

Arts Petition – 2,332 signatures

Text of Petition:

To Minister for Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, MP, MLA

Dear Minister,

We, the undersigned wish to register our strong disapproval of the proposals contained within the draft budget for spending on the arts over the coming years.

We note that you have decided to reduce spending on the arts over the next 2 years. We ask that you amend this decision and, instead that arts funding in Northern Ireland be raised to parity with the UK average – in line with the Private Members Resolution passed by the NI Assembly on October 9 2007. We believe that failure to do so will result in reduction in quality of life in NI and will portray NI as a region with no interest in arts and culture.

Belfast Circus School Petition – 624 signatures

Text of Letter:

Dear Minister

I am writing to you in my capacity as Director of the Belfast Community Circus School – an organisation of 22 years standing – with a plea to reconsider the proposed settlement for the arts under the Draft Budget published in October.

Over the course of the current financial year Belfast Community Circus School (BCCS) has provided performances for more than 100,000 people across Northern Ireland – including engagements with 18 Local Authorities – and has provided circus learning for more than 900 children and young people. As one of the major arts organisations operating in Northern Ireland, BCCS would have grave concerns about the negative impact of the proposals for arts funding 2008-11 contained in the Draft Budget. The per capita expenditure on the arts in Northern Ireland has long been significantly lower than throughout the rest of the UK and calls for parity of funding have been voiced by a wide range of politicians including the Assembly members on 9th October and your own party colleague Gregory Campbell in Westminster on 16th April 2007.

This lack of parity has led to chronic problems regarding the number of people accessing quality arts experiences, professional development, volume of work produced and the loss of artistic talent from Northern Ireland. For many years now, arts organisations have been ‘tightening their belts’ with the result that there is nothing left to sacrifice without losing staff and artistic output. I am sure that you are only too familiar with the theory of economies of scale and

the fact that, in order to generate the same quality and spread of activity across the arts in Northern Ireland, investment would need to be higher per head than in England. This seems to have been accepted by the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament as reflected in their per capita spend on the arts.

Over the past three years, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland has attempted to shore up the arts sector by using £1million per year of Lottery money to substitute for voted funds. With this arrangement about to come to an end, and the reduction in Lottery Funds due to London 2012, the arts sector is facing an unprecedented crisis.

In the absence of significantly increased investment, the arts in Northern Ireland will suffer with redundancies, companies closing down and an overall reduction in quality and quantity of arts product and participation.

Setting aside the 'arts for arts sake' argument, the impact of the proposed settlement for the arts will have an adverse effect on a number of areas identified in the Programme for Government and Investment Strategy.

The overall thrust of the budget to support the growth and development of a world class economy capable of competing on a global stage is laudable. However, the absence of a healthy and vibrant arts and creative sector will make a hard task virtually impossible. Studies throughout the developed world have demonstrated that, other things being equal, the arts and cultural offer of a region is one of the defining factors in determining inward investment and the relocation of businesses. The role of the arts in urban regeneration is now accepted throughout Europe. Notable examples would include Newcastle and Gateshead where the PAT 10 initiative has played a key role in profile raising and attracting investment and where one of the boldest statements of Public Art, The Angel of the North, has shone a global spotlight on the artistic light of that region. Just 100 miles away in Dublin, the arts have played a pivotal role in regenerating Temple Bar into one of the busiest areas in Europe with businesses queuing up to relocate. Indeed Dublin is even creating its own angel of the north with a 50 metre high sculpture by Anthony Gormley due to grace the Liffey in the next few years. Closer to home, Belfast's Cathedral Quarter shows just how important the arts and cultural sector is to promoting regeneration for an area. Just a few short years ago, the Cathedral Quarter was the most dilapidated part of the City Centre. Today the area is the trendiest part of the city and is the first destination to many business visitors to the City.

In addition to helping attract investment to Northern Ireland, the arts can play a significant role in shaping the workforce required for the 21st Century global economy. Knowledge based economies, entrepreneurialism and creative industries are at the heart of the competitive edge needed by the developed world to stay at the leading edge. It is acknowledged the world over that participation in the arts stimulate creative thinking and encourage the kind of risk taking so important to developing enterprise. Many of today's challenges involve creative thinking and use of the imagination to unite problems with

solutions. Indeed the Programme for Government contains targets relating to the growth of creative industries by 2011. It is difficult to see this happening without a healthy arts sector. The recent filming of *Closing the Ring* in Northern Ireland with the reported £3m injection into the local economy would be unimaginable if we did not have a theatre sector which is capable of producing actors of sufficient calibre to star alongside the likes of Shirley Maclaine along with a host of trained extras. If we do not have indigenous talents being nurtured then it will be difficult to advance Northern Ireland as a desirable destination for film makers when places like the Czech Republic are so much cheaper – despite this government's investment of £11 million into the NIFTC.

Another aspect of the Programme for Government is the focus on tourism and developing Northern Ireland as a must visit destination. Whilst it is undeniable that Northern Ireland is blessed with outstanding natural beauty, it is vital that visitors have a variety of opportunities to access high quality arts activity – whether it be visiting an arts gallery, watching a play, attending a concert, or seeing some street theatre. Every tourism survey conducted in recent years has shown that the quality and volume of arts activity in a region is a significant factor in attracting visitors. Under the draft budget settlement, Northern Ireland will see a disturbing drop in quality and quantity of arts activity and this will be an obvious sign for potential visitors who will only need to look at any dozens of websites detailing the cultural calendar in Northern Ireland to confirm the paucity and scarcity of the arts offer. It is inevitable that this will lead to visitor numbers being lower than if the arts sector was well supported. To see the benefits of cultural tourism, one only has to look at London's West End, which attracts millions of visitors from round the world each year leading to additional revenue from tourism which rounds into billions of pounds per annum.

The Programme for Government states that “working together we can build a better future for all.” For a good many years now, the arts in Northern Ireland, and in particular, youth arts and community arts, have been making an important contribution to the promotion of good community relations; the promotion of tolerance; trust; social inclusion; physical and mental health; youth empowerment; social wellbeing. Throughout the darkest days of the Troubles, Belfast Community Circus School and other organisations working through community arts, were out in the field working with people from all backgrounds – together and separately – helping to keep the flame of civilisation alight. Today, in the ‘new’ Northern Ireland, the arts can play a huge role in helping to define and declare our Region to be inclusive, confident, forward looking and open for business.

My final point concerns the welcome investment in capital infrastructure for the arts outlined in the draft budget. The investment looks set to consolidate and complement the extensive development of arts centres and theatres undertaken by Arts Council, Lottery and Local Authorities over the past dozen years. This investment will confirm the position of Northern Ireland as having the greatest concentration of arts centres per head of the population across the UK. However, even before these new buildings come on stream,

Northern Ireland has the lowest level of arts usage of the existing centres in the UK – a corollary of the lowest level of per capita expenditure on arts organisations. This situation will only deteriorate over the next three years with the proposed settlement for the arts. With current levels of funding, 50% of arts council voted funds are spent on just five organisations and, even at this level, the largest recipient of funding, the Ulster Orchestra which receives £2million each year is at the very limits of survival. With an expanded Lyric Theatre and new Metropolitan Arts Centre it is likely that this percentage will rise to more than 60% of arts funding being spent on 6 organisations each year. The impact on the arts sector will be truly devastating.

I would like to ask you to consider the bigger impact of the arts on the economy and well being of Northern Ireland and to amend the draft budget to award a settlement for the arts in line with the £26million over three years as requested by the Arts Council and DCAL. This investment will need to be carefully monitored to ensure that value for money is achieved and that the wider benefits of arts investment are fully realised. This may need a different form of administration that currently exists in the form of the Arts Council, but the result of this investment will reap tangible dividends for everybody in Northern Ireland at minimal cost as a percentage of overall annual expenditure. One final point would be to ask that, in deciding the future for the Arts in Northern Ireland that you listen to the voices expressed in the Budget Consultation process where the overwhelming voice at the four meetings has been from the arts sector and where the largest number of written replies has come from the arts sector. To add to these voices, I have enclosed a petition collected by members of the Belfast Community Circus School and signed by more than 600 people. The wording talks of cuts to the arts because this is how the wording appeared in the draft Budget, but even if revised figures which have been published by the arts Council are true, the request for parity is every bit as valid as heartfelt.

Yours sincerely

Will Chamberlain
Director

Attached petition - text as follows:

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