



**The Courthouse Arts Centre
Tinahely Co Wicklow**

**Artistic
Policy &
Strategic
Plan
2017-
2022**

March 31

2017

This document has been written in consultation with the board of directors at The Courthouse Arts Centre, its artistic director and members of the arts community.

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2018**



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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2016 the board of directors and the artistic director of the Courthouse arts centre began consolidating its artistic policy and developing a strategic plan for 2017-2022. The Courthouse, then in its twentieth year as an independent venue for the arts in Wicklow, was undergoing structural changes both at a physical level and a policy level. In line with new company regulations and charity requirements the company constitution and governance obligations were brought in line with best practice. This artistic policy and strategic plan are the first draft of the work emerging from this period and will continue to be a living document, reviewed annually.

2. CONTEXT

These documents outline how the Courthouse over the next five years plans to remain current and relevant to the artists its supports and the audiences it serves. It also incorporates the obligations the Courthouse has to its main stakeholders: The Arts Council, Wicklow County Council and Pobal.

3. ARTISTIC POLICY

The Courthouse art centre receives, develops and commissions professional new artistic work across: music, theatre, film, literature and visual art. We nurture and grow youth, amateur and community art by providing a space for workshops, rehearsals and performances. Our artistic policy is informed by current strategies of The Arts Council of Ireland, Wicklow County Council arts plan and the five Creative Ireland pillars.

The artistic policy of the Courthouse arts centre is underpinned by our three core values:

- to provide an intimate and dynamic creative environment that inspires and engages artists
- to nurture a diverse audience
- to enrich the rural town of Tinahely and its surrounding regional community.

These core values have enabled the Courthouse to be a dynamic and sustainable multidisciplinary venue for the arts in County Wicklow for twenty one years. Our artistic policy builds on this knowledge and success and is a living document reviewed at each AGM to ensure our presence continues to be relevant.



The first principle of this policy insists on placing the artist at the centre of what we do and by remunerating our artists appropriately we ensure that we are placing them at the financial centre too.

Providing a dynamic space for artists, at all stages of their careers, to feel at home and inspired to create and perform to their artistic capacity is a resource we carry out with heart and professional expertise. We recognise that artists cannot sustain a productive career without being economically viable. Although we are a small venue we will never ask a music or theatre artist to just take a box office split, instead we negotiate a moral guarantee or fee. All visual artists receive an exhibition fee in line with VAI rates to assist with exhibition costs and our commission rate remains at 25%.

Each member of our staff team are trained to connect respectfully and responsibly with artists and encouraged to informally engage in artistic conversations about artists' work.

As an intimate music and theatre venue we offer the artist a direct and up-close experience with their audience thus providing artists an opportunity to engage with audiences at a very personal level.

Our second principle guarantees that we are inclusive in our approach to the arts and sensitive to a diverse audience's art hunger. We actively listen to the voices of our audience and develop programmes that resonate with their lived experience. We also believe in challenging our audiences to encounter new experiences through art forms always ensuring ambition and quality.

Our staff members are encouraged to engage audience members in meaningful conversations so as to broaden our understanding of our audience's lives and current needs. This professional yet generous relationship has been invaluable to us as a marketing research tool.

Our outreach programme prides itself on ensuring that we are part of a community where nobody is left out artistically. However, we must actively continue to develop new audience as our community grows.

Our third principle ensures that we remain artistically current and relevant to our regional roots. Investing in the cultural landscape of south Wicklow, north Wexford and east Carlow the Courthouse arts centre is an important geographical landmark and a uniquely visible and valuable asset in this broad cultural landscape.



We continue to invest support and expertise into community projects, amateur and youth arts as we believe we have a responsibility to raise the cultural profile of our community.

Our innovative programme has also stratified artistic interest from the community of Tinahely and as a result new art initiatives have been undertaken by the community itself separate to our work.



4. STRATEGIC PLAN 2017

4.1 Introduction

The Courthouse Arts Centre has been offering “Arts Council policy-led and strategically-informed arts provision”, in a rural context, to south Wicklow, north Wexford and east Carlow for twenty one years. Our professional intimate space hosts a wide variety of multi-disciplinary arts events to a long standing committed audience base. During these twenty one years we have consistently delivered ambitious, innovative, and high quality arts programmes. We have supported emerging artists build their careers and have advocated on their behalf, while also facilitating mid-career and establish artists deliver smaller scale, intimate work.

Building on the achievements of the last twenty one years and in particular the last year and a half re-structuring governance and financial documents the board of directors recognised in 2016 the importance of developing a strategic plan. With these documents in place it is now well placed to imagine the future direction of this vibrant and important cultural landmark in south Wicklow. Taking inspiration from the Arts Council’s own ten year strategy the board wished to consolidate their vision for the Courthouse as a leading arts venue in County Wicklow. Discussions took place between October and December 2016 and a draft document was prepared. Early in 2017 this first strategy document was formalised and implemented as a working document for 2017 to be reviewed in 2018.

4.2. Objectives and Activities

The object of the company is to advance the education and delivery of the arts for the benefit of the community and surrounding regions by operating and managing the Courthouse Arts Centre as a venue to promote the development, understanding and participation of exciting, challenging and relevant arts events.

The company has the general aim to provide comprehensive artistic and outreach programmes in an atmospheric and intimate space, hosting a wide variety of multi-disciplinary arts events and workshops. Our programme includes: Theatre, Dance, Music, Film, Visual Arts, Comedy, Literature and an Education/Outreach programme. We are committed to offering emerging artists a platform to showcase their work.



4.3 Vision

“We pride ourselves on providing a vibrant and dynamic programme showcasing national and international performers and artists. We actively promote both emerging artists and community arts practitioners.”

4.4 Mission Statement

The Courthouse provides an intimate and dynamic creative environment that inspires and engages artists, nurtures a diverse audience and enriches the rural town of Tinahely and its surrounding region.

4.5 Strategic Priorities 2017-2022

1. Professionalising core staff positions to grow the venue in order to meet artist/audience demand and a return to full time hours and appropriate remuneration.

In 2010, due to ongoing severe cuts in funding the position of the full time productions manager was no longer tenable and production/technical expertise was hired in on a as-needed basis. With further cuts from 2010-2013 the venue was operating at a 50% reduced funding capacity. In 2013 in order to maintain a sustainable venue the board of directors took the decision to move the venue into a part-time operation model - approx. 40 hrs a week. Apart from the role of artistic director the Courthouse has always relied on C.E. positions to staff the venue. This is no longer viable yet income generated from activities does not sustain more than 1.5 employees.

Actions:

1. In reviewing the various employment models available to the arts sector the one recognised as having the most sympathetic and sustainable outcomes was The Community Service Programme managed by POBAL on behalf of the Department of Social Protection. An application has been made and a decision is expected by the end of September 2017. Within this plan is also an opportunity to create an arts training hub for those young people (18-24yrs) who are currently not afforded the opportunity to engage in QQI training in relation to arts-focused courses: sound/lighting skills, theatre skills, painting, print, textiles and sculpture skills and pr/marketing/communications and aimed directly at the arts sector.



2. If unsuccessful with Pobal funding we will look to local authority and fundraising to sustain core salaries.

Outcomes:

Creating sustainable job opportunities for the courthouse arts centre in a rurally isolated part of south county Wicklow will benefit not only the venue, its audience, artists and the people of Tinahely, but also the broader geographic reach of those interested in the arts in east Carlow and north Wexford.

2. Fair and equitable remuneration to all artists including visual artist.

Actions:

1. In the 2017 budget four visual artist's fees were added for exhibitions as per Visual Artists Ireland rates with the remaining artists receiving reduced rates.
2. From 2018 all visual artists will now receive an exhibition fee in line with VAI rates to assist with exhibition costs and our commission rate will remain at 25%.
3. Although we are a small venue we will never ask a music or theatre artist to just take a box office split, instead we negotiate a moral guarantee or fee.
4. Tutors/facilitators will be paid a minimum of €40 an hr contact time and €20 preparation time. Workshop materials and travel will be negotiated depending on art form and distance.

Outcomes:

We recognise that artists cannot sustain a productive career without being economically viable. By investing in our artists we invest in our cultural economy.

3. Artform Development - Artists in residence.

Our capacity to develop an "expertise in particular art forms" has progressed well in the area of offering a venue to facilitate and support professional emerging and mid-career artists across visual art, music, literature and theatre to research and develop their work during informal residencies.

Actions:

1. Residency opportunities during 2017 will be in theatre and visual art.
2. Residency opportunities during 2018 will be in film and literature.



Outcomes:

We will have provided time and space for emerging and mid-career artists to explore their practice both in project led ideas and experimentally. We will look to how we can continue to support these artists through funding relationships, advocacy, training and mentorship.

4. Strategic partners and collaborations.

Our collaboration with Mermaid arts centre in visual arts and on the Irish Chamber Orchestra concert were very successful and has helped to build a strong relationship between the managers.

Actions:

1. We aim to collaborate again with Mermaid in future projects throughout 2017-2022.
2. A visual art collaboration with Dunamaisie arts centre in 2018 has opened new relationships with this venue.
3. Ongoing informal music collaborations with Wexford arts centre, Seamus Ennis arts centre and The Glens arts centre will be continued and formalised.
4. Another important strategic partnership for financial support was PURE, a non-arts sector organisation. This funding in 2016 assisted our Youth Theatre with extra facilitation hours and production costs. In 2017 we expected to work together on a youth animation project however they had to redirect their funding to meet their own project needs.
5. We also intend to partner with Wicklow Arts Festival, subject to their funding application.
6. Outreach work with Shelton abbey open prison will be continued to bring arts events to prisoners.
7. We intend to actively peruse other non-arts sector organisations as a means of accessing project specific funds.

Outcomes:

As always our regular programme of events and outreach workshops are a priority, but it is vital that we access many avenues of funding so we can continue to provide a high standard of arts delivery across diverse platforms. These collaborations will extend our capacity to reach new audience and expand the reach of the Courthouse.



5. Continued strategic investment in technical and build infrastructure.

Actions:

1. Continued upgrading to the building and improved technical infrastructure is expected to continue into 2018/9. Since 2015 the building has undergone dramatic structural upgrades across: reception re-build, Greenroom re-design, new professional stage re-structure, new LED track lighting for visual art exhibitions, a new box office system, sound equipment upgrade and internet and wifi upgrade..
2. In 2017 upgrades have included the re-design of the wall surfaces to facilitate a modern installation system for visual arts, a new motorised film screen and advanced projector, new theatre drapes, the re-painting of all wooden surfaces to modernise and brighten the space, outdoor signage and flags.
3. Developments continuing into 2017/19 include an upgrade of our professional stage lighting system and a portable extension to our stage for larger theatre productions, new double glazed windows for heat conservation and sound proofing, indoor signage to complement the new paintwork and health and safety restructuring.

Outcomes

A professionally equip space for artists and audience to enjoy while maintaining our unique atmosphere of an intimate venue.

6. Research and development.

Actions:

1. Research needs to be carried out on how we can better serve the artistic need of our local community. We have a strong ability to pull audience from outside our direct community, in 2017 we will develop resources to meet the needs of a more diverse community ensuring that we are relevant to the community that surrounds us and that they feel included in the cultural life of the Courthouse.
2. Our outreach programmes are already reaching audiences, for example active retirement, men's shed, local schools, women's groups, but we still need to find ways to encourage them as active ticket buyers and return audience. Innovative ways we engaged with our community in 2016 were our 1916 programme, Mad Hatters' Tea Party in the front garden, Heritage Week wool events.

Outcomes:

We will be in a position to strategically measure the artistic climate of our current audience and developed programmes to include members of groups who access our space but are not engaged with our artistic work.



7. Diversity of programme

Actions:

1. Diversifying our programme to constantly challenge ourselves with programming that will engage our audiences.
2. The arts council's mapping your audience tool verifies that 94% of our immediate community is white Irish compared with a national average of 84%. However, within this strategic plan we realise that we must consider the needs of the remaining 6%, whom we have not specifically catered to in the past.
3. Create opportunities for community groups/youth groups to inform the design, development and evaluation of our programmes. This autumn, 2017, we will invite members from our mentored teen art studio, now in its third year, to become youth advisers on the Youth Arts Festival and help inform, plan and evaluate its success.
4. Ensuring that we are part of a community where nobody is left out.

Outcomes:

Our knowledge of groups in our geographic reach will improve and our access to data on local populations and ability to devise effective ways to reach, communicate and support diverse individuals and groups will be improved.

8. Audience development and marketing plans

Actions:

1. Our marketing budget, increased by 50% to €10,000 in 2017 will continue to be increased in 2018 to €13,000. This is a direct reflection on advice from Heather Maitland and our report in *Audiences for the performing arts in Ireland*.
2. Newspaper advertising, has seen an increase in the editorial space editors are now willing to give artists performing at the Courthouse.
3. Our website and social media platforms are working well to target our advertising and audience buy in. Audience appreciating seeing/hearing a sample of uploaded music they are not familiar with. We are now selling tickets online through the website.
4. Mail Chimp is providing us with more targeted marketing strategies.
5. The new online box office system, Future Ticketing is working well but to date is not providing as useful benchmarking statistics as Ticketsolve. We cannot afford the costs of Ticketsolve.
6. We continue to call our audience to generate ticket sales on events that are slow, however it is time consuming and can only be done once a month so as not to put audiences off.
7. We listen carefully to our audience when they say they would like to attend but can't. Our 'Positive Parenting Initiative' concerts is an example of our ability to facilitate audience engagement.



8. Amateur and community events are strong areas for audience attendance. We are delighted that the new arts council strategy also recognises this and although we do not spend our funding on these events we are committed to stratifying the needs of these audiences in order to grow their public engagement with our venue.

9. Audience information continues to be gathered by website, phone and directly at events.

Outcomes

We will have improved our audience reach and begin to see returns in ticket sales. Our data collection and benchmarking statistic will improve in line with arts council led practice.

9. Recruitment of new board directors/members and renewal of the board skills

Actions:

1. The recruitment of specifically younger members of the community to the board is seen as a priority to ensure relevance to incoming generational trends. One area of expertise recognised as needing addressing on the current board is more members from our business community to lend advice on marketing and sales trends.

2. The Courthouse currently has a highly skilled board and to maximise their life on the board we have increased membership from 7 to 9 in our new constitution so as to facilitate new members to join.

3. As an arts council and county council funded organisation the board receives through the artistic director annual reports on the company in comparison with venues of similar size. As part of these reports the board monitors its abilities and skills in line with other venues to ensure best practice is adhered to. In line with current governance policies the board will be formalising a competency framework for its members as part of its new strategy. When complete this framework will allow board members time to pause and reflect on its performance and standards. Specific training received by all board members and Chair will allow for the board to self-evaluate. An annual strategy day focusing on board development and leadership will be implemented as part of this new strategy.

Outcomes:

The board will be a vibrant reflection of our community with highly skilled individuals ready to carry out future programme needs of artists and the arts community in a relevant and current manner.