and strengthen capacity within the festivals. Potential outcomes here would include an increase in the quality of funding applications and improved prospects of securing new or additional funds from new sources. Some respondents suggested that better planning and coordination could improve the ways that festivals interact with volunteers, and that part of any new role/service should focus on improving volunteer management skills.

A number of contributors flagged the complexity and challenges in designing a shared support service, and cautioned that for such an idea to work effectively there should be clarity about structure and reporting arrangements, clarity about what's involved and what's not involved, and a clear vision for what the benefits would be for all parties.

Contributors also stressed the importance of explaining how such an initiative would help achieve the strategic objectives of local, regional, and national funders and policymakers – *"it will not be enough to point to improvements within the festivals."* Other contributors were more explicit, saying that Birr 20:20 and the festivals *"need to spell out what's in it for artists and audiences"* and one perspective from a funding body was *"they need to explain how the initiative will help us to achieve our goals"*.

Some contributors referred to the example of the festivals support service operated by Tipperary County Council and suggested that this model had already demonstrated the need for such a service. In exploring this point further, some contributors identified a choice that Birr 20:20 and the Birr festivals should consider – whether to focus on a service that provides practical, operational support for the planning and running of festivals (**day-to-day operational support**), or to focus on a service that is more oriented towards supporting business development of festivals (**strategic development support**).

In exploring this perspective, several respondents proposed that the 'day-to-day' support is in fact developmental as it aims to build capacity within the voluntary committees who run festivals. On the other hand, some respondents felt that the Birr festivals needed more strategic support to grow and develop, rather than simply deliver, the festivals. On this point, a number of contributors said that growth and development need to be proportionate to the scale of festivals and their towns and amplified this point by referring to the potential for putting additional stress and pressure on already fragile organisational structures.

In the context of developments in Tipperary, some contributors observed that the Birr initiative looked like a step forward in a different direction and they raised the idea of collaboration between the two Local Authorities (Offaly, Tipperary) in developing structured supports for festivals that reflects the spectrum of needs and opportunities, both operational and developmental. Some contributors also floated the idea of these Local Authorities exploring the possibility of a project with the Arts Council under the Invitation to Collaboration Scheme, with the objective of developing new approaches to supporting festivals.

Some contributors offered views on how the shared support services for the festivals could be designed and structured to minimise risks, and alluded to the following:

- The need for each festival to maintain autonomy and identity, and systems to protect privacy, confidentiality, and competitiveness for each festival
- The need for clear reporting arrangements
- The need for clearly specified service agreements or expectations for each festival
- The need to identify a realistic source of funding for 3 years, to give the initiative time and to allow the festivals and Birr 20:20 Vision CLG to learn from the experience
- The need to consider two budget strands (i) to create/engage the services and (ii) budget for developmental work and projects
- The need for regular review and oversight of the initiative, led by Birr 2020 CLG and including funding stakeholders.

Several dominant themes emerged in repeat interviews that took place after COVID-19 restrictions were implemented:

- Forward planning will be difficult but planning and preparation are essential
- There is deep concern about the viability of the arts sector, and the business and funding models that underpin the arts
- The international tourism business is effectively paused
- There will be higher reliance on domestic tourism
- There will be no reversion to 'old' ways (pre-March 2020) of producing and presenting events
- There will be an increase in the use of technology to create or expand opportunities for people to engage with the arts
- The organisational form of festivals will change
- There will be constant demand for high quality cultural events and experiences.

■ opportunities for change

The Birr festivals, and contributors to the external consultation, have identified opportunities where practical changes in some areas and work practices could have a positive impact on the work of each festival and the work of the festivals as a collective force for the town and county.

The festivals are committed to working collectively to increase their effectiveness. In this context, there are shared needs particularly when it comes to finding quality time and space for creative thinking, programming, planning, and development work.

There are cycles of essential non-creative and non-developmental work that absorb significant blocks of time and energy across the group of festivals, often simultaneously (application deadlines, reporting deadlines, marketing etc).

Ideas to address this have included:

- Festival co-ordinator
- Shared administrative support
- Shared services
- Collective branding, marketing

The thinking behind some of these suggestions is informed by the impact on organisations in the not-for-profit sector of the increase in administration and reporting that is needed to comply with statutory, regulatory, funding and governance requirements. Other suggestions are informed by opportunities for new approaches to creative programming, new ways of building audience engagement, potential economies of scale, or opportunities for greater cohesion in communications and strategic positioning.

Preparing the groundwork and baseline information for funding applications is a recurring task that is capable, to some degree, of being systematised and programmed as part of a core body of professional executive work. This is a predictable and recurring body of work that can create pressures for organisations.

Unsurprisingly, many organisations consulted during the research for this report say that they are experiencing something akin to overload or burnout when it comes to managing the various cycles of reporting and applications. Many assert that it is increasingly difficult to create quality time and space for long-term planning, strategic thinking, and even for attending to the core purpose for which the organisation was established.

This report asks the following questions, in the context of looking for practical ways to advance the Birr 20:20 Vision CLG objective of helping sustainable development of Birr's festivals:

- *"how can we change our ways of working to reduce the administrative burden and create more time and thinking space for our creative and developmental work?"*
- *"how can we do this securely and safely, within a clear ethical framework that respects confidentiality, and that manages potential conflicts of interest?"*

In exploring these questions with the Birr festivals, it was possible to scope out:

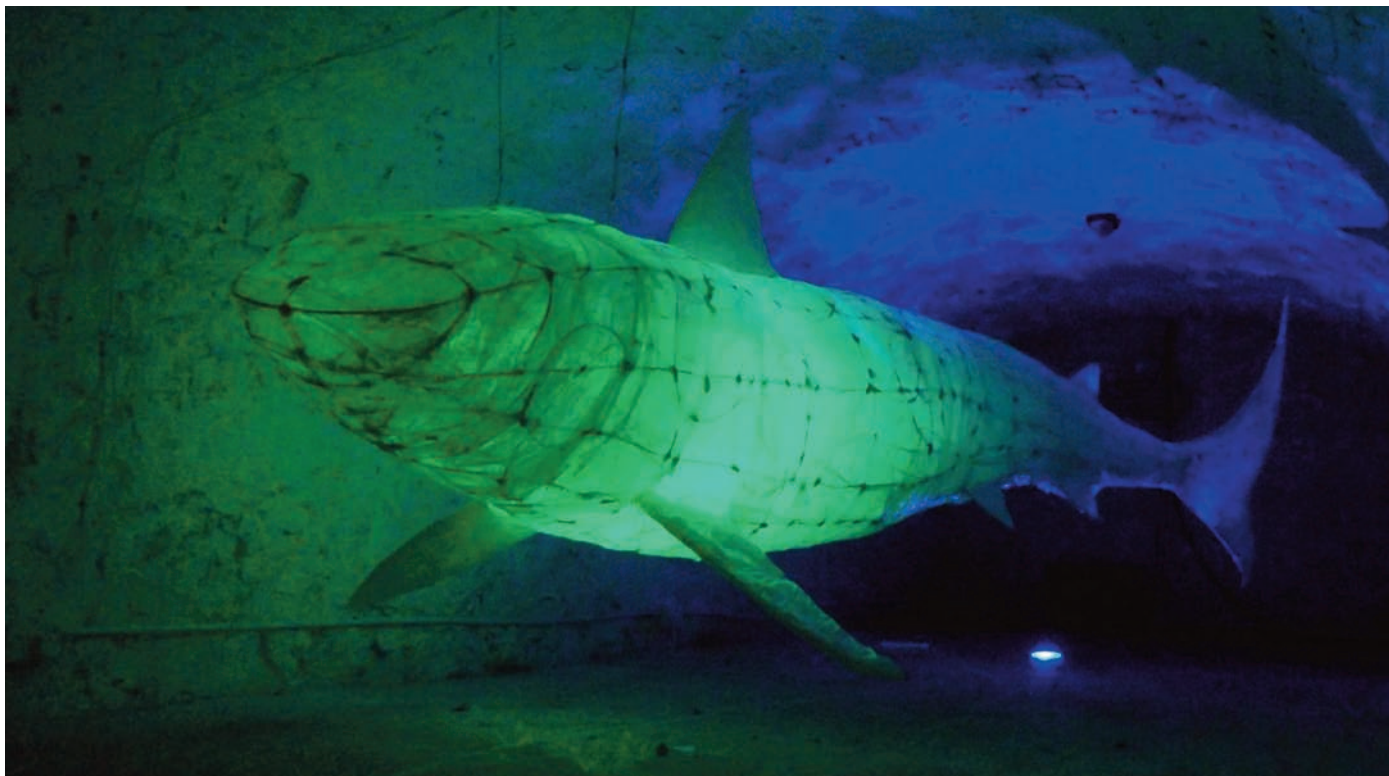
- (a) the limits of any set of shared services or functions and
- (b) the responsibilities of a new executive developmental role to support the festivals in working towards their higher-level strategic goals.

In arriving at a clear sense of what would be involved in (a) and (b), the festivals considered the following:

- Identify the specific workflows that could fall within the set of shared services – what, when, frequency, time required, fixed dates etc
- Identify potential issues and risks with reference to confidentiality, commercial sensitivity, GDPR, governance, ethics
- Identify essential requirements of an agreement to allow controlled access to information and records
- Identify neutral, non-controversial, low risk blocks of work that each festival can assign to the new role
- Identify the appropriate employment, line-management, reporting and oversight mechanisms
- Focus on the simplest and safest solution
- Identify what the new role does not, cannot and will not include – clear limits are essential

The festivals also considered the various possible arrangements for securing such professional services (contract of employment vs contract for services) and also considered feedback from the external consultation regarding the most viable pathways to funding and other supports for this type of intervention.

A consensus emerged that on balance, the most effective approach in the immediate term is to seek funding to engage professional executive services on the basis of a contract for services, and to review the effectiveness and appropriateness of this model annually, in addition to quarterly reviews of the quality and consistency of delivery of services. This approach is akin to action research and creates the possibility of learning, adapting, and improving over a fixed period after which longer-term judgments and decisions can be made with the benefit of new experience and knowledge.





■ recommendations

This report recommends that the following developments need to be initiated during 2020:

- 1** The continuation of a Festivals Strategy Steering Group, initially under the auspices of Birr 20:20 Vision CLG, to provide support and momentum to the Birr festivals, to oversee the implementation of the strategic actions contained in this report, and to maintain an action research approach to developing the consortium of festivals.
- 2** The engagement during 2020 of professional services to provide shared executive support to the Birr festivals consortium. The services will include (a) coordinating business development initiatives with the Birr festivals collectively and individually, and (b) executive support in preparing elements of funding applications and proposals, reports for funders, and aspects of maintaining compliance with governance. This approach acknowledges the experimental nature of this initiative and is designed to facilitate Birr 20:20 and the festivals in refining and adapting this service model over time, with quarterly reviews and an annual external evaluation.
- 3** The procurement of equipment during 2020 to support the live streaming of events. This will create a shared asset that will be of utility to the festivals and, if feasible, available to others in the community. In terms of artistic and creative policy, the priority is to aim for the highest possible technical and creative standards within available resources and with respect to COVID-19 guidelines. In terms of audience engagement, the priority is to ensure that all means are considered to maximise real-time audience engagement with online events.





4 Under the auspices of Birr Theatre & Arts Centre, all the festivals will devise an evidence-informed strategy for audience development and engagement for the Birr festivals consortium. This will build capacity within the festivals to undertake effective campaigns to attract and retain new audiences within Birr's catchment area, and to maintain and improve engagement with existing attendees and supporters.

5 Now that Birr is in the process of being designated as a Fáilte Ireland Destination Town it is essential that there is vigorous engagement with local and regional tourism bodies on behalf of the festivals. The festivals need to influence Offaly's tourism strategy for strengthening Birr's national profile and attractiveness as a cultural destination with a unique identity built on culture, arts, science, and heritage. The objective is to position Birr and its festivals more prominently in national strategies and campaigns.

6 The convening of a working group, involving external stakeholders, to explore the potential for developing an action research project with Offaly County Council Arts Office for submission to the Arts Council's Invitation to Collaboration Scheme which aims to support *"partnerships that focus on developing projects, resources or services that are ambitious and testing new ground."*



acknowledgements

An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council
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Fishamble: The New Play Company
Offaly County Council
Offaly County Arts Office
Offaly Local Development Company
Offaly Local Enterprise Office
Offaly Tourism Marketing CLG
Piranha Bar
Screen Ireland
Screen Skills Ireland
Shorelines Festival
Terryglass Arts Festival
Tipperary County Council Arts Office
Visit Birr

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Photographs supplied by the five Birr festivals and Birr Theatre & Arts Centre.

