

Ireland 2040 Submission

Donegal is at the frontline in terms of dealing with the tide of rural depopulation and was one of only three counties to record a population decline in the recent 2016 Census. The decline is most pronounced among young people in rural areas and may be accounted for in part, by the large numbers migrating abroad for employment, and also, the equally large cohorts availing of Third Level Education opportunities in Galway, Dublin, Belfast and further afield, but not returning to the county after graduation, as many of the employment opportunities relevant to their training exist, in the main, in the aforementioned urban centres.

Engagement and Employment

The cultural vibrancy of an area is an extremely important element in the mix of attributes that can convince people to commit to a particular place or be drawn to it. Equally, the lack of same, and the existence of that cultural vitality elsewhere, is an element in the mix of factors that contributes to a person making the decision to leave. There is ample evidence to suggest that, for younger people in particular, even where they are in positions of employment, poor opportunities for cultural engagement and related leisure activities, is a significant motivating factor in their decision to migrate.

Overall, there are less opportunities for employment in the cultural sector in Donegal now than there were in 2012. This is particularly so within the county's non local authority managed, independent cultural sector, many of whose organizations lost a great deal of essential public (Arts Council) funding between the period 2012 and 2015. Strongly community-based, and working in the fields of visual arts, traditional music and carnival arts, these organizations have yet to see any restoration of same. The funding cuts were most severe in the rural areas of Inishowen and NW Donegal which are presently among the areas hardest hit by out-migration.

Balanced Investment and Cultural Provision

In general, the over concentration of state funding for the arts sector in a limited number of major urban centres – Dublin, Cork, Galway – is having a debilitating effect on the development and the viability of the sector elsewhere and is an unfortunate example of government policy actively encouraging the movement of artists, cultural producers and managers, from rural to urban areas.

In contrast, many local authorities believe in the importance of maintaining a level of balanced cultural provision and support that is 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 our local authorities now require new and additional state partners to help them achieve this.

Opportunities

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 stonger. The proposed reliance on touring arts and financial support for annual festivals, for example, via the Arts Council, is not of itself an effective cultural development or support strategy for rural areas.

What is required of *Ireland 2040* is a reversal of the policy of disengagement from rural, professional, for the most part artist-run organizations, and its replacement with a programme of re-investment of public funds in same. This could be done nationally through a partnership of the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Local Authorities, the objective of which would be a more balanced, considered allocation of existing funding resources, than is currently the case.

This would leave the sector in a stronger position to exploit the many new opportunities that now exist in rural, coastal regions such as Donegal – the Wild Atlantic Way, Creative Ireland Programme, Peace IV, closer interaction with mainland Europe in the run-up to and post Brexit etc. A renewal and a strengthening of the cultural sector in rural areas will make viable options of these locations for locally based practitioners, as well as for those who may be considering returning, having completed their training, garnered high levels of experience and built up valuable professional networks, while away.

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.

Investing in Artists and their Work.

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 rural communities and employment opportunities for rural-based 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, in this regard. 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.

Traolach Ó Fionnáin, [REDACTED] ***March 2017.***