

Community Creators

Voluntary Artists in Northern Ireland Case studies celebrating cultural volunteering in rural communities

2005 – The Year of the Volunteer (UK)



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OBJECTIVES

This publication is a collection of case studies of volunteers who share their time, talents and skills to enable others in rural communities to enjoy the benefits of taking part in arts activities. 'Community Creators' was prepared as Voluntary Arts Ireland's contribution to the Year of the Volunteer 2005, raising the profile of arts volunteers in Northern Ireland.

The research and writing of this report formed part of the authors' MSc in Rural Development and Project Management.

FOREWORD

Every year in Northern Ireland 160,000 adults give freely of their time and talents to enable others to enjoy the benefits of exploring their own creativity. This massive, unpaid, workforce of cultural volunteers brings learning, entertainment and social networking into the heart of communities and is a vital component of the 'glue' that holds these communities together; the social capital that has become so highly prized by twenty-first century policy makers.

The impact of globalisation, the dissolution of the extended family and the emphasis on individualism through the closing decades of the old millennium has been debated elsewhere at length. Whoever the commentator, the general consensus is that the golden threads that tie us to others have been weakened, allowing social isolation and marginalisation to emerge as social maladies.

In rural areas the effects are intensified by changing employment patterns in agriculture, limited access to public transport and the cost implication of providing public services to a dispersed population.

Yet life in the countryside does not conform to the totally bleak picture these factors suggest. Across Northern Ireland people still know their neighbours, take an interest in the fortunes of their communities and children, and notice when elders need a helping hand. Voluntary arts are one of the key ingredients to this social care and cohesion. Just as sports groups get kids to kick balls, arts groups offer an option that does not require physical ability and is open to all ages. The case studies 'Waves of the Nile' and 'CRAIC' show that thanks to cultural volunteers the arts are indeed open for all.

This publication prepared as part of the authors' MSc in Rural Development and Project Management, offered Voluntary Arts Ireland (VAI) an opportunity to contribute to the Year of the Volunteer.

In surveys of volunteering, just 4% of adults identify themselves as cultural volunteers yet commissioned research Facts Figures Futures showed that 12% give their time to run arts groups. Why the difference? Because arts volunteers enjoy their work so much that they do not see it as 'giving' and so don't think to count it as volunteering, but as this report shows, if cultural volunteers and voluntary arts groups ceased tomorrow our rural communities would be a poorer, bleaker place

Brenda Kent, Chief Officer, Voluntary Arts Ireland

ACRONYMS

A & B	Arts & Business
ABCD	Asset Based Community Development
AIMS	Association of Irish Musical Societies
AOIFE	Association of Irish Festival Events
CAF	Community Arts Forum
COMA	Community Music Making from Amateurs
CRAIC	Community Recreational Arts in Coalisland
CWN	Creative Writers Network
DARD	Department of Agriculture & Rural Development
DSD	Department for Social Development
NICVA	Northern Ireland Council Voluntary Action
NIVAF	Northern Ireland Visual Arts Forum
NODA	National Operatic & Dramatic Society
QUB	Queens University Belfast
RCN	Rural Community Network
RDC	Rural Development Council
VAI	Voluntary Arts Ireland
VAN	Voluntary Arts Network
VCS	Voluntary Community Sector
VDA	Volunteer Development Agency
YAVA	Young Adults & Voluntary Arts Project (managed by VAI)

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METHODOLOGY

'Community Creators' was largely written following one-to-one interviews with case study organisations and individuals. Some interviews were conducted in two parts: the first involved asking questions concerning why the organisation was initiated, and by whom, the day-to-day running of the organisation, and what the future holds.

For two of the case studies a second interview was conducted with a participant in the arts group. This allowed varying perspectives and additional information to emerge, as well as adding a human dimension to the case studies.

The methodology also included internet research and other desk research, e.g. examining relevant Voluntary Arts Ireland documents.

Photographs were secured in a number of ways, including some taken by the researcher and others provided by the organisations themselves.

OVERVIEW

'Culture is the widening of the mind and of the spirit'

Jawaharal Nehru (1889-1964), Indian Political Leader.

What is Art?

Art is a natural form of expression, and refers to all creative human endeavours. Culture provides symbols, meaning and innovation to life, and thus is used to humanise space.

What are the Voluntary Arts?

The voluntary arts are those arts and crafts that people take undertake for self-improvement, social networking and leisure, and not primarily for payment.

The Voluntary Cultural Sector

It is essential to set voluntary arts in the context of the voluntary and community sectors. The Voluntary Cultural Sector occupies a unique position within both the cultural and third sectors.

The Voluntary Arts Network (VAN) definition of the Voluntary Cultural Sector (VCS) is:

'Those organisations in which volunteers are entirely involved in the creative process and planning, together with those organisations whose primary purpose is to work with them'.

The VCS contains groups from across the UK and Republic of Ireland. Groups in Northern Ireland are considered as case studies within this report.

The cultural volunteers identified in the case studies play an important role within the community, and often view their work as their obligation to sustaining the quality of life within their neighbourhood.

Benefits Gained from Participating in the Voluntary Arts

There are numerous benefits gained from participation in the voluntary arts. In addition, the arts attract a wide range of different people, thus

bringing together sections of the community who otherwise might not interact. Voluntary arts often draw in people with no previous experience in the arts, thus increasing participation in the arts as a whole.

- Values

The arts deal with meanings and thus art helps us to understand our values. Sharing life processes through metaphor, colour and sound allows us to examine ourselves and contributes to our understanding of others. The creative process contributes to our imagination, vision and creative thinking.

- Health and Well Being

The arts are beneficial to the health and well-being of participants. It is evident that creative activity contributes to efficient health and social care provision. Creative activity reduces stress and anxiety. It also improves quality of life for people with poor health and prolonged illness. There has been the suggestion that the arts can stimulate the immune system (University of Umea, Sweden). People enjoy taking part in the arts with up to 73% of adults stating that it makes them feel happier (Matarasso, 1997, p.IX).

- Economics

The voluntary arts do provide economic benefits. Money spent by the sector covers a wide range of goods and services, including arts supplies, equipment hire, transport, utilities, tax - and most of this is spent with local retailers. Most voluntary arts organisations draw on their local community, thus money spent on staff, materials and services is fed back into that economy. Arts make communities a more attractive geographical area for inward investment, as any area that than offer a cultural life is worth relocating for. The arts creates employment and this in turn creates a more buoyant economy, as the more people in employment, the more money in circulation and thus the economy reaps the rewards. There are financial gains to be found from tourism and the arts contribute to the cultural remit of any area, and thus add to the spectrum tourist activities and attractions.

- Education, Training and Lifelong Learning

Local voluntary arts groups often involve young people and so make a contribution to education and training. The voluntary arts provide accessible, cost effective and informal opportunities for life long learning. This form of informal learning is often perceived as less threatening. Therefore the participatory cultural sector delivers exactly the kind of projects through which learning takes place, as well as encouraging a culture of continuing education. Skills demanded by industry and commerce are acquired through creative practice and are passed on at very little financial cost.

- Locality & Community Cohesion

The voluntary arts create a sense of locality and identity within a community. The arts play a huge role in celebrating and preserving local cultures, traditions, and heritage and help develop local identity, new traditions and involvement in new areas. They also contribute to a positive public image of an area for residents and visitors alike. Residents who feel good about where they live are more likely to become involved in new community initiatives. Thus a positive cycle of involvement in the arts and in the wider community is initiated. Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is a modern strategy. It is essential to acknowledge the assets that exist within a society.

'Community Creators' aims to identify some of the assets found in Northern Ireland in terms of the voluntary arts. Communities are the catalyst for development; funding and other factors are necessary, but without commitment from the community it is futile to try and develop a strategy for development.

