

I would like to register my strong concern regarding the extremely disappointing allocation of funding for the arts in Northern Ireland in the draft budget 2007. From the published figures, it would appear that the arts spending is set to diminish over the coming 2 years although I understand from the Arts Council that there will be a small increase in Arts Council support over the coming 3 years. Even if the Arts Council figures are accepted, the increase still leaves arts funding in Northern Ireland woefully short of the UK average per capita spend. The alleged increase only serves to partially offset the reduction in Lottery spending due to the Olympics. The Festival of Fools attracts 35,000 people each year and is a major boost for tourism, a great experience for citizens of Northern Ireland and a significant source of income for local businesses. The result of a reduction in Lottery funding combined with the proposed level of funding for the arts in Northern Ireland means that the Festival of Fools faces a very bleak future. Unless there is a significant increase in arts funding for the Arts Council, 2008 will be the last Festival of Fools seen in Belfast leading to a loss of employment for artists and the loss of revenue for many hospitality businesses in the city. The Festival of Fools would like to take this opportunity to request that per capita expenditure on the arts in Northern Ireland is increased to bring it in line with the rest of the UK. Failure to do so will result, not only in the demise of the biggest free arts festival in Northern Ireland, but also in the reduction in the overall level of arts activity across Northern Ireland. In addition, the chronic shortage of funding for the arts will lead to a reduction in the overall activity in the arts sector.

The investment in the arts which has taken place throughout the UK and Republic of Ireland over the past ten years has been as a result of the recognition of the benefits of investment in the arts both in terms of the economy and quality of life. This investment of public funds has been shown to bring about a further investment of at least £3.60 for every pound of public money spent. The arts are recognised as being a significant factor in attracting inward investment and it follows that low levels of arts spending will reduce the attraction for foreign companies to set up in Northern Ireland. Also, the arts are a driver for creative thinking and can contribute towards the growth of the knowledge economy. The arts are vital to the development of sustainable cultural tourism and the failure to invest in the arts relative to the rest of the UK will inevitably reduce the attraction of Northern Ireland as a visitor destination. This submission is not solely about securing the future for the arts in Northern Ireland, but also about the importance of investment in the arts to the economy and to the quality of life for the people of Northern Ireland.

Sarah Kelly,  
Administrator, Festival of Fools  
Gordon Street,  
Belfast