

VISUAL

Centre for
Contemporary Art
and the George
Bernard Shaw Theatre

Submission to National Planning Framework 2017



Context

VISUAL is one of Ireland's leading contemporary art spaces. We work with partners, stakeholders and communities to realise the transformative benefits of the arts to society.

History

VISUAL is a project of Carlow Arts Centre Ltd., a company under the ownership of Carlow County Council. This €18 million development is a joint project of the Carlow Local Authorities, made possible through the allocation of funding by the Local Authorities and a grant of €3.17 million by the Department of Arts, Sport & Tourism under the ACCESS Programme.

The Centre opened in 2009. It houses a 335-seat theatre and the largest white-cube gallery space in the country - a massive 12 metres high - where it produces a programme of national and international contemporary art, plus a host of performances and events in multiple disciplines, including theatre, dance, film, comedy, literature and music.

Some facts and figures:

VISUAL 2016 - 65,717 visitors

- Gallery visitors have increased by **67%** since 2013.
- During the past three years, theatre attendance has grown by **25%**, VISUAL's share of Box Office income has grown by **58%** and bar income has grown by **13%**.
- Over the past three years, our Annual Programme funding from the Arts Council has increased by **82%**.
- Over the past three years we have developed arts engagement programmes around design thinking, augmented reality, architecture, urban planning, social enterprise and digital technology with multiple partners across enterprise development, research and education.

Between Feb-March 2017, we have welcomed over 1500 schoolchildren into VISUAL to explore our current exhibition season.



Our Vision

An international hub for realising the **value** of contemporary arts practice

Our Mission

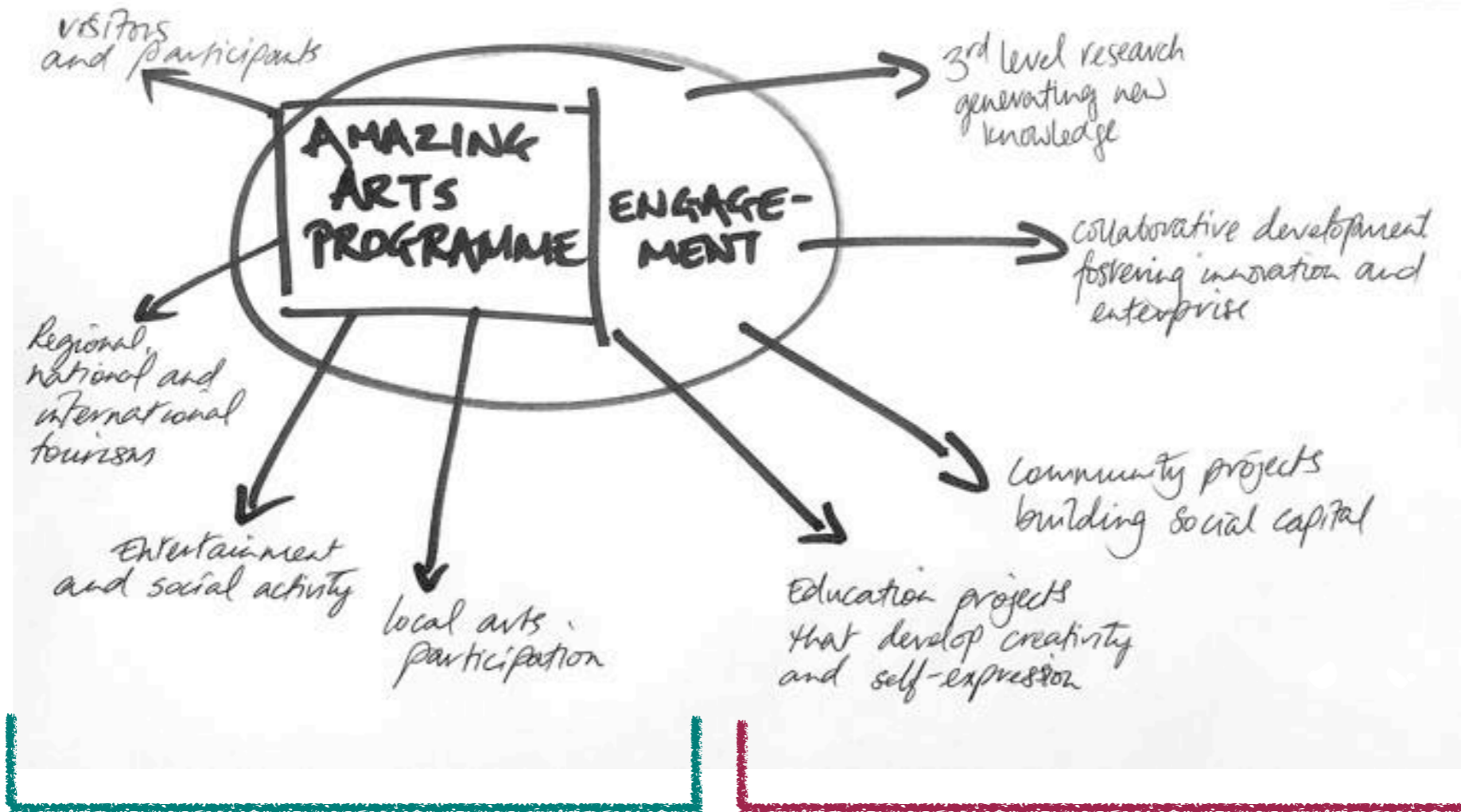
We enrich, inspire and improve the everyday through art

Our Values

- Inclusion
- Excellence
- Creativity
- Collaboration
- Ethics



How we create value through our artistic programming:



these are the areas where we expect arts organisations to deliver value

these are the areas with greatest potential to deliver transformative value

An example of how we work: **Carlow Town Narrative Project**

Our Main Gallery Spring 2017 programme is an international exhibition from Kunsthalle Zurich titled THE PLAYGROUND PROJECT. It features many playground structures that have been created in recent decades. The exhibition is a focal point for ideas about play, creativity, urban planning and public space. It is an ideal opportunity to talk about wider issues of planning, recreation and participation in Carlow town.

We used this as an opportunity to begin a conversation about a **narrative identity** for Carlow Town to inform future planning and economic development, and initiated a project with multiple stakeholders to create one.



Timeline: Autumn 2016

- Started collaborative conversations on town planning with stakeholders including **Carlow County Council**
- engaged the **Heritage Council** in the project and introduced to stakeholders
- Initiated research projects with **IT Carlow** designCORE Research Hub and **DIT School of Architecture**, researching the centre of Carlow Town.

Spring 2017

- Engaged **Carlow PPN** in the project
- Presented initial research outcomes to **Carlow Chamber of Commerce** and **Carlow County Council** and had findings incorporated into Economic Development Project for Carlow Town
- With support from IT Carlow, Carlow Chamber of Commerce, Carlow County Council and Carlow PPN, applied for Community Heritage funding to develop a narrative identity for Carlow Town to inform future planning, using research outcomes and activity to date
- With Heritage Council, presented project to Carlow Chamber of Commerce and conducted SWOT analysis
- Exhibited research outcomes and invited public responses
- Ran Collaborative Place Making workshop and SWOT analysis with community and public as part of Join In Festival
- Proposed Town Narrative project to **Creative Ireland Carlow Culture Team** for adoption as one of the key 2017 initiatives in Carlow

Summer 2017

- Studio Weave workshops with stakeholders and communities to develop Town Narrative using their background of collaborative methodologies and public realm expertise

Autumn 2017

- IT Carlow research tests the narrative back into community and stakeholders
- Collaboratively devised and agreed Narrative is adopted, to inform future planning and development, Carlow Town LAP Review and 2019 Spatial Planning.



Carlow Town Research Projects with IT Carlow and DIT

Research Outcomes to date:

- Analysis of attitudes, behaviours and perceptions re Carlow Town collated from hundreds of interviews
- Identification of 9 potential themes for development
- Mapping of town centre streetscapes, usage and desire lines
- Identification of 'quick wins' in public realm
- Initial SWOT analyses to begin to identify areas of priority



The Nine Themes that emerged from research:

1. **Optimism Prime** - a spirit of optimism is visible in the commercial and business community
Engage this spirit of optimism locally to energise the wider Carlow community for social and cultural growth.
2. **Next Generation** - The strength of a place is in the capacity, energy and engagement of its youth to build a better future
Provide pathways to engage, develop and support youth involvement in the future of Carlow
3. **Modern History** - The development of a common identity is central to a collective understanding of place and time
Enable engagement and connection with the complex and rich local history of Carlow
4. **Transfer Lifelines** - The lifeline of a community is the strength and continuity of intergenerational connection and engagement
Enhance Carlow as a great place to live, grow and age
5. **Collaboration Station** - A shared identity is built on common value and local infrastructure, rooted in locality and region
Connect Carlow with its unique history of 3rd level provision in learning, technology and highly skilled graduates, and develop the narrative of a University Town
6. **Central Revival** - A thriving town centre forms the beating heart of a place to draw community together
Engage Carlow Town and its citizens in a revitalised and energised central place to congregate and share
7. **Where Do You Think You Are** - The character of a place is made-up of the features and contributions of previous generations
Support connection of Carlow and its people to its' historical, social/cultural and geographical landmarks
8. **Water Works** - The river, water and intersection points are where people's lives cross over to form important connections
Enhance and support the engagement and interaction with the people, the river and key crossing points
9. **Behaviour U4EA** - Lack of agency and disenfranchisement impacts connection, participation and pride
Design solutions to counteract the negative effects of drugs and crime in Carlow.

why VISUAL is essential to the project:

- we are creative, innovative problem-solvers with vision and ambition
- we can inspire and communicate to broad audiences through the quality and scale of our exhibitions
- we have deep expertise in engaging and developing audiences and community involvement
- we can move fluently between public, private and community stakeholders
- we are nimble, can maximise scarce resources and respond quickly to opportunities
- we create long-term benefits - we are invested in the transformative potential of what we do
- we are connectors, using creativity to bring many different parties and ideas together



We are also currently developing engagement projects around 3D printing and digital technology in partnership with the Local Enterprise Office for Autumn 2017; engineering, in discussion with Engineers Ireland for Spring 2018; and Science and agriculture in discussion with Teagasc. for 2018/2019. This is alongside the engagement and education programmes that we develop in arts and cultural activities for schools, youth groups, older aged groups and communities in the region, building social cohesion, self expression, efficacy and leadership.

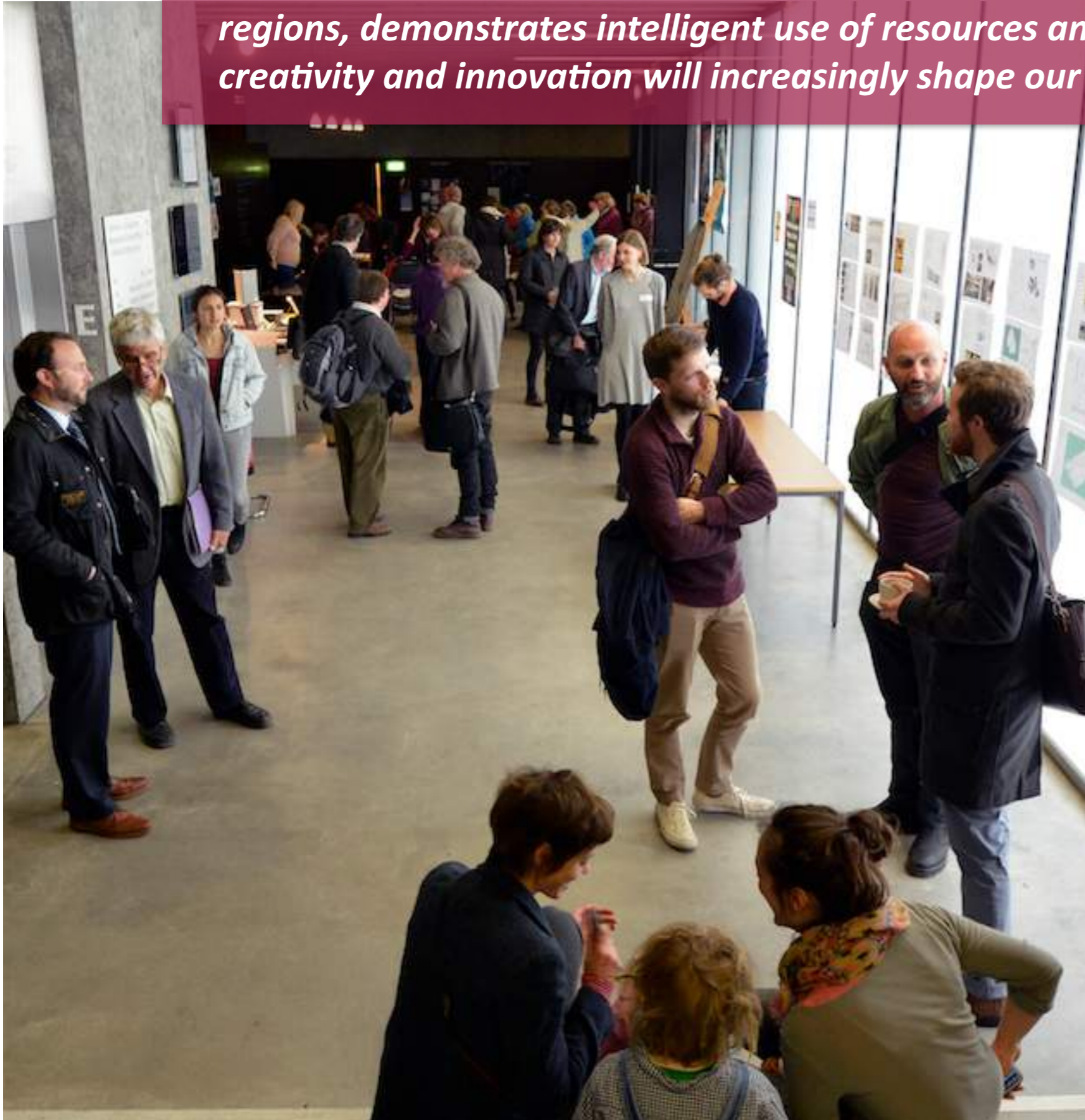
How is it relevant to the National Planning Framework?

Carlow has a long heritage in agricultural and mechanical engineering, a thriving Institute of Technology and significant industries in the areas of science and technology such as MSD and Netwatch. By reflecting these in the engagement projects around our exhibitions, we not only communicate the value and relevance of contemporary art, we also platform and profile the key strengths of the area and help to build a positive and compelling identity for Carlow as a place of creative innovation. The many intrinsic benefits of the arts to society are well-understood and backed up by research. As well as this innate value, Arts Institutions have the capacity to be **powerful generative hubs for creativity, enterprise and innovation**, communicating difficult or complex subjects to wide audiences, through engagement that can bypass barriers to inclusion.

Arts Institutions such as VISUAL are ultimately funded through the **Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government** via Local Authorities, and the **Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs** via the Arts Council. They fulfil many local economic and community objectives through their programmes and activities, but their value in this respect is not always well understood or articulated. **Recognising and harnessing the potential of Arts Institutions to be creative, generative hubs in their regions, demonstrates intelligent use of resources and an understanding of how creativity and innovation will increasingly shape our future.** If planned for and properly resourced within the National Planning Framework, this has the capacity to significantly contribute to the long term cultural, social and economic benefit of Ireland.



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for further information contact: Ann Mulrooney, CEO
VISUAL Centre for Contemporary Art, Carlow