

20th December 2007

Melanie McGinnis
Economic Policy Unit
OFMDFM
Rm E5.22
Castle Buildings
Stormont
Belfast BT4 3SR

Dear Melanie McGinnis

Re: Response to Draft Budget 2008-2011

I am writing to you now to add my voice to the many you will now have heard, to most urgently impress upon the Executive to increase the amount of funding allocated to the arts in the draft Budget. It is an accepted principle in other places in the world that arts and cultural activity are vital components in social, economic and cultural regeneration, yet their contribution to building a new Northern Ireland is not adequately reflected in the proposed budget. At a time when Northern Ireland's success at having moved from violence to peace is recognised throughout the world, economic support to the arts is crucial now to present the best possible 'shop front' to the world.

The Ulster Orchestra Society's case in recent years is probably symptomatic of so many in the arts sector.

For the Orchestra there has been a return to viability and stability coupled with increased attendances, an ever-increasing public profile, a huge development in its education and outreach work (24,500 enriched by the Orchestra's diverse, innovative education and outreach activity last year alone) and its sustained artistic growth (some 78,000 people experienced live Ulster Orchestra concerts last year). The Orchestra has also considerably lifted its level of support from business (through sponsorship) and from individual donors' philanthropic support.

However, the level of support from the public purse has declined in recent years – unlike that for orchestras in GB. The shortfall now negates the significant increases the Orchestra has earned from other sources. It seems that success is neither encouraged nor rewarded.

I know that this is a tight spending round, but the proposed allocation for the arts falls desperately short of DCAL's request, based on the Arts Council's assessment of need, for an additional £26 million over the three-year period. In the grand scheme of the Executive budget, this tiny amount for the arts could deliver so much throughout the region.

The importance of financial stability for artists and arts organisations cannot be underestimated. If this budget is implemented, there will be over 200 arts sector job losses and 25,000 fewer people participating in arts and creative projects. The arts will be unable to contribute fully to key Programme for Government priorities, such as health, social inclusion and education, or to capitalise fully on the great economic potential of cultural tourism and the Creative Industries – a focus of the recent visit to the US by the First and Deputy First Ministers. How can the key priority to "Grow a dynamic and innovative economy" be achieved without the arts to inspire creativity and alight imagination?

In recent years, substantial capital funding has been invested into new art centres throughout Northern Ireland. However, without increased revenue funding for our artists and arts organisations these and future capital projects will become no more than empty hollow shells. What a waste!

The Ulster Orchestra requires increased investment to sustain its operation (80 full-time jobs) and to deliver the potential that can be realised with the move to the Ulster Hall next season. The Orchestra brings major international stars to Northern Ireland; it provides work for musicians who are resident in Northern Ireland and who contribute so much to the education of young people; its weekly concerts are a major offering to Northern Ireland's cultural tourism; its use of venues in Belfast and other centres is a major contribution to urban regeneration; it offers affordable – and even free – access to anyone who would like to come to a concert; it provides a platform for young performers and composers; it gives Northern Ireland an international calling card through its over 70 CDs and its broadcasts which are often streamed worldwide, and, above all for the economy, every £1 of public money invested brings at the very least a threefold return – and often much, much more. These are things to celebrate.

I hope that the final budget will result in the level of public investment that will enable the arts to make their vital contribution to building a better, more dynamic and competitive Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely

Patrick McCarry
