



February 2004

## **Response to the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland**

The Review takes a broad brush approach and this response does likewise.

Our overriding concern is the lack of attention paid to arts in the third sector and to local government.

The voluntary arts sector occupies the mandorla where the cultural and voluntary/community sectors meet. Research<sup>1</sup> shows that in Northern Ireland, volunteer-led arts groups account for 23% of all voluntary and community groups. Volunteering within these groups equates to almost a third of all formal volunteering. Over 160,000 adults a year actively engage as participants in voluntary arts groups. It is not a small sector.

It is thus of huge concern that the review sets aside the role of local government because this is the level of public administration to which the sector most frequently relates. Whilst local authority budgets maybe account for a small proportion of total public expenditure, they are the mainstay of support for local arts groups which in turn, are the largest single provider of opportunities to take part in the arts.

The Review's failure to highlight the provision of arts and cultural services is a major oversight. Arts are important to a huge number of people and they are traditionally an area attracting public subsidy. However, those engaged with arts are not merely 'consumers' of art services provided by (or with or through) part of the public administration. Voluntary arts groups are run by the people who use them. They engage people in communal activity which benefits not only the individual but also the wider community. The 'seller/buyer' or 'service provider/consumer' model, drawn from the private sector and used throughout the Review, fails to reflect the give and take, participative nature and mutual benefit that characterise the voluntary arts sector and its relationship with the public sector.

The extent to which the review sets future provision in the context of service level agreements or contracts between the public and third sectors is also disturbing. The vast majority of voluntary arts groups do not have the capacity to manage such a contract – nor would most wish to recast themselves as service providers. The reason that they are so effective in engaging people is because they are set up, run and shaped by those who use them. They are

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<sup>1</sup> Facts, Figures, Futures, Voluntary Arts Ireland, 2003 ISBN 1 899687 40 8

examples of local 'participative democracy' in action. The idea of being supported in providing only those 'services' which the public sector values cuts right across the very independence and democracy that makes voluntary arts groups so successful.

Nonetheless, given suitable protection for its independence and ability to act as an advocate, the sector would welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with public bodies to develop participatory arts provision. For this to happen there needs to be significant investment in building the capacity of groups and the strength of the infrastructure supporting the voluntary arts sector, as well as an alternative model to that of 'provider/consumer' for the relationship between the state and those who take an active part in their community.

Community Planning is one option when seeking local relevance in planning. However, there is a danger that local service planning and delivery become separated from structures of accountability. There must also be caution that local planning does not hamper strategic, regional policy development. The variation across local authorities in their approach to voluntary arts is indicative of the need for strategic policy leadership at a regional level. The need to build networks and infrastructure support across council boundaries also underlines the importance of ensuring that local is not the only level of public administration at which policy decisions are taken. A careful balance of local access with devolved decision and strategic overview with economies of scale is needed in an area of just 1.6m people.

In respect of accountability and public appointments, there is a general perception that serving on the Council of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland remains the preserve of the few. Those in the voluntary arts sector who have knowledge and skills they could offer the arts community, are not minded to apply to join believing that the criteria for selection are not compiled to recognise their skills and that they are 'outside' the arts establishment which controls such appointments.

Options for addressing this perception include having all or some of the ACNI Council members elected by the arts constituency; consulting the constituency on the criteria to be used in selecting candidates; and using co-options to ensure representation from the voluntary arts sector (or other under-represented communities).

Accountability would also be seen to be in action if ACNI were to hold the equivalent of an AGM at which all interested parties could participate in a review of the agency's work and pose questions. It would also be helpful if annual reports could be distributed soon after the year end (last time it took 18 months). DCAL should also produce the annual report and host the annual forum with the sector it promised in Partners for Change in 2001.

We also point rpani to the research report on the voluntary cultural sector which contains recommendations for funders of relevance to any part of the public administration seeking to service groups run by volunteers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Facts, Figures, Futures, Ibid. Pg.88-90.