

Welcome.

The Association of Local Authority Arts Officers (ALAAO) welcomes the publication by the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government of the consultative document, *Ireland 2040 Our Plan (National Planning Framework)*. The Association especially welcomes the inclusive nature of the Planning Framework as it acknowledges that, when it comes to influencing where people chose to live, or to leave as the case may be, a closely interlinked mix of social, cultural, economic and environmental, push and pull factors, is at play.

The importance afforded to access to and engagement with culture for all citizens, as a constituent and essential element in the development strategies recently announced by government – eg. *Culture 2025, Creative Ireland* and *Realising our Rural Potential (Action Plan for Rural Development)* - is a source of great encouragement to Arts Officers and to the Local Authorities they work for. We similarly welcome the focus on culture in *Ireland 2040* and the invitation to the cultural sector to participate in the formulation of a new National Planning strategy for the country.

Context.

ALAAO members work in all sorts of environments – urban, highly urbanised, suburban, inner city, rural towns and villages, rural areas close to bigger towns and cities, rural isolated, offshore islands etc. As such, they are ideally placed to assess the positives and the negatives associated with each and, arising out of that, to suggest ways in which the essence of that which makes vibrant, sustainable communities with a high level of quality of life, may be brought to the fore.

Among the many positive aspects of urban living are - presence of employment opportunities, good level of essential services (i. shops and retail, educational, cultural, transport, sport and leisure, security), broad range of out-of--school activities for children and young people, higher level of specialist services – i. 3rd. level education, hospitals, local authority and state agency service points, large and diverse populations and therefore more opportunities for social interaction.

The positive aspects of life in rural areas include the natural environment, more living and recreational space, affordable housing, relaxed pace of life, broad range of outdoor leisure pursuits and opportunities, low levels of crime and anti- social behaviour, perceived stronger sense of community and quality of life.

To an extent, the opposite of what is a positive factor in the urban context is often what constitutes a negative in rural areas - ie. presence of employment opportunities v. lack of employment opportunities, broad range of opportunities for cultural engagement v. narrow range of opportunities for same. Similarly, the opposite of what is a positive in rural areas is often the negative factor in urban i. existence of affordable accommodation v. high cost of housing and accommodation, more living and recreational space v. limited and poorly planned living and recreational spaces.

As such, it follows that the overarching aim of *Ireland 2040* should be to bring as much of the positive aspects of each, to bear on the other – better employment opportunities, and access to services and facilities in rural areas; better designed built environments, recreational and green spaces and a focus on building and supporting networks of smaller communities, in urban areas.

In this regard, significant levels of the population are already voting with their feet. In what could be termed the low level urbanization of rural areas – particularly rural areas within a radius of larger urban centres – many people are seeking out and availing of the best of both worlds, by choosing to live in rural areas while making a number commutes to town throughout the day, for employment purposes and to avail of the wider range of services therein.

Local Authority Perspective

Through their own County Development Plans and recently adopted Local Economic and Community Development Plans, Local Authorities are already grappling with these issues on a micro level. The challenge for many is to balance their support of the development of larger towns and urban centres as drivers of economic growth and points of contact for many essential services, with their obligation to rural communities to provide an appropriate level of service provision, so that they too can survive and thrive.

In terms of cultural services and arts development, Local Authority practice ranges from the provision of, or the support of, largescale cultural facilities – theatres, arts centres, museums, galleries, artists workspaces etc. – in larger towns, to the support of more modest, often artist and/or community-led initiatives in smaller towns, villages and rural communities. This is in addition to the wide range of other Local Authority Arts Office-led programmes, projects and services that operate and are delivered on a county or citywide wide basis.

A belief that all are deserving of support and investment, and an understanding and acknowledgement of the interdependency of the all of the constituent elements the cultural sector, informs many Local Authority cultural strategies.

Local Authorities believe in the importance of maintaining such levels of balanced cultural provision and support that are necessary to make both rural and urban areas desirable places in which to live, to work in (be it in the cultural sector or otherwise) and to commit to. But they need additional state partners in which to do this. In particular, there needs to be additional, direct investment from the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs into those areas of the cultural sector in particular, who have seen their levels of public funding cut considerably over the course of the recession, and are now in urgent need of an initiative that goes some way towards restoring it.

This may happen in the context of *Creative Ireland* wherein it is suggested that ‘a dedicated budget will be allocated to each Local Authority with the primary objective of citizen engagement’, on foot of their formulation and submission of a Culture and Creativity Plan.

Or it may happen in the context of the recently launched *Realising our Rural Potential (Action Plan for Rural Development)*, though the cultural element in it does need to be stronger. The proposed reliance on touring arts and financial support for annual festivals, for example, via the Arts Council, will be no substitute for broadly based public investment in the system of interdependent, small and medium sized cultural enterprises and initiatives (as above), that constitute a large part of the functioning, year-round cultural sector in most viable, sustainable community contexts, be they rural or urban.

Where Artists Live and Work

A study into the living and working conditions of artists (*The Living and Working Conditions of Artists in the ROI and NI*, Arts Council of Ireland & Arts Council of NI, 2010) concluded that ‘artists in the ROI are more likely than the wider population to live in Dublin’, and that in general, ‘two thirds live in cities and towns with the remaining one third living in semi-rural or rural areas’. The study also found that ‘artists in the visual arts group are (relatively) more likely to live in rural areas and artists in the performing arts and film most likely to live in urban areas’, that artists’ average earnings from their art were in the region of €14,600 per annum and that among the lowest earners were female visual artists, living in rural areas.

As such, Local Authorities provide a wide range of substantial supports to working artists, to enable them to build careers in the places they choose to live - though grant aid/financial support, but also through providing opportunities for performing or exhibiting of work, commissioning and supporting the commissioning of work, residencies as well as opportunities for teaching, networking, professional development etc.

It is important the *Ireland 2040* acknowledges and supports Local Authorities in this work, and that it endorses the participation of artists in enterprise support programmes such as the Rural Development Programme. Similarly, in the interests of creating engagement opportunities for communities and employment opportunities for artists, *Ireland 2040* should ensure that the Per Cent for Art scheme remains an integral element of all state promoted and assisted capital projects.

In this regard, Irish Water's suspension of the Per Cent for Art Scheme for its capital projects is regrettable. It is denying artists of all disciplines, in rural and urban areas, of considerable employment opportunities and is very much working against the efforts of Local Authorities, and other arms of the public sector. The company's actions are all the more damaging because capital projects in the areas of water services infrastructure traditionally accounted for the largest proportion of Per Cent for Art funding available to Local Authorities, the communities they serve and the creative artists they support. *Ireland 2040* should contain an action to reverse this practice and re-instate the scheme in respect of all water service related infrastructure.

Cultural Infrastructure.

The Association welcomes the introduction by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs of the Creative Ireland Arts and Culture Capital Scheme (2016) and the recently announced round of funding allocations from same. It is important that such programmes continue and that they are acknowledged and supported by *Ireland 2040*, in the interests of building up and maintaining a network of vital cultural infrastructure throughout the country.

Association of Local Authority Arts Officers March 15, 2017.



