

## Response to the Consultation for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Disability Action Plan and Equality Scheme Action Plan - 2019 to 2024.

Community Arts Partnership welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the conversation regarding the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Disability Action Plan and Equality Scheme Action Plan 2019-2024.

### Community Arts Partnership

Community Arts Partnership is the lead organisation in Northern Ireland in the development, support and delivery of community arts projects which the organisation combines with independent advocacy for community arts and community based art activity.

Our organisation's key emphasis is work facilitated in areas of social and economic deprivation. CAP advocates,

*"pro-actively harnessing the transformative power of the creative and cultural sectors to tackle disadvantage and support a confident, creative, informed and healthy society ..."*

And beyond that, encourages the view that the Arts should be utilised

*"..to promote social and economic equality and tackle poverty and social exclusion."*

CAP therefore advocates for and welcomes the extension of arts activities, of access and participation in the arts for the general population, but in particular for those experiencing poverty and social exclusion, in this case, people with disabilities.

### Transformative Power

Community Arts Partnership believes in the transformative power of the Arts.

Our working definition of Community Arts, as contained in the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Community Arts Policy, co-developed with the community arts sector, is

*"Community art is a process of harnessing the transformative power of original artistic expression and producing a range of outcomes: social, cultural and environmental. Looked at politically, socially, culturally and/or economically, community arts aim to establish and maximise inclusive ways of working, providing an opportunity for communities and their participants to continue to find ways to develop their own skills as artists and for artists to explore ways of transferring those skills. Through this process, community arts aim to maximise the access, participation, authorship and ownership in collective arts practice."*

Put simply, community arts practice develops original creative thinking, activity and outcomes to affect positive change.

CAP's work is also governed by the ideas expressed in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

*"Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits."* [Article 27: Right to participate in cultural life](#)

To that end, while CAP has a number of programmes which follow the orientation outlined, we also host the Side by Side project which focuses primarily on individuals with a disability and groups marginalised through physical and intellectual challenges.

This project works in parallel with all other CAP projects through sensitive, high quality workshops, facilitated by highly trained community arts practitioners.

Each Side by Side Project provides the opportunity for a real encounter between groups of differing abilities, previously separated by preconceptions relating to disability, age or background.

These workshops are designed to provide the maximum inclusion, communication and peer education through the arts.

Side by Side offers a safe, creative space for groups to challenge such differences by focusing on a shared experience of creating art in a professionally facilitated workshop. Section 75 groups are welcome to explore new artistic and interpersonal horizons in a fun, productive and sensitive environment.

It is this commitment to a community arts approach which informs our contribution to the conversation.

## The present situation

There can be no doubt that our society generally, and specifically (perhaps even more so) in Northern Ireland given recent history, is headed for uncharted territory with continuing Austerity, our own paralysed governmental institutions and the ongoing Brexit negotiations, all of which bring economic, political and social uncertainty.

While uncertainty may be the watchword of the business sector, academia and those directly involved in the political processes, many predicting a substantial economic decline regardless of how Brexit is delivered,

[www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-49592182](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-49592182)

[www.nerinstitute.net/research/the-economic-implications-of-brexit-for-northern-ireland/](http://www.nerinstitute.net/research/the-economic-implications-of-brexit-for-northern-ireland/)

what is certain is that people with disabilities have suffered severely over the past decade.

Over the last few years report after report provides details which establish the fact that people with disabilities have been subject to the harshest measures regarding Austerity and the accompanying cuts to public funding.

[www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/19/ministers-welfare-cuts-disabled-people](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/19/ministers-welfare-cuts-disabled-people)

People with disabilities have experienced sharper cuts, greater changes to the systems they are required to navigate in order to access benefits and by many accounts this has created an atmosphere of despair.

[www.poverty.ac.uk/report-northern-ireland-government-cuts-benefits/%E2%80%98negative-effect%E2%80%99-benefit-cuts-northern-ireland](http://www.poverty.ac.uk/report-northern-ireland-government-cuts-benefits/%E2%80%98negative-effect%E2%80%99-benefit-cuts-northern-ireland)

[www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-49050309](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-49050309)

## The Assessment by the United Nations

Recently, Dr Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights reported on the impact of austerity in the United Kingdom, (he included a visit to Belfast during his visit to the UK).

He stated that disabled people were not only adversely affected, but that many families had been “driven to breaking point” because of the cuts to public funding. It would appear that increasingly people with disabilities and poverty are inextricably linked.

[www.disabilitynewsservice.com/disabled-people-driven-to-breaking-point-by-cuts-says-un-expert/](http://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/disabled-people-driven-to-breaking-point-by-cuts-says-un-expert/)

[www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/progress-on-disability-rights-in-the-uk-crpd-shadow-report-2018.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/progress-on-disability-rights-in-the-uk-crpd-shadow-report-2018.pdf)

The underlying situation then is one where people with disabilities are experiencing an even more difficult and deteriorating situation.

While the arts sector cannot alleviate this situation, the arts can play a role in offering avenues whereby the creative process can allow a space to discuss and amplify the voices of those living with disabilities. Perhaps equally important, access to the arts might also play a role in maintaining well-being in this difficult situation.

## Access and Participation

The information provided in the preamble to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland’s Disability Action Plan - Final Report 2015 - 2018 suggests that people with disabilities were less likely to attend artistic and cultural events than non-disabled people but also that both attendance and participation were falling.

*“People with a disability are less likely to engage with the arts (either as a participant or attendee) compared to people without a disability (52% compared to 85%).*

*Trend data shows a marked decrease in engagement compared to 2011 when 64% of disabled people engaged with the arts (P9 Disability Action Plan - Final Report).*

*“Persons with a disability are less likely to attend one or more arts even than people without a disability (48% compared with 84%). Compared to 2011, this shows a reduction of 9 percentage points in the proportion of disabled people attending the arts. - 21% of people with a disability participated in one or more arts events compared to 32% of persons without a disability. This represents a slight decrease compared to the 2011 survey, when participation stood at 25% (P9 Disability Action Plan - Final Report).*

Given our collective commitment to equality, to reducing imbalances in society generally and particularly with the most vulnerable groups, these are worrying statistics.

The combination of a deteriorating economic situation, falling participation rates, (one might assume these are linked), informs CAP’s contribution to the discussion.

## Conversations

The following contributions were derived from Focus Group discussions, one to one conversations and interviews conducted for Community Arts Partnership’s online arts sector magazine, The Monthly.

Community Arts Partnership attended the University of Atypical’s Focus Group on the Disability Action Plan

## The Arts Council’s 5 year plan

CAP appreciates that:

“The Arts Council has developed a five year strategic framework to guide its work over the same period as the DAP, 2019 to 2024. *Inspire, Connect, Lead*, provides an overview of the direction we (ACNI) are proposing to take over the next five years, setting out in detail the actions to be taken in order to deliver our strategic objectives. A number of DAP actions are reflected in this document demonstrating our commitment to mainstreaming delivery of our disability duties”

Given there is an overriding strategy which accommodates many of the proposals put forward in the Disability Action Plan and the Equality Scheme Action Plan we make mention here that Community Arts Partnership offered a response to “Inspire, Connect, Lead” and so we draw particular attention to our comments in points 45 and 56 which questioned some of the plan’s prioritisations.

Our full response can be found at the following link.

[www.capartscentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CAP-ACNI-STRAT-RESP-19-24.pdf](http://www.capartscentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CAP-ACNI-STRAT-RESP-19-24.pdf)

## The Disability Action Plan and the Equality Scheme Action Plan

The majority of the participants in our discussions concentrated on the Disability Action Plan. The Equality Scheme Action plan was discussed at the University of Atypical's Disability Action Plan Forum.

Comments below will therefore start with the Disability Action Plan and move on to the Equality Scheme Action Plan where we will reiterate some of the points raised at the Focus Group discussion,

The question of time and the impact of cuts to arts funding.

*"Had CAP not contacted me I probably wouldn't have found the time to read the documents. I feel swamped at the moment. The impact of the cuts over the last few years has meant this sort of thing just passes me by."*

*"I'm flat out with a new show and all that goes into delivering that and pretty much everything else that I haven't had time to really look over the plan."*

*"I'm just flat out so at least I'm being forced to think about it by talking to CAP."*

The need for a preamble

The initial reaction to both the Disability Action Plan and Equality Scheme Action Plan, was the question of what people were being asked to assess.

Participants in our discussions felt that there needed to be some framing of the present economic, political and social situation and within that an assessment of outputs of the previous plan in order to contribute to the discussion.

Participants wanted to know if there was information which could show if there had there been any significant changes with regards access and participation due either directly or indirectly to the measures implemented.

*"I feel as if I need more information to offer an opinion on the action plans. There isn't information to gauge what has been achieved and where we need to go."*

*"I think there should be targets and a more definite set of numbers to show where we have been and where we need to go; this is all too vague."*

*"There isn't a lot of meat on the bone here and I feel like it needs a set of targets or a clearer description of what we need to do and then what we are going to do."*

## Point 1 – Training

In our conversations it was felt that perhaps this point needed more information.

*“It is good that Disability Awareness Training is available for Arts Council staff, but this was in the last plan and I wonder what this means. There are a lot of debates within the sector going on at the moment, so I am assuming this will really be about updating the previous training, but there is no way of knowing.”*

*“Everyone should receive Disability Awareness Training, I’m not sure there is anything more to say about that.”*

## Point 2 – Communications

Participants felt strongly that care had to be taken in how people with disabilities are promoted particularly in social media presentations.

*“You can have photos of people which look like a tick box exercise or you can make it so that the content feels integrated.”*

## Point 3 – Career Support for disabled artists

Participants raised questions about access to funding and to the application process.

*“It is good that disabled artists can access help to fill in application forms from the University of Atypical, but there is a lot of voluntary work going on to help people fill in the application forms as well. If it is a daunting process for non-disabled artists, and I often help artists to fill in SIAP application forms, it is much more difficult for artists with a disability.”*

*“I think maybe it would be useful to look at streamlining the application process.”*

Participants also discussed support for the programming of disabled artists.

*“I think Bounce Festival is fantastic, it is an exciting showcase, and it does a great job, so it needs a bigger budget and it needs to be expanded to much more than the three days.”*

*“I do think there needs to be a review of programming for all the major venues; I think we need a more open approach to programming of disabled artists.”*

*“If you looked at this from a community arts perspective, if we agree that we need to increase access and participation, are we doing enough to improve authorship and ownership? Are we getting enough disabled artists work on main stages and festivals. I’m not sure I am seeing many disabled artists at big festivals.”*

#### Point 4 – Deliberative Forum

The people who participated in our discussion did not know what the Deliberative Forum was.

*“Is this a new body?”*

*“I googled this and I couldn’t find any information about it?”*

#### Point 5 – Premium Payments

This was the most contentious point and those participating in the conversation with Community Arts Partnership, who knew about the Premium Payment process, raised issues about this.

*“We often don’t apply for it anymore, it is just too much hassle.”*

*“We have to make sure that the Premium Payment isn’t a substitute for core finances.”*

*“The paperwork alone puts me off applying or even suggesting that we should apply for this pot of finding.”*

This was also subject to quite a lengthy discussion at the University of Atypical’s Disability Action Plan Focus group with similar points being raised.

#### Point 6 – Survey of accessibility

No one raised any questions about this point in our conversations although at the University of Atypical Focus Group, there was discussion regarding how accessibility might be defined.

*“When we conduct surveys on accessibility they tend to focus on the physical requirements and that is vital but attitude and approach is just as important. There needs to be an attitudinal component to the survey.”*

#### Point 7 - Develop a UK wide disability access scheme and Point 8 - Participate in the DWP disability confident campaign

There were no comments raised about these points of the plan because participants did not have any knowledge of these particular projects. Similar thoughts were expressed at the University of Atypical’s Focus Group.

#### Point 9 – Promote careers in the creative industries

This was generally well received with some participants reiterating previous contributions.



“I would like to see more artists with a disability included as artists in their own right on main stages and in festivals. I appreciate also artists practicing Disability Arts need to be promoted as well.”

## Equality Scheme Action Plan

Our conversations offered few reflections on the Equality Scheme Action Plan although there was discussion regarding the plan at the University of Atypical's Focus Group.

The key points which are worth highlighting which refer to Points 2 and Point 7 were the need for geographical spread when conducting information meetings and the question of evaluation.

Participants felt that sensitivity needed to be applied to evaluation practices as all too often practitioners find it difficult to use evaluation processes which don't take into account the nature of working with disabled people: a reliance on quantitative rather than qualitative processes, the need to factor in, and accounting for, non-verbal communication skills, understanding the extent to which people with disabilities have to overcome societal obstacles just to participate, and looking at distance travelled as an evaluative indicator.

## The question of Mainstream and Discrete Funding

Community Arts Partnership wishes to raise one issue which was absent from our discussions and from the general discussion held at the University of Atypical Focus Group, that of mainstream and discrete funding.

Community Arts Partnership would advocate for funds and programmes that help equalise the opportunity for people with and indeed without a disability to engage in the arts, to fully participate.

In so doing, CAP would urge that the facilities and agencies required to assist disabled populations access opportunities within the arts mainstream be enhanced and developed.

Maintaining discrete ways to enable artists and populations with a disability to access all mainstream arts and cultural activity requires highly targeted assistance, through resources, organisations and programmes.

Whilst offering equality of access to funding resources through the provision of up-to-date technological support is crucial.

With technological solutions now developing so rapidly, sufficient support in this area must be ensured if the fullest potential participation in applications and creative processes is to be maintained.

Deaf-blind populations must be assured that the current technology they rely on is adequately supported by an agency offering opportunity but particularly Arts Council funding programmes.



## Concluding Remarks

We appreciate that the present circumstances are precarious for society in general and for the arts sector in particular, for people in general and for disabled people in particular.

Despite this we would suggest that the arts, and Community Arts practice in particular, has a substantial role to play in creating the circumstances for our vision to be realised, that is

*“to see the emergence of a just, inclusive, peaceful and creative society, where difference is welcomed and participation is valued.”*

As stated at the outset, Community Arts Partnership welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the conversation around the Arts Council of Northern Ireland’s Disability Action Plan and the Equality Scheme Action Plan.